

200 YEARS OF SABBATH KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA

A paper presented by Bruce Dean, Pastor, United Church of God, at the Friends of the Sabbath Conference held in Sydney, 5–8 July 1996.

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My aim is to outline the history of sabbath keeping in Australia. My personal history is very Australian: my family came out from England early in the 1800's; we were at the Eureka stockade, my grandfather was shot at Gallipoli, and my father served in New Guinea during WWII.

Our Beginnings

From Britain and Scotland we have much material on the history of sabbath keeping, and on how it moved across the Atlantic to the settlements in Rhode Island and thence into different groups and parts of America.

Australia's history is not as religious in complexion as that of America, nor for that matter as that of our neighbours in New Zealand. We need to remember also that in Australia religion is very personal matter. There has been since the First Fleet great cynicism towards organised religion. For these reasons data on Australian religious history is sketchy and difficult to find.

Settlement of Australia began in 1783 by courtesy of the transportation system under which convicted criminals were punished by being sent to overseas territories either for life or a shorter term. (Transportation was finally abolished in 1857.) Sir Joseph Banks had travelled with Cook on his journey to Australia in 1770, and after the loss of the American colonies it was he who recommended Australia as a penal settlement.

The First Fleet consisted of three store ships, six convict transports, an armed tender and a flagship. It carried 1,473 people under Captain Arthur Phillip including 778 prisoners, 192 of them women, and other ranks with 30 wives and 12 children. It arrived in Port Jackson in January 1788. In June 1790 the Second Fleet arrived with 1,000 convicts, and the Third Fleet arrived in 1791 with 1,900 convicts.

The Jews

There were at least eight and possibly fourteen Jews on the First Fleet. Indeed, Jews continued to arrive on every convict ship until transportation was stopped on the east coast in 1840. Between 1790 and 1850 Britain experienced an influx of continental Jews who proved unable to increase their material position. Jewish law prohibited them from working on the Sabbath, and hence they were excluded from accepting positions as servants or factory workers, or taking up trade apprenticeships. Many became criminals out of their desperate need to put food on the table.

The majority of Jewish convicts were transported for theft or pickpocketing, and hardly any at all for crimes of violence. During the convict era more than 1,000 Jews came to Australia.

All convicts, regardless of their denomination, were forced by the Governor's ordinance to attend services of the Church of England. Every Sunday morning they were assembled and marched off to church. Failure to attend resulted in immediate and often harsh punishment. Colonial punishment registers note many floggings inflicted on Jewish convicts (and others) for failure to attend services.

The convicts resented this treatment of course, and the first church in the colony was no sooner built than the convicts burnt it to the ground!

In 1810 Samuel Marsden described to the *London Society for the Propagation of the Gospel* how "Roman Catholics and Jews and persons of all persuasions send their children to public schools where they all are instructed in the principles of our established religion."

By 1820 a few hundred Jewish convicts had arrived in NSW. Their children were brought up as Anglicans as the colonial government was opposed to encouraging religious diversity. In spite of their comparatively large numbers, the introduction of regular Jewish services and

other aspects of communal life had to wait until the arrival in the 1820's of free Jewish settlers from England.

The *Holy Brotherhood* was formed in 1820 to bury the dead. There were some sporadic Jewish services held in private homes around this time. In 1828 Abraham Polack, a Jewish emancipist, wrote to Governor Sir Ralph Darling requesting a place of worship in Elizabeth Street "wherein divine service can be celebrated because the Jews are the only denomination who at present are without it." Governor Darling refused.

In 1828 Phillip Joseph Cohen was authorised by the British Chief Rabbi to perform marriages, and he began regular Sabbath services at his home in George Street. The Jewish community grew in numbers and by 1830 they needed to hire rooms for services. The first minister, Rabbi Rose, arrived in 1835.

A major change came in 1836 with the passage of Sir Richard Bourke's *Church Act* which acknowledged the existence of Christian denominations other than Church of England. Under this Act all Christian sects were entitled to receive government assistance for the purchase of land, construction of church buildings and the employment of clergy. The Jewish community opened a synagogue in 1844.

