

The Adventist Sabbath: A Disruptive Force in the American Context

By Edward Allen
Dean and Professor of Religion
Union College

Adventists in the nineteenth century saw themselves as defenders of America. They saw their commitment to the seventh-day Sabbath as an opportunity to express their commitment to “true” Americanism. For them, civil and religious liberty in their most basic forms were essential to the real America. Their support for abolition and advocacy for religious freedom went hand in hand. Since the vast majority of American culture kept Sunday as the Sabbath, the small group of seventh-day Sabbath-keeping Adventists knew their beliefs and practices were disruptive, but they claimed a more profound continuity with America’s most basic freedoms. Almost from the beginning of their existence, they warned of a dystopian time to come when their views and practices concerning the Sabbath would clash with the dominant culture’s revocation of civil and religious liberty. But rather than being traitors to American culture, as their opponents might see them, they argued that they were the defenders of what is most precious about American freedom.

Several influential strands of thought came together to create a Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Sabbath. One of the most significant was a Protestant understanding of biblical authority. William Miller expressed this idea in 1842,

I believe in practical godliness as commanded us in the Scriptures, (which are the only rule of faith and practice,) and that they only will be entitled to heaven and future blessedness, who obey and keep the commandments of God as given us in the Bible, which is the word of God.¹

This belief in the primacy of scriptural authority meant that when believers discovered what the scriptures taught, they were committed to keeping it in the face of whatever creed or clergy taught. Adventists had followed this principle in their understanding of the coming of Jesus in 1843/4, and it became the foundation of their commitment to the seventh-day Sabbath.

The historicist method of interpreting apocalyptic prophecy was a second influential strand of thought. This method has a lengthy history, most notably recorded in L. E. Froom’s *Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*.

Historicists argue that Daniel and Revelation’s sweeping prophetic visions were meant to reveal historical events in a chronological manner. The image of the four empires depicted in

¹ William Miller, “Synopsis of Mr. Miller’s Views,” *The Midnight Cry!*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (November 22, 1842), 2.

Daniel 2 became the foundational paradigm for the rest of the book. Daniel's subsequent visions recapitulate the original vision and expand the description of the latter parts of its chronology. The New Testament book of Revelation picks up the story. It details events after John's time, amplifying Daniel's visions and focusing on the last events before the inbreaking of God's kingdom.

William Miller did not seem to be aware of other ways of interpreting these visions, and historicism became the foundation for his prediction of Jesus' return in 1843/4. The widespread acceptance of Miller's ideas reveals that the historicist method was widely accepted in Christian circles in his time. Early Sabbath-keeping Adventists retained a belief in this system and formed their unique understanding of the Sabbath on this foundation. However, after the Millerite debacle, and perhaps because of it, much of American Christianity moved away from the historicist interpretation toward the allegorical/amillennial approach to the apocalyptic books.

A third essential strand in the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath was the emphasis of American culture on reason and freedom. The Enlightenment's influence on the foundations of the American republic was pervasive. The focus on reason as the way of finding truth was fundamental. Whether in the press, Congress, or the courts of law, the founders of America believed reason should cut through deception, tradition and emotion to discover what was true. In line with this belief, Seventh-day Adventists were confident that historical evidence and reason would clarify the scriptural teaching on the subject of the Sabbath. From the beginning, Sabbath-keeping Adventists believed in a specific chain of reasoning: If one was committed to scripture's authority, if one understood the evidence of history, and if one was dedicated to obeying God rather than creeds or clergy, then a person had no other option but to accept the seventh-day Sabbath. Many Seventh-day Adventists were eager to debate their opponents on the Sabbath subject because they believed that reason and historical evidence were on their side. In the American tradition, they believed that accepting the seventh-day Sabbath meant declaring independence from creeds and traditions in order to follow God's word alone.

With the foundation of scriptural authority, historicist prophetic interpretation, and a commitment to reason and freedom, the catalyst for adopting the seventh-day Sabbath came from Seventh Day Baptists. Their advocacy for the seventh-day Sabbath was advancing just as the Millerite movement reached its climax. However, neither Adventists nor Seventh Day Baptists were interested in listening to the other side's perspective. Seventh Day Baptists were not attracted to the Millerites because they did not keep the seventh-day Sabbath. On the other hand, Millerites considered the seventh-day Sabbath to be unimportant compared to the imminent return of Jesus.

