

Sabbath Reformers

These pages were taken from an earlier book of Ellen White: *The Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4, p. 179-186. That book was a precursor to the later and more popular book, *The Great Controversy*.

Some of the history contained in *The Spirit of Prophecy* was left out of *The Great Controversy*, so as to keep it's length down, and make it more accessible to the general public. Nevertheless, the history is interesting, and worthy of reproduction.

Among the reformers of the church an honourable place should be given to those who stood in vindication of a truth generally ignored, even by Protestants—those who maintained the validity of the fourth commandment, and the obligation of the Bible Sabbath. When the Reformation swept back the darkness that had rested down on all Christendom, Sabbath-keepers were brought to light in many lands.

No classes of Christians have been treated with greater injustice by popular historians than have those who honoured the Sabbath. They have been stigmatised as semi-Judaizers, or denounced as superstitious and fanatical. The arguments which they presented from the Scriptures in support of their faith were met as such arguments are still met, with the cry, "The Fathers, the Fathers: Ancient tradition, the authority of the church!"

Luther and his labourers accomplished a noble work for God; but, coming as they did from the Roman Church, having themselves believed and advocated her doctrines, it was not to be expected that they would discern all these errors. It was their work to break the fetters of Rome, and to give the Bible to the world; yet there were important truths which they failed to discover, and grave errors which they did not renounce.

Most of them continued to observe the Sunday with other papal festivals. They did not, indeed, regard it as possessing divine authority, but believed that it should be observed as a generally accepted day of worship.

There were some among them, however, who honoured the Sabbath of the fourth commandment. Such was the belief and practise of Carlstadt, and there were others who united with him.

John Frith, who aided Tyndale in the translation of the Scriptures, and who was martyred for his faith, thus states his views respecting the Sabbath:

“The Jews have the word of God for their Saturday, since it is the seventh day, and they were commanded to keep the seventh day solemn. And we have not the word of God for us, but rather against us; for we keep not the seventh day, as the Jews do, but the first, which is not commanded by God's law.”

A hundred years later, John Trask acknowledged the obligation of the true Sabbath, and employed voice and pen in its defense. He was soon called to account by the persecuting power of the Church of England. He declared the sufficiency of the Scriptures as a guide for religious faith, and maintained that civil authorities should not control the conscience in matters which concern salvation.

He was brought for trial before the infamous tribunal of the Star Chamber, where a long discussion was held respecting the Sabbath. Trask would not depart from the injunctions and commandments of God to obey the commandments of men. He was therefore condemned, and sentenced to be set upon the pillory, and thence to be publicly whipped to the fleet, there to remain a prisoner. This cruel sentence was executed, and after a time his spirit was broken. He endured his sufferings in the prison for one year, and then recanted. Oh that he had suffered on, and won a martyr's crown!

The wife of Trask was also a Sabbath-keeper. She was declared, even by her enemies, to be a woman endowed with many virtues worthy the imitation of all Christians. She was a schoolteacher of acknowledged excellence, and was noted for

her carefulness in dealing with the poor.

“This”, said her enemies, “she professed to do out of conscience as believing she must one day come to be judged for all things done in the flesh. Therefore she resolved to go by the safest rule, rather against than for her private interest.”

Yet it was declared that she possessed a spirit of strange, unparalleled obstinacy in adhering to her own opinions, which spoiled her. In truth, she chose to obey the word of God in preference to the traditions of men.

At last this noble woman was seized and thrust into prison. The charge brought against her was that she taught only five days in the week and rested on Saturday, it being known that she did it in obedience to the fourth commandment. She was accused of no crime; the motive of her act was the sole ground of complaint.

She was often visited by her persecutors, who employed their most wily arguments to induce her to renounce her faith. In reply, she begged them to show from the Scriptures that she was in error, and urged that if Sunday were really a holy day, the fact must be stated in the word of God. But in vain she asked for Bible-testimony. She was exhorted to smother her convictions, and believe what the church declared to be right.

She refused to purchase liberty by renouncing the truth. The promises of God sustained her faith:

“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer. Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison that ye may be tried.”

“Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life.” Revelation 2:10.

For nearly sixteen years this feeble woman remained a prisoner, in privation and great suffering. The book of God alone can testify what she endured during those weary years. Faithfully she witnessed for the truth; her patience and forti-

tude failed not until she was released by death.

Her name was cast out as evil on earth, but it is honoured in the heavenly records. She was registered among the number who have been hunted, maligned, cast out, imprisoned, martyred; “of whom the world was not worthy.” (Hebrews 11:38) “And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make My jewels.” Malachi 3:17.

God has, in His providence, preserved the history of a few of those who suffered for their obedience to the fourth commandment; but there were many, of whom the world knows nothing, who for the same truth endured persecution and martyrdom.