The Seventh-Day Adventists

The concept of the return of Christ to the earth seems to go right back to early stages of belief in Australia. Chiselled into a Van Diemen's Land tombstone are these words:

Sacred To the memory of
Robert Flowers
Late Private of H. M. 96 Reg
died July 12, 1845
Aged 36 years

I left my nation and my home
My country to defend
I here shall lay till the last day

Till time shall have an end
When Jesus calls my dust shall rise
When the last trumpet sound
With millions more ascend the skies
By angels guarded round.

We do not know who had this written, whether it was Flowers, a chaplain or a family member, but it is evident that the knowledge of the return of Jesus to the earth was understood.

The *Southern Australian* of June 23, 1842 carried a reported of a Millerite camp meeting in New York state attended by 6,000 people. It also reported their belief in the End coming between 21 March 1843 and 21 March 1844.

In 1844 Pastors Jacob Abbott and Thomas Playford were teaching the Second Advent.

What about the Sabbath?

Before 1885 the sole voice was Alexander Dickson who had earlier left Melbourne with Miss Hannah More, an American missionary teacher who had toiled in Sierra Leone. During her holidays in America she was given a copy of Pastor John Andrew's *History of the Sabbath* and other literature. She shared it with Alexander Dickson.

In 1864 she wrote to the *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald*: "Thank God I now see clearly that the seventh-day is the Sabbath of the Lord my God and am keeping it according to the commandment. Mr Dickson also is keeping it.... I do not know of any others on the coast who keep the seventh day.... Your people may now consider that you have a wholehearted Seventh Day Adventist here, waiting with you for that blessed appearing of Him whom we love and adore and purpose to worship evermore."

More returned to America while Dickson returned to Melbourne. While not a baptised member of the Adventist movement, he endeavoured to persuade contacts in Melbourne of his new-found Sabbath convictions. He spent a

portion of his considerable wealth on tracts for his evangelism. Interest was aroused and some people did accept Saturday as the Sabbath, but later abandoned their stand.

In 1884 Stephen Haskell, the California Tract Society President and his secretary, Miss Anna Ingels, arranged for *Signs of the Times* to be posted to names selected randomly from colonial directories. Mrs Sarah Adair of Melbourne was one of those selected, who later became a church member, as was Mr John Henry Stockton, one of the first to worship with the pioneer missionary party of Seventh-Day Adventists.

It is interesting how things haven't changed much over the years: we will learn soon how the truth of the Sabbath 70 years later was mailed out from California.

The teaching of the Sabbath as the Biblical Day of rest and rejuvenation and a command of God began to flourish in Australia after Adventists in America sent the first official party to Australia in 1885. Their first stop was in Sydney where they were pleased to find thirteen bound Seventh Day Adventist volumes in the library catalogue. At the Sailors' Rest they were thrilled to see six well-worn Adventist periodicals which had been sent from the Tract society in Boston.

Rather than staying in Sydney they settled in Melbourne. In 1885 there were 3,000 Americans in Victoria who had settled there after the Gold Rush years of the 1850's, and this fact weighed heavily in the decision to start in Melbourne.

Ministers of established churches stirred up bitter opposition to the Adventists by preaching against the "Yankees" in churches and by writing articles to the press. Little had changed seventy years later when the Churches of God were also ridiculed for their American roots.

The more they organised cottage meetings the greater became the opposition from mainstream clergy:

"As soon as a few persons had become interested in the truth by Bible readings and personal labour, we met with the most bitter opposition from ministers, people and the press.... One Lutheran preacher advertised quite extensively that he would expose Adventism by giving the history of its rise and what the object of these men was in coming from America. Ministers from various denominations seemed to take pride in 'exposing' those Adventists who came from America. One threatened to discipline any member of his church who permitted one of us to enter his house. He said we had no business to enter their houses unless we first consulted him."