Seventh Day Baptists kept the Sabbath on the seventh day in the same manner that other American Christians kept the Sabbath on the first day of the week. While it certainly was a day of rest from the ordinary labors of life, it was also a day of spiritual enrichment. Much of the actual practices of Sabbath keeping for both groups came from their Puritan ancestors. For the

Puritans, the Sabbath day was the market day of the soul.² It was the time when the godly gathered spiritual nourishment to sustain them throughout the following week. Its actual practices included private prayer, private meditation on the Bible, attending worship and hearing sermons, as well as meeting in small groups for spiritual enrichment and caring for the poor. These practices were seen as normative for both first-day and seventh-day Sabbath keepers.

The marriage of Adventist ideas with the Seventh-day Baptist understanding of the Sabbath came through Rachel Delight Harris (1809-1868, later Rachel Oakes Preston). She shared her convictions with Frederick Wheeler (1811-1910), a local Methodist minister who was a follower of Miller. Wheeler shared his convictions about the Sabbath with the Washington, NH Christian church, and a significant portion of the congregation joined him in keeping the seventh-day Sabbath.

Wheeler's Sabbath ideas caught the attention of Thomas M. Preble (1810-1907). Preble was a Baptist minister who had accepted William Miller's message and had accompanied him on some of his journeys. Preble began to keep the seventh-day Sabbath in the summer of 1844. Shortly afterward, the Sabbath subject was raised in the Millerite periodical *The Midnight Cry* (Sept. 5, 1844, Sept. 12, 1844). There is no way to judge how widespread the agitation for the Sabbath was among the Millerites. Still, these references suggest that the Adventists in Washington NH, along with Preble, shared their Sabbath convictions with their Millerite associates.

It was only after the Great Disappointment on October 22, 1844 that Preble published an article about the subject entitled, *A Tract showing that the Seventh-day should be observed as the Sabbath, instead of the First Day*.

He began the tract by quoting William Miller's support for keeping the 4th commandment, suggesting that his intended audience was primarily Millerites. Preble argued that the Sabbath was a sign between God and the Children of Israel, not only for the literal Jews but also for all the people of God. Preble recognized that ceremonial Sabbaths were meant for the Jews, but the creation Sabbath, enshrined in the moral law, was perpetual. Most American Christian would have agreed with this, and understood Sabbath to be Sunday. But Preble argued that the Sabbath was to be observed on the seventh day. In answer to those who might object, Preble stated that the primary reason usually given for keeping the first day is that Christ arose on that day and met on it with his disciples. He answers this objection, along with those based on I Cor. 14:2 and Rev. 1:10. On the other hand, he argued that Jesus himself said that the Sabbath was made for man, and by that, he meant all humanity. He quoted the numerous places in the book of Acts where Paul met with believers on the Sabbath.

Preble stated that he had examined the historical evidence during the "last six months since I became convicted on this point." He argued that in addition to keeping the seventh-day Sabbath like other Jews, the disciples evidently kept the first day of the week as a festival but never as a Sabbath. Preble wrote that there was controversy in the first centuries about whether both days should be kept or only one; and then there was controversy over whether one should be given up or the other. This controversy increased century after century till A.D. 603 when

² See Dennison, James T. *The Market Day of the Soul: The Puritan Doctrine of the Sabbath in England, 1532-1700*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983.

Pope Gregory passed a law abolishing the seventh day Sabbath and establishing the first day. Preble mentioned that Constantine commanded that the first day of the week should be observed as a Sabbath.

Preble quoted John Calvin's statement that the Old Fathers put in place of the Sabbath the day we call Sunday. He reacted with astonishment at this admission: "*The Old Fathers did it!* Not the God of heaven!! Whom will we obey?" Preble's answer is clear: Obey God.

Since Preble's time, the historical argument has been refined and grounded in a more accurate history. Still, even modern Seventh-day Adventists such as Samuele Bacchiocchi describe a complex series of events that led from the apostolic church's observance of the seventh-day to Christendom's adoption of Sunday as a Sabbath.

Regardless of his historical argument, Preble's conclusion came straight from historicist prophetic interpretation: "Thus we see Dan. vii. 25 fulfilled, the 'little horn' changing 'times and laws.' Therefore it appears to me that all who keep the first day of the week for 'the Sabbath,' are Pope's Sunday Keepers!! and God's Sabbath breakers!!!"

Using evidence and reason and implicitly appealing to the primacy of scriptural authority, Preble's tract sought to free his readers from the remnants of Papal traditions and return them to keeping the Sabbath as it was originally depicted in the fourth commandment. Thus, at its foundation, those who advocated for the seventh-day Sabbath were directly in line with the American obsession with gaining freedom from oppressive and tyrannous authority.

