

Should the Sabbatarian Church of God Movement Accept the Baptisms of Sunday Observers?

By Eric Snow

Recently, some ministers in the Sabbatarian Church of God (COG) Movement have accepted the baptisms performed by Sunday-keeping churches as valid in God's sight. Naturally enough, they could cite the personal example of Herbert W. Armstrong (HWA), who was baptized by a Baptist minister during the general process of his calling into the COG movement. This controversy naturally leads to the wider issue of whether someone can truly be a Christian yet not keep the Saturday Sabbath. Then, if someone can be saved as a Christian while attending a Sunday-observing Church, then why should he or she convert to a COG group? Here it will be maintained that only baptisms followed by the laying on of hands in a group keeping the Sabbath and Holy Days are fundamentally valid in God's sight.

What makes a man or woman a Christian? Does the Bible itself define how someone is Christ's or not? Perhaps the most central text is Romans 8:9: "Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His." For as Paul goes on to explain, the Spirit is what resurrects a Christian, and gives him or her eternal life (verses 10-11). The Holy Spirit is a token, guarantee, or earnest payment for salvation (II Cor. 5:5). Its presence in a Christian gives him or her eternal life conditionally.

But we can't directly sense the Holy Spirit's presence in another person, for it's of a distinct, non-physical, intangible dimension that we can't directly touch, hear, or see. So how do we know whether a person who says he or she is a Christian actually has it? For anyone could run around, label himself (or herself) "Christian," and then others would have to extend the right hand of spiritual fellowship to him regardless of his behavior. Ultimately, decisions about someone's state of conversion have to be based not on words only, but on his or her deeds as well. As the Apostle John wrote: "And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfect. By this we know that we are in Him" (I John 2:3-5). The Fourth Evangelist also observed (I John 2:3-5): "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfect in him. By this we know that we are in Him." Someone who keeps systematically violating God's law shouldn't be deemed a Christian, as John revealed: "No one who is born [or begotten] of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born [or begotten] of God" (I John 3:9; cf. v. 7; 2:29; 5:18).

Does God give the Holy Spirit, the presence of which is a requirement for salvation (II Cor. 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; John 6:63; cf. Col. 1:27; I John 3:24; 2:27-28), to those who systematically disobey intentionally major parts of His law? What did Peter and the other apostles say (Acts 5:32)? “The Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.” Of course, all Christians will sin (I John 1:8-10). But a distinction has to be made between two categories of people: It’s one thing for people to sin out of weakness while admitting (perhaps only later upon self-reflection or hearing correction from others) that their conduct was sinful. It’s quite another for people to learn about the major laws of God, such as the Sabbath, tithing, and the holy days, and deliberately violate them as a matter of intentional course. For although a Sabbatarian may sin by (say) committing adultery or neglecting the poor, he isn’t looking at the applicable laws of God in question, and deeming them null and void a priori, which would amount to deliberate rebellion in God’s sight. Even raw ignorance of these laws won’t allow someone to have salvation, for the ignorant can’t be deemed to be saved even if God may not always assess the full weight of the sins they commit against them (John 9:39-41; 15:22; Luke 12:47-48; Romans 1:18-32). Someone has to know God in order to be saved (John 4:22, 24; cf. I John 2:21-27). When proclaiming the truth of God to total pagans in Athens, Paul said God wanted everyone to repent: “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all [not just some—EVS] men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

Consider the main weight of the statement the man born blind, but healed by Jesus, when replying to his questioners (John 9:31): “Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him.” Obviously, someone that is unsaved, but is repenting after being called, God will hear, and give him or her salvation. God heard and justified the humbled tax collector, not the self-righteous Pharisee, in Christ’s parable (Luke 18:9-14). And undoubtedly God has been merciful, and helps uncalled people in the world who know some of the truth by answering various requests they make. After all, He gives rain to the both the righteous and unrighteous out of a sense of mercy and love (Matt. 5:44-45), even if they may lack the requisite faith and obedience for answered prayer (James 1:6-8; 4:2-3; Mark 11:23-24; I John 3:22). But it’s quite a stretch then to assume God will give the Holy Spirit to those who have knowingly chosen a course in life that systematically and deliberately disobey various major laws of His. True, it may well be, some Sunday keepers keep various of the Ten Commandments or observe other principles of God’s law better than various Sabbatarians do, except for the Old Testament laws they deem to be abolished. Likewise, some Sabbatarians who aim to obey the Sabbath, tithing, and the Holy Days aren’t saved, for they are tares in God’s wheat field (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43). True Christians may routinely fellowship with the former after they were baptized and received the laying on of hands for the Holy Spirit, and even wash their feet at the Passover, but the “tares” still aren’t saved.