They had little success. On one occasion out of sheer frustration Pastor Corliss spiked a tract onto an iron railing fence. It was found by a Mr Miller, a printer, whose interest was aroused by the subject of the tract, entitled "Which Day Do You keep, and Why?"

These two gentlemen and the pastors decided to hold a public debate on the matter at a Mutual Improvement Society meeting. The subject of the debate was "Which Day is the Sabbath?"

Mr Miller undertook to debate in favour of Saturday while his printing partner spoke in favour of Sunday. At the conclusion of the debate Pastor Corliss spoke and a follow-up meeting was arranged for the following week. Seventeen people joined the Adventists as a result of that one tract spiked on the iron railing!

The first Sabbath School class in Australia took place on July 4, 1885. On January 10, 1886, the first Seventh-Day Adventist church in the Southern Hemisphere was organised in North Fitzroy, Melbourne, under the ministry of Pastors Haskell, Corliss and Israel.

The work of the Seventh Day Adventists grew in scope with the arrival of Ellen White in 1890. She stayed until 1891. James and Ellen White had experienced the revivals in the days of William Miller. After James' death she went as a missionary to Europe 1885 to 1887, and then to Australia. This period is known as the

“Australian years.” A temporary training school operated from 1892 to 1894 in St Kilda before Ellen White was led to open Avondale in New South Wales in 1897.

To quote from *Entry into the Australian Colonies* by Milton Hook:

“The Australian colonial years of Adventist mission 1885–1900 saw the Adventist denomination firmly established with a total membership of just over 1,500 believers in 33 churches. The colonials who responded were well versed in Christianity and generally broke from their churches over the Sabbath and related issues. A large proportion were Methodists. New groups, therefore, were organised within a few months of the initial contact. Believers were encouraged to participate almost immediately in church activities and the distribution of church literature. Generally speaking, the teaching, printing and ministerial workers were American. During the first 15 years ten men from Australasia were ordained as ministers, but six were eventually lost by attrition for various reasons and two more transferred overseas. A better result was achieved in the next 15 years. The publication of literature and the training of a small army of colporteurs (those selling religious tracts) to distribute it, formed the cutting edge of the mission. Tent crusades and camp meetings followed in the wake of the pioneering booksellers.”

We can see that Sabbath keeping had definitely become part of the religious landscape of Australia when it became a federated Commonwealth in 1901.

The Remnant Church of God

Outside the Adventist movement data is a bit sparse on events from then until the late 1920's and early 1930's. A former Adventist minister, Pastor A. H. Britten, founded the Remnant Church of God in Western Australia. He left, or was more likely put out of, that church because he questioned their teachings. He may have been influenced by G. G. Rupert's writings

which also may have influenced Herbert W. Armstrong. On Pastor Britten's death in 1966 the church was looked after by a Mrs McLachlan. The Church observes the Holy Days and appears similar to other Churches of God. In recent history they have been led by a former member of the Worldwide Church of God, Mr David Dutton.

The Worldwide Church of God

The next major revival of Sabbath keeping in Australia took place in the post-World War II era. The Radio Church of God had been preaching throughout America before and during World War II, and in 1953 commenced preaching by radio in Europe. Through short-wave stations and the *Plain Truth* magazine some Australians had for some years been receiving information on the Sabbath and other subjects. The work in Australia began in earnest on April 14, 1956 when the first *World Tomorrow* broadcast was made on the AM radio band. People needed to send off to England for literature until an office of the Church was established in Sydney on November 12, 1959. The name “Radio Church of God” was changed later to “Worldwide Church of God.”

As with the Adventist movement, the first WCG ministers and leaders hailed from America where they had been publishing many magazines, booklets and a Bible Correspondence course. Again, as with the Adventist movement, the WCG experienced negative publicity from occasional television programme and newspaper articles declaiming against the American influence on the church.