One eager reader of Preble's article in the *Hope of Israel* was Captain Joseph Bates (1792-1872) of New Bedford, Mass.

After the Great Disappointment, having heard of the Sabbath keepers in Washington, NH, he decided to visit them. Arriving at 10 pm one night in the spring of 1845, Bates spent all night talking with Frederick Wheeler and some time the following day with other Adventist Sabbath-keepers in the Washington area. By noon he was satisfied with what he had heard and departed.

As he neared home, Bates met James Hall on the bridge between Fairhaven and New Bedford, Mass. Hall asked him, "Captain Bates, what is the news?" Bates replied, "The news is, the seventh-day is the Sabbath and we ought to keep it." Hall was intrigued, studied the subject with Bates, and began to observe the seventh-day two weeks later. Once convinced, Bates became a tireless activist for his Sabbath beliefs.

By August of 1846, he had decided to write a tract about the Sabbath, but he had very little money. A letter with a ten-dollar donation arrived that enabled him to arrange with the local abolitionist printer, Benjamin Lindsey, for the first edition of his tract, *The Seventh day Sabbath, a Perpetual Sign*.

Bates' tract was built on Preble's material but broke new ground. He connected the Sabbath with the second coming of Jesus, arguing that the Sabbath was among the "all things" that needed to be restored before the second advent (Acts 3:21). Restoration of the true Sabbath was needed, according to Bates, since both Imperial and Papal Rome had changed the seventh-day Sabbath to the first day of the week.

Bate's use of restorationist language makes evident his allegiance to the Restorationist movement that sought to return to "primitive Christianity." His argument was, "If primitive Christians kept the seventh-day Sabbath, we should too."

Bates also made a clearer and more detailed case for the creation origins of the Sabbath than Preble did, answering a multitude of objects to it. In his argument, he quoted Grotius, Philo, and Josephus on the seven-day week's widespread nature. In addition, he quoted Heman Humphrey, President of Amherst College, who wrote that God instituted the Sabbath on the seventh day of the first week and gave it to humanity's first parents.³

After countering the argument against the Sabbath from the writings of Paul in Romans and Colossians Bates attempted to refute all the arguments for the change of the Sabbath from the seventh-day to the first day, interacting with respected and well-known authorities of his day.⁴

Bates spread his publication far and wide among his Millerite Adventist acquaintances. Among those who read it were many who had retained their belief that God had led the Adventists in their expectation of Jesus' return on October 22, 1844. During 1845 and early 1846, these Millerites concluded that Miller's calculations pointing to 1844 were correct, but the event predicted was vastly different from what he taught. Instead of Jesus returning in glory to cleanse the earth with fire, the event predicted was His movement as High Priest from the holy place in the heavenly sanctuary to the most holy place. That new ministry involved a judgment that would eventually result in Jesus' return to earth on the clouds of heaven at some unknown time in the future.⁵

Many of the Millerites who accepted this understanding of the sanctuary also came to accept the visions of Ellen Harmon (1827-1915) as divinely inspired. The account of her first vision in December of 1844 affirmed God's leading in the "Midnight Cry," their term for the October 22 movement. It also taught the literal but future return of Jesus, the reality of a material heaven, and Jesus' leading of their little flock of believers. Each of these points countered a fanatical tendency among other Millerites. After Ellen Harmon's marriage to James White on August 30, 1846, the couple received a copy of Bates' Sabbath tract and studied it together. Within six months, they began to keep the seventh-day Sabbath.

³ Heman Humphrey, *Essays upon the Origin, Perpetuity, Change, and Proper Observance of the Sabbath*. New York and Boston, 1829.

⁴ Citations include *The British Critic, A Quarterly Theological Review and Ecclesiastical Recorder* of January 1830, quoted in William Logan Fisher, *History of the Institution of the Sabbath Day*, Philadelphia, 1845, (p. 84, 2nd ed. 1859). Other citations include *Charles Buck Theological Dictionary* (London, 1802), Dr. Philip Doddridge (1702-1751) *Commentary*, Dr. William Jenks, *Comprehensive Commentary* (Boston, 1824).

⁵ The most detailed discussion of this idea was published by O. R. L. Crosier (1820-1913) in the Millerite publication *The Day Star Extra* of February 7, 1846.

