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Anti-Sabbatarianism in Antebellum America: The Christian Quarrel over the Sanctity of Sunday

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ANTI-SABBATARIANISM IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA: THE CHRISTIAN
QUARREL OVER THE SANCTITY OF SUNDAY

by

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ABSTRACT

In the first half of the 1800s, American Christians posed fundamental questions about the role of faith in daily life by debating blue laws, which restricted Sunday travel, mail delivery, and recreational activities on the basis of the Fourth Commandment. Historians have largely focused on how pro-blue law Christians, or Sabbatarians, answered these questions. They also present anti-Sabbatarian concerns as socially, economically, or politically motivated, largely ignoring religion. However, an examination of religious periodicals, convention reports, correspondence, and petitions shows that many anti-Sabbatarians did indeed frame their arguments in theological terms. Case studies from various faith traditions over four decades demonstrate that anti-Sabbatarian theology commonly transcended denominations, geographical areas, and time, indicating a certain degree of stability and consistency in nineteenth-century American religious life. Understanding how theology can motivate people to act in other realms of life is not only useful when studying the past; it is also a tool that can be used to thoughtfully and effectively engage in dialogue with others today.

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GLOSSARY

Anti-Sabbatarian: A person opposed to blue laws

Blue laws: State or federal legislation enforcing Sabbath adherence and restricting Sunday activities including mail delivery, travel, and recreation

Christian liberty: The right to follow one's conscience and worship how one pleases; based on the idea that Christians are not bound to Old Testament law due to Jesus' fulfillment of the law through his death and resurrection

Eschatology: Theology concerned with end times

Millennialism: A branch of eschatology concerning the millennium, a period of 1,000 years or a golden age where Satan is imprisoned and God will reign; takes place before God's final judgment of the world; based on Revelation 20; can be interpreted in different ways, including pre-millennialism and post-millennialism

Perfectionism: The idea that it is possible for Christians to achieve perfection; also sometimes called Christian holiness or entire sanctification

Post-millennialism: A branch of millennialism that teaches that Christ's second coming will occur at the end of the millennium, which the Church heralds in by preaching the gospel and reforming society

Pre-millennialism: A branch of millennialism that teaches that Christ's second coming will mark the beginning of the millennium and happens according to God's timing

Religion: Systems of belief and action broadly concerned with issues and patterns of faith and worship

Restorationism: A desire to restore the patterns of worship that early Christians used as described by the New Testament; in Disciple of Christ thought, closely related to the idea that the Bible alone (not creeds) should determine how one worships

Sabbatarian: A person in favor of blue laws

Sectarianism: Division and fighting within the church; occurs when one denomination or sect holds itself up as superior to all other denominations/sects

Theology: A more consciously systematic inquiry than religion; refers to specific understandings or interpretations of the Bible

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In 1809, an event in a small frontier community set the stage for a controversy that would ignite the nation for the next four decades. Located less than thirty miles to the southwest of Pittsburgh, the young town of Washington, Pennsylvania, had already experienced its share of upheaval. Before large numbers of white settlers arrived in the 1740s, the area had been the home to displaced Shawnee, Lenape, and Haudenosaunee tribes. In the following decade, disputes over whether this land belonged to Pennsylvania, Virginia, or the French exacerbated relations between natives, European nations, and the colonies themselves. The Scotch-Irish immigrants who settled Washington and the surrounding county of the same name also came into conflict with their own government. They revolted in the 1790s against increased whiskey taxes that had been imposed on them by the very man, George Washington, for whom their community was named.¹ Almost twenty years later, Washington, Pennsylvania, was still drawing the country's attention.

The conflict that erupted in 1809 resulted from the strong religious convictions of the Presbyterian Scotch-Irish settlers. Many families who lived in the countryside only

¹ Boyd Crumrine, Ellis Franklin, and Austin N. Hungerford, eds, *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania: With Biographical Sketches of Many of Its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts & Co., 1882), 15-74, 262. For more information about the French and Indian War, see Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001). For more on the Whiskey Rebellion, see Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

ventured into town to attend church on Sundays. Before and after church services, they would stop and ask the local postmaster, Hugh Wylie, for their mail. Wylie served as an elder in the local Presbyterian church and sometimes left a family member to work the post office while he attended worship. Sunday mail distribution became a routine event, sparking the ire of the leaders and some members of the congregation. Reverend Matthew Brown, who did not shy away from chastising church members in his sermons for sins like playing cards and dancing in their leisure time, likely numbered among those who did not approve of how Wylie spent his Sundays.² They believed that Sunday mail distribution was a violation of the fourth commandment, which states,

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates.³

By delivering mail on the day that they observed as the Sabbath, Wylie – at least in the minds of those who opposed him – was performing the very kind of work that the Bible prohibited. The church requested Wylie to discontinue delivering Sunday mail, but Wylie, who would have earned up to \$1,000 annually – a significant sum at that time – likely did not want to lose his source of income.⁴ Wylie himself did not seem to have any theological qualms because he continued to hand out letters to those who requested them. After Wylie was barred “from the special privileges of the church,” he appealed his case to the Presbytery of Ohio, the Pittsburgh Synod, and the Presbyterian General Assembly,

² Helen Turnbull Waite Coleman, *Banners in the Wilderness Early Years of Washington and Jefferson College* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1956), 105.

³ Ex. 20:8-10 (King James Version).

⁴ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 170.

hoping that they would change his church's decision.⁵ All three bodies, however, upheld the initial ruling. A town petition two years later asked the Presbyterian General Assembly to reverse its position, but nothing came of it.⁶

News of Wylie's expulsion spread quickly beyond this small Scotch-Irish Presbyterian community. To protect postmasters like Wylie, Congress passed an act in 1810 making it mandatory for postmasters to deliver mail and keep their offices open for at least one hour on Sundays. Postmasters could schedule this hour at their discretion; they were not required to remain open during times set aside for church services. The Synod of Pittsburgh, the General Assembly, and other Christians living in western frontier regions began petitioning Congress almost immediately to rescind this act. They declared that it intruded on their religious freedom to *not* work on Sundays, that their worship would be disturbed by the noise of mail carriages, and that postmasters would be forced to desecrate the Sabbath.⁷ Petitioners who took the opposite stance argued that to

⁵ This presumably meant not being allowed to partake in communion. *Records of the Synod of Pittsburgh, from its First Organization, September 29, 1802, to October 1832* (Pittsburgh: Luke Loomis, 1852), 62.

⁶ Synod and assembly records do not reveal whether or not Wylie used any theological arguments to buttress his appeals to Presbyterian authorities, who clearly believed that his actions violated Scriptural commands. Synod records show that by October 1817, Wylie was once again serving an elder in the Presbytery of Ohio (and later in the newly-formed Presbytery of Washington). However, General Assembly minutes reveal that it still disciplined postmasters who worked on the Sabbath at least as late as 1819. Presumably, Wylie finally bent to the General Assembly's wishes as the Assembly did not soften its stance in that decade. Boyd Crumrine et al., *History of Washington County*, 398-399, 487; *Records of the Synod of Pittsburgh*, 124-125, 186; *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, From Its Organization A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d.), 508, 701, 703. Also see John, *Spreading the News*, 170-171; Alexis McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday: The American Sunday* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 23-27; Richard R. John, "Taking Sabbatarianism Seriously: The Postal System, the Sabbath, and the Transformation of American Political Culture," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 (1990): 526.

⁷ "11th Congress, 2nd Session, An Act Regulating the Post-Office Establishment, Enacted April 30, 1810," in William Addison Blakely and Willard Allen Colcord, eds., *American State Papers*

prohibit mail delivery on Sundays would impinge on the rights of postmasters to practice or not practice their religion as they saw fit. By 1815, Congress had received petitions from northern and southern, eastern and western states, indicating that the Sunday mails debate had become a nationwide issue.⁸ Well into the 1840s and even beyond, Americans now vehemently debated both whether it appropriate to deliver mail, travel, and engage in recreational pursuits on Sunday. They also argued over whether or not the government had the right to enforce Sabbath adherence. Those who advocated government intervention were Sabbatarians, and their opponents, the focus of this study, were anti-Sabbatarians.

Historians have used the terms “Sabbatarian” and “anti-Sabbatarian” differently than Christians in the nineteenth century used them. Historically, “Sabbatarian” referred to groups like Seventh-Day Baptists, who kept the Sabbath not on Sunday but on Saturday, like Jews did. Alternatively, “Sabbatarian” could also refer to anyone who kept a Sunday Sabbath. These latter Christians put forth a variety of arguments as to why the Sabbath had moved to Sunday. For example, Christ arose on the first day of the week, and the authority of his “new” covenant of salvation through his death and resurrection superseded that of the “old” law-based covenant. The old covenant included the Ten Commandments, which designated the seventh rather than the first day of the week as the Sabbath. Additionally, Christians met on the first day of the week in the New

Bearing On Sunday Legislation, Revised and Enlarged Edition (Washington, D.C.: Religious Liberty Association, 1911). For examples of petitions from the General Assembly, see *Minutes of the General Assembly*, 513-514, 565-567, 601.

⁸ See reports of petitions especially from January 4, 1811; January 25, 1811; January 31, 1811; January 3, 1812; June 15, 1812; and January 27, 1815, in Blakely et al., *American State Papers*, 176-177, 180-185.

Testament.⁹ Conversely, “anti-Sabbatarian” was usually a derogatory descriptor for someone who did not keep any kind of Sabbath. These terms were rarely used to describe an individual’s beliefs on the proper relationship between the federal government and religious practice.¹⁰ However, historians have consistently used these identifiers to serve as a convenient shorthand for communicating where certain groups and individuals stood on the church-state issue.¹¹ The anti-Sabbatarians in this study were divided over whether or not the Bible compelled them to observe a strict (Sunday) Sabbath, but what united them was their insistence that the government did not have any right to interfere in this matter.

Anti-Sabbatarians have been understudied. Instead, Sabbatarians have captured the majority of scholarly attention. Sabbatarian Christians, who were primarily – although not exclusively – Presbyterian, emphasized the importance of keeping the spirit of the fourth commandment, albeit on a different day of the week. Historians have pointed out that their insistence on keeping a Sabbath and enforcing it through laws

⁹ Discussions on when, how, and why the Sabbath changed days of the week – if it indeed changed at all – littered the pages of early nineteenth-century religious periodicals, including the *Christian Messenger*, a publication that is one of the foci of this study.

¹⁰ The terms “theology” and “religion” will appear variously throughout this study. Although these words are similar, they are distinct in meaning. When not used in quotations of primary sources, “religion” will denote systems of belief and action broadly concerned with issues and patterns of faith and worship, whereas “theology,” a more consciously systematic inquiry than religion, will refer to specific understandings or interpretations of the Bible. In other words, religion (at least in its Christian form) is something that is interpreted through theological lenses. This paper is primarily, although not exclusively, concerned with the theology behind religious practices in contrast to scholars like Patricia Bonomi, who reads sources to discover “popular religious attitudes, the character of the provincial clergy, and prevailing churchgoing practices.” Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xxviii.

¹¹ These shorthand identifiers came into use by the twentieth century. Scholars have not contested the emergence or use of these terms like they have debated other language that describes religious movements and sentiments (see footnote 10).

entwined with the common conviction that America was, or at least should be, a Christian nation. In their eyes, the United States of America was a land that God had given to them through the American Revolution and preserved through the War of 1812. Sabbatarians adopted the language of John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Just as Winthrop warned the early colonists that “the eies [eyes] of all people are upon [sic] us,” watching to see if they would succeed in becoming a godly society, Sabbatarians viewed the Sabbath as an issue with high moral stakes.¹² Like the colonists, they were terrified to fail and invoke God’s wrath. “Our prosperity as a nation,” the Presbyterian General Assembly asserted in one of its pro-Sabbatarian petitions, “depends upon the smiles of heaven, and... the profanation of the Sabbath is calculated to awaken the displeasure of God, and bring down his judgments.”¹³ The country, once a shining city on a hill, could all too easily become one of despotism, limited religious freedom, or even slip into atheism if it lost the guiding light of the Sabbath. Sunday labor was merely one step toward the country’s moral and religious decline. Sabbatarians reconciled their support for blue laws with the Constitution by reasoning that to force Christians like Hugh Wylie to work on Sundays violated Americans’ right to exercise their religion freely. In short, American citizens needed to be free to live moral and godly lives.¹⁴

¹² John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Volume VII of the Third Series*, ed. by Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1838), 31-48.

¹³ *Minutes of the General Assembly*, 566.

¹⁴ For more in-depth explanations of Sabbatarian views toward government and their relationship with colonial American thought, see Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), especially pages 6-21; David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 32-50, especially pages 49-50; Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Scholars have also framed Sabbatarianism within the context of the period of religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening. Some have challenged whether such a thing as “great awakenings” actually existed or whether they were inventions by later historians, but most scholars have clearly and correctly rejected this line of thinking.¹⁵ Although the Second Great Awakening was arguably a continuation of the series of revivals that had begun the century before, scholars of the Sabbath debate usually start their narratives in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ In their telling of it, the Cane Ridge, Kentucky, revival of 1801 was the first wave of religious excitement to combat the deism of the late 1700s. Revivalism quickly spread throughout the southwestern frontier all the way up to New York – including the “burned-over district,” so named for the many revivals that swept over the region – and New England.¹⁷ The Second Great Awakening culminated in the 1820s and 1830s with revivalists like Charles Finney, a Presbyterian preacher. He was known for moving away from strict Calvinism, which holds that only people chosen by God (the elect) could be saved, and towards a more Arminian theology, which emphasizes that *all* who are willing to do so can experience

¹⁵ Jon Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction,” *Journal of American History* 69 (1982): 305-325. Frank Lambert demonstrates that colonists themselves, not historians, created the concept of an eighteenth-century “Great Awakening” in *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). This interpretation can also apply to the Second Great Awakening, as evidenced by periodicals like the *Christian Messenger*, whose issues always included a section entitled “Revivals” that included stories of religious growth from around the country.

¹⁶ Scholars that have pushed back persuasively against traditional declension narratives and in favor of a type of “long Great Awakening” include: Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*; Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (Yale University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), 3-13.

the saving grace of Christ. This Arminianism corresponded well with the beliefs of many Baptists and Methodists, two denominations that experienced exponential growth during this period.¹⁸

Another important Second Great Awakening Presbyterian was minister Lyman Beecher, one of the leading Sabbatarians. Beecher and Presbyterians all over the Calvinist spectrum participated in the nationwide wave of religiosity. They preached and promoted reforming efforts reflecting evangelical beliefs: the authority of the Bible, Jesus' death on the cross, the necessity of being born again, and the importance of manifesting one's faith in everyday life – including, in some people's minds, Sabbath observance.¹⁹ However, there were evangelicals in both the Sabbatarian and anti-Sabbatarian movements, and the evangelicals of the antebellum period are different from the evangelicals that Americans refer to today when discussing modern political developments. Consequently, the term “evangelical” is not especially helpful for the purposes of this study and will not be used.

Despite this attention to Sabbatarian theology, scholars have neglected to take the anti-Sabbatarians' theological concerns seriously enough to examine them with any sustained attention. Historians have commonly interpreted anti-Sabbatarianism through a political lens. Most notably, Richard John views it in the context of the post office's role

¹⁸ Ibid.; John, “Taking Sabbatarianism Seriously,” 520; Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), xiv, 25-39.

¹⁹ This definition of “evangelical” comes from the Bebbington quadrilateral, as set forth in David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), Chapter 1. Although this definition has been occasionally challenged, especially in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, it has been widely accepted and used among scholars of religious history, including those who study nineteenth-century American Christianity.

as a political institution. Others see the movement as representative of the death of Federalism and the rise of Jacksonian politics, which lauded self-sufficiency and scorned government interference in everyday life. In a similar vein, another interpretation suggests that the Sabbath debate and the ensuing religious polarization played a role in the rise of two-party politics and helped inflame the sectionalism that eventually led to civil war. Recently, anti-Sabbatarianism has been used to question the essence of democracy: is it about majority rule or minority rights? Other notable studies of anti-Sabbatarianism focus on its legal and socio-economic implications.²⁰

These are all aspects of anti-Sabbatarianism that do deserve consideration, and we would be worse off without these studies. However, the lack of attention to anti-Sabbatarians' theology means that historians have been missing a vital piece of the puzzle; their understandings of anti-Sabbatarianism are incomplete. Part of this problem stems from the fact that most – albeit not all – of the above scholars have assumed that anti-Sabbatarians were anti-evangelical, non-Christian, or secular. Another reason may be because early nineteenth-century Sabbatarian efforts to pass a federal law prohibiting Sunday postal activity failed. Anti-Sabbatarians were the victors; some might assume that we know plenty about them already because of the popular idea that the winners

²⁰ John, *Spreading the News*; Wayne Fuller, *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003); James Rohrer, "Sunday Mails and the Church-State Theme in Jacksonian America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 7 (1987): 73; Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, ix, xiv, 318-319; Tim Verhoeven, "In Defense of Civil and Religious Liberty: Anti-Sabbatarianism in the United States before the Civil War," *Church History* 82 (2013): 316; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Prelude to Abolitionism: Sabbatarian Politics and the Rise of the Second Party System," *The Journal of American History* 58 (1971): 336; Kyle G. Volk, *Moral Minorities and the Making of American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Steven Green, *The Second Disestablishment: Church and State in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday*.

write history. A third explanation for this oversight is that anti-Sabbatarianism was not a well-organized, structured movement like Sabbatarianism was, so it is more challenging to analyze coherently. Regardless of the reason, the faith of anti-Sabbatarians has fallen by the wayside, an error that this study will seek to correct.

