

# How Pieter Wessels and my Mother Became Seventh-day Adventists

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IN a recent Bible class one of my students asked me why Seventh-day Adventists insisted on keeping Saturday as the Sabbath, instead of Sunday. I gave some answers from the Bible and told a little about how my mother and I became Seventh-day Adventists. She discovered the Sabbath for herself, from the Bible, before she ever met a minister of our Church. Tonight I want to tell you a little about this, but also about another, very remarkable South African who became a Seventh-day Adventist in the same way, more than 100 years ago.

He was a farmer called Pieter Wessels. He lived in the western Orange Free State, a little Boer republic in the interior of what would later become South Africa. His home was near a place that became world famous for huge diamond deposits: Kimberley. This is situated more or less in the middle of the Southern African continent. This is where the Industrial Revolution began in that area, about 100 years ago. It was also the area that God had chosen for the beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the whole of southern Africa, and from where He would finance important undertakings, even as far as North America.

Our story begins with an illness. Pieter Wessels became extremely sick. While he was in bed, he read the Bible; for like all his Afrikaner ancestors he had been brought up on the Word of God. In the Scriptures he discovered what James the apostle had written about healing through prayer, so he prayed to God, and he became well again.

After this he testified to everybody how good the Lord had been to him. But after a while his brother thought that Pieter Wessels was becoming a little fanatic, and so he said to him: "You mustn't carry on like that. After all, there are things the Bible says which nobody does any more!"

Pieter was shocked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, for example, the Bible tells to keep the Sabbath, and nobody does."

"But we do keep Sunday!"

"Yes, Pieter, I know; but Sunday is not the Sabbath."

"Of course it is. Please explain yourself."

His brother looked at him pityingly. "The Good Book tells us to rest on the seventh day, which is Saturday. But we don't do that. We rest on Sunday, which is the *first* day of the week."

Pieter thought he must be dreaming, but then he remembered. In the Ten Commandments it does say, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work; but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work" (Exodus 20:8-11). And every educated person knew that Sunday was the first day of the week. His brother was right.

With this realization began a time of intensive Bible study, and heart-searching. Soon Pieter, who really loved his Lord, decided to keep the Sabbath. He had to put up with the hurt, the anger, and the ridicule of his family, friends, and neighbors. He also felt very, very lonely; for he thought he was the only Sabbath-keeping Christian in all the world.

But then one day he met and spoke to his cousin, Van Druten, whom he had not seen for some time.

"Pieter," this man said, "I have something interesting to tell you: there is an American diamond prospector here who says that Saturday is the true Sabbath and that we are all wrong in keeping Sunday."

"What!" Pieter thought he was dreaming. "Who is he?"

"A fellow called Hunt. Some people think he is crazy, but I am not so sure. I think he may be right."

"Let us go and see him!"

And so they did. Adventist history has nothing more to tell of Hunt, so nobody knows what happened to him afterwards; but he performed a very important function. Apart from sharing his faith, he told these two Afrikaners about the Seventh-day Adventist Church in America. He also gave them an address to write to.

The General Conference, a very small organization in those days, was in session, to plan for expanding God's work. The delegates were electrified by the letter from South Africa that the president was reading to them. You have guessed it: it was from Pieter Wessels.

"We are keeping the Sabbath, like you. Please send us some Dutch missionaries." Included was £50 sterling, a large sum of money in those days.

Where did this money come from? Oh, I forgot to tell you that Pieter Wessels was a very wealthy man. Diamonds had been discovered on his farm.

The General Conference had no Dutch missionaries, so they sent Americans instead. Pieter Wessels did more than pay for their ship fare. From his money he also financed other enterprises. He contributed to the building of the Beaconsfield church, in the Kimberley area, where the work of the Seventh-day Adventists began. He also paid for the Cape Town church, the conference headquarters in the same building, Union College, and a modern sanitarium.

At that time the Seventh-day Adventists in North America just did not have the money for such things. In fact, they were even struggling to pay for some of their own projects. One of these was the sanitarium and medical education facility at Battle Creek, Michigan. But here, too, a hand reached out from South Africa. A crucial donation from money earned in the Kimberley diamond fields came in, and our great Battle Creek project could really get off the ground.

Some of Pieter Wessels neighbors were people called De Beer. Diamonds had also discovered on their farm. Today the name De Beers is the best-known one in the gem market, for this international cartel controls the sale of about 90% of all the diamonds in the world. But this family also produced some Seventh-day Adventists.

My mother discovered the Sabbath in 1935 from her own reading of the Bible. Like Pieter Wessels, she did not know there were other people in the world observing this day. Then one of my father's sisters died. J.N. de Beer, a Seventh-day Adventist missionary, was asked to conduct the funeral. He came from Cancele mission station, where he was working among the Black people, about 32 km from our farm. With him was a Brother Vorster.

Another aunt of mine said to my mother, "These are strange individuals." They keep their Sunday on Saturday!" My mother did not react but thought, "I must see these people!"

After the funeral Pastor De Beer and Brother Vorster visited every family related to the deceased. They had come to say goodbye. As he entered our living room, my mother looked straight at him and asked, "Pastor De Beer, what about the Sabbath?"

In amazement he turned to his companion and said, "Brother Vorster, the Lord has sent us here!"

"Yes," my mother answered, "I know, for I prayed."

Bible studies followed, and she was baptized, together with her older children. Though only five years old, I also decided to become a Seventh-day Adventist.

Via Pastor De Beer I therefore have a personal link with the Western Free State and the Kimberley area, where the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa began. But I also have another link: my wife Ria. She was born in Boshof, only about 60 km from Kimberley. Although I came from the other side of the country, I found her there at the end of 1952. She has been with me ever since, especially for 41 years of marriage—in South Africa, Europe, America, and now Korea.

We would never have met if it had not been for our Adventist Christian religion, or for people like Pieter Wessels and J.N. de Beer.

***(Vespers, SDA English Language Institute,  
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