

A SUMMARY SKETCH OF SEVENTH DAY BAPTISTS 1650 - PRESENT

Seventh Day Baptists are a covenant people based on the concepts of regenerate membership, believer's baptism, congregational polity, and scriptural basis for belief and practice. Seventh Day Baptists have presented the Sabbath as a sign of obedience in a covenant relationship with God and not as a condition of salvation. They have not condemned those who do not accept the Sabbath but are curious at the apparent inconsistency of those who claim to accept the Bible as their source of faith and practice, yet have followed traditions of the church instead.

Seventh Day Baptists date their origin with the mid-17th century Separatist movement in England. With the renewed emphasis on the Scriptures for Free Church doctrine and practice, men such as James Ockford, William Saller, Peter Chamberlain, Francis Bampfield, and Edward and Joseph Stennett concluded that the keeping of the seventh day Sabbath was an inescapable requirement of biblical Christianity. Some maintained membership within the Baptist fellowship and simply added the private Sabbath observance to their other shared convictions. As the power of the state was used to enforce conformity to a common day of worship, separation became necessary. The first separate church of record was the Mill Yard church founded about 1650 in London.

The study of the Scriptures in America brought Samuel and Tacy Hubbard to the Baptist principle of believer's baptism in 1647, and membership in the First Baptist Church of Newport, Rhode Island. Beginning in 1665, their family and several others became convinced of the seventh day Sabbath and joined in fellowship with Stephen Mumford and his wife who had held Sabbath convictions while members of a Baptist church in Tewkesbury, England. When two couples gave up their Sabbath convictions, the others found it difficult to share communion with them within First Baptist. Thus five members joined with the Mumfords in a covenant relationship, establishing the first Seventh Day Baptist Church in America in December, 1671. Even after this separation, close fellowship with other Baptists remained.

A similar separation occurred in 1705 in Piscataway, New Jersey, when a deacon of the Baptist Church, Edmund Dunham, became convinced of the biblical basis for Sabbath observance. Dunham and sixteen others withdrew to form their own church. A third group of churches came out of the Keithian split from Quakerism in the Philadelphia area about 1700. A pietistic movement among German immigrants was influenced by this third group. This led to the formation of a sister conference known as German Seventh Day Baptists which founded the cloisters of Ephrata, Pennsylvania about 1728. From these beginnings, Seventh Day Baptists followed the westward migration, arriving on the Pacific Coast by 1900.

Seventh Day Baptists have been characterized by their participation in missionary activity, educational endeavors, ecumenicity and civic responsibility. The missionary spirit led to the formation of a General Conference in 1802. In preserving the autonomy of the local church, the Conference has relied upon societies for implementing a range of missions, publications, and education. Beginning in 1821 the denomination has had an almost continuous publication, with the current house organ, *The Sabbath Recorder*, published unbroken since 1844.

Several early missionary societies encouraged pastors to make extended journeys on the home field. The current Missionary Society was formed in 1843 and four years later missionaries began an effective mission in China, embracing both medical and educational phases until the Communist takeover in 1950. Most of the foreign missions of the twentieth century have been in response to the "Macedonian call" in response to Sabbathkeeping groups who have cried out, "Come over and help us." This led to missions world-wide in such places as Jamaica and Guyana in the Caribbean region; Malawi and Ghana in Africa; India, Burma (Myanmar) and the Philippines in Asia; Australia and New Zealand in Oceania, and scattered responses in other areas. In 1965 a World Federation of Seventh Day Baptist Conferences was formed which has included more than twenty member conferences.

Seventh Day Baptists' insistence on an enlightened conscience for beliefs and practice led to the formation of an Education Society and the establishment of schools or academies as they migrated into the frontiers. These schools were never limited to members of the denomination but served the areas where public education had not become readily available. Three of these schools later became colleges

at Alfred, New York; Milton, Wisconsin and Salem, West Virginia. The desire for an educated clergy led to the establishment of a seminary at Alfred University in 1871. These schools were among the pioneers in women's education at the college and seminary level. What the academies and colleges did for higher education was duplicated for both children and adults in the local church through the Sabbath Schools and material prepared for them. Though these institutions of higher education met with difficulty in the mid-twentieth century and gradually either closed or sacrificed their affiliation to Seventh Day Baptists, the educational impulse remains genetic to Seventh Day Baptists.

The sense of ecumenicity present in the earliest churches was continued as Seventh Day Baptists were charter members of such organizations as the Federal, the National and the World Councils of Churches. The denomination withdrew from these ties in the 1970s when the direction of these bodies appeared to violate the autonomy of the local church and other principles of Baptist thought and practice. The withdrawal strengthened their relationship with other Baptists in such organizations as the Baptist World Alliance, the North American Baptist Fellowship, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and related kindred groups involving women and societal interests.

Throughout their history, Seventh Day Baptists have had a strong sense of civic responsibility. Several leaders of the first churches in England held responsible positions in the government. In America both Richard and Samuel Ward were governors of Rhode Island in the eighteenth century, the latter serving in the Continental Congress in 1775-1776. Others served in government at various levels, including Congress where Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia represented his state for forty years in either the House or the Senate beginning in 1933. Many have served in the armed forces, including chaplains in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War II, and the "War on Terror". The General Conference has taken strong stands on social issues such as temperance, human life, and sexual immorality and has urged its members to embody those principles and practices which would make for a more Christian society.

Due to an emphasis on freedom of thought and conscience, Seventh Day Baptists have represented a wide diversity of theological thought. Their common bond of the Sabbath enabled them to avoid a split during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s. In fact, the Seventh Day Baptist General Conference of USA and Canada has never split over a doctrinal issue. For most of that history, the denomination has been rural-oriented but has found in more recent years its greatest growth in developing urban ministries, with significant efforts over the last forty years yielding new works in urban areas. Contemporary efforts to plant new churches reflect the Conference's continued devotion to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Seventh Day Baptist General Conference of the USA and Canada is organized as an association of churches. Voting on most issues brought before the annual sessions is done by delegates from member churches. In addition, the annual sessions serve as a time of program evaluation, vision-casting, fellowship, and worship. A five member General Council is empowered to act for the Conference between sessions and prepare budget and program emphases.

As Seventh Day Baptists have entered the digital age, they have expanded their fellowship around the world by the use of new technology, growing the bonds of Christian brotherhood which have long reinforced their fellowship. Most of the ministries of the Conference maintain websites and other internet presences in order to increase their visibility and witness. The General Conference of the United States and Canada's website is www.seventhdaybaptist.org. They can also be found on many of the social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Seventh Day Baptists have faced the increased secularization and individualization of society, especially in the global West, but globalism has strengthened the movement overall through broadening perspectives and providing necessary counterbalancing voices. Increasingly, Seventh Day Baptists are a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic people, representing a broader cross-section of "the nations." Though challenges still remain for their work around the world, Seventh Day Baptists remain committed to God and the guiding of the Holy Spirit at work in their consciences as they strive to live out the mandate of the Great Commission to teach, baptize, and witness throughout the entire world.

The General Conference offices for the USA and Canada are located at 3120 Kennedy Road in Janesville, WI. The allied Seventh Day Baptist Missionary Society has offices in Westerly, Rhode Island. Ten geographical associations help strengthen local fellowship, youth activities and witness.