Cultural ideology, including theology, is worthy of study. People's thoughts and ideas and values and beliefs are largely influenced by their cultural contexts and result in concrete actions. This concept is by no means new. As historian Thomas Slaughter writes, "Ideas are not mere rationalizations for actions. Thoughts precede, incorporate, and explain... acts to those who commit them. There is no accurate version of reality that isolates thought from action."²¹ The problem is that few scholars have considered theology as a genuine source of action-inspiring ideas. Religious historian Robert Abzug points out that they view religion "as a conscious or unconscious cover" for class, social, economic, or other kinds of anxieties.²² British missionary historian Andrew Porter is also right when he asserts that even though people "may have been constrained by local circumstances, historians are not entitled to dismiss their [religious] motives as insignificant and of no consequence or interest."²³ There is no doubt that political, social, and economic concerns were interwoven with the theological facets of anti-

²¹ Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 4.

²² Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), viii.

²³ Andrew Porter, *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 13. Other scholars who have worked to restore conversations about historical figures' religious motivations include Mark M. Smith, "Remembering Mary, Shaping Revolt: Reconsidering the Stono Rebellion," *The Journal of Southern History* 67 (2001): 513-534; Christine Caldwell Ames, "Does Inquisition Belong to Religious History?," *The American Historical Review* 110 (2005): 11-37.

Sabbatarianism. In one sense, these threads are impossible to separate.²⁴ However, this does not automatically mean that faith was a handmaiden to these other issues, a status to which many scholars of the Sabbath debate have relegated it.

Instead, religion and theology should be studied for their own sakes because for many antebellum Christians, their faith informed every other aspect of their worldview. The Hugh Wylie controversy, for instance, did not begin with congressional petitions. It began within the four walls of a church where a religious community struggled over how to interpret the Bible and apply it to their everyday lives. Initially, they sought to resolve it through their own church governance. In fact, they did so for two whole years; pursuing secular modes of resolution was not their preferred method for conflict management. As the debate grew and began to encompass other faith-based communities, Sabbatarians and anti-Sabbatarians alike appealed to their fellow Americans not just through economic or political arguments. They used Bible verses, Bible stories, and certain interpretations of Scripture to affirm – or, in some cases, push back against – specific denominational theological frameworks. As they interacted with the world around them, their experiences confirmed, refined, and revised their theology. There is an endless cycle of thought and experience; each continually shapes the other. The relationship between religion and society, economics, and politics is dialogic. Since the theological aspect of this relationship has been neglected – especially from the anti-Sabbatarian perspective – it is time to give it its due attention. In short, as much as they

²⁴ David Hackett Fischer emphasizes that motives are complex, learned, and pluralistic, and that it is dangerous to try to pigeonhole them. In focusing primarily on theology, the intention here is not to exclude other historical approaches so much as it is to nuance them. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1970), esp. Chapter 7, "Fallacies of Motivation."

are able to, historians should seek to understand anti-Sabbatarians as anti-Sabbatarians understood themselves.

One study by Richard Olin Johnson *does* do this. Johnson argues that “the Sabbath was primarily a theological issue” among theological liberals, the Disciples of Christ, Lutherans, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Anglo-American mainline Protestants. He attributes the decline in Sabbath observance to the simple idea that over the course of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of “Christians no longer believed it.”²⁵ Unlike Johnson’s dissertation, though, this study does not ask *why* Americans’ overall attitudes towards Sabbath observance changed as the nineteenth century progressed. Instead, the focus is on antebellum anti-Sabbatarianism’s origins, *who* anti-Sabbatarians were, *what* they believed and *why* they believed it, and how theologies that were popularized during the Second Great Awakening informed their stake in the church-state Sabbath debate. It also, unlike Johnson, shows interdenominational dialogue and situates anti-Sabbatarianism as an outgrowth of the Second Great Awakening. This is not to say that *all* anti-Sabbatarians had religious motivations, but petitions, periodicals, newspapers, convention reports, and personal correspondence reveal that many of them did. With the exception of Johnson, who asks a fundamentally different question, this is

²⁵ Richard Olin Johnson, “Free From the Rigor of the Law: Theological Challenges to the Anglo-American Sabbath in Nineteenth-Century America” (PhD diss, Berkeley, 2001), 3, 356-357. One of Johnson’s most persuasive arguments is that Lutheran anti-Sabbatarianism evolved because of changing interpretations of the Augsburg Confession. Because he covered them comprehensively, Lutheran and Seventh-Day Adventist anti-Sabbatarians are not discussed here. However, Johnson concentrates on only one of the two anti-Sabbatarian founders of the Disciples of Christ; this study focuses on both. It also borrows his approach of tying together anti-Sabbatarianism with eschatology (the theology of end times), a method that he only applied to Seventh-Day Adventists.

the first time that the anti-Sabbatarian content of these sources will be interpreted as their writers initially intended: through a theological lens.

Anti-Sabbatarianism could be found in every major denomination in antebellum America and even across faith traditions, as in the case of Jews. Three groups, the Disciples of Christ, the followers of Theophilus Gates, and the followers of William Lloyd Garrison, are discussed here. They are not necessarily representative of *all* anti-Sabbatarianism, but they do comprise a significant contingent of the movement and can answer questions like: Why was the Hugh Wylie incident so controversial? Why did the Sunday mail controversy capture the attention of those living outside the region? What was the role of theology in antebellum American culture? How did theology influence Christians' responses to these events, and how did they deploy their arguments? What kinds of interactions did anti-Sabbatarianism across the country have with each other, and how did these interactions affect their thinking?

The various theological justifications for anti-Sabbatarianism were not wholly identical, but they were influenced by common threads. An examination of these threads and their origins reveals that antebellum anti-Sabbatarianism was consistently an outgrowth of rather than a reaction against religious revival. From the 1800s through the 1830s, the Disciples of Christ on the southwestern frontier emphasized Christian unity, the restoration of apostolic Christianity, and millennialism in their defenses of anti-Sabbatarianism.²⁶ Philadelphia also served as a center for anti-Sabbatarianism in the

²⁶ Denominational historians have already explored these three strains of thought. However, no one other than Richard Olin Johnson has applied these findings in any kind of depth to the Sabbatarian debates of the early nineteenth century. William Garrett West, *Barton Warren Stone: Early American Advocate of Christian Unity* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1954); David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Quest for a Christian America*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966); Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of*

1820s and 1830s. There, a periodical editor named Theophilus Gates employed postmillennial arguments to recruit individuals of diverse Christian backgrounds to the cause. In the 1830s and 1840s, William Lloyd Garrison's Boston-based efforts to subvert Sabbatarianism were rooted in postmillennialism and perfectionism, even as he infused his theology with his own unique anti-slavery stamp. All three groups invoked their Christian liberty to worship as they pleased and the right to follow their individual consciences, concepts that Americans had a long history of debating.²⁷ These case studies collectively span over four decades and three different geographic regions, providing insight on how anti-Sabbatarianism evolved yet retained certain similarities over time, from place to place, and from theological tradition to theological tradition.

These Christians, furthermore, did not restrict their theological ponderings to the church pew once a week. Their beliefs spilled over into the very structure of the postal system, their daily reading materials, and yes, into their politics. Despite anti-Sabbatarians' varying theological arguments, and even though they and the Sabbatarians would viciously lash out at each other, the Sabbath debate did not result in the destabilization of religion in the United States, even if it was polarizing at times. The fact that religion and theology maintained centrality in the anti-Sabbatarian debate for decades actually indicates the very opposite; their presence demonstrates a *consistent* element of American life even while the country was undergoing many social, political, and economic changes. In short, theology played a crucial role in the lives of many

Churches of Christ in America (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

²⁷ For an example of how the role of individual conscience in worship was debated in colonial America, see Evan Haefeli, *New Netherland and the Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

antebellum Americans, and it served as the foundation of many Christians' anti-Sabbatarianism.

CHAPTER TWO

FOUNDATIONS

The controversy over Sunday laws did not happen in a vacuum. Presbyterians on both sides of the Atlantic had been in conflict with others in their own denomination for decades. Local conditions in places where there were rival Presbyterian factions commonly contributed to the intradenominational tensions. As Presbyterians traveled and communicated with each other, shared doubts about common Presbyterian theologies and religious practices drew anti-Sabbatarians together and helped them articulate their own distinct worldviews. The most ardent anti-Sabbatarians broke away from Presbyterianism, in the process attracting individuals from other denominations who shared similar concerns. Hugh Wylie soon faded from the foreground of the Sabbatarian debates, but he had unwittingly set the stage for the shape of anti-Sabbatarianism for the next four decades.

Laws restricting Sunday activities were nothing new in 1809. In fact, all thirteen colonies had Sunday laws, sometimes called “blue laws,” supposedly due to the blue paper on which they were printed.²⁸ One Virginia law dating from 1623 declared that anyone who neglected to attend church for a full month “without an allowable excuse”

²⁸ This is the most common explanation, though J. Hammond Trumbell has also suggested that it derived from the phrase “true blue” between 1720 and 1750, which was used by non-Presbyterians to mock strict, puritanical Presbyterians – as unchanging as a blue dye that does not fade. J. Hammond Trumbell, *The True-Blue Laws of Connecticut and New Haven and the False Blue-Laws Invented by the Rev. Samuel Peters* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1876), 9, 24, 27.

would be fined 50 pounds of tobacco.²⁹ The New Haven Colony in present-day Connecticut instituted its own infamous set of Sunday codes in 1656. Working on the Sabbath or participating in recreational pursuits could “be duly punished by fine, imprisonment, or corporally.” However, if “the sin was proudly, presumptuously, and with a high hand committed against the known command and authority of the blessed God, such a person therein despising and reproaching the Lord, shall be put to death.”³⁰ It is unclear how much, if at all, this was actually enforced.

These were typical penalties for Sabbath transgressions. Critics like Samuel Peters, a persecuted Loyalist minister, decried the colonists as “barbarous,” “sinister,” and “illegal,” to list a few adjectives. In particular, he spread false information about New England blue laws by making claims like, “No woman shall kiss her child on the Sabbath.”³¹ Others, like author J. Hammond Trumbull, later pointed out how colonial laws were less harsh than those in England at the time. For instance, a person living in New Haven in 1656 would owe 20 pounds for missing a month of church, but someone living in England would have to pay about twenty times that amount. In Trumbull’s words, the colonists “did no more than repeat, in their new home, a few of the lessons they had been taught in the mother country and by the mother church.”³²

²⁹ Blakeley and Colcord, *American State Papers*, 34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

³¹ Samuel Peters, *A General History of Connecticut, from its First Settlement Under George Fenwick, Esq. to its Latest Period of Amity with Great Britain, Including a Description of the Country, and Many Curious and Interesting Anecdotes* (London: J. Bew, 1781), iv-v, 65-66.

³² Trumbull, *The True-Blue Laws*, 16-17.

By the opening decades of the nineteenth century, blue laws were not as common, although they did still exist throughout the country.³³ Because it is difficult to ascertain how much these laws were actually enforced, another way to capture blue laws' relationship to antebellum society is by looking at the punishments for breaking them. In the first several decades of the 1800s, no one living in Vermont could do "secular labor" on Sundays. They could not travel except "from necessity or charity" or to church, and they could not play sports, go to a dance or the theatre, or "resort to any tavern, inn or house of entertainment" on Sundays until after sundown. The penalty was a two-dollar fine.³⁴ Although Vermont authorities wanted people to conduct themselves in a godly manner, they were more concerned with people who prohibited *others* from doing so. Miscreants who interrupted worship services with their rowdy behavior could be fined anywhere from five to 40 dollars. Even the \$40 fine – the equivalent of \$710 USD today, a conservative estimate – was significantly less than the various colonial fines for similar transgressions, like 50 pounds of tobacco or 20 pounds in currency (worth almost \$3,000

³³ For example, Virginia was one state that continued to fine "any disturber of religious worship and sabbath-breaker[s]." "Legislation: Virginia," *American Jurist and Law Magazine* 6, no. 11 (July 1831): 182. Another example is that North Carolinians were prohibited from fishing with nets on the Yadkin and Pee Dee Rivers during the spring season on Sundays. "An Act to Prevent Any Person or Persons from Working Seines, or Skimming with Nets, in Neuse River, on Sundays and Sunday Nights, from the Fifteenth Day of January to the Twenty-Fifth Day of April, In Each and Every Year," *North Carolina Regular Session*, 17.

³⁴ Chapter 82, "Of the Observance of the Sabbath, and of Disturbing Religious Meetings," in *The Revised Statutes of the State of Vermont, Passed November 19, 1839, to Which Are Added Several Public Acts Now in Force, and to Which are Prefixed the Constitutions of the United States and of the State of Vermont* (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1840), 394-395; *Laws of the State of Vermont, Digested and Compiled: Including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and of this State* (Randolph, VT: Sereno Wright, 1808), 275-276.

USD today).³⁵ It was certainly less extreme than death. Virginia also reduced the penalty for Sabbath breaking; beginning in 1831, those who could not pay the fine were no longer lashed.³⁶ Blue laws were undoubtedly on the decline, but they were still present in antebellum America.

The roots of early nineteenth-century anti-Sabbatarianism can actually be traced back to religious movements in late eighteenth-century Scotland and Ireland. Thomas and Alexander Campbell, father and son, were born in present-day Northern Ireland and educated at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. They were ministers in the Seceder Presbyterian church, a group that split off from the Presbyterian Church of Scotland in the 1730s due to its belief that a congregation had the right to select its own minister. There was much volatility even within the Seceder Presbyterian community, particularly over whether civil authorities should be required to swear oaths that affirmed their commitment to the church. Both Campbells found such infighting discouraging and began to doubt the supremacy of the Seceder Presbyterians. During their time in Glasgow, they had imbibed the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment. This included the belief that “human beings, by exercising their common sense, can know reality precisely as it is... [they] could unlock even biblical truths with scientific precision.”³⁷ Truth was

³⁵ Currency value estimates are from the UK National Archives Currency Converter at “Currency Converter: 1270-2017,” *The National Archives*, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result> and “Measuring Worth is a Complicated Question,” *MeasuringWorth*, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://www.measuringworth.com>, a website put together by professors from Oxford, Ivy League schools, and other public universities from across the United States.

³⁶ “Legislation: Virginia,” 182.

³⁷ This is called Baconianism or Scottish Common Sense Realism. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, vii.

centered in knowing the Bible, not in the Seceder denomination or any other denomination. This belief was further cemented for Alexander when a minister of an independent church took the young Campbell under his wing during Campbell's time at the university.³⁸

Both Campbells longed to end factionalism and restore unity within the church, a desire that would later become one of the theological cornerstones of anti-Sabbatarianism. Thomas Campbell immigrated to Washington County, Pennsylvania, in 1807, seeking a new climate for health reasons. His son followed a couple years later. The elder Campbell published the *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* in 1809, explaining that he was disillusioned with the factionalism within Seceder Presbyterianism and within Presbyterianism more generally. He longed to “restore unity, peace, and purity, to the whole church of God... taking the divine word alone for our rule.”³⁹ For these reasons, he broke away from the local Presbyterian synod. He and Alexander soon established their own congregation, the Brush Run Church, roughly ten miles east of the town of Washington. Alexander increasingly took a more active leadership role. He debated freethinkers and Presbyterians and gained support from some local Baptists. In 1839, Alexander wrote a treatise called *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity as Plead in the Current Reformation*. As he described the history of

³⁸ For more on the Campbells, see Harrell, *A Social History*; Richard J. Cherok, *Debating for God: Alexander Campbell's Challenge to Skepticism in Antebellum America* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008); Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

³⁹ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (Washington: Brown and Sample, 1809), 3-4.

Protestantism, he also expressed his own ideas about division, or sectarianism, within the church and the supremacy of biblical authority. He believed that over the centuries, Protestants had grown jealous of the Catholic pope's power. They created "creeds and manuals, synods and councils" to try to provide a counterbalance to Catholicism and in so doing lost their reforming spirit. "The Bible alone is the Bible only, in word and deed, in profession and practice," Campbell went on, "and this alone can reform the world and save the church."⁴⁰ Even though this treatise was written well after the anti-Sabbatarian movement was underway, it succinctly sums up the theological framework on which Alexander Campbell based his anti-Sabbatarianism.

As the Campbells formed their own opinions on the relationship between Christianity, sectarianism, Catholicism, and power while they were in Ireland and Scotland, there were similar developments in Presbyterian communities on the other side of the Atlantic. Barton W. Stone's anti-Sabbatarian leanings grew directly out of the ideas he developed as a Presbyterian minister. Born in 1772, he spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, whose inhabitants, according to Stone, were not particularly religious. Stone did not have a religious upbringing either, but he became increasingly interested in matters of faith during his time at David Caldwell Log College in Guilford County, North Carolina, in the 1790s. James McGready, a well-known Presbyterian preacher, had a notable following at the school.