Meanwhile, Joseph Bates had been working on a revision to *The Seventh-day Sabbath a Perpetual Sign*. The publication of the revision in January of 1847 marked a milestone in the development of Sabbath-keeping Adventist teachings. Drawing on the imagery of the three angels in Revelation 14:6-13, Bates found a depiction of the Advent people's experience. He stated that the first angel's message about judgment "without any doubt represents all those who were preaching the second Advent doctrine since 1840" (p. 58). The second angel's call to come out of Babylon represented, according to Bates, a call for the departure of God's people from the professed churches who refused to accept the Millerite message. Bates then stated that at the end of the third angel's message, "John describes another very different company... keeping the commandments of God and the faith or testimony of Jesus; who are they? Why, the very same that came out of Babylon." According to Bates, this company was not keeping most of the commandments, but all of them. Bates identified this group with the Sabbath-keeping companies that had arisen in the two years prior to the publication of the second edition of his tract. He also equated them with the remnant described in Rev. 12:17 as those who are "keeping the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus."

Bates then asked, What about the thousands of people who are looking for the coming of Jesus, but who don't keep the seventh-day Sabbath? He answered that only two groups of people are described in Revelation 13 and 14. First are those who keep the commandments, and, second, are those who have the mark of the beast. For Bates, the first day of the week as a Sabbath was "a mark of the beast." Bates then argued that before Jesus can return, the seventh-day Sabbath must be restored. Quoting Isaiah 58, he suggested that the movement he was leading would bring a "repairing of the breach" by the restoration of the true Sabbath day. Concluding the second edition of his work, he wrote, "That there will yet be a mighty struggle about the restoring and keeping the seventh day Sabbath, that will test every living soul that enters the gates of the city, cannot be disputed. It is evident the Devil is making war on all such. See Rev. xii: 17. 'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.' Amen."

The connections Bates made between the seventh-day Sabbath and the prophecies in Revelation 13 and 14 were a startling departure from both Millerite ideas and the Christian consensus of the day. Bates, James and Ellen White, and many in their circle believed that only those who had responded to the "Midnight Cry" would be saved when Jesus returned. They expected that return momentarily. In contrast to the idea of the immediate return of Jesus, Bates' interpretation described a crisis before Jesus' return centered on the Sabbath. Bates' idea implied that there was more time before He returned, and significant events would precede His coming.

Placing the seventh-day Sabbath at the center of the final crisis before the second advent was a radical departure from what any other Christians were teaching at the time. In fact, the whole idea that humanity would be separated before the second coming into those who kept all the commandments and those who didn't was totally out of the mainstream. After the failure of Millerite pre-millennialism, most Christians held that the world would get progressively better until Christ was able to come and reign over a perfected human society.

The publication of the second edition of Bates' *The Sabbath a Perpetual Sign* was followed by Ellen White's report of a vision on April 7, 1847 that connected the sanctuary with the seventh-day Sabbath. She described being ushered into the heavenly temple to view the holy place and its furnishings. Then Jesus took her into the most holy place where she saw the ark of the covenant and the brightness of God's glory. The ark was opened, and she saw the two tables of the Ten Commandments. Her description of them is the classic statement that connects the Sanctuary and Jesus' ministry in the holy of holies to the Sabbath:

“On one table was four, and on the other six. The four on the first table shone brighter than the other six. But the fourth (the Sabbath commandment) shone above them all; for the Sabbath was set apart to be kept in honor of God's holy name. The holy Sabbath looked glorious—a halo of glory was all around it. I saw that the Sabbath was not nailed to the cross. If it was, the other nine commandments were; and we are at liberty to go forth and break them all, as well as to break the fourth. I saw that God had not changed the Sabbath, for He never changes. But the Pope had changed it from the seventh to the first day of the week; for he was to change times and laws.”⁶

After describing how the Sabbath-keeping people would come under persecution, she contrasted them with those who would receive the mark of the beast, as depicted in Revelation 13. Her description is graphic and detailed, but it follows the outline of Bates' interpretations which had been published three months earlier. It is clear, therefore, that Ellen White's influence was not foundational to the adoption of the seventh day, nor was it essential to developing the unique Adventist understanding of it.

The final contours of the Sabbath-keeping Adventist understanding of the seventh-day Sabbath were centered on three interconnected foci. First and most important was their deep commitment to the primacy of biblical authority. They became convinced that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance. They also were sure that it remained a biblical commandment from the time of creation to the time of the new heavens and the new earth. In addition, they concluded that the change of the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday was invalid because it arose in history as solely a human initiative.