On January 30, 1960, thirty people attended the first service in Sydney. A congregation was established in Melbourne in 1961, in Brisbane in 1963 and in Perth in 1966. Growth in membership was promoted by advertising in the *Readers' Digest* and various women's magazines, and by the regular *World Tomorrow* radio broadcast during the 60's and early 70's. Later the magazine was made available on newsstand outlets throughout the country. At the Church's

zenith 7,000 people were meeting to keep the weekly Sabbath.

Many young people were called into that church during those years, as I was. Just as our current generation “channel surfs” or “surfs the net,” then we “played the radio dial” and discovered the *World Tomorrow* broadcast. Many of those people who were aged anything from 16 to 25 changed their lives at great cost to careers and in spite of family concerns over “this American religion.” Such obstacles and problems were quite similar to those the Adventists had coped with in their early days.

More than a few Aussies attended Ambassador College, primarily to the campus at Bricket Wood in England (the Avondale of the Worldwide Church of God), and many returned as lay leaders, ministers and administrators.

It is interesting to note that in spite of all the media work in preaching the gospel we still had people come into contact with the WCG by picking up a magazine in a garbage tip, or finding an old Plain Truth magazine in a doctor’s surgery, or seeing an old Readers’ Digest in a library. Compare this story with that of the tract spiked on the fence by the early Adventist preacher!

The Church of God (Seventh Day)

There seems to be little history of the Church of God Seventh Day until in the late 70’s when some former WCG members aligned themselves with the Denver Conference. Groups formed in Adelaide, Melbourne, Queensland and a small group in Tasmania. At their height they numbered around 150 people. They became divided over the question of the Sabbath or Sunday after reading works by Robert Brinsmead in the 1980’s. Today only a handful continue to observe the Sabbath.

The Churches of God

Through trials and testing the Churches of God have experienced many painful experiences.

Today there are many groups who trace their roots to the Worldwide Church of God, or at least to the teachings of that Church and the work that God did through Herbert Armstrong.

Such groups include the Global Church of God, Philadelphia Church of God, Church of God International, Independent Church of God, United Church of God, the Christian Biblical Church of God, Christian Churches of God, and of course the many hundreds of people still in the Worldwide Church of God who remain Sabbatarians. The leadership of the Church of God (Seventh Day) in Australia is currently in the hands of former WCG members. Other Sabbath keeping groups at the conference today are led by people who have had their beliefs challenged on the question of the Sabbath by the teaching of the Worldwide Church of God.

Seventh Day Baptists

The witness in New Zealand began as a Bible class of Sabbath keepers, most of whom had left the Seventh-Day Adventist church. After a study of Seventh Day Baptists beliefs, they organised into a church in Auckland in the 1930’s with Francis Johnson as pastor. About the same time another group under the leadership of Edward Barrar was formed at Christchurch. By 1940 both groups were in fellowship with the General Conference.

Those churches in New Zealand have had a strong missionary zeal. In 1946 Pastor Barrar’s son, Ronald, answered the call from pastors in Nyasaland (now Malawi) in Africa and was largely responsible for the reactivation of that mission. The New Zealand churches continued their support of the mission by sending of Ian Ingoe in 1989 as a construction missionary. They have also supported work in India and Nigeria.

The New Zealand churches were instrumental in the formation of churches in Australia. In 1975 a young Seventh-Day Adventist couple in Bundaberg saw inconsistencies in the Adventist beliefs and teaching, and withdrew from that

church. In searching for an alternative church with which to fellowship, they remembered having read of Seventh Day Baptists in their Adventist history. A Baptist visiting from America provided them with an address to which they wrote. The reply from Pastor Alton Wheeler contained literature and the address of Pastor Francis Johnson in Auckland. As a result of these contacts, a church was organised in Bundaberg on August 23, 1975.

The following October, Pastor and Mrs Johnson visited Australia spending two weeks in following other leads. At about this time a Seventh Day Baptist immigrant from the Netherlands, Mrs Vicky Kube and her husband Stefan (whose family had been among early Sabbath keepers in Poland), visited Bundaberg. Later they organised a church meeting in their home in Warrimoo in NSW. Other churches and fellowships were soon organised, including a Spanish-speaking church in Melbourne, with Joseph Alegre as pastor.