⁴⁰ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity as Plead in the Current Reformation* (Pittsburgh: Forrester & Campbell, 1839), 3, 6, 12. For more on tensions between Presbyterians in Western Pennsylvania in the late 1700s and early 1800s, see Peter Gilmore, "A Rebel Admist Revival: Thomas Ledlie Birch and Western Pennsylvania Presbyterianism," graduate seminar paper, Carnegie Mellon University, Apr. 15, 2002, https://www.academia.edu/771828/_A_Rebel_Amidst_Revival_Thomas_Ledlie_Birch_and_Western_Pennsylvania_Presbyterianism.

As Stone interacted with other students, many of whom were members of McGready's flock, he entered a period of spiritual wrestling. He wanted to put his faith in Christ, but the Calvinist emphasis on humankind's depravity and humans' inability to play a role in their own salvation caused Stone to despair of ever truly being saved. Stone finally believed he had attained salvation after hearing William Hodge, a Presbyterian minister who had studied under both McGready and Caldwell, preach about God's love for and acceptance of sinners. Hodge's sermon bordered on Arminianism, a theological idea that centered on the free will of humans. It was a stark contrast to the predestination that more orthodox Presbyterians espoused.⁴¹

This tension between Calvinism and Arminianism continued to plague Stone throughout his time as Presbyterian. When he studied at Orange Presbytery in Johnston County, North Carolina, Stone began to doubt other aspects of his religious training. He wrote in his memoir, "I had never before read any books on theology but the Bible. This had been my daily companion since I became seriously disposed to religion. From it I had received all my little stock of divinity."⁴² He found that when he tried to measure Calvinism and other standard Presbyterian teachings (like the doctrine of the Trinity, to name just one example) against the Bible, they consistently fell short. As Stone consequently became "wearied with the works and doctrines of men, and distrustful of their influence, I made the Bible my constant companion."⁴³ When he received calls from Cane Ridge and Concord, Kentucky, he rather reluctantly affirmed the Westminster

⁴¹ Barton W. Stone and John Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone, Written by Himself; With Additions and Reflections* (Cincinnati: J.A. and U.P. James, 1847), 2-11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31.

Confession of Faith, a statement that set forth Presbyterian tenets, as part of his ordination. However, Stone continued to doubt the compatibility of the confession with the Bible and eventually determined that Calvinism was “among the heaviest clogs on Christianity in the world. It is a dark mountain between heaven and earth, and is amongst the most discouraging hindrances to sinners from seeking the kingdom of God, and engenders bondage and gloominess to the saints.”⁴⁴ He became more hopeful when he attended a large, multi-day communion service in Logan County, Kentucky, in 1801. Stone witnessed how diverse groups of Christians – Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists – were able to worship together. Their ecumenism made the “gloomy cloud” fall away. He was heartened at how “all seemed heartily to unite in the work, and in Christian love” and how sectarianism seemed to dissipate.⁴⁵ These interdenominational revival-like meetings, which saw attendees of diverse social classes, spread to Stone’s own congregations – including the famous Cane Ridge Meeting House – and throughout the southwestern frontier.⁴⁶

Emboldened by these developments and firmly convinced that Presbyterians were too wedded to unbiblical creeds, Stone officially renounced his ties to the denomination

⁴⁴ Ibid., 33-34.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 34, 37.

⁴⁶ See Paul Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America’s Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), especially 3-64, 87-94, 103-104. Conkin argues that the original revival services of the Second Great Awakening actually began as communion services that were not reacting against Calvinist traditions but were actually deeply rooted in Scottish Ulster Presbyterianism. A typical service would begin on Friday with fasting, prayer, and preaching, culminate in communion on Sunday, and end with a thanksgiving service on Monday. Preachers would coordinate their services so that other local congregations could attend, thus heightening the sense of excitement and revivalism. Some of these revivals departed from orthodox Presbyterian services with emotional preaching and strong bodily movements (jerking, falling, laughing) in reaction to the Holy Spirit.

in 1804.⁴⁷ It was at this point that he began to publicly advocate for unity amongst Christians. This position stood in contrast to sectarianism, which occurred when one religious denomination proclaimed all others as inferior. He interchangeably referred to this same concept as “partyism,” applying a word that normally described political parties to illustrate the tribalism and level of theological polarization between denominations. Pursuing political power was certainly an extreme example of partyism or sectarianism, but so was simply claiming moral superiority over another denomination and cultivating hard feelings between groups of (Protestant) Christians. The way to achieve unity, Stone believed, was to “support and defend the simple doctrine of the Bible” and especially the New Testament. He called the Scriptures the equivalent of the Constitution for believers.⁴⁸ He was not claiming the Constitution was God-ordained or that Scriptures should replace the Constitution; instead, he meant that just like the Constitution was the document that governed the United States, the New Testament was the document that should govern Christians. New Testament-based (apostolic) Christianity, which was not

⁴⁷ Stone and several other local Presbyterian leaders (Robert Marshall, John Dunlavy, Richard McNemar, and John Thompson) withdrew from their synod, criticizing the Westminster Confession and Calvinism and adopting an Arminian tone. They created their own new presbytery, but shortly thereafter decided to dissolve it, marking Stone’s final break from Presbyterianism. Dunlavy and McNemar were soon drawn into the Shaker movement, which Stone heavily criticized, and Marshall and Thompson eventually returned to the Presbyterian fold. Stone was the only one of this group who continued to emphasize unity and restoration throughout his life. Robert Marshall, John Dunlavy, Richard McNemar, John Thompson, and Barton W. Stone, *Abstract of An Apology for Renouncing the Jurisdiction of the Synod of Kentucky: Being a Compendius View of the Gospel, and a Few Remarks on the Confession of Faith* (1804); Robert Marshall, John Dunlavy, Richard M’Nemar, B.W. Stone, John Thompson, and David Purviance, *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* (June 28, 1804).

⁴⁸ Barton W. Stone, ed., *Christian Messenger*, vol. 7 (1833), 181; vol. 1 (1826), 13-14, 19, 239-240. The *Christian Messenger* will be abbreviated as “CM.” Ironically, Stone’s “Christians” would become a denomination of their own, the Disciples of Christ. The Disciples are sometimes also called the Christian Church or Churches of Christ. Although these terms refer to different subgroups of Disciples today, initially they referred to all the same people.

divided up into denominations, was the ideal model to follow. People should not identify as Presbyterian or Episcopal or Methodist or Baptist; they should simply identify themselves as Christian. Like Alexander Campbell, Stone was confident in humans' ability to correctly interpret the New Testament, its theology, and its prescriptions for worship because "the Bible was addressed to rational creatures, and designed by God to be understood for their profit."⁴⁹ These two ideas, Christian unity (the opposite of sectarianism) and the restoration of apostolic Christianity, would become the central pillars of Stone's anti-Sabbatarianism.

At the same time, others were engaging with theologies popularized during the Second Great Awakening that predisposed them to anti-Sabbatarianism. Anti-Sabbatarian was not just a frontier phenomenon. Theophilus Gates, an eastern ex-Presbyterian urbanite, was another individual who would profoundly influence religious anti-Sabbatarian thought. Gates was born in 1787 in Connecticut to Presbyterian parents. At age sixteen, he began to work as a traveling schoolteacher. It was a tumultuous time for Gates. His brother had recently died, and according to his memoir, he "longed for death, that I might cease from troubles, and suffer no longer the ills of life." His wanderings had brought him to the Baltimore and Eastern Shore areas by 1807, where "for the first time, I had a clear view of the goodness of God to fallen man, in the gift of his only begotten Son to be a Redeemer."⁵⁰ Gates' memoir does not explain what prompted this realization, but having some type of conversion experience like this one

⁴⁹ CM, vol. 1 (1826), 4. Also see Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁵⁰ Theophilus R. Gates, *The Life and Writings of Theophilus R. Gates* (Philadelphia: David Dickinson, 1818), 29.

was common during the Second Great Awakening. Gates believed that God was calling him to become a minister and initially resisted. He frequently became ill in the years after his conversion, and he attributed these constant ailments to his reluctance to join the ministry. He finally began preaching and spreading this theological beliefs to all who would listen. Gates eventually settled down in the Philadelphia area.⁵¹

Acquainted with the Methodist and Quaker denominations for a short while immediately following his conversion, Gates soon became disillusioned with the rigid confines of sectarianism. Reacting against his experience with Methodism as well as against the strict Presbyterian upbringing of his youth, Gates believed that religion was too bogged down by hierarchy. From his perspective, Christians tended to worship the doctrines of their own sect rather than God himself. When Christians threw off this sectarianism, it would allow the Holy Spirit to work and would herald in a 1,000-year golden age for Christianity before Christ's second coming. This kind of post-millennial theology was common during the Second Great Awakening. To spread his own brand of post-millennialism and anti-sectarianism – both of which would influence his anti-Sabbatarianism – Gates became a writer and editor for *The Reformer*, a religious periodical operated from 1820 to 1832.⁵²

Conditions other than theology – particularly industrialization and the physical expansion of the country – also helped set the stage for the anti-Sabbatarianism to

⁵¹ Ibid., 29-53.

⁵² Ibid. For more about Gates' life, see Charles Coleman Sellers, *Theophilus, the Battle-Axe; A History of the Lives and Adventures of Theophilus Ransom Gates and the Battle-Axes* (Philadelphia: Press of Patterson & White, 1930); Bruce Dorsey, "Friends Becoming Enemies: Philadelphia Benevolence and the Neglected Era of American Quaker History," *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (1998): 408-410; Hatch, *Democratization*, 176-177.

become a contentious national issue after it emerged on the western frontier. America grew at a rapid rate in both population and land in the early nineteenth century. In the first ten years of that century alone, the number of American post offices more than doubled. During that same period, post office revenues and post road mileage almost doubled as well.⁵³ This expansion resulted in increased mail transportation and distribution during every day of the week, including Sundays. New England senators, who came from an area of the country where strict Puritan influences still pervaded the local culture, twice rejected a bill twice that required post offices to remain open on Sundays, but continued westward expansion and the Hugh Wylie case finally helped push the 1810 bill through Congress. The new law did, in fact, provide some protective measures for postmasters who were concerned about properly observing the Sabbath. Post offices had to remain open for only one hour after the mail arrived, and if this time happened to coincide with Sunday services, they could close for church and reopen again afterwards. However, Sabbatarians did not believe these measures went far enough in protecting Americans' right to observe the Sabbath. It did not matter that the post office did not have to be open during church; Sabbatarians disliked the general principle of being forced to work *at all* on the Sabbath.⁵⁴

They immediately began petitioning Congress to repeal the section of the postal act that dealt with Sunday mails. Hundreds of petitions came from states across the nation and especially from New England. Minister Lyman Beecher led the way,

⁵³ Fuller, *Morality and the Mail*, 2.

⁵⁴ Fuller, *Morality and the Mail*, 1-13, 23-26; John, *Spreading the News*, 173, 180-185. For more info on postal routes in Pennsylvania in the 1790s, see Arthur Hecht, "Pennsylvania Postal History of the Eighteenth Century," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 30 (1963): 420-442.

spearheading Presbyterian and Congregational petition efforts. At first, the need for efficient communication across the country on all days of the week during the War of 1812 ensured that the law would not be repealed. After the war came to a close, concerns of lost revenue helped sustain the law. The controversy began to die down in the late 1810s, but in the late 1820s, it erupted again even more furiously than before. By this time, the Erie Canal had been completed and operating for three years, running from Albany in the east to the Niagara River and the Great Lakes in the west. The National Road, which ran westward from Cumberland, Maryland, was built around the same time, with plans to extend it all the way to St. Louis, although these plans were never realized due to funding issues. Business was booming along these corridors, and increased mobility meant that Americans were traveling more than ever before, even on Sundays. 467 Sabbatarian petitions from 21 states waiting had been sent to Congress by May 1829, each one concluding that Sunday mail delivery should cease to protect the right of Sabbatarian postmasters to observe the Sabbath.⁵⁵

In addition, Sabbatarians no longer restricted their efforts solely to the confines of their congregations or to legal and political realms. They worked towards their goal in ways that had more tangible effects on local populations, even those that did not attend their churches. Josiah Bissell, an elder of the Third Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, saw that the Erie Canal had brought increased commercial activities to his town on Sundays. In 1828, he decided to establish a transportation line called the Pioneer Line. The line, which provided transport via both boat and stage and did not do any business on Sundays, was meant to rival secular transportation lines. Bissell encouraged

⁵⁵ Ibid.

potential patrons to boycott transportation companies that did operate on the Sabbath. He even tried to obtain permission from Washington, DC for the Pioneer Line to carry mail. These efforts came to naught because the Postmaster General was not fully persuaded of the line's need to carry mail or that there was sufficient public support, but Bissell was determined to get his way and launched another round of petitions to Congress.⁵⁶

Within three years, the Pioneer Line had failed because even some Sabbatarians did not approve of Bissell's methods.⁵⁷ Beecher, for example, preferred to use moral suasion rather than the more forceful methods that Bissell seemed to favor. Bissell did not just want to stop Sunday transportation; he wanted to shut down virtually every non-essential business that operated on the Sabbath. However, Beecher and Bissell did team up in 1828 to work toward their common goal when they, along with other prominent New England Presbyterians including Arthur and Lewis Tappan, established a benevolent society called the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath (GUPOCS). The purpose in forming the GUPOCS, as records from the first anniversary celebration describe, was to inject "new energy" into the public realm about upholding the Sabbath, "the chief support and defence [sic] of the church of Christ on earth... [and] a wall of safety to the civil community."⁵⁸ GUPOCS's goal was not only to protect the Sabbath so that its supporters could follow the fourth commandment in peace. Its

⁵⁶ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 84-86; John, *Spreading the News*, 180-187.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 92-94.

⁵⁸ *First Annual Report of the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath* (New York: J. Collord, 1829), 8. Also see John, *Spreading the News*, 180-185; Fuller, *Morality and the Mail*, 23-26; Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 114-115, 124; and Wyatt-Brown, "Prelude to Abolitionism," 330.

members also believed, as historian David Sehat describes, “that God had established moral norms and that it was incumbent upon them to enforce these norms through law.”⁵⁹

The members of the GUPOCS were activists and wanted to spread their faith and their Sabbath beliefs to the larger society, which they believed was degenerate. They wanted to turn America into a Christian nation, hence the continuous flood of petitions to Congress and the language of “civil community” in the GUPOCS’ founding statement. These sentiments were representative of many Sabbatarians across the nation.

In short, the implications of the improvements in transportation and travel exacerbated the theological tensions that already existed in places like Washington County, Pennsylvania. They helped the Sabbath debate maintain its relevance throughout the 1810s and into the 1820s, well after Wylie had dropped his appeals to Presbyterian leadership and began serving once again as an elder. Some ex-Presbyterians like Stone, Campbell, and Gates became uncomfortable with how others in their old denomination tried to enforce religious behavior through what was supposed to be (in theory) a secular government. They were alarmed at the divisions they saw in the church – divisions perpetuated, they believed, by those falling on the Sabbatarian side of the debate. They began to use their periodicals and other writings to flesh out these views more fully, gain support for what they believed were correct interpretations of the Bible and how it should be applied to everyday life, and hopefully, bring unity to Protestantism.

⁵⁹ Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 56-57; McCrossen, *Holy Day*, 41-49. Quote from David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 73.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRINT BATTLES

The main mouthpieces of the anti-Sabbatarians were their religious periodicals. Their diverse readerships and the rise of print culture meant that the ideas espoused in one particular periodical were often disseminated widely outside of that readership or theological tradition. Authors interwove their anti-Sabbatarian writings with theological ideas that were based on their prejudices against Presbyterianism and Catholicism and their involvement with newly rising denominations, an irony since many of them declared themselves to be anti-sectarian. This first wave of anti-Sabbatarianism culminated in the late 1820s when it received the most political attention, before other social issues displaced it.

Theophilus Gates was one of the first people to begin writing regularly about his anti-Sabbatarian beliefs.⁶⁰ After his conversion in Maryland in 1807, Gates traveled and preached throughout Virginia and North Carolina. He described, “I do not particularly attach myself to any sect of people, but preach among all, and endeavour [sic] to be faithful.”⁶¹ As Gates made his way back up north, he ministered to prisoners, Quakers,

⁶⁰ Another early anti-Sabbatarian was John Leland, a Baptist minister who spent considerable time in Virginia and hailed from a Congregational family in Massachusetts. He advocated for the right to worship according to one’s conscience in “Remarks on Holy Time... On Moral Law... On Changing of the Day... Of Sabbatical Laws: With a Summary, in a Letter to a Friend” (Pittsfield: Phinehas Allen, 1815) and “The Sabbath Examined,” June 1838, in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland: Including Some Events in His Life*, ed. L.F. Greene (New York: G.W. Wood, 1845), 688-696.

⁶¹ Gates, *The Life and Writings*, 161.

