

# **The Sabbath**

## **A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God**

James R. Hughes – 2006-02-04

# Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>CONTINUING APPLICATION.....</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>What the Bible Says About the Sabbath’s Applicability to All Mankind .....</b>       | <b>5</b>  |
| Genesis 2.2, 3.....   | 6         |
| Exodus 16.22-30.....  | 7         |
| Exodus 20.8-11.....   | 8         |
| Nehemiah 13.15-22.....  | 8         |
| Isaiah 56.1-8.....  | 9         |
| Matthew 5.17-20.....  | 9         |
| Mark 2.23-28.....   | 10        |
| Hebrews 4.1-11.....   | 10        |
| Jesus Kept the Sabbath Holy while He Walked Among Men.....                              | 11        |
| The Principle of the Portion.....   | 11        |
| The Sabbath is Different from Ceremonial Rituals.....                                   | 12        |
| <b>Responding to the Anti-Sabbath Arguments.....</b>                                    | <b>12</b> |
| The Sabbath Command Isn’t Repeated in the NT.....                                       | 13        |
| The Sabbath was Revealed to Jews – Not Written on Gentiles’ Hearts.....                 | 13        |
| John Calvin Believed the Mosaic Sabbath was Abrogated.....                              | 15        |
| The Sabbath was Part of the Ceremonial Laws of the OT that Are Completed in Christ..... | 16        |
| The Mosaic Ordinance of Sabbath Observance is Not Binding on New Covenant People.....   | 17        |
| Paul Abolishes Sabbath Observance.....  | 19        |
| The Example and Teaching of Jesus Speaks Against Sabbath Observance.....                | 21        |
| It is ‘Legalistic’ to Draw Lines and Set-up Rules About Keeping a Day Holy.....         | 21        |
| The Seven-day Week is an Artifact of Ancient Mesopotamia.....                           | 22        |
| <b>The Position of the Westminster Confession of Faith.....</b>                         | <b>25</b> |
| <b>CHRISTIAN ADHERENCE .....</b>  | <b>25</b> |
| <b>Sabbath Observance vs Sunday Worship.....</b>  | <b>25</b> |
| <b>The First-Day Sabbath .....</b>  | <b>27</b> |
| The Day of the Resurrection.....  | 28        |
| Commemorating Creation and Re-Creation.....   | 28        |
| Commemorating Redemption.....   | 28        |
| Endorsed by Jesus’ Post-Resurrection Appearances.....                                   | 29        |
| Endorsed by Jesus’ Post-Resurrection Actions.....                                       | 29        |
| The NT Day of Assembly.....   | 30        |
| A Day Blessed by the Holy Spirit.....   | 30        |
| The Lord’s Day.....   | 31        |
| Confirmed by the Early Church.....  | 31        |
| <b>Responding to the Seventh-Day Arguments.....</b>                                     | <b>32</b> |
| The Post-Apostolic, Early Church Changed the Day.....                                   | 34        |
| The Bishop of Rome Changed the Day.....   | 34        |
| Sunday was Selected Because it was the Cult Day for the Worship of the Sun.....         | 35        |
| Revelation 1.10 Speaks of the Seventh Day.....  | 35        |
| The Day is Not important, so Pick Any Day.....  | 35        |

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY</b> .....   | <b>36</b> |
| <b>CORRECT ADMINISTRATION</b> .....  | <b>37</b> |
| Melioration – Holy Resting from Work and Recreation.....                               | 38        |
| Maintenance and Mercy – Performing Duties of Necessity and Mercy.....                  | 39        |
| Meditation – Delighting in the Exercises of Public and Private Worship.....            | 41        |
| Management – Preparing for the Sabbath .....   | 41        |
| <b>CASES APPLIED</b> .....   | <b>42</b> |
| What if My Boss Says I will be Fired if I Don't Work on Sunday? .....                  | 42        |
| Why do Many Christians Go for Lunch at a Restaurant after Church? Is this Right? ..... | 43        |
| Can We Go Shopping on Sunday?.....   | 43        |
| Can We Use Public Transit on Sunday to Get to Church?.....                             | 44        |
| Can We Watch TV on Sunday?.....  | 44        |
| Can We Participate in Sports on Sunday? .....  | 45        |
| What are Legitimate Forms of Rest on the Lord's Day? .....                             | 45        |
| Should We Read a Newspaper on Mondays? .....   | 45        |
| Should We Wash the Dishes on Sunday or Leave Them Until Monday?.....                   | 46        |
| <b>CIVIL ADMINISTRATION</b> .....  | <b>46</b> |
| Nehemiah's Understanding of the Role of the Civil Magistrate.....                      | 47        |
| How Nehemiah Threatened to Punish Sabbath Breakers.....                                | 48        |
| Was Nehemiah Intolerant? .....   | 49        |
| Historical Examples of Sabbath Laws .....  | 51        |
| <b>COVENANT ACCOUNTABILITY</b> .....   | <b>54</b> |
| <b>CONSUMMATE AUTHORITY</b> .....  | <b>55</b> |

## Introduction

I read recently of a New Zealand congregation that cancelled its Sunday service and offered instead a televised show of a key rugby match. The pastor said that the members of his congregation were going to watch the match anyway, so it wasn't worth the effort to resist. In a similar way, the Super Bowl in the US is a big draw and many Christians, if they have any interest in football, will pull up their easy-rockers and tune-in on that Sunday afternoon in February. Christians, from almost every denominational background, will stop at the all-you-can-eat buffet after the Sunday morning service or drop by Wal-Mart to pickup a few household supplies. If someone proposes today that these actions are improper for Christians, he is considered incredibly odd or old fashioned. Yet, it wasn't too long ago that Christians of almost every denominational persuasion viewed Sunday as a sacred day, and they expected sports teams to rest, and stores and restaurants to be closed. What has happened? Has God's word with respect to Sunday observance changed? Did Christians in the past have the wrong interpretation of the Bible, and have we finally gotten it right? Or, have we changed the way we understand and apply the Bible so that we can accommodate our personal desires?

Observing Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, and as a holy day, by putting aside secular pursuits is an almost foreign idea to most Christians, let alone to members of society as a whole. Christians certainly do not find the topic of the Sabbath to be a very exciting one, nor do they consider it to be particularly important. Sabbath observance for most Christians today is one or more of the following:

- A Jewish observance that is now obsolete.
- A Christian religious observance that only applies to Christians.
- A day for worship, when and if we feel like it.
- A legalistically burdensome observance that elders of strict Puritan or Presbyterian churches impose on members of their congregations.
- An historical curiosity that has no relevance today.
- Not a topic worth getting too distressed or worked-up about.
- Not a required day for worship, since any day will do.

In contrast to the prevailing views today, the Puritans viewed the Sabbath with great reverence. For example, in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the Puritan authors wrote:

As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men, in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts. and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments, and recreations, but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a major disconnect between the Puritans' belief about the Sabbath and the view of most Christians today. It would be interesting to consider how this change came about over the past 350 years, since we might be able to learn from the lessons of history, more about the process of secularization and gain insights into how to prevent it from occurring. However, we live now in such a secularized society that Christians are hard-pressed to maintain even basic rights such as the right of public assembly and the right to proclaim freely the truths of the Bible. A review of historical causes of the change away from Sabbath observance seems less important, at this time, than considering the reasons why Sabbath observance is important. I suggest that some of the reasons why we should spend time in careful thought about the Sabbath are the following:

---

<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21: "Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day," paragraphs 7 & 8.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- The Bible may actually teach that God requires Christians to observe a holy Sabbath. If so, we should want to please God by doing what he commands of us.
- The Puritans may have been right. The Sabbath may in fact be a perpetual and universal requirement of God. If that is the case, then we should understand why and call for the Church and society to repent.
- The Sabbath doctrine affects many areas of theology and practice including, hermeneutics (e.g., the nature of the Covenants and the covenantal model for interpreting Scripture), ethics (e.g., what is permissible and required), worship (e.g., the day of the week) and law (e.g., the binding universality of God's commands). It may be the case that we cannot have a proper theology if we don't have a proper understanding of the doctrine of the Sabbath.
- Within Christendom there is a diversity of perspectives on the Sabbath. The topic has been divisive in the past. Even today, most people who claim to be Reformed and honour the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, do not agree (at least in practice) about what the Bible teaches about Sabbath observance. We should have a desire to understand the Bible's teachings clearly so that we can come to a unity of mind.
- We should be interested to know why (almost) everyone in the world observes a seven-day week. Where did the week come from? Why do we have the concept of a week at all? The answers to these questions have a direct bearing on the topic of the Sabbath.

In this study of the Sabbath we will address the following topics:

- *Continuing Application* – what the Bible says about the Sabbath's applicability to all men in all generations and a response to the arguments against Sabbath-keeping under the NT economy.
- *Christian Adherence* – why the Sabbath was moved by Christ to the first day of the week and a response to the arguments for keeping the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week.
- *Commercial Activity* – ceasing from commercial economic activity is the overriding principle for correct observance of the Sabbath.
- *Correct Administration* – the principle means of keeping the Sabbath are rest, works of necessity and mercy, and worship.
- *Cases Applied* – a consideration of examples of how to apply the Sabbath principles.
- *Civil Administration* – a review of the rationale for why the civil magistrate (government) is accountable to God for enforcing Sabbath observance even on those who make no claims to be Christians, including examples of Sabbath laws that were in place for over 1,000 years in Europe and North America.
- *Covenant Accountability* – Sabbath-keeping is covenant keeping.
- *Consummate Authority* – The Sabbath command is the most important of God's commands because it is the symbol of the Covenant, therefore, we should want to keep the Sabbath holy.

## Continuing Application

In this chapter we will consider:

- The Biblical evidence that shows that the Sabbath Law applied to Jew and Gentile.
- The Biblical evidence that the Sabbath Law applies in the NT era.
- How to address the primary objections to the continuing applicability of the Sabbath.
- The position of the authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* with respect to the Sabbath.

## What the Bible Says About the Sabbath's Applicability to All Mankind

There are a number of passages in the Bible that deal with the Sabbath. Some of these passages (e.g., Jer 17.19-27; Is 58.13, 14; Mt 12.1-14) seem to be very clear about how the Sabbath is to be observed, but most opponents of Sabbath-keeping in the NT economy dismiss them because they do not appear to apply beyond ancient Israel. Passages of this kind will be considered in later portions of this

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

study, after we have established the principle that the Sabbath is an enduring institution that applies to all mankind, through all generations.

In this section we will review key passages that speak of, or imply, the perpetual and universal obligation to keep the Sabbath and determine what inferences and applications we can draw from them. Before we consider the passages, I wish to make one contextual observation. Paul reminded Timothy that all of “Scripture [i.e., the OT<sup>2</sup>] is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3.16). Paul informs us that what we learn from the Bible is of value for reforming our lives and walking before God in a manner that pleases him. Therefore, let’s consider what the Bible has to say about the ongoing applicability of the Sabbath.

### Genesis 2.2, 3

<sup>2</sup>By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. <sup>3</sup>And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.<sup>3</sup>

This is the record of the institution of the Sabbath in the account of creation. The institution of the Sabbath at the end of the creation week implies the universality (i.e., it applies to all mankind) of the requirement to keep the Sabbath day holy. We find in this account that:

- God rested from all his work (of creation). He did not rest because he was tired. It is impossible for God to tire. Rest is more than just recovering from weariness. God’s resting has a sense of action (‘he rested’) that encompasses more than just ‘he ceased from his work’. In his resting he contemplated (meditated) on the creative attributes of the Godhead and he appraised (looked at and considered) what he had done and found that it was very good.
- God blessed the seventh day—that particular day—and all seventh days from then on. He set aside the seventh day, of every seven days, as a holy day by blessing it. In blessing that day he gave it special merit above the other days of the week. It is interesting to note that he had performed great and majestic creative works on the other days of the week, yet he did not bless those days. It was *after* he had completed the amazing display of his power that he blessed a day. That day, the seventh day of the week, had a special meaning above all other days.
- God made the seventh day holy. He set it apart from the other days of the week as a holy day (Ex 16.23; Neh 9.14). It became holy by his action of resting from creative work. On that day he didn’t continue the same activities he had been performing on the first six days, but set it apart for a special purpose for man—contemplation and reflection on God’s attributes, character, and works; i.e., worship.
  - Man was already on the scene at the time and saw God rest, so the day must have been sanctified (set-apart, made holy) for Adam as well as God.
  - There is no meaning in the words of Scripture if this expression does not establish a principle for *man’s* use of time. [Later passages in the Bible show that the use of the Sabbath Day is regulated by God.]
- At the very edge of time-past God established the principle of Sabbath rest in the order of the universe.
  - The day of rest (Sabbath) was not a time of enforced idleness it was set aside for reflection and contemplation, and praise of the great creator in worship.
  - It became the special day for man to worship God. Adam didn’t need to rest from labour, as labour at this point had not been cursed and was not wearying. Yet, the observance of the day as holy was still necessary for him.

---

<sup>2</sup> At the point he wrote the Epistle the NT as we know it did not exist, so he was referring primarily to the OT.

<sup>3</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible New International Version*®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- The Sabbath was the first full day that man lived through. So for man it was actually his first day. This may point to the Lord's Day or Christian Sabbath being the first day of the week. Man is destined for an eternal rest. The *Palestinian Talmud* says: “Man was created on the eve of the sabbath in order that he might begin life by a religious practice.”
- The eternal Sabbath will begin on a first ‘day’ that will never end.
- Man in Adam, not Jew in Moses, was given the Sabbath as an obligation of tribute to the sovereign creator.
  - The Sabbath was instituted as a creation ordinance, long before there was any such person as a Jew.
  - Since Adam was the federal representative of all mankind (Rom 5.12; 1 Cor 15.22) the Sabbath-keeping obligation was established with all mankind.
  - The Sabbath applied to all mankind descended from Adam. As a creation ordinance it cannot be called a Jewish or Mosaic law.
- Other creation ordinances inherently have a universal ethical obligation built into them, implying the on-going responsibility of man to observe the Sabbath:
  - Marriage (Mt 19.4-8; Mk 10.6-9).
  - Orderliness in worship and male headship (1 Tim 2.11-14).
  - Work (2 Thes 3.10). Since work is a creation ordinance; so, by inference, is rest.

### Exodus 16.22-30

<sup>22</sup>On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much—two omers for each person—and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. <sup>23</sup>He said to them, “This is what the LORD commanded: ‘Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.’”

<sup>24</sup>So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. <sup>25</sup>“Eat it today,” Moses said, “because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. You will not find any of it on the ground today. <sup>26</sup>Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.”

<sup>27</sup>Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. <sup>28</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? <sup>29</sup>Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out.” <sup>30</sup>So the people rested on the seventh day.

This is the second reference in Scripture to the Sabbath Day. It gives the first recorded instructions for how the Sabbath is to be kept holy, with the rules for gathering the manna on the first six days of the week.

- At this point in the flight from Egypt, Moses had not yet delivered the summary laws from Sinai or the associated case and ceremonial laws.
- Yet, Moses makes reference to the Sabbath. He was not instituting a principle here; he was just reminding the people that they were not to look for manna on the Sabbath, because the next day was to be a holy day set apart (from work) to the LORD. They were reminded of a principle that had been established before there was a distinction between Jew and Gentile.
- The passage may also refer to the reinstatement of the practice of Sabbath-keeping. During their stay in Egypt, the Israelites may not have been able to keep the Sabbath under the repressive regime of slavery. Thus they may have even forgotten the proper day on which the week began, and may not have known the correct reckoning for the week.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

### Exodus 20.8-11

<sup>8</sup>Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

This passage is the fourth Commandment among the Ten Commandments delivered by God, through Moses. It gives directions for Sabbath-keeping:

- The ‘remember’ of verse 8 points back to the creation ordinance. The creation ordinance is specifically referenced in verse 11.
- The fourth commandment is not the institution of the Sabbath (nor is the instruction given in Exodus 16 instituting the Sabbath), since it refers to the Sabbath as a memorial of creation. Exodus 20 does not impose a new institution; it reiterates one that can be traced from the beginning of time.
- Aliens are required to keep the Sabbath. It cannot be inferred that this was because they were resident under a Jewish theocracy. There are other laws which aliens were not required to keep (e.g., circumcision, food prohibitions (Dt 14.21), and they were not permitted to eat the Passover or participate in the sacrificial system (Ex 12.43, 45), but they were *required* to keep the Sabbath Law.
- Man is to imitate his maker by observing a day of rest. Man, Jew and Gentile, is created in the image of God. Mankind, not just Jews, is to imitate God as he bears the image of God.

