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# WHY A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH?

**The answer lies, in part,  
in the name itself.**

**A**sk an Adventist anywhere in the world this question, and it's likely you'll be told that it exists to restore neglected Bible truths to Christianity. It's not likely you'll get away without learning that foremost among those truths is the seventh-day Sabbath. If you're really interested, you'll learn that Adventists don't claim to be the first to restore Sabbath worship. In every age there were believers who hallowed the true Sabbath. Even among the Reformers were those who argued for its validity, foremost among them the Anabaptists.\*\* Where did the Adventists get it?

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\*\**Ana*—Greek meaning “again” and *baptist* meaning “one who dips under.” Thus Anabaptists were those baptized again, generally after having been sprinkled.

From studying the Bible with a Seventh-day Baptist named Rachael Preston in the early 1800s.

Of all you've been told, that Reformers supported the Sabbath may be the most surprising. Even among churches having their roots in the Reformation, many believe their spiritual forefathers to have been hostile to the Sabbath, considering it to be a relic of Judaism. Certainly that is true of Luther. Reacting to his fellow Reformer Carlstadt, who held the moral law in high regard, Luther said: “Indeed, if Carlstadt were to write further about the Sabbath, Sunday would have to give way, and the

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Sabbath—that is to say, Saturday—must be kept holy.” Luther argued Christians would then become Jews in all things. They would even have to be circumcised. For, he said, “he who deems it necessary to keep one law of Moses [must] keep them all.”<sup>1</sup>

Other Reformers did not consider the Sabbath commandment to be binding, but even they found no biblical support for Sunday keeping.

John Calvin, for example, affirmed that Christians should keep neither the seventh day nor the first day holy. Instead, they should abandon what he called the “shadowy ceremony” of keeping one day in seven holy. They could better exercise their new covenant liberty by observing one day in six or one day in eight. Neither did Calvin believe that the early Christians observed the first day in celebration of Christ’s resurrection. Rather, the early church observed the seventh day for at least a few decades after the Resurrection, and only when “constrained by the superstition of the Jews” did they “abandon that day and substitute another.”<sup>2</sup> Sadly, Luther’s rejection of the Sabbath was at odds with two cherished pillars of the Reformation—*sola scriptura* and restitution.

### Infallible Proclamations

*Sola scriptura*—the Bible only—was its vital principle. The Reformers believed that tradition, church leaders, and church councils had for centuries obscured and perverted the gospel. Respected Lutheran scholar Roland H. Bainton, described their mission as proclaiming the “infallibility of the Scriptures” in place of the “infallibility of popes

and councils.”<sup>3</sup> Luther himself insisted that Christians should accept only those doctrines based on the authority of an open Bible. Church historian Justo Gonzalez explains that Luther’s conscience compelled him to reject “those traditional views and practices which contradicted ‘the clear sense of Scripture.’”

His reason for this was that he believed tradition had erred, and that it had to be restored to “the true meaning of the gospel through the authority of Scripture,” which, he said, “is above tradition, the church, the theologians, and Luther himself.”<sup>4</sup> His ringing proclamation at the Diet of Worms should be treasured by all who love the Word and its Author: “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority



of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”<sup>5</sup>

Not only Luther, a mainline reformer, but the so-called “Radical Reformers” treasured Reformation principles and carried them out, often to the embarrassment of their more cautious brethren. Though concurring with Protestantism on major doctrines, they went beyond them in their emphasis on living a life obedient to Bible principles. Foremost among them were the Anabaptists. Their focus, says church historian Hans J. Hillerbrand, was not, as with the mainline Reformers, so much “on the divine forgiveness of sins, which would be apprehended by faith, but on man’s commitment to live a holy and devout life.”<sup>6</sup> Some critics charged that the Anabaptists forsook the gospel and replaced Christ with Moses, a charge that echoes Luther’s comment about Carlstadt. A few small groups may have warranted this criticism, but most Anabaptists affirmed their belief in the gospel while holding to doctrines chiefly practical in nature.

Their fidelity to Scripture and rejection of “worldly wisdom” led to their embracing such doctrines as believer’s baptism, separation of

church and state, pacifism (by some groups), and simplicity in worship, church architecture, adornment, and conduct. Some came to believe in temperance and soul sleep.<sup>7</sup> Daniel Liechty, an expert on 16th century Sabbatarian Anabaptism, cites Anabaptists who accepted the entire Bible—Old Testament and New—as authoritative and relevant for believers. Thus they realized their obligation to observe the Decalogue. Two Anabaptists of the 1520s and 1530s, Oswald Glaidt and Andreas Fischer, proclaimed the Sabbath of the fourth commandment in Silesia, Moravia, and Slovakia. Historians mention Sabbatarian groups in England, France, Holland, Germany, Bohemia, Transylvania, and Russia, some actually preceding the Reformation.<sup>8</sup>

### Restitution

Reformers who held to *sola scriptura* by that very declaration committed themselves to reject unbiblical doctrines and traditions, some of which had penetrated the church centuries before. Their aim was restitution—to restore the church to its apostolic purity by following the New Testament model. To achieve this, they translated the Bible into the language of the people. One of the results: Believers tore down the images or “idols” in cathedrals and refused to purchase indulgences. Courageous men such as Ulrich

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Zwingli abandoned the prescribed readings of the liturgical year and preached entirely from the Gospel of Matthew. Others, as we've noted, began to observe the seventh day as the Sabbath. Some, impatient with the progress of reform, says Reformation scholar George Williams, "espoused, rather, a radical rupture with the immediate past and all its institutions" in working toward "restoration of the primitive church."<sup>9</sup>

Augustine Bader, a "messianic Anabaptist visionary," declared that "the time of the restoration of all things was about to be realized," therefore the "righteous remnant" must join "in the needed elimination of external sacraments and ceremonies."<sup>10</sup> Many Anabaptist writings began with the word *Restitution*. They clearly believed they were living during the time described in their key text, Acts 3:21—"until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of His holy prophets since the world began" (NKJV).