Presbyterians, and Methodists. He preached primarily to a group of people at Mt. Zion, the Baptists living in Germantown, upon his arrival in Philadelphia. He was impressed with them because “they lay aside all human creeds and regulations, and take the scriptures alone for their rule of faith, practice, and discipline. They appeared friendly and pious.”⁶² He contrasted them to the rest of the city, which he viewed as depraved. Perhaps it was this depravity that encouraged him to settle in Philadelphia. The city was a field ripe for harvest, so to speak. He could reach even larger audiences by publishing, not just preaching, about his religious beliefs.

Gates’ autobiography and some pamphlets, released in the 1810s, marked his first foray into publishing. These pamphlets gave his interpretation of prophecy and end times (eschatology), and he also discussed the goodness and love of God. In two particular pamphlets, *Truth Advocated* and *A View on the Last Dispensation of Light*, he argued that the Roman Catholic Church was “the beast” identified in the books of Daniel and Revelation. The beast was given power by the dragon (Satan) to persecute God’s true followers (Protestants). He would echo this nativist, anti-Catholic theme in his anti-Sabbatarian writings the following decade. In 1820, Gates dedicated *The Reformer* to uncovering the corruption of mainstream Christianity, especially that of New England Presbyterianism, which he likened to the Roman Catholic Church.⁶³

His ideas appealed to a wide variety of people, including Quakers, who would take up the anti-Sabbatarian cause in the 1830s and 1840s. Anti-sectarian Methodists,

⁶² Ibid., 168. Also see Sellers, *Theophilus, the Battle-Axe*, 16-21.

⁶³ Copies of *Truth Advocated* and *A View on the Last Dispensation of Light* are printed in Gates’ autobiography. Dorsey, “Friends Becoming Enemies,” 408-410; Gates, *The Life and Writings*; Hatch, *The Democratization*, 176-177; Sellers, *Theophilus, the Battle-Axe*.

anti-sectarian Baptists, Universalists, and Christian freethinkers also found Gates' ideas attractive. Although the contributors to the periodical were overwhelmingly male, reading religious literature was a common pastime among educated women too. If they had leisure time, women would read individually and join female literary societies. It was also common for working women to have a family member read aloud to them while they completed domestic tasks. Additionally, Quakers believed that women could preach and wield spiritual authority due to the Inner Light, or the presence of Christ dwelling inside them. Due to readership patterns and the fact that a significant portion of Gates' subscribers valued women's contributions to religious communities, it is logical to conclude that women comprised a significant portion of Gates' readership and even influenced some of the individuals who wrote into the periodical. Lucretia Mott, a Quaker abolitionist whose anti-Sabbatarianism will be discussed later, may have been one such woman.⁶⁴

Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell also spread their ideas beyond their congregations by writing periodicals in the 1820s and the 1830s. Stone published the *Christian Messenger*, and Campbell was the editor of the *Christian Baptist* and later the *Millennial Harbinger*. Through writing and preaching, Stone increased his following throughout Kentucky, Tennessee, southern Ohio, and northern Alabama in the first two

⁶⁴ For more on religious literature reading habits, see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. chapter 7, and John Fea, *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For more on women's reading habits in particular, see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Books, Reading, and the World of Goods in Antebellum New England," *American Quarterly* 48 (Dec. 1996): 587-622; Mary Kelley, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America," *Journal of American History* 83 (Sept. 1996): 401-424; Mary Kelley, "'Pen and Ink Communion': Evangelical Reading and Writing in Antebellum America," *New England Quarterly* 84 (Dec. 2011): 555-587.

decades of the nineteenth century. There began to be geographic overlap with Campbell's audiences in western Pennsylvania, Ohio, present-day West Virginia, and Kentucky. Their followers officially merged to become the Disciples of Christ in 1832. They did not actively try to appeal to eastern urbanites per se, although receipts published in the periodicals show that they welcomed subscribers from the East Coast and as far away as Texas and Canada. Rural farmers and politicians alike read and wrote into their periodicals. The periodicals' receipts, obituaries of respected female Disciples, and even the occasional letter authored by a woman show that women actively engaged with the periodicals as well.⁶⁵ Many of the subscribers, whether male or female, were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians and former Presbyterians. Baptists and Methodists could be found among the readers too. These denominations – Baptists, Methodists, and the Disciples of Christ – although small at first, grew by leaps and bounds during the Second Great Awakening. For instance, Methodists totaled over a quarter million in 1820 and had doubled their numbers within 10 years. Baptist adherents increased “tenfold” in the thirty years following the American Revolution, soon outnumbering Lutheran and Roman Catholic clergymen. The Disciples of Christ eventually counted about 4000 preachers, which was equivalent to the number of Presbyterian ministers. Conversely, Congregationalists had twice the amount of clergy in 1775 compared to any other church, but 60 years later their clergy was only 10% of Methodist ministers.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Of all three Disciples periodicals, the *Christian Messenger* recorded readership patterns the most thoroughly. For examples of receipts, obituaries, and female authors, see CM, vol. 1 (1827), 73-74; CM, vol. 2 (1828), 95; CM, vol. 5 (1831), 287; CM, vol. 7 (1833) 192, 256, 281-282, 287; CM, vol. 8 (1834), 127, 224; CM, vol. 9 (1835), 235.

⁶⁶ All statistics in this paragraph come from Hatch, *Democratization*, 3-4. Hatch estimates numbers using Frederic Lewis Weis' *Colonial Clergy* series published from 1930s to 1950s and John Winebrenner's *History of All the Religious Denonminations in the United States* (1848).

These statistics show the quantitative prevalence of the denominations from which anti-Sabbatarians usually drew their ranks. Anti-Sabbatarians were thus not *only* radical religious fringe groups, even though certainly a significant portion of Gates' readership leaned in that direction. Anti-Sabbatarians were also very much a part of what became mainstream Christianity during the Second Great Awakening. The rise of print culture also helped spread anti-Sabbatarian ideas among different religious denominations. In particular, Stone and Campbell's shared network and their compatible ideas about anti-sectarianism, Christian unity, the ability to comprehend the Bible through rational thought, and the Bible as the only guiding creed for Christians helped give anti-Sabbatarianism forward momentum. The *Christian Messenger* and *Christian Baptist* borrowed articles from each other on a regular basis, and *The Reformer* also republished articles from the *Christian Messenger*. Newspapers would glean articles from periodicals and vice-versa as well.⁶⁷ Consequently, ideas espoused in one religious periodical were often disseminated widely outside of that particular readership or theological tradition. This wide readership helped the Sabbath debate become a national issue.

Anti-Sabbatarians' written arguments can be broken down into five distinct but intersecting ideas: 1) the role of conscience in Sabbath observance, 2) the need to restore Biblical worship practices, 3) anti-Catholicism, 4) millennialism, and 5) a desire for

⁶⁷ For more about the role of mass media and print culture in faith-based literature, see Nord, *Faith in Reading*. For examples of *The Reformer* publishing anti-Sabbatarian articles taken from the *Messenger*, see *The Reformer*, vol. 9 (1828), 114-115; vol. 10 (1829), 96; vol. 11 (1830), 112. For examples of dialogue and republishing between the CM and the *Christian Baptist* (hereafter referred to as CB), including but not limited to anti-sectarian and Sabbath-related content, see CB, vol. 5 (1827), 379-381; CM, vol. 3 (1829), 167, 187, 203, 217-222, 227; CM, vol. 4 (1830), 35.

Christian unity. First, anti-Sabbatarians emphasized the role of individual conscience in worship. True worship came from the heart. It could not be legislated. However Christians chose to spend their Sundays, it was a matter between them and God alone. Anti-Sabbatarians sometimes also called this concept Christian liberty. One of the earliest outcries against Sabbatarians and in favor of Christian liberty came from Alexander Campbell himself. He traveled throughout Washington County, Pennsylvania, to visit his mother and other family members and noticed that Hugh Wylie was not the only person who had been singled out for not keeping a strict Sabbath. In April 1815, local citizens formed the Washington Moral Society. Its members kept a strict watch out for anybody who swore, became intoxicated, exhibited public disorderliness, violated the Sabbath, or participated in any other kind of immoral activity. The society even began arresting people even though it did not have the legal authority to do so. Campbell became indignant, especially when he heard tales about society members persecuting people for traveling on Sundays. In response, he published a series of letters under the pseudonym “Candidus” beginning in April 1820. He contended, ““Christians are not at liberty to interfere with men of the world in anything pertaining to God and conscience.””⁶⁸ Forced Sabbath adherence was not acceptable because it did not allow individuals to decide for themselves whether or not to follow God’s commands.

Anti-Sabbatarians’ focus on the role of individual conscience in worship is perhaps best seen in a dialogue published in *The Reformer* between a (presumably Presbyterian) clergyman and a farmer. The clergyman approached the farmer as the

⁶⁸ As published in Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell: Embracing a View of the Origin, Progress, and Principles of the Religious Reformation Which He Advocated* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1868-70), 516-524. Quote from 523-524.

farmer was fixing a broken fence so his cattle would not trample over it. The day of the week happened to be Sunday. The clergyman told the farmer that it was wicked to do “worldly labour” on the Sabbath and that God would rain down judgment on him for it. The farmer responded, “I cannot see what harm there is in preventing one’s crop from being destroyed on Sunday more than another day.” He pointed out that by preaching, clergy members themselves work on Sundays. The minister replied that they exempt from this since they spread God’s word. Unsurprisingly, this answer did not satisfy the farmer. The two then went on to debate the Saturday Sabbath versus the Sunday Sabbath, which resulted in the farmer attacking the minister’s denominational confession of faith. At this point, the clergyman accused the farmer of being “a graceless reprobate, bound to perdition, and fire and brimstone will be your portion to all eternity,” to which the farmer replied, “It is a mercy to the human race, that you are not entrusted with fire and brimstone, or you would have all except those of your won faith enveloped in flames. But, thank God, you are but a weak frail mortal like myself.”⁶⁹

This dialogue may have actually happened, or the individual from Perry County, Pennsylvania, who sent it to *The Reformer* may have completely fabricated the entire story. Whether fact or fiction, the more important thing is the point that the article was trying to make. It reveals a core belief of anti-Sabbatarians: Presbyterians had begun to assume the authority of deciding who was saved, a role that should belong to God alone. Anti-Sabbatarians implied that that this was a much more serious sin than working on Sundays. An article originally published in the *Boston Patriot* and reprinted in *The Reformer* explained, “For man, then to assume such authority, is an usurpation of the

⁶⁹ *Reformer*, vol. 9 (1828), 172-173.

prerogative of God. Religion is a thing exclusively between a man and his Maker; it is a voluntary offering from the heart.”⁷⁰ Not only was religion a matter between man and God, but God *himself*, according to anti-Sabbatarians, was the authority who gifted humankind with the ability to follow their consciences without judgment from others. Anti-Sabbatarians commonly pointed out that Jesus performed miracles on the Sabbath. They also cited verses like Colossians 2:16, which states that followers of Christ are forgiven from their sin and are no longer shackled to the Old Testament law, so “let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.” Another popular verse was Romans 14:5, which reads, “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.”⁷¹ No earthly authority could or should try to take that freedom away.

Christian liberty went hand-in-hand with the second theological principle that governed many anti-Sabbatarians: the Bible alone was sufficient as a model of worship. Over the centuries, denominations had developed creeds to clarify how they interpreted Scripture. To anti-Sabbatarians, though, neither creeds nor federal laws held the authority of the Bible. In fact, they were appalled that some Christians tried to use these extra-Biblical measures to dictate morality. Instead, some groups, like the Disciples of Christ, wanted to model their worship on the practices of the apostles in the New Testament. This desire to restore apostolic modes of worship is called “restorationism.”

⁷⁰ *The Reformer*, vol. 10 (1829), 17.

⁷¹ Colossians 2:16, Romans 14:5 (King James Version). For example, see *Salem Gazette* (Dec. 27, 1814), 3.

Other Protestant groups, based on the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* (the Bible alone), aligned very closely to this way of thinking. They did not find blue laws in the Bible.

For example, Campbell, writing again as “Candidus,” declared that Christians “must go by the discipline given in the New Testament...the only system of pure morality is that of the Bible, especially of the New Testament.”⁷² As Campbell understood it, the New Testament contained no statement that equated the first day of the week (Sunday) to the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday).⁷³ Jesus had not commanded apostolic Christians to observe the Sabbath by resting from work. He even performed miracles like healing the sick and the lame on the Sabbath, according to passages like John 5:9. It may seem counterintuitive at first, but by observing Jesus’ behaviors and commands, Campbell was *not* trying to discourage Christians from setting aside a day for worship. In fact, Campbell believed that Sunday worship was actually a good thing. He argued that Christ fulfilled the Old Testament law when he spent the (Jewish) Sabbath in the grave after being crucified. Sunday worship commemorated the day on which Jesus arose. The apostles gathered for worship on this new day, and Campbell advocated following their example.⁷⁴ However, Campbell fervently believed that Sabbath observance, although a good thing, should not be regulated by law or creed. The New Testament did not explicitly command Sabbath observance, and an individual’s religious practices were between that person and God.

⁷² Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell: Embracing a View of the Origin, Progress, and Principles of the Religious Reformation Which He Advocated* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1868-70), 516-524, quote from 523-524.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 526.

⁷⁴ CB, vol. 1 (1823), 43.

Campbell was not the only person to think this. His periodical subscribers eagerly endorsed and expounded upon his ideas. They railed against their enemies in Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger* well into the 1830s, blending their distaste for religion embellished with creeds with their desire to worship according to their consciences. Charles Cassedy, a political journalist and writer from Bedford County, Tennessee, wrote in to voice his concerns over sectarian (read: Presbyterian) churches. Presbyterians were rumored to have gained enough support, both numerically and financially, to soon "possess the POWER to compel Congress to do as they pleased!" Cassedy denounced this as "absolute and unconditional tyranny" and "ecclesiastical despotism" because they were trying to manipulate people into religious belief through political means.⁷⁵ Presbyterians

have yet to learn, that although man may sometimes be made a *hypocrite*, he can never be made a *true believer*, by compulsory or even painful and cruel measures, as is demonstrated by the whole history of the *Inquisition*; and they have yet to distinguish, that *intellectual freedom* is the element of TRUTH, the true parent of mental, moral, and *religious* enjoyment – and, in fine, that however the human physical system may be subjected to the coercive, and even painful inflictions of municipal or ecclesiastical tyranny, yet that the human SOUL is naturally and essentially free, and always will, under the most painful and excruciating circumstances, exult in its sentiments of unrestrained, and even unbounded LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE!⁷⁶

Cassedy was emphatic that no matter how much Presbyterians tried to force the body to conform their worship practices and creeds, the soul was one thing that they had no power over. It could never be beaten into submission. The inner self would always have its own convictions even if outward freedoms were stripped away. Campbell's reply to

⁷⁵ *Millennial Harbinger*, vol. 4 (1833), 464-465. The *Millennial Harbinger* will be abbreviated as "MH."

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Cassedy echoed these same sentiments.⁷⁷ Both men favored a simple, non-coercive, apostolic Christianity. Their exchange demonstrates that their anti-Sabbatarianism was rooted in a concern for individual liberty and a desire to restore Bible-based worship.

Cassedy's rhetoric, with its references to the Inquisition and "ecclesiastical tyranny," was infused with a third stream of anti-Sabbatarian theology: anti-Catholicism. Anti-Sabbatarians saw Presbyterians and their attempts to institute blue laws as a church-state alliance. This alliance eerily resembled the relationship between church and state in Catholic Europe. In anti-Sabbatarians' minds, Catholics were inherently power-hungry, tyrannical, corrupt, and anti-Christ. It is important to remember events like the Gunpowder Plot and the English Civil War, which stoked anti-Catholic sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic, were not yet distant memories in the minds of anti-Sabbatarians. In fact, they were about as far removed from those events as we are today from the nineteenth-century Sabbath debate; that is to say, not very much at all. Memories of the strife that Catholic-Protestant feuds could bring helped fuel anti-Catholicism in what was a predominately Protestant country. This culture of anti-Catholicism progressively increased in the first half of the 1800s due to the large influxes of German and Irish Catholic immigrants.⁷⁸ Cassedy and his fellow periodical subscribers were scared that Presbyterians would become the new Catholics, using political power as a tool to punish those who had theological differences.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 469.

⁷⁸ The increasingly partisan and sectional political climate in the years preceding the Civil War exacerbated these tensions. For more information on anti-Catholicism in America, see Hamburger, *Separation*, esp. 193-202 and Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, esp. 30.

The “hireling clergy” was one of those Catholic tricks adopted by Presbyterians that anti-Sabbatarians were on the lookout for. In this alleged scheme, Presbyterians would raise funds ostensibly to train their clergy at seminaries, but what they were really doing – at least according to the people who wrote into *The Reformer* – was using this money to line their pockets and increase their influence. This disdain for seminaries and trained clergy is usually attributed to the lack of education and poverty that existed in rural areas.⁷⁹ Gates’ subscribers were scattered across the country, but many of them lived in the urban mid-Atlantic. This suggests that the socio-economic dynamic, although it certainly played a role, is not wholly sufficient in explaining anti-Sabbatarians’ hostility to clerical efforts.