### Nehemiah 13.15-22

<sup>15</sup>In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. <sup>16</sup>Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. <sup>17</sup>I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? <sup>18</sup>Didn’t your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.”

<sup>19</sup>When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. <sup>20</sup>Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. <sup>21</sup>But I warned them and said, “Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. <sup>22</sup>Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Nehemiah the reformer, repairer, and restorer, believed that Sabbath-keeping was a critical component of successful reconstruction of the community. He required even those who were not part of the returned Jewish community, and within the bounds of his jurisdiction as governor in the Persian Empire, to observe the Sabbath. We can infer from his instructions that:

- The requirement to keep the Sabbath applies not only to those who are within the bounds of the covenant community; it also applies to those outside of the covenant community, including those from pagan societies.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- Sabbath-keeping is a significant principle, based on God’s Law, which must be observed as part of man’s duty to God.
- Commercial activities are not to be practiced on the Sabbath.
- People fall into Sabbath-breaking very easily. While Nehemiah was away the people began to do what they were specifically prohibited from doing.
- Sabbath breaking is a great evil worthy of severe punishment.
- Proper Sabbath-keeping is a key component of societal reformation.
- Sabbath-keeping is to be legislated and enforced by the civil magistrate (and the Church), even within the bounds of governments that do not explicitly endorse God’s laws as the basis for civil polity.
- Nehemiah understood his role in a prophetic context. Isaiah had prophesied (Is 58.12) that the “Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings” would view Sabbath-keeping as an important principle of godliness (Is 58.13-14).

### Isaiah 56.1-8

<sup>1</sup>This is what the LORD says: “Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. <sup>2</sup>Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”

<sup>3</sup>Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely exclude me from his people” And let not any eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.”

<sup>4</sup>For this is what the LORD says:

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—<sup>5</sup>to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. <sup>6</sup>And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—<sup>7</sup>these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” <sup>8</sup>The Sovereign LORD declares—he who gathers the exiles of Israel: “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.”

Foreigners who want to be obedient to God must keep the Sabbath.

- Isaiah, in speaking of salvation for the Gentiles, indicates the requirements for those who will be brought to God’s house. It is not those who are circumcised or who forsake leavened bread as formalities.
- The passage is not to be understood as indicating that they will become Jews (otherwise the reference to the nations in verse 7 would not make much sense).
- Rather, it is through observing the Moral Law, and in particular the fourth Commandment, that they show their allegiance to God.
- Foreigners who “keep the Sabbath without desecrating it” (v 6) are those who will be acceptable to God. Gentiles, not just Jews, must keep the Sabbath to come into God’s house.

### Matthew 5.17-20

<sup>17</sup>Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup>I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Anyone who breaks one of the least of these

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus says that no law of the OT has been abolished, not even the Ceremonial laws.

- The *form* of the ceremonies has been changed in Christ but the intent/principle still abides.
- The OT commands still apply unless they have been expressly done away with.
- The form of the Sabbath has been changed (e.g., it is now the first day of the week, not the seventh; it also points to Christ's resurrection [the new creation] under the NT economy).
- The Sabbath law is part of God's great moral law that is a summary of all that God requires of mankind (not just Jews or Christians). We don't have nine summary commands, we have been given *ten*.
- On the Day of Judgment, God will hold accountable men who have not kept the Sabbath holy. A person who denies this statement must hold the view that God's standard for holiness has changed and that therefore his character has changed.

### Mark 2.23-28

<sup>23</sup>One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. <sup>24</sup>The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

<sup>25</sup>He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? <sup>26</sup>In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

<sup>27</sup>Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

<sup>28</sup>So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Jesus teaches the universal nature of the Sabbath in his use of the generic term 'man'.

- By using the term 'man' he implies that the Sabbath was made not just for Israel but for all mankind.
- In this, he appeals to creation (by speaking of the Sabbath and man as being made) as the origin of the Sabbath, rejecting the idea that it is only a Jewish or typical ceremony.
- Being made for man, the Sabbath is not under man's hand to do with as he pleases. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was instituted for man's benefit, good and welfare.
- Jesus also challenges the Pharisaic traditions that had turned the Sabbath into a legalistic parody of its original purpose.

### Hebrews 4.1-11

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. <sup>2</sup>For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. <sup>3</sup>Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

"So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. <sup>4</sup>For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." <sup>5</sup>And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

<sup>6</sup>It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. <sup>7</sup>Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before:

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

<sup>8</sup>For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. <sup>9</sup>There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; <sup>10</sup>for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. <sup>11</sup>Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

The Sabbath day not only looks back to Creation but also forward as a promise of salvation, resurrection and eternal rest (v 9). It is a memorial of God’s work in creation, re-creation (salvation), and eternal creation (resurrection and glorification). We find in scripture multiple administrations associated with the perpetual institution of the Sabbath:

- *Creation Sabbath* – A day of worship in which there was no element of sin or rest from weariness (Gen 2.2, 3) since there was no sin and work had not been cursed with painful toil.
- *Covenant [Mosaic] Sabbath* – A day of worship with the addition of rest from weariness (Ex 20.10) that pointed to the hope of rest from sin in Christ (Dt 5.15; Heb 3.18-4.6). Note that Hebrews 4.6 indicates that it was sin that kept the Israelites from experiencing the rest. The implication being that they needed salvation by faith in Christ.
- *Christian Sabbath* – A day of worship and rest with a reflection on the death and resurrection (the new creation) of Christ (Acts 20.7) and the procurement of rest in Christ (Mt 11.28; Is 48.17,18; Jer 6.16), and a foretaste of the Consummation Sabbath in the recreated New Heavens and Earth to come. God’s eighth day (Lev 23.36, 39; Num 29.35; Neh 8.18) has broken through in the Christian Sabbath and looks forward to the eternal eighth day. This is consistent with the ‘already but not yet’ theme we find running through salvation theology (e.g., sanctified, but being sanctified; declared sons, but waiting for our inheritance).
- *Consummation [Eternal] Sabbath* – An endless ‘day’ of worship (Rev 4.10; 5.11-13; 7.15). Resting from weariness will be removed from the meaning of the Sabbath (as it was not required in the Creation Sabbath) as there will no longer be any sin or the consequences of sin (Rev 7.16; 21.4). There will be, however, an eternal reflection on what Christ has accomplished in procuring salvation for his people (Rev 5.9-10) and providing a restored creation in (Rev 21.1-3; 22.1-5), and eternal spiritual rest (Heb 4.1; Rev 14.13). The eternal eighth day will become a present reality (Heb 4.6-10)

All of these administrations of the Sabbath have different aspects, but they are all instances of fulfilling the same Sabbath Principle.

### Jesus Kept the Sabbath Holy while He Walked Among Men

Jesus demonstrates by his practice on the Sabbath, his attitude toward the Sabbath, and his teachings about the Sabbath, that he viewed the Sabbath to be an important institution that is to be kept holy (Mt 12.1-14; Mk 2.23-3.6; Lk 6.1-10; 13.10-16; 14.1-5; Jn 5.8-15; 9.13-16). No one was ever able to charge him with breaking the law (Jn 8.46a). As the Second Adam he fulfilled all righteousness (Mt 3.15; cf. Rom 5.12-21), in active obedience to the Law. In addition, it is clear from the examples where Jesus is accused of breaking the Sabbath that he is teaching both that it is to be observed and how it is to be observed.

### The Principle of the Portion

The Sabbath is the portion we are to give back to God, a ‘tithe’ of our time similar to giving a tenth of our income. The general obligations of the Covenant made between God and man apply in two

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

key areas. First man must keep the Ten Commandments and secondly, man must return to God a portion (a tribute payment) of everything that God gives to him. This is the *Principle of the Portion*.<sup>4</sup> We find this principle laid out in Exodus 34 as well as elsewhere in Scripture. In brief, the principle is that everything belongs to the Lord (Ex 34.1-9; Job 41.11; Ps 50.10), man has been given a role as God's vassal as a subordinate monarch over creation (Ex 34.10; Gen 1.28), and as a vassal of the Great King man is to abide by the covenant treaty obligations (Ex 34.11-28). The treaty obligations include strict obedience to what God commands (Ex 34.27, 28) and to pay a tribute of:

- Life (Ex 34.12, 15, 16, 19, 20, 25, 26)
  - Not to Mix the Unlike (Ex 34.12, 15, 16, 25, 26b)
  - Firstborn (Ex 34.19, 20)
  - Blood (Ex 34.25)
- Worship (Ex 34.13, 14, 17, 18, 22-24)
- Possessions (Ex 34.20b, 22, 26a)
- Time (Ex 34.21)

The *Principle of the Portion* extends to the allotment of time that we are given by God. Just as some people are given the responsibility of stewardship over more possessions than others, some are given more time than others—i.e., longer lives. Yet God requires that we each pay tribute with the same portion of our time. He holds forth his sovereignty by requiring that we return to him one seventh of all the time he gives to us.

The purpose of all the tribute obligations is to remind us that we are creatures before a sovereign creator (Exodus 34.29-35). We are finite, whereas he is infinite. We do not live of ourselves or to ourselves, as he does. We live and move and have our continuing existence only because he so wills it. Ultimately, we do not own our lives, possessions, worship, or time. Nothing that we are, or do, or claim to own is excluded from God's sovereign ownership.

### The Sabbath is Different from Ceremonial Rituals

The OT prophets denounce formalism (Is 1.11-13) in ceremonial observances and predict the end of the particular forms of the ceremonial system that are typical, but nowhere does a prophet denounce the observance of the Sabbath or predict its discontinuance. To the contrary, the prophets are explicit in their reverence for the Sabbath (Is 56.2-6; 58.13; Jer 17.19-27) and indicate its enduring relevance and importance.

### Responding to the Anti-Sabbath Arguments

The Bible shows that all mankind, in all ages, are to keep the Sabbath. However this is a fact that is accepted by only a small minority today—in the world and in the Church. Within the Church in its broadest sense, most evangelicals, antinomians, dispensationalists, liberals, Roman Catholics, and even many in the Reformed 'camp' disagree with the statement that we are required to keep the Sabbath. They raise a number of objections against the continuing applicability of the Sabbath, including the following:

1. The Sabbath is the only command of 10 Commandments not repeated in the NT. Therefore, it is less important.
2. The Sabbath could not be written on people's hearts. Gentiles would know little about the Sabbath. Therefore it cannot be a universal command.
3. John Calvin believed the Mosaic Sabbath was abrogated, but it was still useful to have a day for rest and worship.
4. The Sabbath was part of the ceremonial laws of the OT that are completed in Christ.
5. The Mosaic ordinance of Sabbath observance is no longer binding on the new covenant people

---

<sup>4</sup> James R. Hughes, *The Principle of The Portion: A Structure for Organizing Biblical Law* (2002-11), available at: [http://www.epctoronto.org/Press/Publications\\_JRHughes/Publications\\_JRHughes.htm](http://www.epctoronto.org/Press/Publications_JRHughes/Publications_JRHughes.htm).

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

6. Paul, in Colossians 2.16-17, Galatians 4.9-10, and Romans 14.5, abolishes Sabbath observance.
7. Jesus shows by his example that the Sabbath is obsolete in Luke 13.10-14 and teaches that the Sabbath was made for man: Mark 2.23-28. So I can do as I wish.
8. It is 'legalistic' to draw lines and set-up rules about keeping a day holy.
9. The 7-day week is an artifact of ancient Mesopotamia; the idea of a universal law is ludicrous.

We will address each of these objections to the continuing applicability of the Sabbath-keeping principle.

### The Sabbath Command Isn't Repeated in the NT

The Sabbath is the only command of the Ten Commandments not repeated explicitly in the NT. This seems to indicate that it is not as important as the other commands. One writer has said, "There is not a single command in the New Testament for Christians to keep the Sabbath. ... [T]his is surprising if the Sabbath were still in force today. There are a number of references to the other commandments, but never one about the Sabbath. There are numerous references and warnings about sexual sins, but not a single one about Sabbath breaking. There are several lists of sins in various books, but none of the lists mention the Sabbath. If believers are to live according to the commandments of our new covenant King, then it would appear that the Sabbath is not nearly as important as some would make it."<sup>5</sup>

#### Response:

- The NT does in fact reference the Sabbath command (Mt 12.1-13; Mk 2.23-3.6; Lk 6.1-10; 13.10-16; 14.1-5; 23.56 with Mk 16.1; Jn 5.8-15; 9.13-16; Heb 4.6-11) and shows how Jesus and his disciples applied it correctly. For example, in Matthew 12.12 Jesus says it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. This implies that there is a law (command) governing actions permissible on the Sabbath.
- The argument that the NT, and more specifically, the post-Pentecost NT must restate the Sabbath command or it isn't binding is fallacious:
  - The Bible is a unit, all Scripture is given for our instruction (2 Tim 3.16-17).
  - There are a number of practices that the opponents of the Sabbath principle observe that they could not defend from post-Pentecost NT scriptures, such as women taking communion (not mentioned in the Bible anywhere), singing with instrumental accompaniment in NT worship, and singing merely human compositions in worship.
  - There are commands in the OT that are not repeated in the NT, which nevertheless no Christian would question as being binding on Christians and mankind in general (e.g., prohibiting kidnapping [Ex 21.16; Dt 24.7] and bestiality [Ex 22.19; Lev 20.16; Dt 27.21]). We can see the fallacy of the argument quoted above, by substitution: "If believers are to live according to the commandments of our new covenant King, then it would appear that [kidnapping/bestiality] is not nearly as important as some would make it."

### The Sabbath was Revealed to Jews - Not Written on Gentiles' Hearts

"In fact the one command where it is hard to see how it could be written on people's hearts, is the Sabbath. Gentiles would know little or nothing about the Sabbath."<sup>6</sup>

#### Response:

- All people know, or sense, that they are to set aside a time to worship God. The evidence is shown in many ways:
  - Within all religious systems men set aside days for worshiping their invented deities (e.g., Hindu festivals: Buddha Jayanti; Diwali; Sri Krishnaashtami; Vijaya Dashami; or Moslem fasts/festivals: Ramadan, Eid ul-Fitr).

<sup>5</sup> Roger Fellows, *The Law and The Christian*, <http://www.sgfcana.com/article-law.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Same as previous.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- Even in ‘civil religion’ men create heroes, hold parades, and declare days of remembrance.
- It is ironic that it is hard to convince Christians of the importance of the Sabbath and yet it is easy for them to adapt pagan festivals such as Christmas and Easter. Even Reformed Presbyterians find it hard to resist the tendency to introduce the human-invented festivals, contrary to the Westminster standards they profess to adhere to: “There is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.”<sup>7</sup>
- A professor of government and philosophy at the University of Texas, J. Budziszewski, disagrees with argument that the Sabbath could not be written on the hearts of men. He says:

[The 4<sup>th</sup>] Commandment declares that complete engrossment in mundane affairs is not merely tiring but debasing; one of the principles of our design is that times be set apart just for the remembrance of God. A presupposition of the Commandment is that although the created world in which we go about our labors is real and important, the Creator is more important still. Also presupposed is that we are built to run in cycles. It isn't possible for beings of our kind to do everything all the time; we need to do some things sometimes and other things at other times. Thus someone who says “My work is my worship” is deceiving himself—or else worshipping his work. Yes, we should do all our labors as though for God; but for God, we should intermit our labors. Traditionally, these presuppositions of the biblical injunction have been regarded as belonging to the natural law. Of course the biblical injunction goes further, requiring that labor and intermission come in cycles of precisely seven days. This has *not* been regarded as belonging to the natural law. As in several other Commandments, the universal and particular are mixed.”<sup>8</sup>
- Budziszewski follows in the Natural Law tradition of Thomas Aquinas, and Augustine before him. One writer, summarizing the traditional Natural Law position of the Middle Ages with respect to the Sabbath, says:

The religious observance of the seventh day ... seems to be implied in the very form in which the ... Commandment is worded: “Remember that thou keep holy the sabbath day.” If we except the merely positive determinations of time ... all the precepts of the Decalogue are also precepts of the natural law, which can be gathered by reason from nature herself, and in fact they were known long before Moses wrote them down at the express command of God. This is the teaching of St. Paul — (Rom, 2.14, 15). Although the substance of the Decalogue is thus both of natural and Divine law, yet its express promulgation by Moses at the command of God was not without its advantages. The great moral code, the basis of all true civilization, in this manner became the clear, certain, and publicly recognized standard of moral conduct.<sup>9</sup>
- Lest you think this is just the view of late Middle Ages scholastics and Roman Catholics, the authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* did not agree with the idea that the Sabbath could not be known by Gentiles in their hearts. They agreed with the Natural Law tradition, and said: “As it is of the *law of nature*, [italics added] that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God ...”<sup>10</sup> As further evidence of the authors’ view, the minutes of the Westminster Assembly state:

<sup>7</sup> “An Appendix, Touching Days and Places for Publick Worship,” *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, February 6, 1645.