There are now about 150 members in six churches. They have an outreach work in Queensland with some young people changing their lives and becoming Sabbath Keepers.

Personal Experience

May I present a little personal in this history at this point?

We had been ministers of the Worldwide Church of God employed for twenty years. We had to make the painful decision to quit because of their moving away from the beliefs and commandments of Almighty God to which we had been called. There were so many articles being produced by the WCG which were against our understanding of the truth. One article in the official newspaper, the *Worldwide News*, devoted some 16 pages to debunking every argument for the Sabbath.

I wrote to my superiors to say I had been called into a Sabbatarian church and ordained as a Sabbatarian minister, and that I could not move

from that position. My wife and I left our former church expecting that this was the end of our religious work. We really had no idea what we would do next. Within weeks people began to contact us from all over the Sydney region. We started services with about 30 people, and a year later there are 150 people in fellowship in the Sydney / Wollongong / Newcastle region.

In the Sydney region there were about 1,000 people observing the Sabbath, Holy Days and other distinct teachings with the Church of God. Now it is sad to say that there wouldn't be much more than 300 people in various Church of God groups in Sydney who are truly Sabbatarians.

If a church loses its distinctions it loses its right to exist. I want to share with you an interesting commentary based on Genesis 3:1-13 which was given to me last year:

:1 Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made, and he said to the church, "Has God indeed said, 'you shall not work on every day of the week'?"

:2 And the church said to the serpent, "we may work on the days of the week,

:3 "But as far as working on the seventh day which God has set apart, God has said, 'You shall not work on it or treat it as your own, nor shall you profane it, lest you sin.'"

:4 And the serpent said to the church, "It is not a sin to work on the seventh day;

:5 "For God knows that there is nothing special about the seventh day and that you are able to decide for yourself what to do on it."

:6 So when the church saw that the seventh day was good for pleasure, profit, and work, that it was not a holy day which God had created, the church took the day and did profane it and gave license to profane it to all church members.

:7 Then the eyes of the church and its members were opened and they knew they did

not have mainstream beliefs; and they adopted false doctrines and made themselves new teachings.

:8 And they read the word of the Lord in the Holy Bible and the church and its members hid themselves from the Lord God among the churches of the world.

:9 Then God called to the church members and said to them, “Where are you?”

:10 So they said, “We read your words in the Bible, and we were afraid because we were not mainstream Christians; and we became as one of them.”

:11 And He said, “Who told you that you were not mainstream Christians? Have you profaned the day which I commanded you that you should not profane?”

:12 Then the church members said, “The church into which you called us, it told us we could profane the Sabbath, and we did.”

:13 And the Lord God said to the church, “What is this you have done?” And the church said, “The serpent deceived us, and we profaned the Sabbath.”

Hebrews 12: 1–2

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

This passage is referring to those people in Hebrews 11 who are held up as examples of faith. This principle applies to us in any era as we look back on Sabbatharians and commandment keepers who have gone before us.

“Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (*and Jesus Christ is also the Lord*

of the Sabbath) who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

We must give credit to those who went before us who have hung onto the truths that we have been given.

The history of God’s people as Sabbath keepers has been a story of people finding the truth and of many moving away from observing this Eternal Day of Rest. For instance there was once a group of 200 meeting in Sydney who were keeping the Sabbath, but their pastor moved into Pentecostalism and even into Sunday worship. All Sabbatarian groups including the Adventists have experienced groups of their members cease keeping the Sabbath.

Our aim as God’s people must be to follow the Holy Words of Life. The book of Revelation contains the warning to “Be Watchful and strengthen the things which remain, That are ready to die” and “Hold fast that which you have, that no one may take your crown.”

I say to all assembled here today, **hold fast to the Holy Day of God**, as many who have been Sabbatharians have lost this precious truth!

Extra Information?

In no way has this presentation meant to be an exhaustive history of all groups. If anyone has more history to add to this please let me know. Please send information to:

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