There was a significant religious component to anti-clericism. Anti-Sabbatarians argued that relying on educational institutions revealed Presbyterians’ lack of belief in God’s ability to use preachers no matter what their level of education. Seminary education resulted in a holier-than-thou mentality: “in no part of the United States does the religion of the people so much resemble the religion of the Pharisees” as it did in seminaries.⁸⁰ This was a reference to members of a religious subgroup of Judaism who were often called out by Jesus for their legalistic adherence to Old Testament law. The New Testament portrayed Pharisees as being more concerned about material gain and maintaining pious appearances instead of actually following God. Gates’ subscribers called Presbyterian clergymen “hireling priests” and pointed to their constant fundraising efforts for their seminaries and national missionary, Bible, tract, and Sabbath school

⁷⁹ See, for example, Wyatt-Brown, “Prelude to Abolitionism,” 331-334.

⁸⁰ *The Reformer*, vol. 1 (1820), 49-50.

societies as proof of their greed.⁸¹ At least one writer to *The Reformer* took issue with the idea of preachers, especially those associated with GUPOCS, accepting pay at all (“preaching for hire”).⁸²

Anti-Sabbatarian periodical subscribers used the language of “priestcraft” to link the hireling Presbyterian clergy explicitly to the corruption of the Catholic Church. This connection went beyond simply using the word “priest” to conjure up images of the Catholic clergy. Priestcraft, as one writer who called himself “Christophilus” defined, was simply “the union of temporal and spiritual power” for the purpose of “strengthening and securing clerical power.” He went on to describe, “To achieve this favourite object, tricks and juggling, of almost every description, have been resorted to, and played off upon the people under the name of religion.”⁸³ One Christian freethinker defined priestcraft as a “system” which makes “a gain of godliness.” Anyone who received a “‘filthy lucre’ under the pretence [sic] of teaching or administering Christianity” was guilty of priestcraft.⁸⁴ Presbyterians’ constant solicitation for money may have reminded this particular writer of Catholic practices like selling indulgences. At the very least, the consolidation of money, education, power, and religion seemed like a very Catholic thing to do. Although Catholics were not the only ones to unite power and religion in the form of a theocracy – the Puritans, for example, had set up a theocracy in the Massachusetts

⁸¹ Anti-Sabbatarians conveniently ignored the fact that such benevolent societies, while admittedly dominated by Presbyterians, were usually interdenominational efforts. *Ibid.*, 76-77.

⁸² *The Reformer*, vol. 9 (1828), 77-78.

⁸³ *The Reformer*, vol. 2 (1821), 80-82.

⁸⁴ Originally printed in *Freethinking Christians’ Magazine*, as appears in *The Reformer*, vol. 4 (1823), 169.

Bay Colony – the historical corruption of the Catholic Church made it an easy target. The influx of Catholics straight from Europe into American cities made this analogy seem all the more relevant and urgent. By targeting Catholics, anti-Sabbatarians were targeting an enemy common to all Protestants. Christians of many stripes – including Baptists, Methodists, Universalists, and Quakers – thought they were being duped and manipulated in ways started by Pharisees, continued by Catholics, and now being perfected by Presbyterians.

Take, for example, *The Reformer's* dialogue between the clergyman and the farmer, where the clergyman condemned the farmer to eternal damnation for working on a Sunday. This dialogue was meant to illustrate that Presbyterians were hostile and judgmental towards all those who belonged to non-Presbyterian denominations. Readers steeped in this culture of anti-Catholicism would have instantly made the connection that the act of the clergyman proclaiming the farmer's eternal fate was suspiciously similar to the moral and religious authority claimed by the pope. One writer referred to the New England clergy as "Presbyterian priests" who were "no better" than "a body of Popish Cardinals," using the Roman Catholic clerical titles to indicate his disdain for priestcraft.⁸⁵ Another author said that if "we do not all in our power to oppose the aggressors, we shall doubly deserve to be chained to the Popish Car, and in the gloomy of the Inquisition gnaw our chains in sullen silence."⁸⁶ Anti-Sabbatarians were terrified that America might begin to resemble Catholic Europe, with its church-state unions, persecuted dissenters, and rampant corruption, if Presbyterians were successful in their

⁸⁵ *Reformer*, vol. 9 (1828), 119-121.

⁸⁶ *Reformer*, vol. 1 (1820), 255-256.

attempts to mold all Americans in their image through federal enforcement of Sabbath adherence.

Complaints and accusations of priestcraft were by no means restricted to the *Reformer* or the mid-Atlantic. This culture of fear was so widespread that it even permeated areas that were historically sympathetic to Puritanism and Presbyterianism. *The American Yeoman*, a Vermont newspaper, bemoaned Connecticut's blue laws, saying they were a product of repressive "puritanick [sic] fanaticism" that did not stem from a concern true religion.⁸⁷ The *New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* similarly published an article highlighting the hidden danger of Sunday laws: "The deadly pill, at first, will always be rolled in honey. The honor or religion – the spread of the gospel... the safety of the state, and the salvation of souls, form the sirrorup [sic], in which the poisonous pill is hidden."⁸⁸ Although the fears of priestcraft and persecution were likely dramatized and exaggerated for rhetorical purposes, they were still very real in the minds of anti-Sabbatarian Americans.⁸⁹

Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and their readers in the western states and territories saw similar dangers in Sabbath laws. One subscriber to Stone's *Christian Messenger*, known simply as "T.S.," was old enough to remember the Revolutionary

⁸⁷ *The American Yeoman*, Sept. 23, 1817, 4.

⁸⁸ "Sunday Mails [From the *United States' Telegraph*]," *New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, Feb. 1, 1830, 2.

⁸⁹ Conspiracy-making was very popular during this time. Even Sabbatarians like Lyman Beecher perpetuated conspiracy theories that painted Catholics and immigrants as threats to religious liberty. Conspiracy theories could be found in other arenas of American life as well. See Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 26; Leo P. Hirrel, *Children of Wrath: New School Calvinism and Antebellum Reform* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 93-116; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

War.⁹⁰ He wrote a letter to the editor in which he compared the Presbyterian clergy not to Catholics but to the oppressive British. He saw creeds, confessions, and other religious tests (like monitoring Sabbath adherence) as acts of “ecclesiastical despotism” because these practices were not present in the New Testament and served to advance denomination-specific doctrines and interests. This resulted in a tug-of-war between “liberty” on one hand and “dominion and power on the other”; the “sectarian bigots” felt threatened by those who rightfully advocated for “Bible government alone.” T.S.’s letter culminated with a colorful martial metaphor: “To avert this impending ruin, all the sectarian tribes are united in their exertions from the pulpit and the press; and have levelled their artillery at the restoration of Bible government to the church of Christ. The armies have taken the field, and the battle is begun.”⁹¹ Although the enemy in T.S.’ cosmic drama was compared to the British, his rhetoric resembles that which was used to equate Presbyterianism to Catholicism. That strategy, together with his exhortation to restore Bible government and Christian liberty, illustrates how these three components of anti-Sabbatarian theology worked together toward a common goal: eradicating the threat of blue laws.

A fourth theological stream of thought played a role, albeit less prominently, in anti-Sabbatarianism: millennialism, defined by one scholar as an idea “based on Revelation 20:1-9, which describes an angel casting Satan into ‘the bottomless pit’ for a

⁹⁰ T.S. is part of a larger trend where Americans used the memory of the American Revolution to make statements about 1820s and 1830s politics and labor movements. In a very similar way, T.S. chose to remember the Revolution by drawing parallels to nineteenth-century theological debates that he was invested in. Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

⁹¹ This was an ironic comparison since many Disciples were pacifist. CM 1 (1826), 249-250.

thousand years (millennium), [and] this perspective anticipates a period characterized by peace, justice, and righteousness.”⁹² Many anti-Sabbatarians were post-millennial. People who adopted this version of millennialism took a positive view of humanity and believed that the reform and progression of society would herald in the millennium. Christ would return to earth at the *end* of this era. Other anti-Sabbatarians were pre-millennial; they believed that Christ’s second coming would *precede* the millennium. Jesus’ second coming was not an event that could be ushered by humankind. God alone would decide the timing. Christ would then be present on earth to rule for a thousand years, a period of peace and unity. Even though anti-Sabbatarians had differing ideas about when and how the millennium would begin, their distinct brands of millennialism still led them to similar conclusions about the relationship between reform efforts and government.

Post-millennialism was the most common form of millennialism among anti-Sabbatarians. T.S., for instance, envisioned the fight between the true followers of Christ and the Presbyterian clergy as a grand cosmic battle between good and evil, an idea that was compatible with the idea that Christians had a duty to usher in the kingdom of God. Alexander Campbell was even more outwardly post-millennial. He stated that the purpose of publishing the *Millennial Harbinger* was to encourage “the development and introduction of that political and religious order of society called THE MILLENNIUM, which will be the consummation of that ultimate amelioration of society proposed in the Christian Scriptures.” The Sabbatarian brand of postmillennialism, like that espoused by Lyman Beecher, touted the effectiveness of using government to reform society –

⁹² Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, xiii.

including through Sunday laws – and make the nation more virtuous. For Campbell, though, the millennium could only occur once “sectarianism, infidelity, and antichristian doctrine and practice” was destroyed.⁹³ Since sectarianism corrupted the government, the government had a limited ability to change the hearts and lives of Americans.⁹⁴ To bring this idea to its logical conclusion, then, blue laws – which Campbell viewed as a sectarian product of Presbyterian scheming – would actually work *against* the coming of the millennium.

Theophilus Gates was another postmillennial anti-Sabbatarian. He identified the Catholic Church as a tool (“the beast”) of Satan (“the dragon”) in *Truth Advocated and A View on the Last Dispensation of Light*, pamphlets that described his interpretation of the book of Revelation and end times. In Gates’ eyes, Catholics were not the only culprits that wreaked havoc on the worldwide church. Some Protestants were guilty of this too. Gates particularly singled out Lutherans and Calvinists, including Presbyterians. He asked, “What are the great evils in the world which must necessarily be done away before the happy period of universal righteousness and peace, spoken of in the Scriptures, can possibly commence?” The culprits were unbelief and sectarianism, which were “the

⁹³ MH, vol. 1 (1830), 1.

⁹⁴ For more about these worldviews, see Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 92-112, esp. 110-112; Harrell, *A Social History*, 39-48; West, *Barton Warren Stone*, 135-136; C. Leonard Allen, “‘The Stone That the Builders Rejected’: Barton W. Stone in the Memory of Churches of Christ,” in Anthony L. Dunnivant, *Cane Ridge in Context: Perspectives on Barton W. Stone and the Revival* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1992), 43-62; D. Newell Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 210.

fruitful source of every evil. They, and they only, prevent the *kingdoms of this world* from becoming *the kingdoms of the Lord and of his Christ*, and destroy peace on earth.”⁹⁵

Gates wrote these words shortly after the Hugh Wylie incident and on the eve of the formation of the many benevolent reform societies – the American Bible Society, tract societies, and Sunday school unions, to name a few – that were run by many of the same Presbyterians who were in favor of blue laws.⁹⁶ *The Reformer*’s railings in the 1820s against blue laws constitute a prime example of the sectarianism that prevented the millennium. It is not clear if Gates was aware of the Hugh Wylie controversy or signed any anti-Sabbatarian petitions in the early 1810s, but comparing the contents of *The Reformer to Truth Advocated* and his other pamphlets demonstrate consistency in his views over time regarding the dangers of a close relationship between religion and secular power.

A less common variation on millennialism that influenced anti-Sabbatarian thought was pre-millennialism. Barton Stone was a pre-millennialist, convinced that humans and their governments could do nothing to make God’s kingdom arrive more swiftly. Scholars have described Stone’s premillennialism as “apocalyptic” or “pessimistic,” which Richard Hughes defines as “an outlook on life whereby the believer gives his or her allegiance to the kingdom of God, not to the kingdoms of this world, and lives as if the final rule of the kingdom of God were present in the here and now.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Originally written Dutchess County, NY July 1812, published in *Truth Advocated*, which was itself published in Gates’ autobiography. Gates, *The Life and Writings*, 219-220. Also see pages 234-236.

⁹⁶ For more on benevolent societies, see Fea, *The Bible Cause*.

⁹⁷ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, xii.

Stone mocked those who “look[ed] for the millenium [sic] in their sect and on their plan” or believed that they could have any impact on God’s timing. “If we dare judge from the plans of some,” he continued, “the millenium [sic] will commence within 20 years, for within that time, by the American Sunday School Union, by the theological schools, and by the monopoly of printing establishments to issue books and tracts, the whole country will become orthodox [Calvinist].”⁹⁸ The President, Congress, and state governments would be orthodox too. Stone highly doubted that God would model his plan for the millennium on human visions and imperfect governments. He also did not see how imposing spiritual uniformity on every aspect of American life and government would lead to increased inner piety. If anything, it would lead to discontent and division. To Stone, post-millennialism was wrapped up in sectarianism. His apocalyptic premillennialism led him to believe that sects and governments were human creations and were thus fallen and illegitimate. It was useless to try to use these structures to herald in the millennium.

Admittedly, anti-Sabbatarians usually did not explicitly reference millennialism in their writings about blue laws or, conversely, anti-Sabbatarianism in their millennial expositions. But although anti-Sabbatarian millennialism took multiple forms, these separate paths ultimately led many Christians to the same conclusion: that Christians should be wary of any government that tried to reform society for religion’s sake. In their eyes, it was a pointless endeavor. Thus, it is quite logical to assume that they extended this line of thinking to blue laws. Anti-Sabbatarians who sympathized with post-millennialists believed that a lack of blue laws would actively herald in the

⁹⁸ Orthodox usually refers to Presbyterian. CM, vol. 3 (1828), 91.

millennium, and the few that identified as pre-millennialist simply believed that blue laws were a futile pursuit because God worked on his own timetable.

Millennialism, anti-Catholicism, restorationism, and a focus on individual conscience all contribute to the fifth and what was perhaps the anti-Sabbatarians' ultimate theological goal: the unity of Christians. For advocates of post-millennialism, unity would usher in the millennial kingdom of God. Biblical modes of worship – based on individuals' own readings of the Bible, not on creeds, the word of the pope, or federal laws – would bring unity. Along with restorationism, unity was one of the pillars of the Disciples of Christ, and Barton Stone rebuked not only Sabbatarians but even some anti-Sabbatarians for going to “a criminal extreme” to convince the other side that it was wrong.⁹⁹ Overall, though, the periodicals accused Sabbatarians of sowing division. Gates lamented, “Observe how party-advocates deceive mankind to establish and worship a certain system or form of religion.” He compared them to Catholics, who proclaimed “that they only are right, the only people whom God approves, and considering all others as schismatics and heretics.”¹⁰⁰ This, in a nutshell, was the problem with blue laws. Forced uniformity did not equal unity; in fact, it was the exact opposite. It was sectarianism at its height because it meant that one belief system had wrestled control over all others. Anti-Sabbatarians conveniently overlooked the fact that even though they claimed they were above sectarianism, they were also members of sects themselves, whether they were Disciples of Christ or Quakers or freethinkers.

⁹⁹ CM, vol. 4 (1830), 140-141.

¹⁰⁰ Truth Advocated, as published in Gates, *The Life and Writings*, 240.

Regardless, in all of their theological arguments, anti-Sabbatarian periodicals deployed sectarianism – the lack of unity – as a weapon against their Sabbatarian enemies.

The periodicals served as a written form of call and response, where both editors and readers expressed and fed off of each others' provocative ideas. Anti-Sabbatarians also used petitions to convince others of the validity of their position. The most common argument that appeared in anti-Sabbatarian petitions was that the creation of a law to prohibit Sunday mails would be a direct “violation” of the First Amendment and constitute an establishment of religion.¹⁰¹ Such a law would implicitly proclaim Sunday as Sabbath and run counter to the beliefs of people who did not uphold the Sabbath at all and also would oppose beliefs held by people like Jews and Seventh Day Baptists, who upheld a Saturday Sabbath.¹⁰² Residents of Cumberland County, New Jersey, believed that blue laws would result in “the worst of all tyranny” and “would be the death blow to our *civil* and *religious liberties*.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ See committee records of the 20th and 21st Congresses (SEN20A-G14.1 and SEN21A-G15.1) at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. for examples of petitions.