Does Scripture ever recognize the practice of rebaptizing people? Notice that John’s baptism wasn’t enough for salvation, according to Paul: “John baptized with the

baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus” (Acts 19:4). After hearing this, these people were then baptized in the name of Jesus (v. 5), for they hadn’t known enough the first time they were baptized to be deemed saved by God by it. These people also needed to receive the Holy Spirit, which they had not even heard of (v. 2). So God gave them the Holy Spirit via Paul’s laying on of hands on them (v. 6). And not just anyone can be used to give others the Holy Spirit, as Simon the Sorcerer perceived. After Phillip had baptized people in Samaria, Peter and John had to be sent up to give the people the Holy Spirit, which they did by the laying on of hands (Acts 8:12, 14-17). And besides the initial spectacular miracles in which the outpouring of the Spirit was used to start the Church of God with a bang (Acts 2:1-4, 16-18), and which showed a special blessing was upon the first gentiles to come into the church (Acts 10:44-47; 11:16-18), the normal way the Holy Spirit was given was by the laying on of hands (Acts 9:17; I Tim. 4:14; II Tim. 1:6). So then the questions need to be asked: How many Sunday-keepers today were baptized by immersion at a responsible age (say, age 17 or older)? How many underwent the laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit after baptism? How many lived a committed, responsible Christian life after being baptized? Obviously, all those sprinkled as infants or even dunked as young children need to be eliminated as having become saved. But, again, can people who deliberately violate God’s law as a matter of policy, not just momentary physical weakness followed by repentance, be saved? Even if they were just ignorant of these laws, that doesn’t appear to be enough of an excuse to allow them to be saved. If God is truly working with people, He will lead them to greater and greater levels of truth if they humbly accept correction at each level, which means He wouldn’t leave truly called people permanently in Sunday-keeping, non-pacifist churches anyway.

Furthermore, can we honestly believe that churches that allow their members to hate and kill fellow Christians or other people on the battlefield are true churches of God? Did not John write (I John 3:15; cf. 2:9-11; 4:20-21): “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murdered has eternal life abiding in him”? Can men who kill other men in war really claim to love their neighbor as themselves, to be practicing the Golden Rule, to be turning the cheek? Can they lawfully kill their enemies when their enemies still wish to live themselves? The mind boggles at the mental leaps and twists required. Just because a human government allows or orders Christians to go off and kill total strangers who live hundreds or thousands of miles away doesn’t mean such killing is without sin (see Acts 4:19; 5:29).

Now interesting counter-arguments to the above reasonings can be presented from the life of Herbert W. Armstrong (HWA), the spiritual teacher God used to assemble His truth together for the Church of God during these end times before His Son returns, and to proclaim publicly a non-Trinitarian Christian Sabbatarianism to more people than anyone else has since the first century A.D.. After having been raised a Friend/Quaker, a denomination that doesn’t practice water baptism, HWA was baptized by a Baptist minister. HWA also had a most interesting encounter with a Sunday-keeper who was used by God to heal HWA’s wife, Loma. He later lost the gift of healing after rejecting the Sabbath truth Mr. Armstrong revealed to him. (See Autobiography, Vol. 1, pp. 315, 319, 326-331, 340-344). But here we’re faced with an interesting issue: How much