<sup>8</sup> J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know – A Guide* (Spence Publishing Company, Dallas, 2003), p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> T. Slater, “Moral Aspect of Divine Law,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09071a.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21: “Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day,” paragraph 7.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

The Assembly entered upon the debate ‘of the Sabbath day.’ Upon some debate about this proposition, ‘Light of nature teacheth that a time be set apart for the solemn worship of God,’ it was *Resolved* upon the Q., These words shall not stand. *Resolved* upon the Q., That something be spoken in this proposition concerning the light of nature. *Resolved* upon the Q., ‘Light of nature teacheth that some set times be observed for the worship of God.’ *Resolved* upon the Q., ‘God in His word hath appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath to be kept holy unto Him.’”<sup>11</sup>

### John Calvin Believed the Mosaic Sabbath was Abrogated

“John Calvin believed the Mosaic Sabbath was abrogated, but said that as it is useful to have one day a week for rest and for worship, it is good for us to keep the Lord's Day ... Basically I agree with Calvin's position.”<sup>12</sup>

#### Response:

- This is a favorite objection of the anti-sabbatarians who claim to be Reformed. They like to think that if Calvin spoke against Sabbath-keeping, we should take his position as normative. Ironically, many (especially those among the Reformed Baptists) would reject Calvin's statements in many other areas such as on infant baptism, regulations for worship, use of Psalms in worship, place of the law, role of the civil magistrate, etc.
- In reality those who make such a statement probably haven't actually read Calvin or they wouldn't say that they agree with Calvin's view of the Sabbath, for he does not say that Sabbath-keeping is abrogated for Christians.
- In general, Calvin understood the Sabbath commandment to have three continuing roles, which are:
  - To designate a stated day of public worship
  - To prescribe a day for bodily or physical rest
  - A foreshadowing of the spiritual rest enjoyed by believers.
- Calvin also understood that there was a ceremonial aspect added to the Sabbath. He argues that this part of the Sabbath was replaced by the reality of Christ.
- Here is what Calvin said (abbreviated) about the Sabbath in his *Institutes*:  
(31) [T]here is no doubt that by the Lord Christ's coming the *ceremonial part* of this commandment was abolished. For he himself is the truth, with whose presence all figures vanish; he is the body, at whose appearance the shadows are left behind. ... Christians ought therefore to *shun completely the superstitious observance of days*. (32) The two latter reasons for the Sabbath *ought not to be relegated to the ancient shadows*, but are *equally applicable to every age*. Although the Sabbath [i.e., the Jewish ceremonial Sabbath] has been abrogated, there is still occasion for us: to assemble on stated days for the hearing of the Word, the breaking of the mystical bread, and for public prayers [cf. Acts 2:42]; ... to give surcease from labor to servants and workmen. [Italics added.]<sup>13</sup>
- It is clear, also, from Calvin's two sermons on Deuteronomy 5.12-15 that he understood the Fourth Commandment to place an obligation on Christians to keep the Sabbath holy. He indicates that as a ceremonial observance it has changed, but the principle of Sabbath-keeping has not been changed. We must understand the distinction between the form and the essence, or principle. Listen to what Calvin actually says on the matter of the Sabbath:  
[T]he [Sabbath or] *day of rest was, first, a figure partly to show that men cannot serve God properly unless they put to death all that is of their own*

<sup>11</sup> Session 615, April 6, 1646.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Fellows, *The Law and The Christian*, <http://www.sqfcanada.com/article-law.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John t. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian classics*, Vol. XX (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.8.31-32; pp. 397-398.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

*nature and dedicate themselves fully to him so as to be separate from the world. **Second**, the day of rest was a ceremony to bring the people together so that they could hear the Law, call upon the name of God, and offer sacrifices and do all other things that concern the spiritual government. Thus we see the type of Sabbath day being spoke of—yet it cannot be well understood without setting forth these two parts separately. . . . Thus we can understand what Saint Paul means (Col 2.20) when he says that we are no longer tied to the old bondage of keeping the Sabbath day. Instead we must give much honour to Jesus Christ and be content with what he has given to us in his own person, since we no longer have the outward things that were under the Law. From this we observe how the *ceremony itself applies to us today—it is past*. Therefore we must come to the **important point** of this which is that *to serve God properly we must learn to give up our own wills, thoughts, and desires*. Why? Because otherwise we will be wise in our own conceits and will imagine that we can serve God with this or that, and thus mar everything. Therefore, we must lay down our own ‘wisdom’ and hear God speak, without following our own will or fancy. . . . Thus, the first way *to keep the Sabbath as we should* is to *give up the things that seem good to ourselves*. Instead we must rest. How are we to rest? We must stand still so that our minds don’t wander to our own inventions. I say, we must continue quietly in obedience to God. When we are tempted by our own lusts, we must consider that all our lewd and disobedient desires are enemies of God. Therefore, we must rest, considering what God wants, so that he may work in us and guide and govern us by his Holy Spirit. . . . We will profit throughout our lives if we keep the Sabbath well by renouncing whatever is our own and by dedicating ourselves entirely to God. . . . *We ought to be more on fire for keeping spiritually the Sabbath* of the LORD since we have been set free from the slavish subjection to the Law and since God has granted to us greater privileges than he did to the fathers of the past. . . . In fact, *what was commanded about the day of rest must also apply to us as well as to them. For we must take God’s law as it is and thus have an everlasting rule of righteousness. For it is certain that in the Ten Commandments God intended to give a rule that should endure forever*. Therefore, let us not think that the things which Moses says about the Sabbath day are unnecessary for us—not because the figure remains in force, but because we have the truth represented by the figure.<sup>14</sup> [Italics added.]*

### The Sabbath was Part of the Ceremonial Laws of the OT that Are Completed in Christ

The Sabbath was part of the ceremonial laws of the OT, and the ceremonial laws of the OT are completed in Christ. For example, John MacArthur argues that “the Sabbath purpose was purely symbolic”<sup>15</sup> in the same way as the sacrificial system and is no longer applicable. Roger Fellows speaking of Matthew 12.1-5 says,

Jesus said that the priests *desecrate* the Sabbath, yet are innocent. Could Jesus have said that the priests could *break* any other commandment and be innocent? Could they commit adultery and be innocent? Could they worship idols and be innocent? That is unthinkable. No moral commandment can be desecrated and leave the offender without blame. Yet the priests could *break* the Sabbath and be innocent, because their priestly duties required them to work on the Sabbath. This surely removes the Sabbath commandment from the realm of moral to

---

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy by John Calvin*, preached on Thursday the 20<sup>th</sup> of June, 1555. This modern English rendering of Calvin’s sermons is based on the translation made by Arthur Golding in 1582. It was translated into modern English by James R. Hughes from the facsimile edition published by The Banner of Truth Trust in 1987; available at: [http://www.reformed.com/pub/ic\\_sab\\_1.htm](http://www.reformed.com/pub/ic_sab_1.htm). For a modern translation, made directly from the French, see the translation of Benjamin W. Farley, published by Baker Book House in 1980.

<sup>15</sup> John MacArthur, *The Ultimate Priority*, (Moody Press, 1983), pp. 94-96.

*ceremonial* as the later New Testament references so clearly show.<sup>16</sup> [Italics added.]

**Response:**

- Roger Fellows' argument about 'desecration' of the Sabbath is spurious and illogical:
  - It is interesting to note that he changes 'desecrate' (NIV), 'profane' (ESV/KJV) in verse 5 into 'break', as used in Matthew 15.2, 3 and Romans 2.25. This is subtle, but it is twisting the facts. There is a distinction between 'desecrate' and 'break' that is important.
  - We can provide other examples where we set aside one moral law for fulfillment of another. For example we desecrate private property to rescue a drowning man if we 'trespass' (normally a breach of the commandment not to steal) on that property; the civil magistrate (executioner) or a soldier 'desecrates' the command not to take the life of another if he kills him. Yet his action is not classed as murder, because it is required by God (Gen 9.6).
  - In the same way, works of necessity and mercy are included in the proper application of the law. Jesus makes this clear in Matthew 12.5 and also in Luke 13.15-16; 14.5. You do not break the command when you perform these classes of works on the Sabbath. The work of the priests on the Sabbath fell within the class of 'works of necessity'.
  - Because the law can be set aside, at times, by the priests doing their work Fellows jumps to the conclusion that the Sabbath law was ceremonial. On what grounds is there a logical connection? There isn't any.
- The re-statement of the Sabbath Principle in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20.8-11) includes aliens. This shows that the Fourth Commandment was not an essentially ceremonial law, i.e., one pointing to Christ and spiritual separation and holiness. Uncircumcised aliens were generally not permitted to participate in the ceremonial rites of Israel (Ex 12.43, 45) and were allowed to eat unclean food (Dt 14.21).
- It is true that after the fall of man into sin the Sabbath did take on ceremonial-typical aspects (Ezek 20.12) that pointed to rest in Christ. The marriage ordinance that was established at creation also points to Christ (Eph 5.32). However, while the ceremonial-typical aspect of marriage (Hos 1.2; 3.1) is fulfilled in Christ, that does not mean that marriage is no longer to be observed. In the same way, even if the ceremonial-typical aspects of the Sabbath are fulfilled in Christ, this does not mean that the overriding principle of the Sabbath no longer applies.
- The Fourth Commandment must be distinguished from the ceremonial sabbatical month (Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles) and the Jubilee Sabbaths (Lev 25; Ex 23.10-11) because its origin precedes the ceremonial forms by thousands of years.
- Adam had not sinned when God set the Sabbath day apart. There was no need for the typical laws associated with substitution, redemption, cleansing, separation, and holiness when there was no sin. The system of ceremonial types pointing to Christ presupposes the need for atonement. The Sabbath institution, as a Creation Ordinance, could not have been a ceremonial observance pointing to the atoning work of Christ because it was introduced before there was any sin.

**The Mosaic Ordinance of Sabbath Observance is Not Binding on New Covenant People**

There are some in the Church who argue that the requirement to keep holy one day in seven is nothing more than a Mosaic requirement that is to be abandoned in the new-covenant age. They usually claim that important passages that speak of Sabbath-keeping (e.g., Is 58; Jer 17.19-27) apply only to OT Jews under the Mosaic Covenant, because they do not appear to have universal applicability. For example:

---

<sup>16</sup> Roger Fellows, *The Law and The Christian*, <http://www.sqfcanada.com/article-law.htm>.

The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

[T]he Mosaic ordinance of Sabbath observance is no longer binding on the new covenant people of God.<sup>17</sup>

Now that the Mosaic covenant is obsolete, the Sabbath is not binding on us, just as circumcision is not binding on us because it was the sign of the covenant with Abraham.<sup>18</sup>

**Response:**

- It is insufficient to dismiss Sabbath-keeping by just saying that it is a ‘Mosaic ordinance’. Those who make this claim have to demonstrate that the Sabbath principle is not perpetually binding on the use of our time when it was binding for man before the Mosaic ordinances were issued (e.g., Adam, Noah, and the Jews at the time of the Exodus)
- There is only one Covenant, with multiple forms, by which God deals with mankind. The Sabbath, along with the rainbow, remains as perpetual sign of the Covenant.

| <b>Major Signs of the Covenant Instituted at Each Administration</b> |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Covenantal Administration</b>                                     | <b>Sign/Symbol</b>   |
| 1. Creation (Adam): Commencement (Gen 1.26-2.17)                     | Sabbath (Gen 2.2, 3)   |
| 2. New World (Noah): Preservation (Gen 8.20-9.17)                    | Rainbow (Gen 9.13-16)  |
| 3. National (Abraham): Promise of Seed and Land (Gen 15, 17)         | Circumcision (Gen 17.11)   |
| 4. Sinaitic (Moses): Law (Ex 24)                                     | Passover [although before the actual giving of the Law] and sacrifices (2 Ki 23.21; Ps 50.5) |
| 5. Priestly (Phinehas): Holiness (Num 25.10-13)                      | Urim and Thummim (?)   |
| 6. Royal (David): Kingdom (2 Sam 7.5-16)                             | Scepter (Gen 49.10; Num 24.17; Ps 45.6; 108.8; 110.2; Heb 1.8); Salt (2 Ch 13.5)             |
| 7. New (Christ): Consummation (Jer 31.31-34; Lk 22.7-20; Heb 8, 9)   | Bloodless Sacraments: Baptism and Lord’s Supper (Col 2.11, 12; Lk 22.20)                     |

- Notice that Rogers Fellow mentions circumcision as being representative of the Covenant with Abram. However, it had a wider application. When the Covenant was re-enacted with Moses, circumcision was not removed (Jn 7.22). When the NT confirmation of the Covenant was established in Christ circumcision was continued in a new form. It was replaced with baptism (Col 2.11, 12).
- The Sabbath was not the primary sign of the Mosaic Covenant administration. It was the sign primarily of the Covenant of Creation. However, it continued in the Mosaic Covenant with new symbolic elements (Dt 5.15).
- As with the previous ‘objection’, it is not at all surprising that a Baptist would miss the principle of Covenant and ceremonial continuity with *changed* forms. Baptists generally have a faulty understanding of Covenant Theology and ignore the fact that baptism, while it replaces circumcision and is equivalent to it, is one of the signs of the eternal Covenant.
- R. L. Dabney counters the argument that the Sabbath is a Mosaic ordinance that is no longer binding on Christians:  
 We are but using logic parallel to that which the apostle Paul employs in a similar case. He is proving that the gospel promise made to the Hebrews in Abraham could not have been retracted when the law was published on Sinai. His argument is (Gal. 3:17): “The covenant that was confirmed before of God

<sup>17</sup> Mark W. Karlberg. “Review: Created in God’s Image”, by Anthony A. Hoekema, *Westminster Theological Journal*, v. 49: 437-442.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Fellows, *The Law and The Christian*, <http://www.sqfcanada.com/article-law.htm>.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul.” So reason we: if the Sabbath was instituted long before, it did not come with Judaism, and does not go with it. It is instructive to note that those Christian Fathers who gave countenance to the idea that the divine injunction of the Sabbath was abrogated also leaned to the opinion that the Sabbath was of Mosaic origin. This indirectly confirms the soundness of our inference, while it betrays their slender acquaintance with the Old Testament Scriptures. The anti-Sabbath opinion in the Christian church had its origin in error and ignorance among the early, uninspired teachers.<sup>19</sup>

- And Dean Henry Law said: “[The Sabbath] arose not as a ceremony among ceremonies. Sinai was not its birth-place. The wilderness was not its cradle. Therefore Calvary is not its tomb.”<sup>20</sup>

### Paul Abolishes Sabbath Observance

It is often claimed that Paul, in Colossians 2.16-17, abolishes Sabbath observance. For example, Donald Barnhouse said:

Sabbatarians have evolved a way to circumvent this direct statement of the Lord in Colossians 2:16, 17. Just as they have invented the two-law theory, that the ordinances were abolished but not the Ten Commandments, so they have invented the two-sabbath theory to get around this text. First, they say, there was the ordinary seventh-day sabbath, which is still in effect. Then there were various ceremonial sabbaths, and Colossians 2: 16, 17 applies only to these! Since the Greek word for *sabbath* is in the plural here, they say, it refers to the high sabbaths. But they admit that in every other instance in the New Testament the same form refers to the weekly Sabbath.<sup>21</sup>

#### Response:

- Barnhouse is correct to critique the ‘two-law’ theory. There is an artificial distinction made between types of Law in the OT. While it is convenient to classify laws into ‘moral’, ‘case/civil’, ‘ceremonial’, this distinction is not easily (if at all) found in Scripture. Law is treated as a unit in Scripture. The principles behind the case/civil laws (e.g., weights and measures, consanguinity, sexual practices, protection of life related to acts of negligence, etc.) continue to apply, but the specific form of each application may change with different cultural, socio-economic, and technical realities (e.g., we don’t have flat roofs on our houses that people walk on, so we don’t have to put parapets around them; however, we apply the principle to putting fences around swimming pools).
- However, contrary to Barnhouse’s contention, there were in fact other Sabbaths beside the seventh day Sabbath (e.g., the Sabbatical month and year). Paul may include these, because of the reference to festivals and feasts. Paul switches from the singular for “holyday” and “newmoon” to the plural “sabbath days”. It could be a conscious choice of wording on his part to ensure that no one makes the mistake of assuming that he is referring to the Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment. In this regard, Albert Barnes’ commentary states:  
The word Sabbath in the Old Testament is applied not only to the seventh day but to all the days of holy rest that were observed by the Hebrews, and particularly to the beginning and close of the great festivals. There is doubtless reference to those days in this place, as the word is use in the plural number, and the Apostle does not refer particularly to the Sabbath so called. There is ... not the slightest reason to believe that he meant to teach that one of the ten commandments had ceased to be binding on mankind. If he had used the word

<sup>19</sup> R. L. Dabney, “The Christian Sabbath: Its Nature, Design And Proper Observance,” *Discussions Of Robert L. Dabney, Volume I*, p. 500.

