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Gilbert W. Cranmer became a Sabbatarian Adventist in the 1850s but his opposition to the prophetic claim of Ellen G. White and other disputes led to his separation from the movement that soon took the name Seventh-day Adventist and subsequent founding of several congregations that became part of the Church of God (Seventh Day) in southwest Michigan.

Early Years and Conversion Experience

Cranmer was born on January 18, 1814, in Newfield, Tompkins County, New York,¹ as the first child of Nicholas Cranmer and Mary Ogden.² About 1822, the family moved to Tioga County, New York. Three years later, his father died from a rattlesnake bite. Therefore, at a young age, he had to take upon himself the responsibility of caring for his mother and seven younger siblings.³

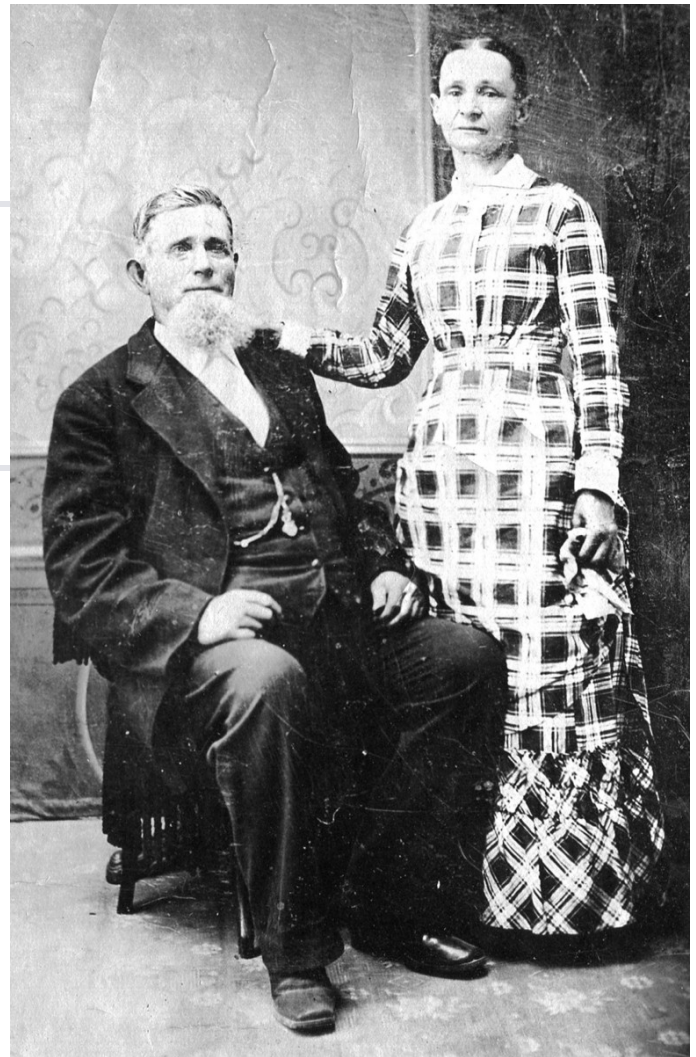
According to an autobiographical article published in 1863, Cranmer accepted Jesus as his Savior at the age of 15 and a year later was baptized and joined the Christian Church, the northeastern branch of the Christian Connexion.⁴ Later in his life, however, Cranmer stated that he “was 17 years old [when he] was converted and united with the Methodist Church” but then became convinced that the Methodist doctrine of God was wrong. Thus, two years later, in 1833, he “joined the Christian Church and they gave [him] a license to preach.”⁵

In the night of November 12-13, 1833, when still living with his mother, Cranmer witnessed a massive Leonid shower that could not then be explained by meteorologists, generally referred to as “the falling of the stars” (Mark 13:25) in Adventist literature. He described the event as follows:

It was toward morning. I went to the door and what a sight I beheld. Meteors like balls of fire flying cross-wise and in every direction. I called my mother, and when she came she exclaimed, “Gilbert, the day of judgment has come.” She fell upon her knees and began praying. It was a wonderful sight! It made a deep impression on my mind.⁶

For about three years, from 1833 to 1836, he served as an itinerant minister in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, and southern Indiana.⁷

In the fall of 1837, Gilbert Cranmer left his home in Tioga County, New York to visit some relatives in Canada. Shortly afterwards, the Patriot War broke out, with frequent conflicts along the border between Canada and the United States from December 1837 to December 1838. As roads in Ontario, Canada were patrolled by British military forces, Cranmer remained in Ontario for the next couple months. From St. Catharines, he traveled to Brantford and from there to Sodom, all the while searching for believers and congregations of the Christian Connexion where he preached and evangelized. Eventually about three hundred people converted, yet he felt that he could not baptize them before he was ordained. Thus, he traveled sixty miles (96.5 kilometers) to be ordained and upon his return to Sodom, he baptized the new converts.⁸



Gilbert W. Cranmer and Sophia Branch Cranmer.
Photo courtesy of Bible Advocate Press, Denver, CO.

There he also met Mariah Averille who became his wife shortly afterwards. With the Patriot War still in progress and the opposition to religion being quite strong in Canada, Cranmer decided it was time to return to the United States. After six weeks of traveling west, he, his new wife, and another relative arrived at Fort Dearborn (now part of Chicago, Illinois) where Cranmer bought forty acres of land. Starting a new farm was hard work, permitting him to preach only occasionally in surrounding places.⁹

Marriages and Children

Throughout his life, Gilbert Cranmer's home was stricken with poverty, sorrow, and suffering. He was married four times and had to carry three of his wives to the grave. His first wife, Mariah, seventeen years old when they married in March 1838, died of an illness just two years later that also took the lives of their two infant children.¹⁰

Two years later, on October 16, 1842, Gilbert married Betsey Heath of Climax Prairie, Michigan,¹¹ and they had three children: Mary Ann Brown (1843-1902),¹² Nathan H. Cranmer (1846-1914),¹³ and Gilbert W. Cranmer, [Jr.] (1855-1939).¹⁴ Betsey tragically died about a decade later, in the mid-1850s.

On April 19, 1855, Gilbert married Harriet F. Mesick,¹⁵ with whom he had one child: Frances H. Collins (1857-1886).¹⁶ After more than twenty years of marriage, he also had to lay her to rest. Harriet died on September 12, 1878 at Comstock, Kalamazoo County, Michigan.¹⁷

Eight months later, on May 18, 1879, Gilbert Cranmer married for the fourth, and last, time. His fourth wife, Emily Sophia Branch (née Stoughton), was a widow and sixteen years his junior.¹⁸ Years before he had converted her late husband, Erastus Branch, and his family to the seventh-day Sabbath and the belief in the Second Advent of Christ. Cranmer and Erastus had become good friends and co-laborers in gospel ministry. When her husband passed away in 1873, Emily remained alone with six boys.¹⁹ When Gilbert married her in 1879, he became a stepfather to her children: Lemuel Joseph (1850-1939),²⁰ John Clarence (1852-1932),²¹ Mortimer Albert (1855-1926),²² Charles Ray (1858-1889),²³ Adelbert (1862-1955)²⁴ and Erastus Graves (1864-1955).²⁵ They all retained the surname of Emily's first marriage, yet they revered Gilbert Cranmer and called him "Father Cranmer."²⁶

The Millerite Movement

William Miller's proclamation of the imminent Second Coming of Christ "about" the year 1843 seems to have found broad reception in the Christian Connexion. An unproportionally large number of Millerite lecturers (8 percent) were Connexion ministers, including Gilbert Cranmer, who embraced the belief in the Christ's soon coming in 1842.²⁷ His earlier experience of "the falling of the stars" seemed to corroborate Miller's assertion that most eschatological prophecies had been fulfilled already.²⁸ As did other Millerites, Cranmer looked forward to Jesus' coming on October 22, 1844 and was disappointed when the prediction failed to materialize. He described the events of that day and the ensuing disappointment as follows:

Many did not accept the doctrine, my wife [Betsey Cranmer (née Heath)] among the number and when the time came in which to expect the Lord to come we repaired to a schoolhouse where we were to remain all night or until He should come. Before leaving my wife at home, we engaged in prayer and we parted. I went to the place appointed for our meeting and there I, with many others, waited in prayer for the Lord to come; but the night passed and the morning came and we were disappointed. We went home amid the jeers and smiles of our neighbors. My wife met me at the door with a smile and said she knew I would come back. . . . It was indeed a great disappointment.²⁹

The fondest hopes of the Millerite believers were shattered when Christ did not return, and many intensely sought an explanation. While some gave up their faith in the soon coming of Christ, Cranmer could say, "Though we were disappointed, our faith was strong. We again examined the position taken but every time the figures would bring us down to 1844 and no farther."³⁰ In order to escape hostilities from those who were opposed to Millerism, Cranmer decided to trade his farm in Fort Dearborn for 240 acres of wild land in what later became Holland, Michigan.³¹

The Sabbatarian Adventist Movement

In his 1863 autobiographical narrative, Cranmer wrote, "About ten years ago a Seventh Day [sic] Advent minister, by the name of Bates, came to our town, and advocated the whole Law, the gifts of the Spirit, and many other glorious truths."³² Hearing Bates' explanations, Cranmer rejoiced and supposed he "had found the people [he] had been so long looking for."³³

For the next five and a half years, though, he does not seem to have made an appearance in Sabbatarian Adventist circles. Their periodical, the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, did not mention him until 1856, from which time he was listed once a year in the receipt section.³⁴ This may suggest that apart from subscribing the periodical, he was not as actively involved with the Sabbatarian Adventist movement because unlike other church members and ministers, he did not donate financial means to the cause, did not send letters to the periodical, did not write articles for it, and did not announce a preaching itinerary or appointments.

Later, Gilbert Cranmer stated that his belief in the presence of the gifts of the Spirit among the Sabbatarian Adventists suffered when he did not witness any healings and found that the prophetic gift "was confined wholly to a

woman.” Those observations led him to investigate Ellen White’s visions and he concluded that they contradicted themselves and the Bible. He remained with the Sabbatarian Adventists for another couple of years, “hoping,” as he said, “they would get sick of the visions of E.G. White.” When that did not happen, he decided he “would not belong to a church that was ruled by a woman any longer.”³⁵ A particular incident in late 1857, when the Whites visited the church at Otsego, Michigan, may have contributed to that decision.³⁶ J.N. Loughborough commented on the meeting as follows:

We were led in these meetings to reflect on the awful danger of those who are not keeping pace with the counsel of the true Witness, and do not zealously repent of their sins. Although these meetings were scenes of trial, yet the Lord gave us the victory, especially in [Otsego], where wrongs were reproved, and to all was it outwardly manifested that God’s Spirit was present. Bro. White joined us at this meeting, and spoke on the Sabbath with freedom, on the Unity and Gifts of the Church.³⁷

On that occasion, Ellen White had a vision that provided comfort to those present and reportedly exposed the sins of Joseph J. Perkins and others.³⁸ Later, Perkins claimed that “miss white [sic] had a revelation here and she saw that we must believe her visions or be lost[,] and in this vicinity about forty good substantial members made up thare [sic] mind to follow the teachings of the Bible rather than her visions[,] they are made a test here and allover [sic] the state before her vissons [sic] the bible falls and so does moral Charecter [sic][.] atleast [sic] it is so here the visions in them is sallvation [sic][.]”³⁹ George Leighton and his wife Rocksilda, members of the Otsego church, replied, “Mr. Perkin’s [sic] statement that Sr. White had a revelation that we must believe the visions or be lost, is utterly false. Sr. White did have a vision in our midst last winter, which no one then present opposed. Even Eld. Cranmer then testified that he believed it to be of God.”⁴⁰ James White added, “The statement that all must believe the visions, or be lost, can be regarded in no other light than a willful falsehood, as fifty persons then present from Monterey, Allegan, Otsego, Re., will testify.”⁴¹