The second center of focus was the Sabbath's relationship to the sanctuary. Their understanding of the sanctuary explained their deep disappointment in 1844 and gave them a new purpose, vision, and mission. Jesus had entered a new phase of his ministry, and he had entrusted to them a new message that would prepare a people for His return. Their understanding of the sanctuary gave them a message to proclaim to the world. That message came from Jesus in the holy of holies in the heavenly sanctuary where He was seeking to exalt His law and prepare a people who would keep all His commandments. These people would stand firm in their allegiance to Him in the face of intense opposition. They believed His prayers in the heavenly sanctuary would sustain them to the end.

⁶ “Broadside 3,” April 7, 1847, originally recorded in a letter written by Ellen White to Joseph Bates. The material was later published in *Early Writings*, p. 32ff.

The third focal point was the three angel's messages in Revelation 14. The early Sabbath-keeping Adventists identified themselves as the bearers of these messages. In fact, "the three angel's messages" became a shorthand way of speaking of their unique teachings. They understood these messages within the context of Revelation 13 and its beasts. Following historicist prophetic teachings, they identified the beast from the sea as the papacy. They built upon this idea with a radical innovation, identifying the second beast, the beast from the earth, as the United States. They pointed to creedalism and slavery as evidence of its oppressive and imperial-like nature. They saw themselves as resisting the oppression of the popular churches to enforce Sunday observance. They ultimately saw themselves as the people who, in the end, would be the only ones keeping God's commandments and having the faith of Jesus. Because of their seventh-day Sabbath keeping, they alone would be ready for Jesus to return.

What a radical discontinuity this was from both the first-day Sabbath keepers and the Seventh Day Baptists!

This astonishing perspective gave rise to both hubris and humility. Some of the early Sabbath-keeping Adventists were so certain that they were right and the rest of the world was wrong that they rejected other Christians as apostates, sought to combat what they saw as disobedient rebellion, and developed an insular and sect-like mindset. On the other hand, some saw themselves as the servants of God sent to serve the rest of humanity, bringing help, healing, and hope to the world. They were outward-looking, believing that they were merely the bearers of God's everlasting gospel (Rev. 14:6) and that He would use them to warn the world of the issues at stake in the final clash between human and divine governments.

This unique sense of mission highlights another remarkable aspect of early Sabbath-keeping Adventists. They saw themselves as the upholders of the most fundamental American value—freedom. The rise of Adventist Sabbath-keeping occurred in a context where Americans were convinced that God had called their nation to be a "city set on a hill" that would act as a beacon to oppressed and enslaved people everywhere. Adventists took this idea to heart and identified themselves as the remnant of true Americanism, those who would uphold both physical liberty for slaves and religious liberty before the world. They affirmed God's calling of America to its unique mission of providing liberty and justice for all, but they were not optimistic about America's ability to fulfill that mission.⁷

The understanding of the Sabbath these Adventists began to advocate put them at odds with the dominant power structures of their day. Sunday was a legal holiday in most places. There were controversies in mid-1800s America over publishing Sunday newspapers, opening parks and museums on Sunday, and operating public transportation on Sunday. When Adventists identified the United States as the beast from the earth in Revelation 13 and predicted that it would abandon its commitment to religious liberty, Sabbath-keeping Adventists offered a stinging critique of the United States. They presented it as a slaveholding imperial power seeking

⁷ See A. T. Jones, *The Two Republics or Rome and the United States of America* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1891), 663. Jones writes that the United States government was "the first national government upon the earth that accords with the principles announced by Jesus Christy for mankind and for civil government."

to coerce the conscience of those who would not uphold Sunday as sacred. They claimed allegiance to the liberty affirmed in the United States Constitution, and they believed that they would lead the resistance when the United States abandoned its commitment to religious liberty and sought to enforce the religious observance of Sunday.

At first, the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the Sabbath was based on the same arguments that Seventh-day Baptists used to support the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath. However, Joseph Bates originated a synthesis of logical and biblical proofs, historical inquiry, and prophetic interpretation that advocated a unique understanding of the Sabbath. The result was a view of the Sabbath that was not merely a legal obligation to obey the fourth commandment but also encompassed Christ's work in the heavenly sanctuary and the opportunity to be part of a global prophetic movement that would prepare the world for Jesus' return. The result was the creation of what became the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Sabbath was no longer just a forgotten obligation to be urged upon Christendom. It was now the center of their lives and the reason for their existence.