Those who oppressed these followers of Christ called themselves Protestants; but they abjured the fundamental principle of Protestantism—the Bible and the Bible only as the rule of faith and practice. The testimony of the Scriptures they thrust from them with disdain.

This spirit still lives, and it will increase more and more as we near the close of time. Those who honour the Bible Sabbath are even now pronounced willful and stubborn by a large share of the Christian world, and the time is not far distant when the spirit of persecution will be manifested against them.

In the seventeenth century there were several Sabbatarian churches in England, while there were hundreds of Sabbath-keepers scattered throughout the country. Through their labours this truth was planted in America at an early date.

Less than half a century after the landing of the pilgrims at Plymouth, the Sabbath-keepers of London sent one of their number to raise the standard of Sabbath reform in the new world. This missionary held that the ten commandments as they were delivered from Mount Sinai are moral and immutable, and that it was the antichristian power which

thought to change times and laws, that had changed the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day. In Newport, R. I., several church members embraced these views, yet continued for some years in the church with which they had previously been connected.

Finally there arose difficulty between the Sabbatarians and the Sunday observers, and the former were compelled to withdraw from the church, that they might peaceably keep God's holy day. Soon after, they entered into an organization, thus forming the first Sabbath-keeping church in America.

These Sabbath-keepers had flattered themselves that they could obey the fourth commandment and yet remain connected with Sunday observers. It was a blessing to them and to after generations that such a union could not exist; for had it continued, it would eventually have caused the light of God's holy Sabbath to go out in darkness.

Some years later, a church was formed in New Jersey. A zealous observer of Sunday, having reproved a person for labouring on that day, was asked for his authority from the Scriptures. On searching for this he found, instead, the divine command for keeping the seventh day, and he began at once to observe it. Through his labours a Sabbatarian church was raised up.

From that time the work gradually extended, until thousands began the observance of the Sabbath. Among the seventh-day Baptists of this country have been men eminent for talent, learning, and piety. They have accomplished a great and good work as they have stood for two hundred years in defense of the ancient Sabbath.

In the present century (1884) few have taken a nobler stand for this truth than was taken by Elder J. W. Morton, whose labours and writings in favour of the Sabbath have led many to its observance. He was sent as a missionary to Haiti by the Reformed Presbyterians. Sabbatarian publications fell into his

hands, and after giving the subject a careful examination, he became satisfied that the fourth commandment requires the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath. Without waiting to consider his own interests, he immediately determined to obey God. He returned home, made known his faith, was tried for heresy, and expelled from the Reformed Presbyterian Church without being allowed to present the reasons for his position.

The course of the Presbyterian synod in condemning Elder Morton without granting him a hearing, is an evidence of the spirit of intolerance which still exists even among those claiming to be Protestant Reformers.

The infinite God, whose throne is in the heavens, condescends to address His people, "Come now, and let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18); but frail, erring men proudly refuse to reason with their brethren. They stand ready to censure one who accepts any light which they have not received as though God had pledged Himself to give no more light to any one than He had given to them.

This is the course pursued by opposers of the truth in every age. They forget the declaration of the Scriptures "Light is sown for the righteous." Psalms 97:11. "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." Proverbs 1:18. It is a sad thing when a people claiming to be reformers cease to reform.

If professed Christians would but carefully and prayerfully compare their views with the Scriptures, laying aside all pride of opinion and desire for the supremacy, a flood of light would be shed upon the churches now wandering in the darkness of error.

As fast as His people can bear it, the Lord reveals to them their errors in doctrine and their defects of character. From age to age He has raised up men and qualified them to do a special work needed in their time. But to none of these did He

commit all the light which was to be given to the world.

Wisdom does not die with them. It was not the will of God that the work of reform should cease with the going out of Luther's life; it was not His will that at the death of the Wesleys the Christian faith should become stereotyped. The work of reform is progressive. Go forward, is the command of our great Leader, forward unto victory.

We shall not be accepted and honoured of God in doing the same work that our fathers did. We do not occupy the position which they occupied in the unfolding of truth. In order to be accepted and honoured as they were, we must improve the light which shines upon us, as they improved that which shone upon them; we must do as they would have done, had they lived in our day. Luther and the Wesleys were reformers in their time. It is our duty to continue the work of reform. If we neglect to heed the light, it will become darkness, and the degree of darkness will be proportionate to the light rejected.

The prophet of God declares that in the last days knowledge shall be increased. There are new truths to be revealed to the humble seeker. The teachings of God's word are to be freed from the errors and superstition with which they have been encumbered.

Doctrines that are not sanctioned by the Scriptures have been widely taught, and many have honestly accepted them; but when the truth is revealed, it becomes the duty of everyone to accept it. Those who allow worldly interests, desire for popularity, or pride of opinion, to separate them from the truth, must render an account to God for their neglect.