### Anabaptist Reforms

The Radical Reformation principles of restitution meant that the church had "fallen" at some point in its history. Liechty explains that Anabaptists usually identified the fall as "the Constantinian synthesis, in which Christianity became the religion of an empire rather than the religion of personally committed believers."<sup>11</sup> Thus the Anabaptists sought to purge Christianity of its accumulated defilements and restore the pre-fall ideal of church and state. They acted by separating themselves from the "evils" of society. Some even founded the Free Church, which rejected all contact with the state.

Other Anabaptists placed the fall at different points in history. And still others interpreted history as a series of falls and restorations awaiting the climactic restitution of the Lord. Andreas Fischer, the Sabbatarian Anabaptist leader, placed the fall at the time Christians apostatized by keeping the first day, rather than the

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seventh day, holy. According to Sabbatarian Anabaptists, Sundaykeeping was a sure mark of rejecting God’s moral law and, by implication, of rejecting God himself. Christians could not hope to receive God’s blessings unless they restored observance of God’s Sabbath and worked for the restoration of the pre-fall church.

Since both the mainline Reformers and Radicals believed in the principles of *sola scriptura* and restitution, Sabbatarian Anabaptism is simply an extension of the Protestant Reformation. The *American Catholic Quarterly Review* concurs: “Protestantism, in discarding the authority of the Church, has no good reasons for its Sunday theory, and ought logically to keep Saturday as the Sabbath.” Sunday, it insists, “is purely a creation of the Catholic Church.”<sup>12</sup>

#### Sabbath Tracks

Liechty concedes that “Sabbatarianism is certainly a legitimate and

consistent extension of the Protestant Reformation” and that “adoption of the radical reformers into the Church’s legitimate mainstream must include the adoption of the Sabbatarian as well.” He refers to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, explaining that “it shows without question that Sabbatarian ideas were [part of] the Protestant Reformation itself”—not simply a 19th-century “musing of Ellen White and her little sectarian group.”<sup>13</sup>

If Sabbatarianism is a logical extension of the Protestant Reformation, why then did most Reformers not accept the Sabbath? Anabaptists would answer that God’s truth unfolds through history, one reformer building upon another. Some—among them, Erasmus and later Luther, Melancthon, and Zwingli—balked at the implications of totally restoring primitive Christianity.

The Reformers, says Ellen G. White, “were not prepared to receive all the light at once. Like the full

glory of the noontide sun to those who have long dwelt in darkness, it would, if presented, have caused them to turn away. Therefore He revealed it to the leaders little by little, as it could be received by the people. From century to century, other faithful workers were to follow, to lead the people on still further in the path of reform."<sup>14</sup>

Sabbatarian Anabaptists Andreas Fischer and Oswald Glaidt could be included as two of these "other faithful workers." Surely, "among the reformers of the church an honorable place should be given to those who stood in vindication of a truth generally ignored."<sup>15</sup> For "how much the world owes to these men, posterity will never know. They were branded as heretics, their motives impugned, their characters maligned, their writing suppressed, misrepresented, or mutilated. Yet they stood firm, and from age to age maintained their faith in its purity, as a sacred heritage for the generations to come."<sup>16</sup>

Adventists are the recipients of that sacred heritage. That is why we believe our mission to be restoring neglected Bible truth to Christianity. We were not the first to hold the torch for Bible truth, but we may be the last. That seems to be what three angels are trying to tell us. □

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<sup>1</sup> J. N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath* (reprint) (Brushton, Tenn.: TEACH Services,

1998), p. 460.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442.

<sup>3</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Christianity* (Boston: Houghton, 1964), p. 243.

<sup>4</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Protestant Reformation to the 20th Century* (Vol. 3) (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1950), p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Anabaptism and the Reformation: Another Look," *Church History* 29 (1960): 412; for more on this, see *ibid.*, pp. 404-424. See also Gerhard F. Hasel, "Sabbatarian Anabaptists of the 16th Century," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 5 (1967): 101-121.

<sup>7</sup> Personal interview with Dennis Pettibone, Professor of Church History, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tenn., March 2000.

<sup>8</sup> *Sabbatarianism in the 16th Century: A Page in the History of the Radical Reformation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1942), p. 376.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine Bader, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>11</sup> Much of the information in this section is based on Daniel Liechty, *Andreas Fisher and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists: An Early Reformation Episode in East Central Europe* (Scottsdale, Penna.: Herald, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Liechty, quoting *American Catholic Quarterly Review*.

<sup>13</sup> Liechty, in an E-mail to Michael Campbell, Spring 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *The Story of Redemption*, p. 353.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.