should we use history and/or personal spiritual experience and/or others' spiritual experiences to determine doctrines, as a matter of theological epistemology? We need to be cautious about doing so. For example, someone could argue that one can't trace, using extant historical records, a holy day/festival keeping set of Christians down through all the centuries since A.D. 100. Therefore, someone may conclude, God doesn't require the festivals as any kind of condition for Christians to be truly saved. But, of course, what few records of their church history that were recorded and have survived to the present for the period 100-1600 A.D. were largely recorded by hostile outsiders. The Roman Catholics who persecuted the true church obviously had little interest in making an objective and systematic doctrinal account of their heretical Christian enemies' beliefs. Such a set of holy day keeping Christians theoretically could have existed, but the records were either destroyed and/or never written. So historians, who have to work with what records are available to them, can't write much (or at least call it "history") about what was never written about in the past before their lifetimes. So it's best not to draw major decisive doctrinal conclusions apart from what Scripture reveals to us. Therefore, although God has directly answered the prayers of Sunday-keepers, according to various stories I'm aware of, that doesn't prove decisively that they had the Holy Spirit and were saved.

The principle found in the parable of the vineyard workers (Matt. 20:1-15) doesn't apply to fundamental Christian laws and principles that are sins of commission to violate. Consider this sin list, one of many in the New Testament: "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Rev. 21:4). Sabbath-keeping (and Holy Day keeping, by derivation) are in the same category as the other nine Commandments. They are fundamental laws Christians have a duty to obey, or else their salvation is at risk if they are unrepentant about their violations of these laws (compare I Cor. 6:9-11). Someone who routinely commits adultery and denies that the Seventh Commandment is still in force is no more saved than someone who denies the Fourth commandment and works on the Saturday Sabbath.

The vast majority presently aren't saved, and haven't been saved throughout history, as per Rev. 12:9 and II Cor. 4:4. The great false church is a whole lot larger than the small flock of God, as the Book of Revelation shows. What's so hard about saying all these nice Sunday-keepers simply get their first chance at salvation in the next life, after being resurrected? There just needed to be a few people who knew the truth down through history somehow, in order to maintain the continuity of the church's existence (as per Matt. 16:18). Long before there was a Strong's, a 19th-century production, or even printed Bibles, some people figured out that the seventh day was the correct Sabbath. In this context, consider the parents of Seventh-day Adventist church historian Samuele Bacchiocchi. They strenuously searched to find a Bible for sale in the city of Rome. After eventually finding them sold at a Waldensian bookstore, they figured out that the Saturday Sabbath should be kept after having read enough of it. Being ignorant of the SDA's at the time, they thought that they were the only Christians in the whole world who kept the seventh day, but they later found out about the SDA Church. I bet there was no equivalent of "Strong's" in Italian at the time (c. 1930). The lack of availability of

God's truth to most of the world, such as to the unsaved pagans of India, China, Africa, or the Muslims of the Middle East on to Indonesia, doesn't prove Sunday-keeping Christians are saved while in willful or ignorant violation of one of the Ten Commandments. (That one, like the rest, He deemed so significant that He wrote it out with His own finger!)

There's a certain amount of Scriptural teaching, whether it be doctrinal or concerning Christian behavior, that can be figured out by average (uncalled) people reading it through, for certain parts are or appear to be straightforward. But very few people in history have ever been like George Fox (1624-1691), the founder of the Quakers/Society of Friends. After reading the Sermon on the Mount, he concluded that swearing and bearing arms in war were both sinful, which literally obeys statements in Matthew 5. He and those who agreed with him endured terrible persecution and societal pressure that makes what COG Christians experience in the USA today look like a cakewalk by comparison. Thanks to Fox, even so indirectly, we don't have to swear (but just affirm) to get a passport. His group's example also helped to make conscientious objection status more available to people in the COG in America and elsewhere.