When Ellen White came out of the vision, she reportedly also had a message for Gilbert Cranmer. While there is no record of that message in her extant writings, Loughborough remembered her making the following remarks:

The Lord showed me that you have ability to teach the truth, but there are two points on which you have victories to gain; and when you have gained those victories, it will be an evidence to you that the Lord will go forth with you in teaching the truth. The first is to be a victory over the use of tobacco. You speak against its use, and talk as though you discarded it, but at the same time you are secretly using the weed. When you get strength from the Lord to wholly cease using it, that will be an evidence that He will aid you in the ministry. The second point is, you fear your family. You do all of your praying in the barn, because you have not the courage to read the Scriptures and pray before your family. When you get strength to take up that cross with the other, you will have a twofold evidence that the Lord will aid you in preaching the truth.⁴²

Robert Coulter, historian of the Church of God (Seventh Day), refers to Cranmer’s open use of tobacco from the 1860s onwards to question Ellen White’s remarks on Cranmer’s *concealed* use of tobacco in late 1857,⁴³ yet the different records may be complementary as he may have become more open in his use of tobacco in later years. Her advice was on the need to relinquish the use of tobacco itself, which was, and still is, certainly good advice.

According to Loughborough, Cranmer expressed his confidence in the testimony and promised to “carry out the instruction, and these victories, that he might, in the strength of the Lord, proclaim the truth.” About six weeks later, Cranmer attended a mid-week prayer meeting in Battle Creek. After the meeting, he asked James White and Loughborough for a card of recommendation as a minister. When White asked him whether he had gained the needed victories, Cranmer acknowledged that he had not but promised again that he would go “home to gain the victories.” White replied, “Well, Brother Cranmer, when you have gained those victories there will be no difficulty about your getting a card recommending you to our people as a minister.” Nevertheless, Cranmer was unable to give up the habit of chewing tobacco.⁴⁴

About the middle of March 1858, Cranmer preached at the church in Otsego, Michigan. During his sermon, he remarked that he was not aware of any biblical evidence for the closing of the door of the Holy Place and the opening of the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary in 1844.⁴⁵ His remarks created a number of questions. After the sermon, he made an appointment to preach on the same question again four weeks later, an appointment that would not come to fruition. The same day, he visited Joseph Perkins and his wife Louise, and while he was there, Lester Russell came to have further discussions with him on the said remarks. Russell argued that the door to the Holy Place was closed and as evidence, he allegedly pointed to the book *A Sketch of the Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (1851) rather than providing biblical proof. Cranmer replied, “Perhaps Mrs. White’s visions are proof to you, but they are not to me.”⁴⁶

Cranmer’s remarks on the “shut door” and the ensuing discussion may illustrate that the progressive understanding on that subject among Sabbatarian Adventists and the role of Ellen White’s visions in that progression were likely not entirely clear among both Sabbatarian Adventists and other Adventist groups, which is why the subject was occasionally brought up in later decades. Ellen White admitted that like William Miller and other Millerites, she initially believed that probation had closed in October 1844. By December 1844, she had given up belief in the prophetic significance of the October date but her first vision caused her to re-adopt trust in God’s leading in the 1844 message, including elements of the “shut door.” Encouraged by her visions, the later Sabbatarian Adventists continued to study their Bibles to understand why Jesus had not come in 1844. Those studies led them to a better

understanding of Jesus' heavenly sanctuary ministry, the belief in the perpetuity of the Sabbath commandment, the meaning of the third angel's message (Revelation 14:9-12), and the meaning of the end-time sealing (Revelation 7 and 13). Through their ongoing Bible studies and the integration of those findings, their understanding of the "shut door" gradually changed, until by 1849-1852 they emphasized the open door to the Most Holy Place and the imperative to share the new theological concepts of the seventh-day Sabbath, the heavenly sanctuary ministry, the third angel's message, and the sealing more broadly.