¹⁰² Petition from Kentucky, Feb. 15, 1830, Folder 21-G15.1, Box 32B, SEN21A-G15.1, Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, Record Group 46: Records of the U.S. Senate, 1789-2015, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC; Petition from Orange and Sullivan Counties, New York, Feb. 22, 1830, Folder 1830, Box 32B, SEN21A-G15.1, Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, Record Group 46: Records of the U.S. Senate, 1789-2015, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

¹⁰³ Petition from Cumberland County, New Jersey, Jan. 29 1830, Folder 1830, Box 32A, SEN21A-G15.1, Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, Record Group 46: Records of the U.S. Senate, 1789-2015, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. Other petitions that echo fears of one group seizing power or emphasizing the importance of Christians being able to worship as they saw fit include but are not limited to those of Essex and Middlesex Counties, Dec. 28, 1829, Folder 1829, Box 32, SEN21A-G15.1, Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, Record Group 46: Records of the U.S. Senate, 1789-2015, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC; Cold Spring Putnam County, New York, Feb. 17 1830, Folder 1830, Box 32B, SEN21A-G15.1, Senate Committee on Post Offices and

The petitions and periodicals both inspired and showed support for an address given to Congress on January 19, 1829 by Kentucky Senator Richard Johnson. Johnson was a Democrat whose interpretation of the Constitution as a “wall of separation” between church and state may have, according to some scholars, predisposed him to accept anti-Sabbatarian arguments.¹⁰⁴ In his inflammatory report, Johnson argued that

the proper object of government is, to protect all persons in the enjoyment of their religious, as well as civil rights; and not to determine for any whether they shall esteem one day above another, or esteem all days alike holy... Our Government is a CIVIL and not a RELIGIOUS institution. Our Constitution recognizes IN EVERY PERSON THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE HIS OWN RELIGION, and to enjoy it freely without molestation.¹⁰⁵

Thus, Congress did not have the right to “interfere” with the Sunday laws issue, especially because not all Americans, including Jews and some Christians, believed in a biblical mandate to uphold the Sunday Sabbath. It was a matter that should not be left up to the government but rather to one’s own conscience. Johnson went on to address the idea that “religious despotism,” or seizure of power by a specific denomination that resulted in the oppression of all religious groups, could arise as a result of these “Extensive RELIGIOUS COMBINATIONS to effect a POLITICAL OBJECT.”¹⁰⁶ The

Post Roads, Record Group 46: Records of the U.S. Senate, 1789-2015, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

¹⁰⁴ Fuller, *Morality and the Mail*, 7; Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 482-483.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Johnson, *Report of a Committee for the Senate of the United States on the Petitions Against Sunday Mails* (Philadelphia, 1829).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

petitioners also made assertions like these, and a second report by Johnson the following year, this time as a representative in the House, expressed similar sentiments.¹⁰⁷

Since these reports and petitions were written for political rather than religious purposes, they usually do not delve into explicit theological arguments. This is why the religious periodicals are so important; they contain theological expositions because they were written for religious, rather than political, audiences. However, the fact that some politicians invoked religion to advance their political arguments does not necessarily mean that politics determined the nature of one's religious faith. In fact, the inverse could occur: sometimes, theological beliefs informed one's politics. For example, there is evidence that Stoneites and Campbellites influenced Johnson's Sunday mails report. Admittedly, the reports did not specifically talk about the restoration of apostolic Christianity, one of the Disciples' main tenets, with the exception of one line in the 1830 report that asked, "Did primitive Christians ask that government should recognize and observe their religious institutions?"¹⁰⁸ The report also did not explicitly refer to partyism, sectionalism, or Presbyterianism, but Johnson clearly believed that blue laws would constitute a coercive establishment of religion. He was wary about one group of Christians that, in his mind, was trying to gain power by forcing outward conformity to its values. Furthermore, when Democratic representative Ely Moore endorsed Johnson for the vice-presidency in 1833, he explicitly talked about Johnson's aversion to "sects,"

¹⁰⁷ Richard Johnson, "21st Congress, 1st Session, House Report on Sunday Mails, Communicated to the House of representatives, March 4-5, 1830," in William Addison Blakely and Willard Allen Colcord, eds., *American State Papers Bearing On Sunday Legislation, Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Washington, D.C.: Religious Liberty Association, 1911), 245-268.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

language that is reminiscent of that used by the Disciples of Christ and other anti-Sabbatarian Christians.¹⁰⁹

Although Johnson's connection to Stone and Campbell is not immediately apparent, an investigation into Johnson's family tree highly suggests that one did indeed exist. Richard Johnson's brother, former politician and judge John Telemachus Johnson, was a practicing Baptist. By the time Richard issued the Sunday mail reports, John had already begun to engage with Campbell and Stone's ideas through reading and writing into the *Christian Baptist*. John soon became a Disciples of Christ minister and in 1832 began co-editing the *Christian Messenger* with Stone. Campbell would come to visit John at home, and John lived in the same town as Stone for a time.

Scholars agree that Richard Johnson did not write his Sunday mail reports on his own. At the time, many of Campbell's followers believed that Campbell had authored the reports of John's brother, and Campbell's biographer Robert Richardson clearly agrees with this hypothesis due to the evasive nature of Campbell's answers when anyone would ask him about it. However, most scholars postulate that Obadiah Bruen Brown was the ghostwriter due to the reports' rhetoric, which was similar to Brown's own. Brown not only owned the boarding house in Washington, DC, where Richard Johnson lodged but was also a postal clerk and Baptist minister.¹¹⁰ Disciples of Christ scholar David Harrell believes that even though Brown and Richard probably wrote the reports together, Richard's brother's close relationship with Campbell and Stone heavily influenced them, as the reports' theological intimations align well with Disciple

¹⁰⁹ Ely Moore, "Tribute to Col. Richard M. Johnson, Author of The Sunday Mail Reports Adopted by Congress in 1829 and 1830," from a speech at Masonic Hall, New York, March 13, 1833, in Blakely and Colcord, *American State Papers*, 269-70.

¹¹⁰ John, *Spreading the News*, 199; Richardson, *Memoirs*, 334-335.

theology.¹¹¹ Campbell and Stone's influence on two of the most important political documents of the Sabbatarian debate illustrate how theology permeated the anti-Sabbatarian movement in not only the religious but also the political realm.

The rise of print culture – especially periodicals – gave anti-Sabbatarians in the 1810s, 1820s, and early 1830s an outlet for their theological ideas, allowed them to communicate with each other, and enabled them to reach Americans living in other parts of the country and across denominations. Even though these anti-Sabbatarians were never quite as unified as their Sabbatarian counterparts and could be just as guilty of sectarianism and division in their rhetoric, their dialogue was nuanced, and their positions were built on their faith. That they wove their theologies so thoroughly into their writings reveals that many people viewed it first and foremost as a religious issue even though the Sabbath debate intersected with political, economic, and social realities.

The Sabbath debate fizzled temporarily in the early years of the 1830s. Johnson's scathing reports had helped to make sure that the efforts of the GUPOCS were in vain, and the Sabbatarian society's founders began to pour their energies into other, more productive reform efforts. The most notable reform effort was the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), established by the Tappans and fellow abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. In 1832, the same year of AASS' establishment, an investigation of the Post Office Department began to weed out corruption. Johnson also scandalized Easterners by taking one of his enslaved African-Americans as a common-law wife, and his interest in commercialization and industry earned him no points among his fellow

¹¹¹ Harrell, *A Social History*, 192-193; Stone, *Biography*, 76-78; Richardson, *Memoirs*, 334-335.

Democrats.¹¹² Although Johnson soon recovered from these blips in his political career to become Vice President of the United States, his postal crusade was at an end.

In the meantime, growing tensions within the anti-slavery movement set the stage for a new wave of anti-Sabbatarianism. Sabbatarians like Lyman Beecher and the Tappan brothers found themselves driven apart by their different approaches to the slavery issue. This infighting provided fuel for anti-Sabbatarian abolitionists, who accused their less radical anti-slavery brethren of moral hypocrisy in their contradicting approaches issues that held religious weight. The nation was also still expanding – now railroads had begun to crisscross the nation – and Sabbatarians, seeing problems like alcohol consumption, slavery, and a growing (Catholic) immigrant culture, feared that their country was still forsaking God. Sabbath unions formed and Sabbath conventions took place throughout the early 1840s. John Quincy Adams even spoke at the National Lord’s Day Convention in Baltimore in 1844.¹¹³ Sabbatarianism was not dead, and that meant that neither was anti-Sabbatarianism.

¹¹² Miles Smith, “The Kentucky Colonel: Richard M. Johnson and the Rise of Western Democracy, 1780-1850” (PhD dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2013), 178, 196.

¹¹³ McCrossen, “Sabbatarianism,” 136-142; Fuller, *Morality and the Mail*, 36-42.

CHAPTER FOUR

ABOLITIONIST THEOLOGY

The anti-Sabbatarian movement of the 1840s was a more organized and cohesive movement than the ones of the 1810s and 1820s had been. The theology reflected both old and new influences. Most notably, it took on an outwardly abolitionist twist when William Lloyd Garrison actively took up the cause. Although Garrison combined his anti-Sabbatarianism with his leading social agenda, the abolition of slavery, that social agenda was driven, at least in part, by theology. Like anti-Sabbatarians before him, he used the emerging print culture to defend his views, which resembled previous anti-Sabbatarian theology but also harnessed different theological metaphors. He persuaded other abolitionists, both men and women, to join his anti-Sabbatarian efforts, which culminated in an anti-Sabbatarian convention in Boston in 1848. Unlike earlier anti-Sabbatarians, Garrison and his followers never represented a numerically significant contingent of Americans, Christians, or even anti-Sabbatarians. However, the fact that *both* mainstream and radical fringe anti-Sabbatarians infused their arguments with sophisticated religious and biblical reasoning attests to theology's central role in the Sabbath debate, regardless of the particular forms that those theologies took.

This particular wave of anti-Sabbatarianism was birthed out of tensions between William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists in the 1830s. Garrison was born in Massachusetts in 1805. His Baptist mother raised him and had him educated by a Baptist deacon. Garrison entered the workplace at a very young age, and after several failed

apprenticeships, at the age of thirteen he found one that stuck: a position with the local newspaper where he wrote and edited articles. He established his own newspaper upon the completion of his apprenticeship and worked for various others in the coming years, honing the writing and publishing skills that would serve him well when he began dedicating his attention to anti-Sabbatarianism in the 1830s. In these newspapers, he expressed his Federalist leanings, his abhorrence for slavery, and his support for the American Colonization Society until he realized its “antipathy” toward free blacks.¹¹⁴ By about 1830, he had gravitated toward the abolitionist crowd.

By this point, Garrison had aligned himself with Sabbatarians like Lyman Beecher and Arthur and Lewis Tappan – all three of whom were Presbyterian – due their anti-slavery stances. Arthur Tappan even bailed Garrison out of a Baltimore jail when Garrison was imprisoned for libel after accusing a man from his hometown of being involved in slave trading. However, Beecher had always been apprehensive about what he thought were Garrison’s “fanatical” methods, disapproving of Garrison’s tendency to distance himself from clerical reform efforts; many Christians viewed Garrison’s plea for immediate abolition as too radical, and he increasingly distrusted them.¹¹⁵ Tensions over other issues, such as blue laws, also exacerbated the feud between the two men.

Garrison’s position on the Sabbath was not simple. Like anti-Sabbatarians such as Alexander Campbell, he believed that there were good reasons for observing a weekly

¹¹⁴ For more background on Garrison see Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told By His Children* (New York: The Century Co., 1885) and William Lloyd Garrison, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, eds. Walter M. Merrill and Louis Ruchames, vols. 1-6 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). Quote from letter from Garrison to Henry E. Benson, Boston July 30, 1831, in Garrison, *Letters of WLG*, 123-124.

¹¹⁵ Garrison and Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 1, 215.

day of rest, but he expressed wariness of those who observed it so doggedly that they would condemn people who were not quite as faithful. Several months before they married in 1834, he wrote a letter to his fiancée, Helen Benson, who was born into an abolitionist family and shared Garrison's reforming spirit. In the letter, Garrison proclaimed the Sabbath's "loveliness, and purity, and benevolence, and holiness," as well as its restorative properties after a long week of laboring. He described, "It is a beautiful, though imperfect, type of heavenly rest. It is a rich and special provision for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Shall we not remember to keep it holy?" Furthermore, it was "the grand device of Satan to vitiate the Sabbath, and destroy its sanctity," extending the grip that he already held on countries like France.¹¹⁶ This was a reference to the 10-day calendar briefly instituted in that country after the French Revolution, which replaced the regular seven-day week (including Sunday as a day of rest). Garrison further observed that in order to be consistent in one's logic, if one disregarded one commandment, one would also have to disregard the other nine. He made it clear to his future wife, though, that he was not "contending for a bigotted [sic] observance of this holy day. Bigotry is a monster, ferocious, sightless, bloody." He described how he would rather pray in secret than worship in public with those who observed "the letter of the law" but not "the spirit." Garrison punctuated his statements by calling such rigid Sabbath observers "Pharisees" for their false show of piety and legalistic ways.¹¹⁷ His worries about superstition and hypocrisy clearly mirrored some of

¹¹⁶ Letter from Garrison to Helen E. Benson, New-York City, April 27, 1834, in Garrison, *Letters of WLG*, 333-335.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the same concerns that the anti-Sabbatarians in the mid-Atlantic and on the southwest frontier had at around this same time.

Within a couple of years, Garrison had grown frustrated enough to make his concerns public in his anti-slavery newspaper, *The Liberator*. In 1836, Beecher made a speech in Pittsburgh that criticized a Fourth of July celebration that included military exercises. The events were problematic because they occurred on a Sunday, which, in Beecher's words, was the "great sun of the moral world." In Garrison's eyes, this was "extravagant and preposterous language" and reduced the rest of the Ten Commandments to lesser, "little glimmering stars." All penalties for not observing the Sabbath should "be resisted by all the Lord's freemen, all who are rejoicing in the glorious liberty of the sons of God."¹¹⁸ Garrison justified this position by referencing the same Bible verses that the anti-Sabbatarians before him had used. He pointed out Colossians 2:16: "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath." Another verse he relied on to make his case was Romans 14:5: "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind."¹¹⁹

But Garrison went even further than simply denouncing Beecher's apparent suppression of religious liberties by linking the Sabbath debate to slavery. To be sure, Garrison was far from the first anti-slavery anti-Sabbatarian. Barton Stone, for example, published an immediate abolitionist tract in the *Christian Messenger* in 1835. Stone

¹¹⁸ All quotes in this exchange come from the description in Garrison and Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 2, 108-124. The original article can be found in *The Liberator*, Vol. 6 (1836), no. 30-32.

¹¹⁹ Colossians 2:16, Romans 14:5 (King James Version).

ultimately fell on the side of colonization because, in keeping with the Disciples' desire for unity within the church, it was less controversial. A letter in the *Christian Messenger*, presumably written by Stone himself, argued that slavery was certainly immoral but "to emancipate them, and turn them loose amongst us, is an evil... [Colonization] has opened the way for Christians to emancipate their slaves from bondage, and themselves from the more intolerable bondage of keeping them."¹²⁰ Alexander Campbell was anti-slavery but condoned the slaveholding of other church members because of slavery's presence in the New Testament. Even some southern Disciples of Christ were anti-slavery, but many other southern Disciples did support slavery, owned slaves, and had their enslaved African-Americans baptized into the church.¹²¹ On the other side of the Appalachian Mountains, Theophilus Gates expressed disdain for slaveholding, calling it "an indolent, luxurious way of living" and "a reproach on the christian name" in his autobiography.¹²² Even still, Gates perhaps underestimated the plight of enslaved African Americans. During his journeys in the South, while agonizing over whether or not to heed God's calling to become a minister, Gates noted, "seeing a coloured man at work in the field [along the Norfolk road], I thought within myself how gladly would I exchange situations with this man, and labour as a servant all the days of my life, if it would excuse me from

¹²⁰ CM, vol. 5, (1831), 10. The idea that slaveholding was morally damaging to white society was a rather Jeffersonian view to take. For more about Thomas Jefferson's position on slavery see Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: David Carlisle, 1801), esp. Query XVIII.

¹²¹ Harrell, *Quest*, Vol. 1, 93-107. For a case study on southern Disciple slaveholding, see Charles Crossfield Ware, *South Carolina Disciples of Christ: A History* (Charleston: Christian Churches of South Carolina, 1967). Some southern followers of Stone, like his Cane Ridge congregation, were anti-slavery to the point of drafting anti-slavery petitions. Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 118.

¹²² Gates, *The Life and Writings*, 190.

preaching the gospel.”¹²³ What made William Lloyd Garrison unique from his anti-Sabbatarian predecessors, then, was not that he was anti-slavery, but that he was in favor of immediate abolition.

Up to this point, no anti-Sabbatarian had specifically viewed blue laws and slavery as interrelated issues. Gates republished an article originally appearing in the publication *Plain Truth* in 1828 that called blue laws “chains which are to enslave us, and fondly to rush into the arms of the specious image whose embrace is death,” but such anti-Sabbatarian articles never addressed the injustice of slavery as it *actually* existed in the United States: the bondage of peoples of African descent.¹²⁴ Garrison, however, did. He was disgusted that Beecher dedicated so much attention to Sabbath observance and other social issues “while he [Beecher] is unmoved, and as tranquil as a summer’s twilight, in view of ‘the breaking up of the family alliance’ among two millions and a half of our *colored* population” who were enslaved. Furthermore, slavery “denied not only the Sabbath but the entire Decalogue to two and a half million Americans.”¹²⁵ This travesty, in Garrison’s mind, should have made Beecher an immediate abolitionist. Beecher would have disagreed with this characterization of himself because he believed that colonization was the fastest road to abolition and emancipation.¹²⁶ Clearly, though, Garrison was not sympathetic to this point of view.

¹²³ Ibid., 136.

¹²⁴ The article was signed by “Watchman.” *The Reformer*, vol. 9 (1828), 132-133.

¹²⁵ Letter from Garrison to Isaac Knapp, Brooklyn, July 19, 1836, in Garrison, *Letters of WLG*, vol. 2, 144-145; *The Liberator*, vol. 6, no. 31 (1836), 3.