<sup>20</sup> Dean Henry Law, “Christ is All,” *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, 197x, p. 205.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse, “The Christian and the Sabbath,” *Six Bible Study Hour Broadcasts, Commentary on the Epistles to the Romans, Chapter 14, verses 5,6; book 78; The Bible Study Hour*, Phil. PA, 1958, p. 23.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

in the singular number, “The Sabbath,” it would then, of course, have been clear that he meant to teach that the commandment was no longer to be observed. But the use of the term in plural number, and the connection show that he had his eye on the great number of days which were observed by the Hebrews as festivals, as a part of their ceremonial and typical law ...<sup>22</sup>

- Translations of this passage do not help us determine what Paul is speaking of. The NKJV may be accurate with the translation ‘sabbaths’ but it is inconsistent since it translates other passages with a capital ‘S’; the NIV and NASV have: ‘a Sabbath day’; the ESV has: ‘a Sabbath’.
- Multiple citations of the three items—religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day (1 Chron 23.31; 2 Chron 2.4; 8.13; 31.3; Neh 10.33; Is 1.13-14; Ezek 45.17; Hos 2.11)—indicates that Paul is probably referring to the ceremonial aspects of the OT economy, and dealing with all the annual, monthly, *and* weekly (i.e., *the* Sabbath day) festivals of the ritual calendar of the OT economy.
- Since Paul is probably including the Jewish weekly Sabbath day in his list, this does not mean that Christians are no longer to keep a holy Sabbath, since the original institution of the Sabbath did not include ceremonial aspects. The ceremonial aspects of the Sabbath were added during the Mosaic administration. It is specifically the observance of the ceremonial aspects of the Sabbath about which Paul does not want us judging one another. He indicates this when he says in verse 17 that they are shadows of the coming NT covenantal era.
- Calvin, for example, commenting on this passage, says:

But there is no doubt that by the Lord Christ's coming the *ceremonial part* [italics added] of this commandment was abolished [I prefer to use the word ‘abrogated’ or ‘changed’]. For he himself is the truth, with whose presence all figures vanish; he is the body, at whose appearance the shadows are left behind. He is, I say, the true fulfillment of the Sabbath. ... Christians ought therefore to shun completely the superstitious observance of days.<sup>23</sup>
- We can conclude that the ceremonial part of the Sabbath, being fulfilled in Christ is now realized in its spiritual antitype to which it pointed. Therefore we are not required to observe the Sabbath today with the redemptive-typical elements associated with it from the time of Moses. A proper interpretation of this passage in no way abrogates the perpetual binding obligation of the Fourth Commandment.

Other ‘bullets’ in the anti-sabbatarian ‘Bible-gun’ are Romans 14.5 and Galatians 4.9-10.

### Response:

- The best way to understand the Romans 14.5 passage, as with Colossians 2.16-17, is to consider the context in which Paul wrote. Apparently the seventh day (and other Jewish festivals) was still being observed among Christian Jews, along with the first day—the Lord’s Day. In this context, Paul is saying that it is no longer necessary to observe the seventh day (and other festival days) as holy, but if you want to do so, that is okay and no one should judge you for it. It would be the same as if he said, “You don’t have to abstain from eating pig’s meat, since it is now permissible, but don’t make your unwillingness to eat it a rule for other Christians.” Or it is similar to when Paul went up to Jerusalem and took a religious vow before going into the Temple. By doing this he was in no way suggesting that the form of separation vow that he took must be observed by all Christians.
- With respect to the Galatians passage, it is clear that Paul is dealing with a superstitious and slavish adherence to the forms of Jewish ceremonial observance. This is consistent with the entire argument of Paul’s letter where he is attacking adherence to the rituals as a means of

---

<sup>22</sup> Albert Barnes, Albert. *Notes on the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, New York: Harper Brothers, n.d.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John t. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian classics*, Vol. XX (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.8.31-32; p. 397.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

appropriating salvation or gaining merit before God (Gal 2.16, 19; 3.2, 5, 10-13, 17, 21; 4.5).

- Charles Hodge commenting on the Romans passage (with reference to the Galatians passage) says:

Some Christians ... thought it incumbent on them to observe these days; others were of a contrary opinion. Both were tolerated. The veneration of these days was a weakness; but still it was not a vital matter, and therefore should not be allowed to disturb the harmony of Christian intercourse, or the peace of the church. It is obvious from the context, and from such parallel passages as Galatians 4:10, "Ye observe days, and months, and times and years," and Colossians 2:16, "Let no man judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of Sabbath-days," that Paul has reference to the Jewish festivals, and therefore his language cannot properly be applied to the Christian Sabbath.<sup>24</sup>

### The Example and Teaching of Jesus Speaks Against Sabbath Observance

It is claimed that Jesus shows by his example that the Sabbath is obsolete (e.g., Luke 13.10-14) and that he teaches that the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2.23-28). So we can do as we wish on every day of the week.

#### Response:

- Jesus does not show by his example that the Sabbath is obsolete in Luke 13.10-14. If it were truly obsolete, he would not have defended his actions on that day. He would have said something like, "You are in error, the Sabbath no longer applies and my disciples can now work." By defending their actions, he teaches that the Sabbath command still applies, and how it is to be properly observed.
- In Mark 2.23-28 Jesus teaches that the Sabbath was made for man. The point Jesus makes is that the Sabbath was created for mankind's good in that it brings him closer to God, gives him needed rest, and reminds him that he is not a slave to this world. Along with all of God's other commands, the Sabbath command was given for man's benefit and welfare, if we observe it as he intended it to be observed—as a holy day.

### It is 'Legalistic' to Draw Lines and Set-up Rules About Keeping a Day Holy

Donald Barnhouse said:

Let us flee with horror from a legalism that would bind us to the observance of days. When we are thus free, the Lord will possess our Mondays and Tuesdays, our Wednesdays and Thursdays, our Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, and all our days and weeks and months and years because He has bought us and possesses our hearts in simple grace. Oh, praise God for deliverance from the bondage of keeping days, and may He restore to us the glory, of lives that are overflowing fountains, never knowing a time when the living water is not surging forth!<sup>25</sup>

#### Response:

- God possessed the first six days of creation just as much as the seventh day, yet he set aside the seventh day as holy.
- If it is wrong now to have one day set aside as holy, it was wrong also under Moses and at creation.
- Men always chafe at God's commands, in every area of life. Barnhouse is just formulating another example of man asking with Satan, "Did God really say?"

<sup>24</sup> Charles Hodge, *Romans*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1989.

<sup>25</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse, "The Christian and the Sabbath," *Six Bible Study Hour Broadcasts, Commentary on the Epistles to the Romans, Chapter 14, verses 5,6; book 78; The Bible Study Hour, Phil. PA, 1958, p. 11.*

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- Rather than being concerned about legalism, as Barnhouse claims he is, we should be concerned about libertinism that rejects God's laws.
- The fact that we would prefer to do something else than keep God's law respecting the use of time indicates the poor state of our hearts.
- Obeying God's laws is not 'legalistic'. We cannot earn our salvation through obedience, any more than we can by observing any of the Ten Commandments. We should obey because we know that obedience pleases God and because we want to please him.

### The Seven-day Week is an Artifact of Ancient Mesopotamia

The unbelieving world claims that the seven-day week is nothing more than an artifact of ancient Mesopotamian culture, so the idea that there is a universal or natural law requiring that we rest one day in seven is ludicrous. An article that appeared in the Economist, for example, speaks of the history of the week:

Why does The Economist appear every seventh day? The answer is because we, like you, still regulate our lives by a septimal law that Mesopotamian star-gazers framed, and local warlords imposed, more than 40 centuries ago. Our weekdays and weekends ... have their origin in something that happened around 2350BC. Sargon I, King of Akkad, having conquered Ur and the other cities of Sumeria, then instituted a seven-day week, the first to be recorded. ... Why were these clever chaps, who went for 60 because it is divisible by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 15, 20 and 30, fascinated by stubbornly indivisible seven? In ancient Egypt and ancient China, "weeks" of ten days were long in use—much more understandable, as people have ten fingers to count on, not seven. ... Above all, why should the Sumerian system have not merely endured but become an almost universal conqueror? Ur's posterity now sways regions Sargon never knew. Its lead has been slavishly followed by Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Hindus ancient and modern, Muslims and most of the present inhabitants of Europe and the Americas. Even China surrendered a good thousand years ago.

The year, the day and (not quite so obviously) the month are natural divisions of time. The week is an oddity. The moon's four phases are a near miss, but still a misfit, for weeks. You will be in trouble ... if you try to make the moon perform every 28 days, instead of its usual 29½ and a bit. The Sumerians had a better reason for their septimalism. They worshipped seven gods whom they could see in the sky. Reverently, they named the days of their week for these seven heavenly bodies [apparently: Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn]. ...

For the Sumerians themselves, seven was a very special number. They conceived of a seven-branched Tree of Life, and of seven heavens, that were passed to Babylon and symbolised there in seven-tiered ziggurats, or hanging gardens. ...

In spite of all that, Ur's seventh day was not holy. On the contrary, it represented danger and darkness. It was risky to do anything at such a time. So it became a day of rest.

Ever since the time when Abraham trekked westward from Ur, Mesopotamian influences had helped to form Hebrew traditions. The Jews got the story of the Flood from Sumeria. They got the seven-day-week idea early enough to use it in the account of the Creation given in Genesis. But there may have been some garbling in the transmission. The Sumerians would not have depicted the Creator as just sitting back, satisfied, on the seventh day; to them, he would seem to have stopped work, wisely, because anything attempted on that day must end in tears. The week reached India from Mesopotamia more than 2,000 years ago, in time to get into some of the Hindu scriptures. ... They never

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

accepted a Sabbath; their scriptural references to the week, as in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, were almost casual ...

The Hindus were keen sky-watchers and sometimes keen septimalists. They had noted the Pleiades ... [I]n their absorbent way, they happily adopted the seven planet-gods who arrived with the original Sumerian week. ...

Elsewhere, new names have been showered on the old gods and their planets. Yet, to an astonishing extent, they have retained their identities—and kept their places in the order of the days of the week. ...

The French Revolution brought in a ten-day “week” whose days were, literally, numbered (the experiment lasted, officially, for 12 years, but never really took). As soon as the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1917 they tried, but failed, to imitate the French revolutionaries (or the Pharaohs?). Later, for 11 years starting in 1929, Stalin imposed first five-day and then six-day weeks on the Soviet Union. The elimination of Sunday, with its strong religious associations, was one purpose of his experiments. They all failed, abjectly. Warned by this, the communist regimes established in other countries after 1945 did not even try to tamper with the Ur-old seven-day week.

Today, Sumeria's 4,400-year-old feat of cultural imperialism is triumphantly intact and more assured of universal acceptance than ever. How can this be explained? Seven is a thoroughly awkward number. It gives us a year of 52 weeks (another awkward number), plus the annoying extra one or two days which force us to keep buying new calendars.

The seven-day system's ability to challenge and, in time, overlay all others has always rested on its religious inspiration, not on its practical value. It has leapt blithely from one religious base to another, from Ur of the Chaldees to Israel, then on to Christendom, to Islam. It infiltrated the Roman empire before Christianity and reached India many centuries before the first Muslim invaders. European colonisers spread it through the Americas, but in the Old World, wherever Hindu or Muslim influences had penetrated, even the earliest European explorers found it was there before them.

Today, most of the human race takes it for granted that their activities are recorded in weeks. ...

“Men of old” knew. They could read it in the heavens. In a song of great antiquity like “Green grow the rushes O”, it was natural, perhaps unavoidable, to include the line “Seven for the seven stars in the sky”.

They are all still there: Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn. We may send out spacecraft to ring them round, but we ourselves are still held in the hebdomadal grip of the Seven.<sup>26</sup>

### Response:

- The article shows a clear bias against the interpretation that Scripture is the word of God. Starting from that premise, all that the article says must be considered suspect. Some of the specific mistakes in that article the need to be corrected include:
  - Abraham and the Jews did not copy the Sumerians. The Sumerians had the account of the institution of the Sabbath from Adam (now recorded in Genesis) from before the Flood. It was probably delivered to them by Shem.
  - It is a faulty, and unsupportable, assumption that the Genesis account was created after the time of the Sumerians. It is always in vogue to accept other historical documents and dismiss the Bible. The text of Genesis 10 does not support the view that the Genesis account was written at a late period (e.g., after the Sumerians). To the contrary, the internal evidence supports an ancient date for its composition. For example:

---

<sup>26</sup> “Chronicles of chronology: The power of seven,” *Economist*, Dec 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- Babylonia is referred to as the land of Cush (later Ethiopia was given this name).
- Sidon is mentioned but not Tyre (founded around 13<sup>th</sup> century BC).
- Sodom and Gomorrah were still existing (destroyed in 21<sup>st</sup> century BC).
- The ‘Hebrew’ line is discontinued with Peleg. Before Eber/Abraham were known to be important.
- Importance is given to the Joktanites who were meaningless to Jews.
- The Jebusites are mentioned without reference to Jerusalem.

This evidence indicates that the account predates the foundation of Israel, and certainly the period of the monarchy. As an ancient account it can be accepted as a literal, contemporaneous, account rather than an account concocted to promote national interests at a late date, as many suggest.

- Contrary to what the *Economist* says, “... those who have tried to find the source from which Israel derived its seven-day week and sabbath in Babylonian or other non-Jewish cultures have failed. Yet the evidence to which these writers have appealed could well be the last relics of an earlier sabbath-institution ...”<sup>27</sup>
- The Sumerians did not have *seven* planets in their cosmology.
  - “They claimed that our system was made up of the Sun and eleven planets (counting the moon), and held steadfastly to the opinion that, in addition to the planets known to us today, there has been a 12<sup>th</sup> member of the solar system—the home planet of the Nefilim (Anunnaki). What we know call Planet X.”<sup>28</sup>
  - *Collier’s Encyclopedia* from 1980 states: “There is no natural grouping of days to form a week. Our week of seven days is an invention of the ancient Near East where seven was a magic number. ... The week is primarily an Old world product, invented a number of times, its duration fixed by the reoccurrence of market days or religious ceremonies at set intervals.”<sup>29</sup> This account does not try to force-fit the week to seven apparently moving stellar objects, although it accepts the view that the week is merely a human invention. It is more likely that the week existed in ancient Sumer and they named the days after their astrological gods, rather than creating a week around the objects in the sky.
- The article mentions that all cultures (ancient and modern) have accepted the seven-day week (the *Collier’s* article mentions some African societies that have had weeks of different lengths). Even attempts (ancient China, French Revolution, Communist) to overrule the seven-day week have failed. This points to the fact that in the week, we are encountering a phenomenon that is not the result of observing the sky, but rather built into the very makeup of man through natural revelation.
- The extreme anomaly of a seven-day week, which does not fit any natural cycle (year, month, day), clearly points to God’s Creation ordinance. The Sabbath in Genesis does not align with the phases of the moon. By falling in an unvarying cycle on the seventh day. The cycles of the moon would be 7<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, with 1.5 days left over.
- All attempts to explain why the week has seven days, without accepting God’s ordinance will fail. All men know that the seven-day week is from God. They may not wish to observe the Sabbath, but they are faced each Sunday with the start of a new week that declares both God’s creation and his day of rest.