Interestingly, while Ellen G. White herself was far from having a clear understanding of the meaning of the "shut door" during those years, her visions theologically undermined their initial shut-door views. Until the end of her life, she nevertheless believed that whereas there was no general close of probation in 1844, "probation," as Merlin Burt succinctly summarizes, "was closed for those who had rejected the 1844 message after understanding its meaning and seen the movings of God's Spirit."⁴⁷ This progressing and nuanced perspective was likely not fully understood by everyone, which may have contributed to Cranmer's questions and the discussions in the Otsego church.

Meanwhile, George Leighton, a charter member and long-time elder of the Otsego church,⁴⁸ went to Battle Creek to consult with James White about the situation at Otsego. White advised him not to permit Cranmer to preach again at the church. As a result, the Otsego church decided to cancel Cranmer's appointment for April. Later, Cranmer deplored that "Brethren White and Loughborough would not give him a card of recommendation because he did not believe the visions."⁴⁹

Subsequently, Cranmer wrote a letter to Battle Creek, requesting "a decision as to whether they considered him a minister, and as to the right to preach among them."⁵⁰ At a conference in Battle Creek, Michigan on May 21, 1858, it was noted, "G. Cranmer has been preaching views contrary to the present truth, and grieving the brethren by disorderly walk, and . . . he has been faithfully labored with and still persists in his course." As a result, it was resolved "that the churches be warned against him as not in harmony with the body."⁵¹ Two years later, Joseph Bates remarked that "because the church would not approbate him [Cranmer] to preach the message in his unqualified state, he left them and began to teach the message in accordance with his own peculiar views, professing to gather a remnant for the coming of the Lord."⁵²

On January 8, 1859, Ellen G. White visited the church at Otsego, Michigan and encountered some of Cranmer's sympathizers. In their view, his message did not differ from the preaching of J. N. Loughborough that day. The latter remarked that the "Cranmerites" could not understand why there was a division at all and they were unsatisfied that all blame was laid on Cranmer.⁵³ Joseph Bates noted that Cranmer taught the same views concerning "the second advent of the Saviour and that the seventh-day is the Sabbath," yet he identified the points of difference, in Cranmer's words, as: "The visions of Mrs. White, and a part of the midnight cry, and some of the work in the sanctuary."⁵⁴ Many years later, Loughborough reasoned that Gilbert Cranmer's opposition to Ellen White had its root in his unwillingness to give up tobacco and reform his family life.⁵⁵

However, Cranmer and the Perkins surmised that the denial of permission for him to preach resulted from the fact that he did not believe Ellen White's visions to be inspired. Joseph Perkins and his wife claimed that Leighton had not only said that the visions were inspired but even "that they were better than the Bible because they were warm and fresh from the throne of God, and that anyone who did not accept them as inspiration absolutely would be damned."⁵⁶ Such remarks seem contrary to Leighton's own convictions as seen above, yet it is their word against his. How much of that disagreement resulted from actual statements, falsehoods, or misunderstandings is impossible to verify after the lapse of time. Sabbatarian Adventists generally believed in the divine inspiration of Ellen White and the resulting divine authority of her visions, yet also they strongly affirmed their belief in a closed canon, the Bible as their only rule of faith and practice, and the difference in function and scope between the Bible and Ellen White's ministry.⁵⁷

The Church of God (Seventh Day)

Soon after leaving the Sabbatarian Adventists Gilbert Cranmer founded separate Sabbath-keeping congregations that referred to themselves as the "Church of Christ."⁵⁸ His continuous efforts proved successful, and by 1860, he had established twelve congregations with several hundred members, which were then organized as the Michigan State Conference of the Church of Christ.⁵⁹ It later united with Sabbath-keeping groups in other states. By the 1880s, they called themselves Church of God (Seventh Day). Interestingly, he continued to chew tobacco and did not conceal his habit to either ministerial colleagues or church members. Thus, Robert Coulter notes, "His grandnephew remembered that at the White Cloud church, Cranmer spit his tobacco juice through a knothole in the floor of the church's rostrum while preaching."⁶⁰