Is it possible to detect the Holy Spirit in another person? We simply can't do it directly, for we can't read other people's minds and hearts, unlike God. Likewise, there's the interesting philosophical problem called the problem of other minds. In order to know that people have minds and hearts (emotions) like ourselves, we judge their thoughts by their body language, facial expressions, and words. Unlike Mr. Spock in "Star Trek" when he used the "Vulcan mind-meld," we have no direct way to contact someone else's mind without the physical flesh coming in-between. A similar issue has arisen in discussions of computer-supported "artificial intelligence." For instance, during a Turing test, someone dialogs with a computer long enough until it makes an obvious blunder that a human being with a mind (and emotions) would never do. But this is a practical, operational test: A person can't know how soon the computer will blunder syntactically, etc., as it is programmed to fake acting human before actual experience in having a dialog with the machine occurs. We know, from Samuel's blunder with Eliab, that appearances can indeed deceive us, even when (in this case) the man was a righteous prophet of God (I Sam. 16:6-7), for only God can look into a man's or woman's heart directly, or read their minds.

How can someone safely conclude that he or she has discerned in Sunday-keeping Christians the Holy Spirit? This mistake results from assuming that niceness or good interpretations of Scripture can only come from people who are believers. I distinctly remember hearing an agnostic professor of philosophy at MSU give an interpretation of one Biblical test (John 1:1, if I'm not mistaken) that was very interesting. (If I remember right, he observed that this verse starts off by mentioning the Word, not God, was in the beginning, which by itself implies Jesus is God. This professor could read Greek, unlike most of us in the COG or the world's churches, which surely was generally helpful). But obviously the Holy Spirit didn't give him such insight. No doubt, if we routinely associated with, worked with, visited the homes of, or had other social contact with various Hindus, Muslims, agnostics, the unchurched, or other unbelievers, lots of them would turn out of be nice people who do kind things for other people in their families or

for neighbors. If they know anything about the Bible, which is sometimes the case even today with certain high-powered atheists and agnostics, they might even have some interesting and useful interpretations of Scripture even as they would presumably harshly attack it. They could even obey various commandments better than various COG Christians do, for we know that God calls the weak of the world, not the strong, which may explain a lot of the personality conflicts in the COG over the years (I Cor. 1:18, 26-29). It's the people who perceive their own emotional, intellectual, and/or moral problems who are most apt to respond to God's calling. They will say they need to depend on God rather than try to go through life without using God's help as (skeptics might say) a "crutch." (Likewise, a disproportionate number of psychology majors have significant psychological problems themselves: They choose that subject academically while hoping to fix their own personal problems practically). If everyone in the COG was as smooth socially as the great French diplomat Talleyrand (1754-1838), there would be a lot fewer splits and divisions in the COG movement. (This leads to the interesting distinction between EQ and IQ, that social skills and intellectual ability don't necessarily correlate tightly, but that's yet another digression).

Consider now the problem with this kind of reasoning: "There are all these nice Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, etc., I know. Judging from their behavior, which often is better than certain COG members I know, they must be just as saved as the COG members." Notice that this reasoning assumes "salvation by works": Outward behavior is judged proof of salvation regardless of specific beliefs or faith. Of course, this reasoning in principle can be extended to people of other religions: "Look at all these millions and billions of nice Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, ancestor worshipping pagans, etc.. Since God would be a monster to torture them for unending trillions of years in an everburning hell fire for not accepting or even not hearing the name of Christ, God will save them also." Well, that reasoning is "salvation by works" also: Good behavior saves, in this case, regardless of belief! Of course, Scripture teaches that people can only be saved by the name of Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

It's a good general principle that we shouldn't try to figure out what we can "get away with" in God's sight, and yet still be saved. For example, should single Christians see "how far they can go" (i.e., concerning physical contact), before getting married? Instead, we should maintain positive standards of holiness and righteous conduct even when they cost us X amount of physical pleasure in this life. But this principle also can be misapplied when it's used to argue people who are better behaved must be saved. It's one thing to say that, all other things being equal, that a person who sacrifices 10% of their income to help the poor is doing better spiritually than one who merely gives 5%. Similarly, someone who spends 50 hours a month preaching the gospel door-to-door does better than one who spends merely 25. But neither person, when it comes to doing additional good works, is necessarily more "saved" than another. True, an exception arises when a Christian becomes so utterly negligent (and faithless, as per James 2:14-26) that he is in the position of the man who hid his one talent in a napkin (Matt. 25:24-28). After all, good works fundamentally don't determine whether one enters the kingdom of God, but how high or low one's position will be (see also I Cor. 3:10-15). But we

shouldn't use good works to discern that someone is saved when their beliefs are still wrong.