---

<sup>27</sup> Roger t. Beckwith & Wilfrid Stott, *The Christian Sunday – A Biblical and Historical Study*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ancient Sumerian Astronomy*, <http://xfacts.com/x4.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Aline Jordan, “Invention,” *Collier’s Encyclopedia*, vol 13, 1980, p. 188.

## The Position of the Westminster Confession of Faith

At this point we will review our considerations of the Sabbath thus far, by noting the conclusions that can be drawn from the summary of Scripture written by the authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

As it is of the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath.<sup>30</sup>

According to the authors, the Sabbath is:

- A creation ordinance and a law of nature, i.e., part of natural law that God endowed in the very essence of man.
- A portion that we owe in return to God, like the tithe on our income.
- A moral law, not a ceremonial law.
- Binding on all men in all times and places.
- A day for reflection and meditation on and worship of God.
- A day to be kept holy to God, implying setting aside of unnecessary human pursuits and focusing on the worship of God.
- Observed in different forms throughout history. All forms are one in principle, but modified in execution and sign among the old and new covenantal administrations.
- Kept as the day changes from the seventh to the first, between OT and NT economies.

## Christian Adherence

As we demonstrated in the preceding section, the Sabbath has continuing applicability in the NT era. This raises the issue of why Christians observe the Sabbath on Sunday instead of Saturday. Some argue that Christians in fact do not keep the Sabbath when they worship on Sunday, as their assembly for worship on the day of the resurrection is not a continuation of the Sabbath principle of the OT. In this section, I will present the argument that Christian Sunday worship is part of ongoing Sabbath-keeping and that the Sabbath day has been moved from the seventh to the first day of the week. We will also address two counter arguments:

- The Sabbath should be observed on the seventh day and not the first day of the week.
- Any day for worship is okay, As long as we agree on a day, it doesn't have to be Sunday.

## Sabbath Observance vs Sunday Worship

It is claimed by many in the Church that the Sunday worship is not a continuation of the OT Sabbath-keeping principle. Their argument goes something like this: "The Sabbath was a Jewish ordinance that was abolished along with all its obligations. Sunday was chosen by the early church, or dictated by a Roman emperor, as just a convenient day to hold worship services." For example, the *Augsburg Confession* endorsed by Lutherans, says:

For those who judge that by the authority of the Church the observance of the Lord's Day instead of the Sabbath-day was ordained as a thing necessary, do greatly err. *Scripture has abrogated the Sabbath-day*; for it teaches that, since the Gospel has been revealed, *all the ceremonies of Moses can be omitted*. And yet, *because it was necessary to appoint a certain day, that the people might know when they ought to come together, it appears that the Church designated*

---

<sup>30</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21: "Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day," paragraph 7.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

*the Lord's Day for this purpose; and this day seems to have been chosen all the more for this additional reason, that men might have an example of Christian liberty, and might know that the keeping neither of the Sabbath nor of any other day is necessary.*<sup>31</sup> [Italics added.]

The *Second Helvetic Confession*, written by Henry Bullinger, Zwingli's successor, presents a similar idea:

THE TIME NECESSARY FOR WORSHIP. Although religion is not bound to time, yet it cannot be cultivated and exercised without a proper distribution and arrangement of time. Every Church, therefore, chooses for itself a certain time for public prayers, and for the preaching of the Gospel, and for the celebration of the sacraments; and no one is permitted to overthrow this appointment of the Church at his own pleasure. For unless some due time and leisure is given for the outward exercise of religion, without doubt men would be drawn away from it by their own affairs. THE LORD'S DAY. Hence we see that in the ancient churches there were not only certain set hours in the week appointed for meetings, but that also *the Lord's Day itself, ever since the apostles' time, was set aside for them and for a holy rest, a practice now rightly preserved by our Churches for the sake of worship and love.*<sup>32</sup> [Italics added.]

According to these confessions, Sunday observance is seen as a human convention for ordering the public worship, not as a divine moral commandment, even though it was instituted during the time of the Apostles and therefore, probably, has Apostolic authority.

Calvin's position differs from the *Second Helvetic Confession* that was prepared a couple of years after his death. He says:

I am compelled to dwell longer on this because at present some restless spirits are *stirring up tumult over the Lord's Day. They complain that the Christian people are nourished in Judaism because they keep some observance of days.* But I reply that we transcend Judaism in observing these days because we are far different from the Jews in this respect. For we are not celebrating it as a ceremony with the most rigid scrupulousness, supposing a spiritual mystery to be figured thereby. *Rather, we are using it as a remedy needed to keep order in the church.* Yet Paul teaches that no one ought to pass judgment on Christians over the observance of this day, for it is only "a shadow of what is to come" [Colossians 2:17]. For this reason, he fears that he "labored in vain" among the Galatians because they still "observed days" [Galatians 4:10-11]. And he declares to the Romans that it is superstitious for anyone to distinguish one day from another [Romans 14:5]. *Who but madmen cannot see what observance the apostle means?* For [those whom he was addressing] did not regard the purpose to be political and ecclesiastical order; but, *retaining Sabbaths as foreshadowing things spiritual, they obscured to that extent the glory of Christ and the light of the gospel.* They therefore abstained from manual tasks not because these are a diversion from sacred studies and meditations, but with a certain scrupulousness they imagined that by celebrating the day they were honoring mysteries once commended. *The apostle inveighs, I say, against this absurd distinction of days, not against the lawful selection that serves the peace of the Christian fellowship. Indeed, in the churches founded by him, the Sabbath was retained for this purpose. For he prescribes that day to the Corinthians for gathering contributions to help the Jerusalem brethren [1 Corinthians 16:2].* If one fears superstition, there was more danger in the Jewish holy days than in the Lord's days that Christians now keep. For, because it was *expedient to overthrow superstition, the day sacred to the Jews was set*

---

<sup>31</sup> *Augsburg Confession* (1530), Article 28, "Of Ecclesiastical Power".

<sup>32</sup> *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), Article 24, "Of Holy Days, Fasts and the Choice of Foods".

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

*aside; because it was necessary to maintain decorum, order, and peace in the church, another was appointed for that purpose.”*<sup>33</sup> [Italics added.]

Calvin argues that the Mosaic ceremonial aspects of the Sabbath are no longer to be observed, but that the Sabbath Principle is retained. While he has a similar view as the *Augsburg Confession* and *Second Helvetic Confession*, that keeping the Lord’s Day is for order in the Church, he also argues that the observance of the Sabbath was moved from the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the week to the 1<sup>st</sup> by Apostolic appointment. He therefore views Sunday worship as a continuation of the Sabbath-keeping principle. As we noted earlier, in his *Sermons on Deuteronomy* Calvin understood the Fourth Commandment as placing an obligation on Christians to keep the *Sabbath* holy. He indicates that as a ceremonial observance it has changed, but the principle has not:

From this we observe how the ceremony itself applies to us today – it is past. Therefore we must come to the important point of this which is that to serve God properly we must learn to give up our own wills, thoughts, and desires. ... Thus, the first way to keep the Sabbath as we should is to give up the things that seem good to ourselves. ... In fact, what was commanded about the day of rest must also apply to us as well as to them. For we must take God’s law as it is and thus have an everlasting rule of righteousness. For it is certain that in the Ten Commandments God intended to give a rule that should endure forever. Therefore, let us not think that the things which Moses says about the Sabbath day are unnecessary for us ...<sup>34</sup>

Although some of the early continental Reformers may have been anti-Sabbatarian, by the time of the Second Reformation a consideration of the Biblical and historical evidence resulted in a corrected position. We have already quoted the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to demonstrate that the authors viewed the Sabbath as a continuing obligation. The *Canons of Dort* and the *Belgic Confession* both released in 1618, do not refer to the Sabbath vs Lord’s Day issue, however the *Heidelberg Catechism* does refer to the Sabbath when dealing with the Fourth Commandment and views it as a continuing obligation:

Q. What does God require in the fourth commandment?

A. First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained; and that I, especially on the sabbath, that is, on the day of rest, diligently frequent the church of God, to hear his word, to use the sacraments, publicly to call upon the Lord, and contribute to the relief of the poor. Secondly, that all the days of my life I cease from my evil works, and yield myself to the Lord, to work by his Holy Spirit in me: and thus begin in this life the eternal sabbath.<sup>35</sup>

## The First-Day Sabbath

We will now consider the arguments for observing the Sabbath on Sunday (the first day of the week) in the New Testament era. However, before we look at the reasons for the change of day, we should note that what the Seventh-day Sabbatarians or anti-Sabbatarians say is true: there is no direct command in the NT to change the day from the seventh to the first. This counter-argument can be addressed by considering the fact that all actions that God requires of man (or permits) are not necessarily given by direct command from God. For example, we can find no direct command to allow women to participate in the Lord’s Supper. Also those who argue for a direct command with respect to the Sabbath are often the same ones who ignore their own requirement when it comes to singing hymns of human composition and using instrumental music in NT worship. They have no direct command for either of these practices.

As with some doctrines (e.g., infant baptism) the argument for a first-day Sabbath is based on theological, analogical, and historical (i.e., the practice of the Apostles and apostolic Church)

<sup>33</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John t. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian classics*, Vol. XX (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.8.33; pp. 398-399.

<sup>34</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy by John Calvin*, preached On Thursday the 20th of June, 1555.

<sup>35</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q 103.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

arguments. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* refers to this approach for establishing belief and practice as what “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.”<sup>36</sup> It is important that we lay this foundation, because the arguments for observing Sunday as the NT Sabbath are drawn from inferences and are not obtained from direct prescription.

Support for the first day of the week being the Christian Sabbath is provided by the following:

- It commemorates the resurrection of Christ
- It symbolizes Christ’s re-creative work
- It symbolizes Christ’s redemptive work
- It was blessed by Jesus’ appearances
- It was invested with significance by his actions; also the ascension was probably on that day
- The NT church assembled on that day; it is the day Christians are expected to contribute to the treasury of the Church
- It was witnessed to by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost
- It is called the Lord’s Day
- It is confirmed by the early Church.

We will now look at each of these reasons in more detail.

### The Day of the Resurrection

Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week (Lk 24.1-12; Jn 20.1-9). On that day Jesus was declared to be the Son of God (Rom 1.4; Acts 13.33). Through his resurrection on the first day of the week, Jesus blessed that day and made it holy. The first covenant administration began on an established holy day (the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the week). The final covenant administration, in Christ, also began on a holy day (the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week).

### Commemorating Creation and Re-Creation

The change of day is theologically founded on the relationship between God’s creative work in nature and Christ’s *re-creative* work in redemption. The Old Testament work of creation ended with a holy day. The New Testament work of redemption ended with a holy day. In the first creation God was victorious over natural darkness and chaos. In the new creation he is victorious over spiritual darkness and chaos. On the first Sabbath he rested from his work of creation, on the new Sabbath he rested from his work of re-creation. Robert Dabney observes:

But when the ceremonial law was for a particular, temporary purpose added to the original, patriarchal dispensation, the seventh day became also for a time a Levitical holy day and a type. This temporary feature has of course passed away with the Jewish institutions. Upon the resurrection of Christ the original Sabbath obligation was by God fixed upon the first day of the week, because *this day completed a second work even more glorious and beneficent than the world's creation*, by the rising of Christ from the tomb. Hence, from that date to the end of the world the Lord's day is, by divine and apostolic authority, substantially what the Sabbath day was originally to God's people. It is literally the “Christian Sabbath,” and is to be observed with the same sanctity as it was by the patriarchs.<sup>37</sup> [Italics added.]

### Commemorating Redemption

The change in day is theologically founded on God’s *redemptive* work in Christ.

The Fourth Commandment in Exodus 20, provides the commemoration of creation as the reason for keeping the Sabbath (v 11). Forty years later, as Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, the commandment was repeated (recorded in Deuteronomy 5). This time the reason given was as a

---

<sup>36</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1: “Of the Holy Scriptures,” paragraph 6.

<sup>37</sup> R. L. Dabney, “The Christian Sabbath: Its Nature, Design And Proper Observance,” *Discussions of Robert L. Dabney, Volume I*, pp. 498,499.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

commemoration of the deliverance from Egypt (v 15). The first reason was not abolished, but the second was added. The deliverance from Egypt is referred to as a redemption (Ex 6.6; 15.13; Dt 7.7-9; 9.26, 13.5, 15.15; 24.18; 2 Sam 7.23; Ps 78.42; 111.9; Mic 6.4; etc.). Thus it is analogical or typical of the spiritual redemption that would be procured by Christ.

The observance of the Sabbath on the first day of the week does not abolish the original reason it was given: to commemorate the work of creation—it expands it. Just as a second reason was added to commemorate redemption in the OT economy, so in the NT economy a second, more glorious, reason is added—the commemoration of the greater work of eternal redemption from sin accomplished by Christ through his death and resurrection. In this respect John Murray says:

The Sabbath commandment derives its sanction not only from God's rest in creation but also from redemption out of Egypt's bondage. This fact, that the Sabbath in Israel had a redemptive reference and sanction, bears directly upon the question of its relevance in the New Testament. The redemption from Egypt cannot be properly viewed except as the anticipation of the greater redemption wrought in the fullness of the time. Hence, *if redemption from Egypt accorded sanction to the Sabbath institution and provided reason for its observance, the same must apply to the greater redemption and apply in a way commensurate with the greater fulness and dimensions of the redemption secured by the death and resurrection of Christ.* In other words, it is the fulness and richness of the new covenant that accord to the Sabbath ordinance increased relevance, sanction, and blessing.<sup>38</sup> [Italics added.]

We now commemorate, through the Sabbath, the deliverance from Satan by Christ rather than the deliverance from Pharaoh by Moses.

### Endorsed by Jesus' Post-Resurrection Appearances

The *appearances* of Jesus to his disciples or the women, after his resurrection and before his ascension, occurred on the first day of the week. Jesus appeared to his disciples or the women multiple times. Of these appearances, at least two explicitly mention the first day of the week (Mt 28.1/Mk 16.9; Jn 20.19), and it appears that all of them occurred on the first day of the week:

- Mt 28.1-9/Mk 16.9/Jn 20.10-18 – to Mary Magdalene.
- Mk 16.12/Lk 24.13-35 – to two on the road to Emmaus.
- Mk 16.14/Lk 24.36-49 – to the eleven.
- Jn 20.19-23 – to the disciples [this could be the same as one of the appearances noted above].
- Jn 20.26-29 – a week later to the disciples.
- Jn 21.1-23 – Jesus meeting with the disciples, feeding them, and reinstating Peter. [This could not have been on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, or the disciples would not have gone fishing on the Jewish Sabbath.]

By implication, Jesus no longer paid any attention to the seventh day Sabbath after his resurrection.

### Endorsed by Jesus' Post-Resurrection Actions

The *actions* of Jesus that occurred during his appearances on first day of the week invest the day with special significance:

- He revealed himself to the disciples in the upper room and turned their fear into peace (Lk 24.40; Jn 20.19-23).
- He symbolized the new resurrection fellowship by eating with his disciples and offering forgiveness (Jn 21.12).
- He commissioned his disciples (John 20.21).
- He blessed the disciples with the presence of the Holy Spirit (Jn 20.22).

---

<sup>38</sup> John Murray, *The Pattern of the Lord's Day*.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- He accepted worship from Thomas (Jn 20.26, 28).

The *ascension* (Lk 24.50-51/Acts 1.2-11) of the Son into the glorious presence of the Father *may* have occurred (and *probably* did occur) on the first day of the week. We are not told this explicitly, but it can be inferred from the following:

- Some parts of the Church from the earliest days dated (and commemorated) the ascension as the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (where Easter is the 1<sup>st</sup> and Ascension Sunday is the 7<sup>th</sup>).
- Note, however, that others determine that the ascension occurred on a Thursday, 40 days after Easter. This is because Luke tells us that Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days (Acts 1.3). The exact number of days between Easter and Ascension Sunday is 42. It is possible that Luke is giving the days as a rounded total, and he chose to use the number 40 as a symbolic approximation to coincide with other Biblical 40-day periods:
  - Flood (Gen 7.4,12,17).
  - Moses on Sinai (Ex 24.17)
  - Days of exploration (Nu 13.25)
  - Elijah's journey (1 Ki 19.7)
  - Jesus' temptation and preparation (Lk 4:1-2).