Cranmer functioned as editor of the periodical *Hope of Israel* when it was launched in August 1863.⁶¹ Despite his travel schedule, he continued serving as editor until April 1865.⁶² In his view, apart from his church, no denomination has ever preached the second angel's message of Revelation 14:8. He reasoned that even Seventh-day Adventists had not given that message, notwithstanding claims to the contrary, because "their converts are mostly from the world" rather than from "the people of God."⁶³

A survey of both the *Hope of Israel* (later the *Advent and Sabbath Advocate*) and the *Review and Herald* indicates that tensions continued between the predecessors of the Church of God (Seventh Day) and Seventh-day Adventists. Ellen White compared the "Cranmer party" to Dathan, Korah, and Abiram, who had rebelled against the leadership of Moses in the wilderness (Numbers 16).⁶⁴ James White denied a rumor that Seventh-day Adventists had been unwilling to "receive Eld. Cranmer because he would not give his property to the cause" and clarified the reasons for their hesitation to confirm him as a minister of the gospel: "first, he seemed too much entangled in the affairs of this

life; second, he was a slave to tobacco; third, they could not see in him sufficient talent, at his age of life, to warrant the supposition that God had called him to the ministry.” James White stressed that while the brethren in Battle Creek were “waiting for evidence that High Heaven had called him to the ministry, he [Cranmer] rose against the body, rejected the body, and accepted the leadership of a faction most hostile to the principles of good order taught in the *Review*.”⁶⁵

While some Seventh-day Adventists who became alienated from the denomination joined the so-called “Cranmer party” in subsequent years,⁶⁶ other members of that party were disappointed about Cranmer’s ongoing “filthy habit of chewing tobacco” and “several false statements.” Some members in Maine, who had invited him to a conference in North Berwick and heard him speak, were “greatly disappointed in him.” They could hardly fathom that he had “been in the ministry for thirty five years,” as he claimed. Samuel B. Gowell, a merchant in Portland, Maine, observed, “His presence at our conference did more to open the eyes of the deceived than any one could have imagined beforehand.”⁶⁷ Two months later, M. E. Cornell noted that although Cranmer had repeatedly advertised in the *Hope of Israel* a second conference in North Berwick for February 2-4, 1865, yet “not a single soul came to that meeting” because the people were “all now in sympathy with the *Review*.”⁶⁸

When younger former Seventh-day Adventist ministers, such as Benjamin Franklin Snook, William H. Brinkerhoff, and Henry E. Carver, joined the movement about 1865, Gilbert Cranmer seemingly moved more into the background. But he continued to minister to the Sabbath-keeping churches as a farmer-preacher for the next couple decades.

Later Years

After their marriage on May 18, 1879, Gilbert and Emily Cranmer⁶⁹ lived at Hartford, Michigan for some years⁷⁰ before they moved about 113 miles (182 kilometers) north to White Cloud, where they spent their last years.⁷¹ Gilbert died of “old age” on December 17, 1903 at the age of 89.⁷² Emily Cranmer survived her husband for eleven years and passed away on December 31, 1914 at the age of 84.⁷³ Both are buried at White Cloud Cemetery in White Cloud, Michigan.⁷⁴

Contribution

Gilbert W. Cranmer’s brief association with the Sabbatarian Adventist movement was not without tensions, yet he never gave up the belief in the continued relevance of the biblical Sabbath and his practice of worshiping God on that day. He was instrumental in raising up the Church of Christ, forerunner of the Church of God (Seventh Day), which initially became a home for disenchanting Seventh-day Adventists and later for other people who worship on the seventh-day Sabbath.

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