It's also necessary to make a distinction between having the Holy Spirit and being led by it, as per John 15:17. Various Sunday-keepers really could be getting some help from God as they interpret Scripture and live their lives personally. God also likely used various remarkable individuals among them to do major historical works that eventually benefited average Sabbatarians in later centuries. Without doubt, God used the Protestant Reformation (and its major leaders such as Luther, Calvin, Wycliff, Zwingli, Hus, etc.) in order to break the power of the Catholic Church and thus eventually set the historical stage for the true church receiving the religious freedom to preach the true gospel publicly to the world generally. More specifically, ponder the case of William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536), who was martyred basically for translating the Bible into English from the original languages against the will of the Catholic Church. I myself benefit greatly from the insights Sunday-keepers have on issues of (say) dating and family relationships. What Henry Morris and others in the scientific creationism movement have done in attacking evolution has been very valuable. Some of what Morris wrote on this subject was what persuaded me to give up belief in evolution when I was about 17 in 1983 (or perhaps 1984), not something by HWA or any WCG literature. We depend on these people to translate the Bible and do background historical research and linguistic/language work for us. But just as the Jews aren't saved, despite they were used by God to preserve the Hebrew Bible and the sacred calendar (Romans 3:2-3), neither should we believe the Sunday-keeping Christians, Catholic or Protestant, are saved, despite doing many admirable things, like Mother Theresa's in helping the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. But once again, all these nice things they do, or great works they have done, don't prove they are saved or have the Holy Spirit or are called, for true faith requires correct belief (cf. John 4:21-26), not just good works or being nice to other people.

Raw ignorance, in this case, won't excuse Sunday-keepers when it comes to fundamental laws of God. Suppose someone was ignorant of the command to not use pictures when worshipping God, such as many Catholics would be ignorant of the Second Commandment (by the normal, non-Lutheran Protestant enumeration). Does that let them off the hook? I doubt it. A certain amount of basic spiritual knowledge is required by God for people to be saved. Observing the Sabbath, keeping the Holy Days, avoiding military service and police work, and not using violence in personal self-defense are all part of this required package.

It's a crucial duty for people who are called to leave a false church (or assembly of people) that is denying doctrines crucial to salvation. Charles Pickering's book, "Biblical Separation," influences my thinking some on this subject. Pickering, a staunch conservative Baptist, cites such texts as Rev. 18:4 or II Cor. 6:14-17 in order to make the argument that conservative Protestant Christians should leave a big denomination (e.g., Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, etc.) when it allows religious liberals to remain in positions of authority. But this same principle of separation is also valid when it comes to analyzing what doctrines we in the COG should determine our standards of fellowship

by. That's why Sabbatarians should rebaptize people who didn't have the correct fundamental beliefs when they were baptized the first time.

In conclusion, we should require the rebaptism of all people who God is calling from churches that didn't keep the Sabbath and Holy Days, and which allow their membership to serve as armed combatants in wars (or as police officers). A spiritual line based on Biblical standards has to be drawn somewhere between Christians and non-Christians; we can't just accept as "brothers" and "sisters" all those who wish to label themselves "Christian." And this process inevitably involves Sabbatarian Christians exercising some level of spiritual judgment based upon others' outward behavior (cf. I Cor. 5:1-5, 9-13; 6:1-11; John 7:24) and beliefs, not just accepting others' proclamations about their inward faith. Just because many Sunday-keepers have done good works or made impressive sacrifices in serving God in one way or another, including even dying as martyrs and serving as missionaries in primitive, hostile lands, or obey various commandments or Biblical principles better than called Sabbath-keepers, doesn't prove they are saved. A number of these people, who ridiculed literal obedience to the Fourth Commandment as legalism even as they obeyed other commandments literally themselves, may well find these verses applying to them (Matt. 7:21-23): "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"