## The NT Day of Assembly

The *assembly* of NT believers after the resurrection never occurs (at least no record is given) on the seventh day, but it does occur on the first day of the week.

- *Pre-ascension* (Jn 20.19; Jn 20.26; Acts 2.1): It is not claimed that these were post-resurrection worship services, as we know them. The NT Church was just being formed by post-resurrection believers. However, their assembly on the first day of the week indicates that they understood the day to have special significance, if at this point to do nothing other than to remember the resurrection.
- *Post-ascension* (Acts 20.7): They assembled to remember the resurrection in “breaking bread” and to hear a sermon. We see in this the first explicit instance of a NT worship assembly—and it is held on the first day of the week. Paul was in the city for seven days (Acts 20.6). This means that he was there on a seventh and a first day. There was an opportunity to choose between the two days, and he chose the first day of the week. Also, he didn't travel or depart on that day. Paul's actions give Apostolic endorsement to the first day of the week as the day of assembly for NT believers.

Christians are also commanded to bring to the treasury of the Church their *tithes and offerings* on the first day of the week (1 Cor 16.1-2). Paul, in this instance, is speaking to the congregation (as he also told the Galatian congregations) and telling them that each person is to bring his tithes into God's storehouse (Mal 3.8-10): “each of you by himself let him put, storing what ever he is prospered”. Seventh Day Adventists argue that this passage speaks of a person setting aside his offering at home and has nothing to do with the corporate assembly on the first day of the week. This view is purely an attempt to avoid the truth and is contrary to the interpretation of the passage by the NT Church its from earliest days.

## A Day Blessed by the Holy Spirit

The Day of Pentecost fell on the first day of the week. Pentecost was 50 days after Passover. It fell on the first day of the week 50 days after the Sabbath day closing the feast of Unleavened Bread or the day after the seventh Sabbath (Lev 23.15-16). Therefore, the Holy Spirit empowered the Church for its mission (Acts 2.1-4) on the first day of the week and blessed that day by adding thousands to the Church. Every time we assemble on the first day of the week we commemorate not only the resurrection but the pouring out of the HS on the Church.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

### The Lord's Day

On the first day of the week the Lord Jesus appeared to John on the Island of Patmos (Rev 1.10). Jesus gave John a revelation for the Church on that day. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who knew a number of the Apostles personally, said:

If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day ... let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week]. Looking forward to this, the prophet declared, "To the end, for the eighth day," on which our life both sprang up again, and the victory over death was obtained in Christ ...<sup>39</sup>

### Confirmed by the Early Church

The practice and teachings of the early Church, in addition to the quotation above from Ignatius, confirms the observation of the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, as the Christian Sabbath:

- *The Didache*, about 90-110 AD:  
But on the Lord's day, after that ye have assembled together, break bread and give thanks, having in addition confessed your sins, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let not any one who hath a quarrel with his companion join with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be polluted.<sup>40</sup>
- *The Epistle of St Barnabas*, around the end of the first century:  
Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.<sup>41</sup>
- Justin Martyr, writing about 145 AD:  
And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, about 110-116 AD, chapter. 9

<sup>40</sup> *The Didache, or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, Translated by Charles H. Hoole, sections 14.1 and 14.2, about 1xx AD <http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/reading/St.Pachomius/Liturgical/didache.html>

<sup>41</sup> Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, "The Epistle of Barnabas," Chapter 15, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume I*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, "Justin Martyr: *First Apology*, Chapter 67," *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume I*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research, Inc.) 1997.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- Clement of Alexander, writing about 194 AD:  
He [a true Christian], in fulfilment of the precept, according to the Gospel, keeps the Lord's day, when he abandons an evil disposition, and assumes that of the Gnostic, glorifying the Lord's resurrection in himself.<sup>43</sup>
- Tertullian, writing at the close of the second century:  
In the matter of kneeling also prayer is subject to diversity of observance, through the act of some few who abstain from kneeling on the Sabbath; and since this dissension is particularly on its trial before the churches, the Lord will give His grace that the dissentients may either yield, or else indulge their opinion without offence to others. We, however (just as we have received), only on the day of the Lord's Resurrection ought to guard not only against kneeling, but every posture and office of solicitude; deferring even our businesses lest we give any place to the devil.<sup>44</sup>  
Here is another translation of the same section:  
With regard to kneeling, too, prayer allows a difference in custom because of certain ones—a very few—who stay off their knees on the Sabbath, an opposing point of view which is just now strongly defending itself in the churches. The Lord will give His grace so that either they will yield, or else maintain their own opinion without giving scandal to others. As for ourselves, according to our tradition, only on the day (which commemorates) our Lord's Resurrection should we refrain from this custom; and not only from this, but from every sign that bespeaks solicitude and every ceremony arising therefrom. This includes deferring business, lest we give any opportunity to the Devil.<sup>45</sup>
- Anatolius of Alexandria, writing around 270 AD:  
Following their example up to the present time all the bishops of Asia—as themselves also receiving the rule from an unimpeachable authority, to wit, the evangelist John, who leant on the Lord's breast, and drank in instructions spiritual without doubt—were in the way of celebrating the Paschal feast, without question, every year, whenever the fourteenth day of the moon had come, and the lamb was sacrificed by the Jews after the equinox was past; not acquiescing, so far as regards this matter, with the authority of some, namely, the successors of Peter and Paul, who have taught all the churches in which they sowed the spiritual seeds of the Gospel, that the solemn festival of the resurrection of the Lord can be celebrated only on the Lord's day.”<sup>46</sup>

## Responding to the Seventh-Day Arguments

As we have seen, thus far, the Sabbath is a universal and enduring ordinance of God, and therefore it applies to all people through all time. The day of its observance, however, has been changed to the first day of the week under the authority of Jesus Christ and the Apostolic Church. It is clear that this view is not understood or accepted throughout the church. Even among those who claim to be Reformed. For example, Roger Fellows states:

We are often told that the Sabbath is 'God's abiding, unchanging moral law.'  
My response to that is to ask, "Who really believes that?" The Mosaic command, as we saw, was to keep the seventh day holy. Who does that apart

---

<sup>43</sup> Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, "Clement of Alexandria: *Elucidations*, Chapter XII.—The True Gnostic is Beneficent, Continent, and Despises Worldly Things." *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume II*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, "Tertullian: *Prayer*, Chapter XXIII," *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume II*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

<sup>45</sup> [http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/LostBooks/terullian\\_prayer.htm](http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/LostBooks/terullian_prayer.htm).

<sup>46</sup> Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, "Anatolius of Alexandria: *The Paschal Canon*, Chapter X," *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume IV*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

from Seventh Day Adventists and a few others? ... Whatever people say, those who believe the Sabbath applies to Christians, change it from the form in which it was given, so how can it be abiding and unchanging?<sup>47</sup>

His statement that changing the *form* of the observance of the Sabbath shows that it isn't abiding and unchanging is spurious. He does not understand that the principles of the OT law and worship system and the principles of the NT law and worship system are the same. The *forms* have changed, but not the principles.

God does not alter his Law from age to age. God's Law is an eternal and universal moral standard, reflecting his character and defining his righteousness. It applies to all mankind, at all times (e.g., Rom 2.15; 8.4; 1 Cor 7.19; 1 Tim 1.8-11; 1 Jn 3.4). It is against this standard that men will be judged on the Last Day. Time or geography do not alter his standard. The Law, as a specific portion of God's word, continues to be valid in the NT era and retains its validity in its entirety (Mt 5.18) and in its parts (Mt 5.18, 19). There is no part of the Law about which we can say "This is abolished or cancelled." Jesus says specifically (Mt 5.17) that he did not come to *abolish* the "Law". There is no room in Jesus' statement for the idea that the OT is obsolete, has no application to us, or that we do not have to obey its commands. We are not to be NT Christians; we are to be Biblical ('whole-Bible') Christians.

However, the fulfillment of the Law by Christ does have the effect of altering the specific *way* we are to keep many of the laws. And in other cases the specific observance of some of the laws has been set aside, or the *form* has been changed, because the righteousness they require is now experienced in a different manner. For example, God places before us the eternal requirement to worship him as he prescribes but has changed the specific forms at various times. Abraham offered sacrifices and was given a new covenantal sign of circumcision. The sacrificial system under Moses became more elaborate with the introduction of many elements pointing to Christ. At the time of David, God added new elements such as instrumental music. With the destruction of the Temple the form of worship was simplified: the types were replaced by spiritual equivalents.

The OT forms for observing the redemptive types in God's Law—the sacrificial system (e.g., Heb 7.11; 9.9,10; 13.15), the festivals (e.g., Acts 20.7; Col 2.16-17) and the OT signs of the covenant (e.g., Acts 2.38; Gal 5.11)—are not required by NT Christians because of God's completed revelation in Christ. The types have been replaced by NT counterparts by which Christians fulfill the requirements of the Ceremonial Law. Also, specific laws of holiness and separation (e.g., food laws; clothing, seed and animal mixtures; intermarriage with non-Jews; Levirate marriage; cities of refuge; etc.) are not to be observed today (e.g., Acts 10.9-16) as they were by the Jews. These were physical symbols of principles that are to be manifested in the spiritual life of believers (e.g., Mt 16.11, 12; 2 Cor 6.14-18).

The Sabbath Principle remains in the NT economy, even though the form (i.e., day) of its observation has been changed because we have a fullness in Christ. We now keep the Sabbath not only as a memorial of creation (Ex 20.11) but as a commemoration of the **re-creation** in Christ that was accomplished at his Resurrection on the first day of the week, not as a commemoration of the escape from Egypt (Dt 5.15) but as commemoration of our escape from sin (Heb 4.6-11).

Other objections to the proposition that the first day of the week is to be the Christian Sabbath come primarily from the Seventh Day Adventists. Most of their arguments are included in the work of Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi, a Seventh Day Adventist. He was the first non-Catholic to graduate from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He graduated *summa cum laude* and was awarded a gold medal by Pope Paul VI. He wrote a book entitled *From Sabbath to Sunday* that was published with the *imprimatur* of the university's press in Rome. This book was highly acclaimed within the Roman Catholic Church because, as Professor V. Monachino, S.J., says in the preface: "We gladly mention the thesis that Bacchiocchi defends regarding the birthplace of Sunday worship: for him this arose most probably not in the primitive Church of Jerusalem ... but rather in the Church of Rome."<sup>48</sup> His thesis is that it was the early Roman Church that changed the day. This is a claim agreeable to the Roman

---

<sup>47</sup> Roger Fellows, *The Law and The Christian*, <http://www.sgfcana.com/article-law.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1977).

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

Catholic Church and the contention of the Seventh Day Adventists. The primary arguments against the change from the seventh day to the first day of the week for the Sabbath are the following:

### The Post-Apostolic, Early Church Changed the Day

The early Church, after the time of the apostles and *after* the destruction of Jerusalem changed the day the Sabbath was observed. The day was not changed by Christ, the Apostles or the early church in Jerusalem. It is claimed further that Sunday observance arose as late as the time of Emperor Hadrian (117-135 AD), when Roman persecution of the Jews forced the Christians to adopt a different day of worship to distinguish them from the Jews.

#### Response:

- We have already quoted from writers (e.g., Ignatius, *The Didache*, and *The Epistle to Barnabas*), whose lives overlapped the lives of the Apostles or they lived in the next generation, who show that the Lord's Day was observed by Christians as the Christian Sabbath before the time of Hadrian.
- However, it is probably the case that some converted Jews continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath. But the historical evidence seems to indicate that the Jewish-Christians also kept the first-day Sabbath. If this is the case, then by the time of Hadrian they weren't making a switch but were discontinuing a Jewish ordinance.
- In 1873 Philotheos Bryennios, then Head Master of the higher Greek school at Constantinople, discovered a collection of manuscripts in the library of a monastery in Constantinople. This collection is bound in one volume, is transcribed by one hand, and bears the Greek date of 6564 = 1056 AD. There has been much debate about the authenticity of the documents; when they were originally written, and by whom. However, the scholarly opinion is that the earliest part of the documents has similarities to the writings of Ignatius and date from at least as early as the first half of the second century, and probably no later than 120 AD. Here is a portion of what is stated in the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*:  
[B]ut assemble yourselves together every day, morning and evening, singing psalms and praying in the Lord's house: in the morning saying the sixty-second Psalm, and in the evening the hundred and fortieth, but *principally on the Sabbath-day. And on the day of our Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's day*, [italics added] meet more diligently, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus, and sent Him to us, and condescended to let Him suffer, and raised Him from the dead. Otherwise what apology will he make to God who does not assemble on that day to hear the saving word concerning the resurrection, on which we pray thrice standing in memory of Him who arose in three days, in which is performed the reading of the prophets, the preaching of the Gospel, the oblation of the sacrifice, the gift of the holy food?<sup>49</sup>
- From the quotation above, it can be seen that early Jewish Christians probably continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath along with the first-day Lord's Day. However, more emphasis is placed on worship on the Lord's Day (Sunday), since the observance of the Lord's Day, the celebration of the resurrection, has extended worship that corresponds to what we observe. It should also be noted that if this document dates from 120 AD, as scholars conclude, the Lord's Day was being observed before the time of Emperor Hadrian.

### The Bishop of Rome Changed the Day

The Bishop of Rome (not yet the Pope) was the prime mover behind the recognition of Sunday. The successful substitution of Sunday for the seventh day in the second century was due to the primacy of Rome. Roman Catholic scholars appreciate this argument because it seems to support the view that the Church of Rome had early supremacy over the other churches.

---

<sup>49</sup> Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," Book 2, sec. 7, para. 59," *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume VII*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

### **Response:**

- The Church of Rome did not have this kind authority. Even at the end of the second century bishop Victor of Rome could not influence other churches with respect to the date for the observance of Easter.
- There is no evidence to support the claim that Sunday worship was introduced and promulgated by the second century church in Rome, and not by the Apostles.

### **Sunday was Selected Because it was the Cult Day for the Worship of the Sun**

The Church of Rome chose Sunday as the Christian day of worship because the day of the sun, honoured by the pagan sun cult, was already prominent. By adopting Sunday as the day of worship they could more easily Christianize the pagan symbols of the cult to represent Christ. Sunday is Satan's attempt to counterfeit God's work. Sunday worship is a mark of false religion and is a human ordinance.

### **Response:**

- Adopting a practice of paganism in the second century would have been contrary to the strong position held by the early post-Apostolic Church. Writings, such as those from Justin Martyr (100-165), speak explicitly against adopting pagan practices. Christians were still being persecuted for not accepting pagan practices in the second century. It is highly improbable that they would have adopted the sun-cult practice when they were willing to give their lives to resist pagan practices.
- It is beyond credulity that in the second century, if Rome introduced a pagan day of worship, the other leading churches (Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, etc.) would have gone along without a complaint.
- In an attempt to substantiate this argument a parallel is made to the observation of Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>. It is claimed that worship on Sunday was derived from the Sun Cult and promoted by the Church of Rome. However, this supposed parallel fails to have merit because Christmas was introduced into the Church after the time of Constantine (after 325 AD) when the Church was becoming 'comfortable' as a state-endorsed religion and allowed pagan influences to creep in.

### **Revelation 1.10 Speaks of the Seventh Day**

It is claimed by Seventh Day Adventists that Revelation 1.10 speaks of the seventh day (compare Is 58.13 and Mt 12.8), not the first day of the week—the day of the resurrection.