¹²⁶ For more on Beecher’s anti-slavery views, see Jeremy Land, “Lyman Beecher: Conservative Abolitionist, Theologian and Father,” *Madison Historical Review* 6 (2009): n.p and J.E.

Unsurprisingly, Garrison received plenty of pushback from his treatment of Beecher. He responded to his critics, including some of his own newspaper subscribers, by employing colorful language meant to conjure up pictures of imprisonment, enslavement, and coercion. “It must be the government of God in the hearts of men,” he proclaimed, “. . .not one based upon physical strength, and maintained by powder and ball, and accompanied by stripes, and fines, and jails, and dungeons, and gibbets, and lawyers, and constables, and sheriffs.” He clarified that he was not against Sabbath observance in principle, although true worship of Christ was a “voluntary” act not restricted to merely one day a week.¹²⁷ He was merely trying to demonstrate that Beecher’s dedication to reforming Sundays was hypocritical when Beecher was not doing enough to purge the country of another, greater evil: slavery.

This anti-Sabbatarian stance resulted directly from Garrison’s theological beliefs. He had clearly exhibited anti-Sabbatarian tendencies since the early 1830s, rooting his anti-Sabbatarian arguments in particular New Testament verses and his interpretation of how to apply the Scriptures in daily life. In 1837, a visit from perfectionist John Humphrey Noyes, a preacher who studied at Andover and Yale, helped to solidify Garrison’s outlook on the Sabbatarian debate. Second Great Awakening revivalists like Charles Finney had popularized perfectionism, or the idea that it is possible for a follower of Christ to completely rid him or herself of sin. Noyes’ particular understanding of perfectionism was antinomian. Since Christ’s forgiveness of sins meant that Christians

Thompson, “Lyman Beecher’s Long Road to Conservative Abolitionism,” *Church History* 42 (1973): 89-109.

¹²⁷ Quote from Garrison’s response a reader named Porter who claimed Garrison was “against the Sabbath.” Letter from Garrison to the *New England Spectator*, Brooklyn, Ct. July 30, 1836, in Garrison, *Letters of WLG*, vol. 2, 147-149.

were not under the Old Testament law any longer, he “believed that you could do no wrong as long as your intentions were to do the right thing.”¹²⁸ Neither Finney nor Garrison’s understandings of perfectionism were quite this extreme, but the visit did have an effect on Garrison nonetheless. He soon adopted perfectionism as his own personal theology, saying, “If a man has passed from death unto life, how much of death is attached to him? If he has crucified the old man with his lusts, how corrupt is the new? If he has the spirit of Christ, how can he have, at the same time, the Spirit of Satan?” He continued on, arguing that if perfection were not attainable, Christians would not have been given the command “be ye perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”¹²⁹

Garrison’s perfectionism complemented the aversion he had already displayed toward the clergy and forced Sabbath adherence. Garrison believed that government, as a human structure, was inherently evil. To find proof of the government’s sinfulness, one had to look no further than the fact that it condoned slavery. Because it was the duty for all Christians to strive for perfection, it was necessary for them to separate themselves from the government completely and not use it to achieve any of their reform efforts. In fact, in order to prepare for the millennium, human structures had to be done away with completely. This is a concept sometimes called Christian anarchism, although Garrison

¹²⁸ For more on Finney’s brand of perfectionism, see James E. Johnson, “Charles G. Finney and Oberlin Perfectionism,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 46 (1968): 56. Noyes’ antinomian perfectionism resulted in the formation of the free love Oneida community. His perfectionism probably had more of a direct influence on Theophilus Gates, who started his own free love community in Pennsylvania after he stopped writing for *The Reformer*, than it did on Garrison. Garrison, however, saw a connection between perfectionism and anti-Sabbatarianism, while it appears that Gates did not.

¹²⁹ From *The Liberator*, vol. 11 as described in Garrison and Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 3, 11-14. The bible verse that was referenced (“Be ye perfect...”) is Matthew 5:48. Also see vol. 2, 148-150.

did not call it anarchy, preferring to think of it as living under God's government. In fact, what Garrison called "anarchy" – a term he took offense at when his critics slapped the label on him – was totally different than Christian anarchism, modern historians' term for the precept that Garrison abided by. Garrison asserted in *The Liberator* that human governments "are better than anarchy just as a hail-storm is preferable to an earthquake, or the small-pox to the Asiatic cholera"; that is to say, human government and anarchy were one and the same.¹³⁰ This line of thought meant that blue laws, since they were not only coercive but also derived from the human structure of government, were unacceptable. Christians could not create or adhere to blue laws *and* follow Christ at the same time. Blue laws – and slavery – were products of anarchy. No such things would exist in God's kingdom.

As Garrison distanced himself from Lyman Beecher and even the Tappans, who were also staunch Sabbatarians and opposed Garrison's endorsement of woman's suffrage, he began to surround himself with other people whose beliefs more greatly resembled his own. Quaker abolitionists James and Lucretia Mott in particular made an

¹³⁰ Ibid., vol. 2, 150-151, as originally published in *The Liberator* vol. 7. Scholar Lewis Perry explains Garrison's Christian anarchy and his call for nonparticipation in government the best: "As their resentment at being called no-governmentists suggests, the Garrisonian nonresistants opposed anarchy and yearned for government. If there is a paradox here, it is at the heart of their faith. They were anarchists – or, more properly, we would call them anarchists – because they detested anarchy. In their categories, human government was synonymous with anarchy and antithetical to the rule of Christ and moral principle." Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 58. Although Garrison viewed human government as an obstacle to the government of God that would be implemented during the millennium, some perfectionists, including those who were Sabbatarian, believed that government could be a tool to herald in the kingdom of God. Because God had ordained human government, they believed they should work to reform it and make it godlier. For more on this sliding scale of perfectionism, see Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999). For other aspects of abolitionist reform theology, see Joseph Moore, *Founding Sins: How a Group Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ Into the Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*.

impression on Garrison. He met them after he being imprisoned in Baltimore for libel. He had prepared speeches on slavery and colonization while he was still imprisoned but did not find a receptive audience there upon his release. Making his way up north to what he hoped would be friendlier territory, Garrison stopped in Philadelphia. Friends of Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker newspaper editor who was also charged for libel, took him in. Although Lundy was a gradual abolitionist, his Quaker friends in Philadelphia, including the Motts, championed immediate emancipation. Garrison later wrote that even though he was still “strongly sectarian in my religious sentiments (Calvinistic)” at this time, they were still kind and charitable towards him. He went on, “If theological dogmas which I once regarded as essential to Christianity, I now repudiate as absurd and pernicious, - I am largely indebted to them for the change.”¹³¹

James and Lucretia Mott were Hicksite Quakers. Unlike some Quakers, who recognized the Bible as authoritative, Hicksite Quakers believed that the Inner Light, or the presence of God dwelling within oneself, was the primary source of religious revelation and authority rather than the Bible, a product of imperfect men. Furthermore, they also saw the Bible and its flurry of related creeds as sources of contention and division. Lucretia Mott, for instance, lamented that “the simple and benign religion of Jesus should be so encumbered with creeds and dogmas of sects” and referred to priestcraft in letters to her friends and acquaintances.¹³² Based on their anti-sectarianism

¹³¹ *The Liberator*, vol. 19 as described in Garrison and Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 1, 202-204.

¹³² The quotation is from a letter from Mott to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 23 March 1841, as described in Dana Greene, “Quaker Feminism: The Case of Lucretia Mott,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 48 (1981): 147. For examples of Mott’s discussions on priestcraft, see Lucretia Mott, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, ed. by Beverly Wilson Palmer (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), esp. letter from Mott to George W. Julian,

and dislike of priestcraft, the Motts may well have numbered among some of the subscribers to Theophilus Gates' *The Reformer*. Even if they did not, their use of similar language indicates that at the very least, the Motts ran in circles with people who did. These beliefs predisposed them to anti-Sabbatarianism, and they supported Garrison as he dedicated more attention the cause in the 1840s.

Garrison's first formal anti-Sabbatarian effort, the Chardon Street Convention, was actually a series of three conventions held in Boston in November 1840, March 1841, and November 1841. A call for the convention circulated in local newspapers and was signed by a people from a wide variety of theological and intellectual traditions. It included Dr. William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian minister who vehemently opposed Calvinism. Unitarian abolitionist Theodore Parker, a leader of the Transcendentalist movement, which placed emphasis on individualism and inner spirituality, was also on the list, as was anarchist Henry C. Wright. Garrison did not sign the call, but many members of the public wrongly believed that the convention was his doing since he ran in the same social circles as these Unitarians and Transcendentalists.¹³³

Even though he did not initiate it, Garrison attended the convention and supported its objective "to examine the validity... [of the idea of] divine appointment of the first day of the week as the Christian Sabbath, and to inquire into the origin, nature, and authority of the institutions of the Ministry and the Church."¹³⁴ The convention was also

Philadelphia, November 14, 1848. For more on Mott and Hicksite Quakers, see Bliss Forbush, *Elias Hicks: Quaker Liberal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957) and Dorsey, "Friends Becoming Enemies."

¹³³ Garrison and Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 2, 422-423.

¹³⁴ *The Liberator* vol. 10 as described in *ibid.*, 421-422.

concerned with what the Sabbath debate revealed about the extent of the power of the Christian church. In a letter to his brother-in-law a few weeks beforehand, Garrison wrote that the impending convention “is beginning to make a mighty stir among the priesthood, and even to fill with dismay some of our professed anti-slavery friends. Cowards! not to know that truth is mightier than error, and that it is darkness, and not light, that is afraid of investigation.”¹³⁵ Garrison was clearly skeptical of the clergy and may have had individuals like Lyman Beecher and the Tappans in mind. During the convention itself, Garrison’s arguments reveal that he had slightly changed his tune regarding Sabbath observance and the fourth commandment. According to his children, he argued “that the institution was done away by the coming of Christ.”¹³⁶

Few records exist from the Chardon Street Convention because no resolutions were formally passed, but to combat the pro-Sabbath efforts of the 1840s, Garrison organized a larger convention, scheduled to take place in Boston in March 1848. Its purpose was not to undermine the importance of having a day of rest as much as it was convince others that the government should not enforce Sabbath observance; it was an attempt to break free of the government’s influence. This time, although Transcendentalists and Unitarians participated and were actively involved in the planning process, Garrison and the abolitionists took center stage. Garrison had been toying with the idea of holding a convention since Reverend Justin Edwards of Andover had given a call in 1844 for increased enforcement of the Sabbath.¹³⁷ James and Lucretia Mott were

¹³⁵ Letter from Garrison to George W. Benson, Boston, Nov. 1, 1840, as described in *ibid.*, vol. 2, xi, 423-424.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, xi.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 222.

also “distressed” over “sectarian religion” and had noticed quite a few Sabbatarian tracts on public transportation the previous summer “appeal[ed] [sic] to the credulity & gross superstition of the Ignorant. I [Lucretia] then thought something should be done to ‘assert eternal {Liberty} & justify the ways of God to Man.’”¹³⁸ Opinions over the Sabbath and Sunday laws were just as strong in the 1840s as they were twenty years prior, and in the eyes of anti-Sabbatarians, their opponents were still steeped in superstition and sectarianism.

The call for the 1848 convention made the same connections between priestcraft, tyranny, and individual conscience that anti-Sabbatarians did in the 1810s and 1820s. The purpose of the Anti-Sabbath Convention, according to the circular, was to spread the idea that “the right of every man to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience is inherent, inalienable, self-evident.” The fact that breaking Sabbath laws often resulted in fines or imprisonment was ridiculous in the eyes of anti-Sabbatarians because there was nothing “more intrinsically heinous than that of gathering in a crop of hay, or selling moral and philanthropic publications” on Sunday than on any other day. Garrison and his supporters emphasized that they were simply against the Sabbatizing efforts of the clergy and not the Sabbath itself: rest would cause individuals “to be enlightened and reclaimed – to put away those things which now cause them to grind in the prison-house of Toil, namely, idolatry, priestcraft, sectarianism, war, slavery, intemperance, licentiousness, monopoly, and the like...” Finally, again, the circular emphasized, “It is for every one to be fully persuaded in his own mind, and to obey the

¹³⁸ Letter from Mott to Nathaniel Barney, Philadelphia, March 14, 1848, in Mott, *Selected Letters*, 159-162. The quote in this letter is from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

promptings of his own conscience; conceding to others the liberty he claims for himself.”¹³⁹ The call was signed by thirty-four people from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Philadelphia, New York, and Ohio. The list included three women: Lucretia Mott, immediate abolitionist Maria W. Chapman, and Abby Kelley Foster, a Quaker, immediate abolitionist, and women’s rights activist. Intellectual and faith traditions represented on the list included Quakers, Trancendentalists, Unitarians, anarchists, former Congregationalists (who, historically, were closely linked with New England Presbyterians), a former Baptist, and a single Presbyterian. All were abolitionists, and many were also actively involved the women’s rights movement. This was clearly a radical group.¹⁴⁰

However, there is no evidence that African-American abolitionists like Frederick Douglass were interested in this convention or other anti-Sabbatarian efforts. Like Garrison, Douglass abhorred Christians who acted piously on Sundays but turned around to rob slaves of their dignity by selling them, separating families, and refusing to pay them for their labor. However, this disdain for hypocrisy does not appear to have led him to question the principle of the Sabbath itself. Douglass was also willing to work towards the abolition of slavery through any means, including through reforming the government, revising the Constitution, and the work of benevolent societies, but Garrison was not.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ *Proceedings of the 1848 Anti-Sabbath Convention, Held in the Melodeon, March 23d and 24th, Reported by Henry M. Parkhurst* (Boston: Andrews & Prentiss, 1848), 3-9.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Dublin: Webb and Chapman, 1846), 119-122; Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (New York, July 5, 1852), *Teaching American History*, last accessed Sept. 3, 2018, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>; Jay Thompson, “Toward Douglassonian Abolitionism: The Rift Between Frederick Douglass and

Douglass was not unique; it appears that other African-Americans and other people of non-white descent generally did not play a primary role in anti-Sabbatarian efforts from the 1810s through the 1840s. However, the Sabbatarian debate and the existence of Sunday laws certainly affected their lives too. For instance, although some enslaved people were not forced to labor on Sundays, others were. One man named Charles Ball, who worked as a slave in South Carolina, Georgia, and Maryland, recounted that he was often hired out by his owner to at least 20 different people to work on Sundays. Although Ball said that he was never “insulted or maltreated” by those he worked for on Sundays, he observed that “the practice of working on Sunday, is so universal amongst the slaves on the cotton plantations, that the immorality of the matter is never spoken of.”¹⁴² Some places did prohibit Sunday slave labor – for instance, in Florida, an owner could be fined \$2 for putting an apprentice, servant, or slave to work “except it be in the ordinary household business of daily necessity or other work of necessity or charity.”¹⁴³ Fines were paltry, though, and slaveholders were willing to risk being fined in order to uphold the system of slavery on every day of the week.¹⁴⁴ As

William Lloyd Garrison,” University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project, 2002, last accessed Aug. 28, 2018, <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2842>.

¹⁴² Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837), 186-187.

¹⁴³ “An Act for the Suppression of Vice, and Punishing the Disturbers of Religious Worship and Sabbath Breakers,” in *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida Passed at Their 6th Session, 1827-8* (Washington, DC: Statute Law Book Co., 1936), 28-29.

¹⁴⁴ By working their slaves, selling their labor, and making African-Americans’ time their own (perhaps scared that revolts would ensue if their slaves had too much leisure time or freedom) on Sundays, owners exercised their power every day of the week in an attempt to shore up slavery as an institution even more. In this sense, the benefits of using slave labor on Sundays far outweighed the (\$2) cost. For more on how slavery was a prosperous, growing, and even modernizing economic institution by the early nineteenth century, see Edward E. Baptist, *The*

Ball's case evidences, slave owners likely were not often prosecuted for violating such laws, especially since what constituted "ordinary household business" or "work of necessity" was left to one's own discretion.

Every once in a while, though, slave owners were prosecuted. In June 1844, a North Carolina man named Joseph J. Williams went to court for forcing three enslaved men, Elias, George, and Talbot, to erect fences on his farm on a Sunday. Williams argued that he was punishing them for their failure to confess to stealing some corn and young pigs. He was not forcing them to work for profit, but the jury – apparently made up of some Sabbatarians – still found him guilty. Williams appealed his case and the charge was reversed. The judiciary authorities concluded that even though it constituted a breach of God's law, it was not indictable as a common law crime because Williams' actions did not preclude *others* from observing the Lord's Day (clearly enslaved African-Americans were not regarded as people here).¹⁴⁵ So although African Americans' voices are not directly present in the Sabbath debate, it is still one in which they still played an indirect yet important role. Their lives were affected by how their owners chose to observe – or not observe – the Sabbath and how the state courts interpreted blue laws. Furthermore, the very fact that they were enslaved provided useful ammunition for anti-Sabbatarians like William Lloyd Garrison.