### **Response:**

- This is certainly not how Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who knew many of the Apostles personally, understood it. We noted that he said:

If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day ... let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week]. Looking forward to this, the prophet declared, "To the end, for the eighth day," on which our life both sprang up again, and the victory over death was obtained in Christ ...<sup>50</sup>

### **The Day is Not important, so Pick Any Day**

It is claimed that "[t]hose who argue for a Sabbath today say that the day is not important. All that matters is to observe one day in seven. But is that true? Could an Israelite change the day? We have in Numbers 15 the record of a man being stoned to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. If the day was not important he could have said to Moses, 'You misunderstand me, I am not breaking the Sabbath,

---

<sup>50</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, about 110-116 AD, chapter. 9

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

I will be keeping my Sabbath tomorrow.’ Of course that wouldn't be good enough. The day was specified and never changed.”<sup>51</sup>

### Response:

- There are many in the Church who don't believe that the Sabbath day is a perpetual obligation. They do, however, assemble for worship on Sundays and believe that after worship they can do as they please with the rest of the day (e.g., go shopping or to the neighbourhood buffet). They may argue that worship can be held on any day (e.g., Saturday evening), but they don't argue that the Sabbath can be moved on a whim, because they don't believe that Sabbath observance is still required in the NT economy. There are others (e.g., Seventh Day Adventists) who believe that the Sabbath should still be observed, but the NT Church must continue to observe it on the seventh day. There is probably no one, today, who holds to the view that the Sabbath is a perpetual obligation and that it could be observed on any day of the week—i.e., the day is not important. Rather, those who don't hold to the Seventh Day Adventist position and believe in the perpetual obligation to keep the Sabbath believe that it *must* be held on the Lord's Day—the first day of the week.
- The day is not *unimportant*. The particular day is very important. The day for observing the Sabbath in the NT era is now the first day of the week, the day of resurrection—the day that symbolizes the promise of the eternal Sabbath. Keeping that day holy is as (and even more) important for the Christian than was keeping the seventh day holy by a Jewish OT believer.
- OT Jews did not have the right to change the day, and we don't have the right to change it either. No mere human has the right to change the day. The only person who could change the day for celebrating and observing the Sabbath was Jesus. He changed it, as we have seen, through his resurrection and by blessing the day with his actions.

## Commercial Activity

When Nehemiah returned to Judah and Jerusalem from a period of absence, he found people who claimed to be part of God's covenant community who were performing work on the Sabbath (Neh 13.15, 16) that was prohibited by God (Ex 34.21; Jer 17.21). He also found that traveling merchants from the surrounding nations were breaking the Sabbath by selling their wares and being encouraged to do so by the shoppers from Jerusalem and Judah. This breach of the creation ordinance, the innate law placed within man's hearts, and the explicit provision of the written moral law, was visible to direct observation. Nehemiah did not have to set up an investigation to determine if men were breaking God's law. There violation was open to the eyes of everyone, and it appeared to spread widely throughout the community.

The specific activities that Nehemiah refers to as falling within the prohibitions of the Sabbath-keeping principle are wine manufacturing, transportation of merchandise, and selling produce. All of these activities fall into the category of what today we would call commercial activity. This passage provides an application and example, in the OT Jewish societal context, of what both Jews and Gentiles were to cease doing in order to rest from work. Ceasing from commercial activities falls within the scope of the creation ordinance and the explicit provisions of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20.10). In the case of the creation ordinance, God rested from his creative work activities, so we also are to rest from work activities. In our case, this includes all activities related to the primary provision of our material sustenance. Under the rules of the Ten Commandments, God requires man to conduct his work of labour related to his livelihood over a six-day period and to rest from that work on the Sabbath.

It is clear from Scripture that men and women are to cease their commercial activities on the Sabbath day. Of course, it is somewhat easier to state the overriding principle than it is to define precisely what falls within the scope of the prohibition on commercial activity on the Sabbath. It is quite easy for us to become pedantic about the application of the Sabbath principle and get lost in minutiae. For example, we could get bogged-down when considering questions such as the following:

---

<sup>51</sup> Roger Fellows, *The Law and The Christian*, <http://www.sqfcanada.com/article-law.htm>.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- What are legitimate (i.e., necessary) forms of work on the Sabbath? For example, should we do the dishes on a Sunday or leave them until Monday?
- What are legitimate forms of rest from work? For example, are fishing from a cottage dock on a Sunday afternoon or walking in the park, etc. legitimate forms of rest?

It is very easy for us to make the Sabbath rather than the Lord into our god. In some respects this is what the Jews at the time of Jesus had done. They made Sabbath-keeping more important than justice and mercy. However, it is clear from this account in Nehemiah, and from elsewhere in the Bible, that Sabbath-keeping is of paramount importance. We will look at how to apply the Sabbath Principle in more detail as we continue this study; but before we look at the *how*, we need to understand the *why*. Let us first establish principles before we look at specifics.

Thus far, we have established that the Sabbath Principle has continuing validity in the NT economy. Therefore, *assuming* that it does, and based on the example of Nehemiah, the classes of commercial activity undertaken in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century AD that clearly fall within the prohibitions of the Sabbath Principle (based on Neh 13.15, 16) include:

- Manufacturing food products (wine) or, by extension, any kind of goods.
- Operating a supermarket or other kind of store to sell merchandise.
- Operating a restaurant.
- Operating commercial transportation for the purposes of moving goods to market (e.g., food or manufactured products).

By logical extension the other classes of commercial activity, in our day, that can we include under this prohibition, because they are associated with the commercial activities that are prohibited, are all forms of service work that are directly related to commercial and manufacturing activity (e.g., banking, financial services, and information technology services to support commercial and manufacturing activity).

In addition, Nehemiah prohibited not only those who were selling but also those who wanted to make purchases from undertaking commercial activities. Based on the example of Nehemiah's shutting down the markets, we are not to utilize the services of people who work in commercial or service activities on the Sabbath. That is, we are not to hire others to work on our behalf on the Sabbath so that we can avoid doing the work ourselves. This is consistent with the Sabbath command (Ex 20.8-11) that extends to servants, animals and foreigners.

Nehemiah applied the fourth command directly by requiring the men of Tyre, as well as the Jews, to cease from their activities. It wasn't right for the Jews to say: "We'll let the non-Jewish sellers work, they don't hold to God's laws. We can let them sell, and we can buy from them. After all, buying is not the same as selling, and we aren't breaking the law if we don't work ourselves." In the same way, it would be wrong for us to hire Moslems to work on Sunday instead of us because they don't observe the Christian Sabbath, so that we can continue to reap the benefits of commercial activities performed on Sunday (e.g., operating a store). Nehemiah expected all people to stop work on the same day—the memorial of creation rest. As a further extension, we should not eat in a restaurant or go shopping on the Sabbath, because that would require other people to work on our behalf on that day. This prohibition applies, even if those who are working on Sunday do not believe that they are breaking the Sabbath.

The overall principle that we can derive from Nehemiah 13.15, 16, is that we should not pay others to do work or perform services on Sunday which require them to undertake money-making/salary earning activities that are associated with prohibited commercial and manufacturing activities.

## Correct Administration

How are NT Christians to keep correctly the Sabbath holy and to observe the First-Day Sabbath? What is the correct way to administer the Sabbath under the NT economy? We can now answer these questions based on the principles we have established in the preceding sections of this

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

study. To structure our thinking we can use the guidance of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Westminster Larger Catechism*:

This Sabbath is to be kept holy unto the Lord when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”<sup>52</sup>

Q. How is the Sabbath or Lord’s day to be sanctified?

A. The Sabbath or Lord's day is to be sanctified by an holy resting all the day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercises of God's worship: and, to that end, we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.<sup>53</sup>

In these two statements, the components of keeping the Sabbath holy are identified. The activities that can and should be performed with respect to keeping the Sabbath holy can be categorized as follows:

- *Melioration* – Holy resting from work and recreation that is lawful on other days and doing whatever is required to contribute to rest.
- *Maintenance* – Performing works and duties of necessity.
- *Mercy* – Performing loving works of care and healing.
- *Meditation* – Performing and delighting in the exercises of public and private worship.
- *Management* – Planning the use of our time and preparing in advance for the Sabbath.

We will now consider each of these categories in more detail to determine what the Biblical guidelines are for Sabbath-keeping and then, in the following section, apply these guidelines to some of the day-to-day specific questions and issues that arise whenever the subject of Sabbath-keeping is discussed.

### **Melioration - Holy Resting from Work and Recreation**

When we consider the commands and examples that define rest from work on the Sabbath (e.g., Ex 20.9, 10; 35.2, 3; Lev 23.2-3; Luke 23.56), we find that Sabbath-keeping includes not performing normal work that could be performed on other days of the week. By not performing the normal work of the other six days we engage in rest (i.e., we desist, or rest, from doing the activity). However, the command does not tell us to work six days in one way and then to work a seventh day in another way. This means that we are not to engage in frantic participation in church activities on Sunday. Rest certainly includes an increase in restorative relaxation such as sleeping longer or taking a nap. But rest in this context does not mean doing nothing. Rather, the day of rest is to include participation in different kinds of activities such as worship and participation in Christian fellowship. A careful analysis shows that we are called to maintain a balance that includes eliminating regular work activities, slowing down the pace from other days, and involving ourselves in holy activities.

The work that falls within the scope of the command’s prohibitions includes:

- Economic/commercial activity (Neh 13.15, 16; Jer 17.19-27).
- Household work (Ex 16.5, 23; 35.2, 3; Num 15.32-36).
- Farm work (Ex 20.9, 10; 34.21).
- Work associated with preparing for funerals (Luke 23.56), since the Sabbath is to be a life-affirming day.

---

<sup>52</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21: “Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day,” paragraph 8.

<sup>53</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q 117.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

In summary, we are not to undertake any activity by which we make our regular livelihood or which furthers our personal economic welfare. We are also not to require (or permit) others to do that kind of work on our behalf (Ex 20.9, 10). We can apply these guidelines to our own situation today by considering *examples* of regular work activities that we should not engage in on the Sabbath, such as:

- Regular work activities including work in offices, construction sites, stores, academic schools (as teachers or students), restaurants, banks, marinas, airlines, sports facilities, sporting events, etc.
- We are also not to go shopping or utilize restaurants, attend (at least professional) sporting events, use airlines, etc. on the first-day Sabbath as this would require others to work on our behalf, and they are not to be employed in their normal means of livelihood.

We will consider ‘exceptions’ to these guidelines when we look at the duties of necessity and mercy in the following subsection.

Many in the Church argue that recreation is a form of rest. There are forms of recreation that do not cause others to work on Sunday, including: swimming in a home pool, reading a novel, playing a computer game, working on a hobby such as building a model train, etc. Can these recreational activities be performed on the Sabbath without breaking the Sabbath? A difficulty we can have with answering this question is that the Bible does not say anything explicit about what we call ‘recreation’ today. However, the Bible may give us guidance in Isaiah 58.13, 14, where it says that we should not do as we please on the Sabbath. It may be that the best approach to issues related to private and personal recreation is for us to ask some questions to help us determine whether or not we should participate in the particular activity:

- Is the activity a duty of necessity or mercy, or is it a work of worship?
- Does the activity provide true rest for my body?
- Does the activity help me draw closer to God?
- Does the activity cause me to think more about the things of the world than I should?
- Does this activity help me enjoy the fellowship of other believers in a way that brings us all closer to God?
- Could this activity be performed on another day of the week; for example, on a Saturday, and the only reason I am performing it on Sunday is because I can’t make time for it on other days?

We will close this section with a careful consideration of the words of Robert Murray McCheyne:

Oh, Sabbath-breaker, whoever you are, you are a sacrilegious robber! When you steal the hours of the Lord's Day for business or for pleasure, you are robbing Christ of the precious hours which He claims as His own. ... Surely we may well say, in the words of Dr. Love, that eminent servant of Christ, now gone to the Sabbath above, “Cursed is that gain, cursed is that recreation, cursed is that health, which is gained by criminal encroachments on this sacred day.”<sup>54</sup>

### Maintenance and Mercy - Performing Duties of Necessity and Mercy

Jesus showed by example, and taught, how the principle of the Sabbath Law is to be applied. His actions and teachings show us that there are two classes (that overlap) of work that can be performed on the Sabbath:

- Acts of *necessity* (Mt 12.1-8; Mk 2.23-28; Lk 6.1-5). The Pharisees claimed that the disciples had broken the Sabbath. However, their charge is not based on any command in the OT. It is probably based on the *Mishna* that forbids plucking “ears of grain equal to a lamb’s mouthful.” Jesus pronounced the disciples guiltless (Mt 12.7), showing that their action did not break either the letter or the spirit of the Sabbath Law. ‘Acts of necessity’ can be of two kinds:

---

<sup>54</sup> “I Love the Lord's Day,” Bible Message by Robert Murray McCheyne.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- *Ordinary* – The category of ‘ordinary’ acts of necessity certainly includes: simple food preparation, eating food, simple personal hygiene, dressing, working as a guard in a jail, etc. We can think of ordinary works of necessity as those actions which must be performed in order for us to engage in worship and those, which if not performed, would cause us to be distracted from worshipping or serving on the Sabbath. We must be careful, however, not to overindulge in the ordinary acts of necessity, as this would violate the spirit of Sabbath-keeping. For example, although it is legitimate to scramble eggs for breakfast on the Sabbath, it is not legitimate to prepare a gourmet ten-course dinner.
- *Extraordinary* – These are actions not normally performed on the Sabbath, or on any other day, but required in the event of true emergencies such as fighting a fire in a home, or defending a country against attack in time of war.
- Acts of *mercy* (Mt 12.9-13; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6.6-11; Lu 13.10-14). This class of actions includes the preservation of animal and human life in emergency situations and may require some people to work at their regular employment activities (e.g., driving an ambulance or performing emergency surgery). Acts of mercy do not *break* the Sabbath law; they may not even temporarily *set aside* the Sabbath Law (as, for example, as does ‘trespassing’ on private property to save a drowning person). God never pits one law (e.g., the preservation of life) against another law (e.g., keeping the Sabbath holy). Proper keeping of the Sabbath *includes* preserving life.

A consideration of what Jesus taught about the Sabbath and what actions he performed or endorsed cautions us to be very careful about proscribing actions; for example, the disciples would not have died of starvation if they had *not* eaten on the Sabbath. Yet, their plucking and eating was considered to be a valid work of necessity. Also, it was not necessary for Jesus to heal the man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. His hand had had been like that for many years, and the healing was not as urgent as performing a life-saving procedure such as a tracheotomy. Yet, Jesus performed this work of mercy on the Sabbath. Jesus appears to leave the scope of acts of necessity and mercy vague to allow for its application in various situations. This shows that we must be careful not to draw the line about what constitutes works of *necessity* or *mercy* too tightly (Eccl 7.16). However, as a balance to this, we must also be careful we don’t try to excuse actions on Sunday by calling them necessary or merciful. We must be careful that we don’t use liberty as licence.

Jesus deliberately healed on a Sabbath to challenge the Pharisees wrong interpretation of the Sabbath laws. But notice the context. He had gone to the Synagogue to worship (Mt 12.9). The man with the shriveled hand was present in the Synagogue. Jesus did not skip attendance at worship in order to perform an act of mercy. This warns us that we are not to use performance of acts of necessity and mercy as a means of avoiding attendance at the stated assemblies of God’s people. We might agree that a particular action (e.g., visiting a sick relative in the hospital) falls clearly within the scope of the principle, but it does not constitute grounds for skipping worship. As an illustration: It seems that some people who are tending a house-bound relative can find time to go shopping during the week but somehow ‘must’ stay home from worship to tend to the relative on Sunday.

Jesus’ quotation from Hosea 6.6 (Mt 12.7) shows that we are not to have a slavish attitude to the observance of the Sabbath. God will not accept a slavish adherence to the form of the Sabbath if our hearts are begrudging the observance. The Sabbath is to be a delight and to be observed with joy, humility, love, and a spirit of mercy.

Our definition and application of *necessity* and *mercy* must be guided by the examples and teaching of Jesus. Someone might say: “It is *necessary* for me to work on Sunday because I must be prepared for my 7:00am Monday meeting.” or “It is *necessary* for me to drive home on Sunday because I don’t want to miss the hockey game on Saturday night” or “It is *necessary* for me to go into work on Sunday because my boss told me to.” In these instances, is the person applying his own meaning to what is necessary, or applying the Biblical sense?”

The Bible gives enough examples of works of *necessity* and *mercy* to give us guidance: (Lk 6.1-5), feeding animals (Lk 13.6), acting as a guard (2 Ki 11.5, 7, 9), rescuing an animal (Lk 14.5), caring for the sick and needy (Luke 6.6-10; 13.10-16; 14.1-4; Jam 1.27). Modern examples of *necessity*

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

or *mercy* include: feeding and milking cows, fighting fires, driving an ambulance, working in a hospital, working as a police officer or jail guard, and possibly monitoring hydro, phone and water services (although we probably could automate these functions, if society took the Sabbath seriously).

Examples of activities performed on Sunday that *do not* fall within the definition of *necessity* or *mercy* include: flying a commercial airplane, monitoring computers used to process Visa transactions, operating a drug store, etc. These are *unnecessary* activities. There are likely very few duties which truly are works or acts of *necessity* or *mercy* and **must** be performed on the Sabbath.