The Anti-Sabbath Convention took place on March 23 and 24, 1848 at Boston's Melodeon, a concert hall. Garrison was did not serve as President – that role went to his

Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 2014). For more about the racial fears of slaveholders, see Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

¹⁴⁵ State v. Williams, 26 N.C. 400, 4 Ired. 400 (June 30, 1844).

brother-in-law, George Benson – but he did serve on the business committee along with Lucretia Mott and several others. The first order of business was to pass resolutions denouncing laws regulating Sunday activities and worship practices. One of the resolutions almost directly echoed one of Garrison’s letters to Helen from fourteen years prior, claiming that Sabbatarians wrongly elevated the fourth commandment over the other nine. The convention did not believe that the New Testament changed the Sabbath to the first day of the week. Sabbatarians put on “a show of piety,” likely intended to be a reference to the New Testament Pharisees, and the “Sabbatizing clergy” were “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Later, the convention passed more resolutions that declared that the Sabbath was a Jewish practice. It was not a “part of the teaching of Jesus, but is alien to his spirit; that the religion of Jesus is the life of the soul, not observances of times or forms.” Even more egregious was that “in the matter of our Sunday laws, majorities have undertaken to stand in the place of interpreters for God.” Sabbatarians had made themselves intermediaries between God and man, but the only true intermediary, the resolutions implied, was Christ acting through “the private conscience,” revealing the prevalence of Quakerism at the convention.¹⁴⁶ Statements like these were also criticisms of the Catholic Church, as the pope acted as one such intermediary.

The convention’s speakers delivered their speeches in between passing the various resolutions. Charles C. Burleigh, who was arrested the previous year for selling anti-slavery literature on a Sunday, spoke on the issue of individual Christian liberty most eloquently in his address to the convention attendees. The only one who could govern a conscience, and whom one could obey without question, was God. Continuing the legal

¹⁴⁶ *Proceedings*, esp. 11-15; 31-32.

analogy, Burleigh said, “As true liege subjects of the King of heaven, we have no right to submit our consciences to the control of our fellow-subjects in this matter. To admit of control in this matter, is to be guilty of high treason against the sovereignty of Heaven.”¹⁴⁷ Burleigh spoke specifically of the rights of Jews and Seventh Day Baptists, who maintained a Saturday Sabbath rather than a Sunday Sabbath. He exhorted his listeners to make a choice: follow God by following their consciences, or forsake God by following men. Garrison echoed similar sentiments in his own addresses, as did several others.¹⁴⁸

These arguments in and of themselves were nothing new; anti-Sabbatarians prior to Garrison and his supporters had employed them. At this convention, though, anti-Sabbatarians began to explicitly link their cause to other reform movements, most notably slavery. For example, in a letter written by Hicksite Quaker and abolitionist Thomas M’Clintock to Garrison and H.C. Wright before the convention, M’Clintock stated that Sabbatarianism “threatens to bind the consciences of men with the fetters of superstition & fanaticism, forged anew on the anvil of religious intolerances.”¹⁴⁹ M’Clintock’s language of “binding” and “fetters” reveals that he equated blue laws and the efforts of the clergy who supported these laws to slavery. Garrison himself commonly used language that he knew would resonate with the anti-slavery contingent,

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 96, 122, 127.

¹⁴⁹ Thomas M’Clintock, letter to William Lloyd Garrison and Henry Clark Wright, Waterloo, New York, Jan. 8, 1848, accessed May 3, 2016, https://archive.org/details/lettertodearfrie00mccl_0.

comparing the pharisaical nature of Sabbatarianism to a “rope” that continued to become “heavier upon the necks of the people.”¹⁵⁰

The abolitionists also articulated these ideas at the convention. Henry C. Wright pointed out that slave auctions in the South would take place on Fridays and Saturdays, which religious leaders and publications took no issue with. The practice was stopped on Sundays, not out of concern for the enslaved, but because “it would desecrate a certain day.” The sales would continue on Monday with no qualms. “They may tear human bodies to pieces, but oh! do not break a day,” Wright mocked. His extremely low opinion of the southern clergy revealed itself as he continued,

I sincerely wish that all the hanging in this nation had to be done in front of the pulpits on the Sabbath, and that ministers had to do it. I wish you would petition your Legislature to compel your ministers to do it, if they will plead for the gallows. They plead for the breaking of human necks; but, oh! do not break the Sabbath. They may tear men, women, and children to pieces, but must be careful to keep a day sacred; and so, by keeping up that delusion of sacred days, they compensate, in the estimation of mankind, for their butchery of human beings.¹⁵¹

Even more subversive than Wright’s exposure of southern Christian hypocrisy was Lucretia Mott’s provocative lecture. While other speakers appealed to verses, commands, and anecdotes within the Bible, Mott based her address on “the higher revelation within us” and advocated “seek[ing] authority less from the Scriptures.” Despite her disavowal of the Bible, she still took a rather spiritual tone. She used the words of the apostle Paul, who said, “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind” whether or not to “regard” the Sabbath, to justify her reliance on the Inner Light. Mott boldly proclaimed that even though others branded them as heretics, they should not back

¹⁵⁰ William Lloyd Garrison, letter to Joseph Congdon, Boston, December 15 1848, accessed May 3, 2016, https://ia802309.us.archive.org/21/items/lettertodearfrie00garr_3/39999054962590.pdf.

¹⁵¹ *Proceedings*, 91.

down because too much was at stake. “It is regarded, too generally,” she raged, “a greater crime to do an innocent thing on the first day of the week, - to use the needle, for instance, - than to put a human being on the auction-block on the second day.”¹⁵² The fact that some of the Sabbatarians who condemned a seemingly harmless action like sewing on Sundays but condoned slavery – or at the very least, did not put forth satisfactory efforts to stop it – incensed these abolitionist anti-Sabbatarians. They had in mind people like Lyman Beecher, who did not support immediate abolition. Not only were Sabbatarians spiritually coercive and using an evil government to achieve this coercion, people like Mott believed, but also they were hypocritical in their condemnation of acts that were not inherently sinful. Although Mott and her allies were clearly using the Sabbath debate primarily as ammunition against slaveholders and non-abolitionists – or in other words, for their social agenda – their stances on the Sabbath did grow out of genuine religious conviction.

The leaders of the anti-Sabbath convention were pleased with the convention’s proceedings. Even the appearance of Abby Folsom, a woman who supported abolition but was notorious for interrupting meetings with sometimes slightly deranged ramblings, did not appear to have much diluted their enthusiasm. Newspapers estimated that at any given time there were between 40 and 400 attendees at the Melodeon, coming and going at their leisure. Garrison wrote the following December that the speeches “embraced every important aspect of this great [Sabbath] question, and were marked by great ability.”¹⁵³ They were so encouraged, in fact, that they ordered 200 copies of literature,

¹⁵² Ibid., 97.

¹⁵³ Letter from Garrison to Joseph Congdon, Dec. 1848, in *Proceedings*, 144-146.

presumably the convention proceedings, to be printed. Although these did not sell as well as initially hoped, the Anti-Sabbath Convention committee was not discouraged and published a series of pamphlets about the Sabbath the following year. For example, John W. Browne's "Sunday Law Neither Christian Nor American" and Charles K. Whipple's "Sunday Occupations" criticized the corruption of the clergy. They also argued that Christ's followers were no longer obliged to follow the Jewish law and answered to God alone, not government, for their actions and beliefs. The authors of these pamphlets, like their predecessors, rooted their arguments in individual conscience and fears of coercion, occasionally revealing their connection to the Anti-Sabbath Convention by making direct references to slavery.¹⁵⁴

Although Garrison and his supporters viewed the convention as a success, the response to the Anti-Sabbath Convention from non-Garrisonians ranged from skeptical to downright hostile. Boston's *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine* and a Universalist publication called (coincidentally) the *Christian Messenger* stated respectively that the proceedings of the Anti-Sabbath Convention were "not based on the principles of the Bible, and are not conducted in the spirit of Christianity" and that the Garrisonians, "rabid ultraists of the worst school," were bent on "the destruction of the Christian religion."¹⁵⁵ Mainstream denominations condemned the convention even more strongly. For instance, the *Boston Christian Reflector*, a Baptist publication, noted the "fanaticism"

¹⁵⁴ John Browne, "Sunday Law Neither Christian Nor American" (Boston: Committee of the Anti-Sabbath Convention, 1849), Box 1849, Massachusetts Historical Society; Charles K. Whipple, "Sunday Occupations" (Boston: Committee on the Anti-Sabbath Convention), Box 1849, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁵⁵ This was likely the *New-York Christian Messenger*, the only Universalist paper published in 1848 that had that title. *Proceedings*, 143-145.

and “evil” that the anti-Sabbatarians espoused.¹⁵⁶ An article originally published in the *Maine Freewill Baptist Repository* called Garrison, Parker, and their associates “infidels” who “hate the gospel of Christ, the Bible, the Christian Sabbath, and would tread under foot all the institutions of religion.”¹⁵⁷ The *Episcopal Christian Witness and Church Advocate* absolutely excoriated the convention proceedings:

When they have exhausted their stock of philanthropy and fire, upon this point, like the locusts of Egypt, they will, no doubt, move on, and blacken, by their presence, some other point of the horizon, and, with their vampire fangs, fasten upon some other institution of Divine ordination. They have assaulted the civil government, and pronounced it of no authority. They have denounced the ministry, the church, and the Sabbath; what will they next assault?... Much mad havoc remains yet to be enacted.¹⁵⁸

Clearly, many Christians perceived 1840s anti-Sabbatarianism as an extremely radical movement; even Baptists, a denomination that consisted of many anti-Sabbatarians in the 1820s, and Universalists, who were usually sympathetic to Unitarian and Quaker reform efforts, reacted strongly against the abolitionists’ anti-Sabbatarianism. Richard Carwardine pinpoints the reason for this hostile reaction: sectionalism and partisanship had begun to sharply increase during this decade over issues like temperance, women’s rights, immigration, the war with Mexico, and most notable of all, slavery and its expansion. The fact that certain abolitionists like Garrison, whom American society already viewed as radical due to his belief in racial equality, so ardently backed the anti-

¹⁵⁶ *Boston Christian Reflector* article as appears in *ibid.*, 148-149.

¹⁵⁷ *Maine Freewill Baptist Repository* article (referring to the call for the convention) reprinted in *New Hampshire Patriot & State Gazette*, Mar. 9, 1848, 1.

¹⁵⁸ *Proceedings*, 150-151.

Sabbatarian movement likely made many Americans hold anti-Sabbatarianism, just like abolitionism, at “arm’s length.”¹⁵⁹

At its core, though, the anti-Sabbatarian theology of the 1840s still, to a degree, resembled that of the 1820s. These abolitionist anti-Sabbatarians did place a lesser emphasis on the evils of priestcraft and more attention on the spiritual dangers of collaborating the same government that perpetuated evils like slavery. However, a disdain for religious coercion and a high value on individual conscience still dominated anti-Sabbatarian thought, even if it was more radical than it had been in earlier decades. If anything, the presence of both radical and mainstream religious groups and ideas attests to the prevalence of theology across diverse anti-Sabbatarian circles.

¹⁵⁹ Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 30, 139.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

The Garrisonian anti-Sabbatarians of the 1840s represented a moment of transition. They retained the theological influences of earlier anti-Sabbatarian movements, but they operated in a much different socio-political context than their predecessors. Over the course of Garrison's life, the postal controversy faded from the minds of anti-Sabbatarians, and the issue of slavery rose to the forefront of American politics.

The anti-slavery movement was only one of many emerging influences that mingled with and shaped anti-Sabbatarianism. During the Civil War, for example, troops marched and fought on Sundays, even though Abraham Lincoln had encouraged the military to observe the Sabbath early on in the war.¹⁶⁰ Since the war lasted for only four years, this dramatic interruption of Sabbath observance was temporary and atypical, but precedents for new ways of Sabbath observance – or precedents for not observing it at all – had already been set in everyday life. Beginning in the 1850s, streetcars in places like Philadelphia and New York allowed the masses to move around more easily to engage in recreational pursuits. Sabbatarians argued that increased access to secular activities on the Sabbath, like going to parks and lectures and other sources of entertainment, degraded the day. Anti-Sabbatarians, who often were part of or at least sided with the working

¹⁶⁰ Abraham Lincoln, General Order to Observe the Sabbath, Washington, DC, Nov. 15, 1862.

class, argued that these leisure activities could be sources of uplift and restoration and thus were appropriate for the Sabbath. Streetcars, then, should run on Sundays, as they enabled people who worked six days a week to partake in a day of rest. As scholar Alexis McCrossen explained, “Commercial meanings for Sunday joined rather than replaced religious meanings.”¹⁶¹

Commercialization and religion continued to intersect throughout the second half of the century. For a brief period in the 1880s, Protestant clergy and labor activists, including Catholics, actually teamed up against employers to advocate for a shorter working week. These joint efforts, along with new technology like the telegraph and telephone, helped lead to the 1912 law that finally stopped Sunday mail delivery. However, the clergy and activists’ inability to agree on what constituted “rest” hindered their ability to work effectively together for a sustained length of time.¹⁶² Unlikely alliances were also made on the other side of the Atlantic. At one point, scientific naturalists, Unitarians and theological liberals, and secularists worked together to combat state support for “particular theological vision[s] of how Sundays should be spent” in late Victorian Britain.¹⁶³ Throughout the late 1800s, Christians of many stripes continued to insert themselves on both sides of the Sabbath debate. Theology and religion were not

¹⁶¹ McCrossen, *Holy Day*, 15-16. McCrossen rejects declension models of the Sabbath, which state that the Sabbath fell from a sacred to a secular day. Instead, she argues that competing meanings of rest and leisure form a “continuum” rather than an antithesis.” For more about the streetcar controversy, also see Verhoeven, “In Defense.”

¹⁶² William A. Mirola, “Shorter Hours and the Protestant Sabbath: Religious Framing and Movement Alliances in Late-Nineteenth-Century Chicago,” *Social Science History* 23 (1999): 395-433.

¹⁶³ Ruth Barton, “Sunday Lecture Societies: Naturalistic Scientists, Unitarians and Secularists Unite Against Sabbatarian Legislation,” in *Victorian Scientific Naturalism, Community, Identity, Continuity*, eds. Gowan Dawson and Bernard Lightman, 189-219 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), quote from 210-211.

gone from the Sabbath debate, but they were joined by new social, economic, and scientific concerns. This joining created new contexts for anti-Sabbatarians and their evolving arguments to navigate. Anti-Sabbatarianism was no longer set against the backdrop of antebellum issues like national expansion and slavery.

Antebellum anti-Sabbatarianism, though, retained some remarkable consistencies in both method and argument over a roughly 40-year period. Whether or not they believed that Sabbath observance in and of itself was necessary, their stance against government regulation of Sundays united them. Anti-Sabbatarians used print culture to provide theological justifications for their anti-Sabbatarianism, gain wider public support for those positions, engage with their Sabbatarian opponents, and influence Congressional decisions. They found their origins simultaneously in Presbyterianism and in anti-Presbyterian attitudes. Common theological influences popularized by the Second Great Awakening reached across denominations, geographic areas, and time to invigorate the anti-Sabbatarian cause. They stood against creeds, had millennial and other eschatological concerns, and strove to follow biblical patterns of worship. They yearned for unity among believers and the unity that Christ's kingdom would one day bring.

Even though historians tend to view the antebellum period as one of dissent and division within American culture and society, these commonalities indicate a degree of consistency during this time as well. This look at anti-Sabbatarianism reveals that certain strains of theology remained more or less stable and served to unite diverse groups of people. Furthermore, the fact that theology remained a central component of anti-Sabbatarianism from the 1810s into the 1840s – infiltrating post offices, the halls of

Congress, publications read in people's homes, and lecture halls – demonstrates theology's centrality to American culture during this time.

At the same time, the nuances and differences between anti-Sabbatarians and Sabbatarians, who emerged from similar theological frameworks – as well as among anti-Sabbatarians themselves – indicate that many early nineteenth-century Americans did not just blindly accept religious practices and mantras. Instead, they actively engaged with these things, thought critically about them, embraced religious revival, and sought to apply their theology to the wider world around them. As they interacted with that world, they revised their theology and again applied it back to their surroundings. The nature of this kind of anti-Sabbatarianism points to historians' need to acknowledge historical actors' theological worldviews. If we do not, we reduce their complexity and paint inaccurate – or at the very least, incomplete – portraits of who they actually were. If they took their religion seriously, so should we.

Understanding how theologies and religious belief – or lack thereof – motivate people to act and react is an insight that should not be relegated to the study of the past.¹⁶⁴ This is a skill that can be used by Americans – regardless of whether they identify with a particular religious community or not – to promote healthy dialogue in today's contentious social and political atmosphere, where polarization and talking past each other are all too common. Within religious communities themselves, learning to recognize and even value how people can have similar theological starting points and yet

¹⁶⁴ The idea that studying that extending hospitality to those in the past cultivates humility and that it can make us better citizens in today's society comes from John Fea, who was heavily influenced by Sam Wineburg. These ideas were discussed in an undergraduate Intro to History class in 2012 at Messiah College and published shortly after in John Fea, *Why Study History?: Reflecting on the Importance of the Past* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

come to different conclusions about societal issues is key to overcoming divisions and moving forward. Once we master this skill, we will be able to thoughtfully and effectively engage with others, especially those with whom we disagree, about the proper relationship between religion, politics, and society today.

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