### Meditation - Delighting in the Exercises of Public and Private Worship

The problem with identifying works of necessity or mercy seems to lie with our hearts. We are so attached to the things of this world that we consider it to be a burden to have to put aside our legitimate work and recreation of the other six days of the week. In contrast, it should be considered a blessing that we can set aside the burden of these over-pressing responsibilities without any sense of guilt that we aren't doing our job or doing enough (e.g., to meet the demands of an unreasonable boss). We should be eager to rejoice that God has set apart this day as holy from all others and that no man can take it from us (Ps 118.24). It should also be a joy to us that we can confess that we are not mastered by the temporary and passing things of the physical realm. When we can't wait until the Sabbath is over (Amos 8.5, 6), it shows that we are mastered by the world and not by grace.

Jesus was diligent in his attendance at the Synagogue on the Sabbath (e.g., Mk 6.2; Lk 4.16). His practice should encourage us to perform our exercises of worship on the first-day Sabbath (Heb 10.25). What should we do on the first-day Sabbath with respect to worship? We should set aside the legitimate activities of the other six days of the week and consecrate our hearts in worship of God, and find joy in that worship (Ps 43.4; 71.23).

Men in general, and Christians when under a burden of sin, find little joy in worship. If we have been saved by Jesus Christ, we should desire, on the Sabbath, to:

- Learn more through study and attention to teaching and preaching about our God and to draw closer to him.
- Recall God's creative powers and governance of his universe, and with him contemplate that all that he does is very good.
- Remember our Lord's death and resurrection in the 'feast of Life'.
- Contemplate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first-day Sabbath.
- Thank and worship God for all his mercy and love toward us.
- Fellowship with God's people.
- Anticipate the eternal Sabbath and true rest we will enjoy with God.

*The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* provides the following for our guidance:

That what time is vacant, between or after the solemn meetings of the congregation in publick, be spent in reading, meditation, repetition of sermons; especially by calling their families to an account of what they have heard, and catechising of them, holy conferences, prayer for a blessing upon the publick ordinances, singing of psalms, visiting the sick, relieving the poor, and such like duties of piety, charity, and mercy, accounting the sabbath a delight.<sup>55</sup>

### Management - Preparing for the Sabbath

In order to enjoy the Sabbath properly we should manage our time and activities so that we are properly prepared for Sabbath observance. This means that we should order our lives so that unnecessary activities do not need to be performed on the Sabbath. The Puritans viewed preparation as including anticipatory expectation of the coming Sabbath. We should anticipate the Sabbath with the mind-frame of children preparing for a special outing or their birthday.

---

<sup>55</sup> "Of the Sanctification of the Lord's Day," *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, 1645.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

Often the reason that people end up working on the Sabbath is because they have not worked as they should have on the preceding six days with diligence and discipline. The problem is often that people manage their time so poorly that they allow time-wasters to crowd their days and have to use Sunday to catch up. We need to think seriously about planning and scheduling our lives better so that we can clear the Sabbath of all the junk that piles up during the week. There is a blessing in this. Preparing for the Sabbath teaches us to be disciplined, to plan ahead and not to procrastinate. By logical extension, societies that keep the Sabbath will be more prosperous because they are more disciplined.

*The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* provides the following for our guidance:

THE Lord's day ought to be so remembered before-hand, as that all worldly business of our ordinary callings may be so ordered, and so timely and seasonably laid aside, as they may not be impediments to the due sanctifying of the day when it comes. ... That the diet on that day be so ordered, as that neither servants be unnecessarily detained from the publick worship of God, nor any other person hindered from the sanctifying that day. That there be private preparations of every person and family, by prayer for themselves, and for God's assistance of the minister, and for a blessing upon his ministry; and by such other holy exercises, as may further dispose them to a more comfortable communion with God in his public ordinances.<sup>56</sup>

## Cases Applied

We will now apply the principles that we have been considering. We will use these principles to provide practical guidance for how we should observe the first-day Sabbath. Our approach will be to use a few case-study examples from representative questions that are often asked by young people who grow up in congregations where the Sabbath has been observed or when there is debate about Sabbath-keeping. We cannot consider all the possible circumstances that apply to keeping the Sabbath holy, nor should we. We do not want to create the equivalent of the Jewish *Halakhah* that attempts to lay out exhaustively the right way to walk. In addition, we cannot begin to address every possible circumstance, since cultural and technological considerations do affect how each generation and society will keep the Sabbath. This is not to suggest that we are to apply some form of subjective morality; rather, our application of the Sabbath-keeping principle it is to be in accord with current reality. For example, while the Jews had the concept of a Sabbath day's walk (Acts 1.12) and rules with respect to lighting fires (Ex 35.3), they did not have automobiles or live in sub-zero climates where furnaces are required or use electric stoves or lights. Rather, we want to encourage Christians to apply intelligently the principles of Sabbath-keeping with a desire to love God and their neighbours.

### What if My Boss Says I will be Fired if I Don't Work on Sunday?

My immediate response to this is, "Would you really be fired?" At present, there are laws in most western countries that would prohibit a boss from firing an employee because he or she objected to working on Sunday. In addition, most bosses who would make such a threat are bullies who think that threatening someone is the way to get him to perform, but are in fact cowards who wouldn't really carry through on their threats. If you, as an employee are doing good work, your boss won't want to lose you. The best response is to show a willingness to work on Saturday, if the work is really that pressing. This alternative tests our own commitment to the Sabbath and our boss's commitment to see the work completed.

Another way to challenge this supposed requirement is to ask if we would do other things that our boss wanted done even if he threatened to fire us. For example, if our boss asked us to steal or lie or lose our job, would we do it? I hope that we would refuse. Yet, when it comes to the Sabbath command, it always seems to be easier to break than others of the Ten Commandments.

Our boss and our co-workers need rest as much as we do, and we should object to work situations that require more than six days of hard and dedicated work per week. The Sabbath command

---

<sup>56</sup> "Of the Sanctification of the Lord's Day," *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, 1645.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

is a universal command that applies to all men, including our bosses. They have no right to require us to work on the Sabbath, and we have to be willing with the Apostles to say that we will obey God rather than man (Acts 4.19). We also need to question why we should put aside God's law for our own personal, or for others', commercial and economic benefit. We should not contribute to our boss's greed and inability to plan properly by agreeing to work on the Sabbath. A story is told about a boss who argued in response to a Christian's objection to work on Sunday, "Doesn't the Bible say that if your donkey falls into a pit on the Sabbath you can pull it out? Well, our business has fallen into a pit; we need you to help pull it out." The Christian worker replied, "Sure I would pull out the donkey. But if my donkey kept falling into the pit every week, I would either fill the pit with dirt or sell the ass!"

One writer has said, with respect to bosses who require work on the Sabbath, that,  
Work is good. Bondage to work is bad. But work easily becomes a form of bondage. The Sabbath is a sign that our work is not coerced, and regular rest allows us to experience our work as free people rather than as bondslaves. ... Without being legalistic about it, Christians have a duty to protest the oppressive tyranny of time and productivity and an economic order that tries to squeeze inordinate productivity out of people's energies. ... "There is a gratuitous quality to Sabbath rest. It is antithetical to utility. The celebration of the goodness of God and of his creation needs no further justification."<sup>57</sup>

We need to say to the world: "Sunday, the Sabbath, is ours (Mk 2.27). You can't have it!"

Even if the worst did happen and we lost our job because of refusing to work on Sunday, would this have justified working on the Sabbath? We have to determine whether or not we trust God to work his providences for our best benefit and his glory. Christians who are really living for God may be persecuted and are to trust God when they are the victims of injustices, such as being fired, for standing in obedience (Mt 5.10; 1 Pet 3.13-17).

The category of *extraordinary necessity* includes emergencies such as defending our country when it is at war, stacking bags of sand to prevent a flood to protect lives, and putting out a fire, etc. What if the emergency were a flood at a data center (e.g., a broken water main) and the boss called in his team to prevent the destruction of millions of dollars' worth of data and computer equipment and avoid putting hundreds of people out of work? My counter questions would be:

- Do the same principles of preventing loss of life apply to preventing economic loss?
- Are the computers insured? If not, why not?
- Does the company have a proper disaster recovery plan and disaster back-up site? If not, why not?

Keeping the Sabbath helps us manage our personal and corporate time better from week-to-week. It also teaches us to be better prepared for the future. Sabbath-keeping is a blessing for individuals, companies, and societies.

### **Why do Many Christians Go for Lunch at a Restaurant after Church? Is this Right?**

In general, we should not frequent restaurants on the Sunday. We are asking people to engage in unnecessary economic activity on our behalf. If we are away from home, staying in a hotel, and not invited to a Christian's for lunch, then we may have to use a food catering facility. If possible, it would be better to use a facility that does not exist purely for commercial motivation (such as a fast-food restaurant), and instead use a facility that must be open for other reasons. For example, it is possible to get good quality food in a hospital cafeteria. It could be argued that operating this facility on Sunday is necessary since hospital staff and visitors to the sick require food.

### **Can We Go Shopping on Sunday?**

For most items we should have planned ahead and purchased our items during the week. If a true emergency arises, we may have to use a store or a gas station. However, we should apply a test for ourselves to determine if our need to purchase something constitutes a true emergency. This test is simple: what if all the stores were shut (such as on Christmas day), what would we do in that situation

---

<sup>57</sup> "Take Back Your Sabbath," Editorial in *Christianity Today*, Nov 2003, pp. 42-43.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

(e.g., borrow something from a friend or neighbour)? If we could come up with another way of meeting the ‘emergency’ or would just wait until the next day to make the purchase, then it does not truly constitute an emergency. In this respect, consider what one writer has said:

God gave us one day in seven to serve our deepest needs. Yet, like Esau, we are now willing to sell our birthright rather than suffer a momentary discomfort. Just because we can shop on Sunday does not mean we must shop on Sunday. We can choose to step beyond the economic struggle to a resting place. Surely we can plan our lives to allow one day to stand as a symbol of our highest values. Sunday is the day to declare our independence of anything that is not of God.<sup>58</sup>

### Can We Use Public Transit on Sunday to Get to Church?

Ideally, congregations should provide transportation (e.g., car pooling) for its members who do not have access to cars or can no longer drive. It would be silly to argue that a person should walk or ride a bicycle. However, when a person gets no offer of a ride, and takes a bus/subway to get to Church, he is justified in this action under the heading of *necessity*.

In some cultural settings, e.g., where access to cars is scarce, some might argue that working a shift as a transit worker is similar to working a shift as a police officer. In North America where everyone has (direct or indirect) access to a car, there is little justification for running transit systems on the Lord’s Day; so Christians who work in the transit sector should try to avoid working on Sunday.

It is interesting to consider how cavalier much of the Church is today about the use of public transit compared with the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in Scotland.

DEAR FELLOW COUNTRYMEN, as a servant of God in this dark and cloudy day, I feel constrained to lift up my voice in behalf of the entire sanctification of the Lord's Day. The daring attack that is now made by some of the directors of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway on the law of God and the peace of our Scottish Sabbath, the blasphemous motion which they mean to propose to the shareholders next February, and the wicked pamphlets which are now being circulated in thousands, full of all manner of lies and impieties, call loudly for the calm, deliberate testimony of all faithful ministers and private Christians in behalf of God's holy day.<sup>59</sup>

### Can We Watch TV on Sunday?

TV (and other media) broadcasting requires significant involvement of staff who are required to work on Sunday to make the broadcasts possible. We should avoid using the media so that these people don’t have to work. The TV should remain shut-off on the Lord’s Day, and we should avoid listening to the news. Why is it so urgent to know what is going on in the world on Sunday? Whatever has happened, will still have happened on Monday. The same should apply to the use of Internet news services. Besides the fact that we require people to work in order to post the news on the Internet, we also need to overcome the insatiable temptation to know what is happening in the world. Being pressed by world or local events just distracts us from being focused on what we should be thinking about on the Lord’s Day—Jesus’ victory over sin and death.

It is the case that many churches broadcast their services on Sunday, and some Christians argue that these services are necessary for involving those who are unable to make it to the worship services. The media can be of service to the Church, but they can also be of great danger. Just as the Reformation leaders used the printing press very effectively to reach large audiences, so the electronic media can be used effectively. However, just as the printing press disseminated the Bible, it also allowed many people to gain access to *The Communist Manifesto* and to pornography. In the same way, electronic media have a very dark underbelly. While we should applaud the effective use of electronic media for the cause of Christ, we need to question whether broadcasting church services is truly effective and

---

<sup>58</sup> Judith Loback, “Speaking Out: Sunday is No Day for Shopping,” *Christianity Today*, 1989/03/03, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> “I Love the Lord’s Day,” Bible Message by Robert Murray McCheyne.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

even right. Christians should be together in assemblies of the faithful on the Lord's Day (Heb 10.25), not sitting in front of a television screen. Broadcasted worship services with high-powered 'evangelists' may have done more to undermine local congregations of God's people than they have ever contributed to building the Kingdom.

The argument that televising a service provides for the needs of shut-ins is spurious. Shut-ins represent a very small minority of any congregation and there are other ways to provide for them, including supplying them with audio tapes or CDs of the service. The real need of shut-ins is that they be visited by members of the congregation, not that they be provided with electronic surrogates of the assembly of worship.

### Can We Participate in Sports on Sunday?

Attendance at, and participation in, professional sports on Sunday is clearly unnecessary and does little more than contribute to the commercial economic interests of team owners and highly paid athletes. Why we should further their greed on the Sabbath is beyond any possible justification. Participation in organized amateur sports on Sunday is also hard to justify. Participation requires that umpires or referees and possibly grounds keepers or other staff, such as life guards, be employed in unnecessary work on Sunday. In many cases, coaches of amateur teams are also paid for their work (even if it is not their primary occupation). We are not to require others to work on the Sabbath on our behalf in any work that is not necessary.

In addition we should be aware of the way in which organized sports can become all-consuming and distract us from focusing on rest and the worship of God on the Sabbath. We should reflect on what Isaiah (58.13) says about not doing as we please on God's holy day and remind ourselves of good examples of those who have resisted the temptation to participate in sports on Sunday, such as Eric Liddel (as shown in *Chariots of Fire*) and Michael Jones, one of the best players on New Zealand's Rugby team in the late 1980s. Michael Jones said before the semi-finals of the World Cup: "Since I was young I have not played on Sunday, and I do not intend to start now. Sunday is the Lord's Day. Rugby is very important to me, but there are other things in life. It is up to the individual<sup>60</sup>, but I certainly feel happier adhering to my principles and standards of never playing on a Sunday. It would be hypocritical to change my mind now just because there is a World Cup semi-final coming up. I would love to play in terms of the opportunity, but I put God first. I hope people can understand and accept that."<sup>61</sup> NZ went on to beat Wales, and the final was played on a Saturday and Michael Jones was able to participate.

### What are Legitimate Forms of Rest on the Lord's Day?

Are fishing from a cottage dock, canoeing, sailing on a Sunday afternoon, walking in the park, flower gardening, going for a run, reading a novel, legitimate forms of rest? These are not easy examples to deal with. Some Christians are fitness fanatics and run every day of the week. For them to run on Sunday would be wrong because they would allow their exercise to consume them. On the opposite end of the spectrum someone who works in a high-stress office setting and gets little exercise during the week may find that as his adrenaline level drops he becomes sleepy and can't read or becomes drowsy during the worship services. A brisk walk or a jog may actually contribute to his concentration and spiritual communion with God. Light recreation that is truly helpful for keeping the Sabbath holy may be permissible.

### Should We Read a Newspaper on Mondays?

The fact that the Monday morning paper (or Internet news) is available so early on Monday morning means that some people likely had to work on Sunday to prepare it. If we purchase it we are encouraging others to work on Sunday on our behalf. It certainly isn't necessary to read the paper on

---

<sup>60</sup> He makes adherence to the Sabbath a matter of personal private morality, rather than God's standard for all men, however, his point about putting God first is still valid.

<sup>61</sup> Geoff Thomas, "Sunday Sport: Should Christians Compete?" *Evangelical Times*, August 1987. Reprinted in the *Gospel Witness*, Nov. 5, 1987, pp. 15-16.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

Mondays, so anyone who has a qualm about reading the paper produced on Sunday should not do it (James 4.17).

It is possible, however, that we could become overly ‘righteous’ (Eccl 7.16) and scrupulous, since everything we consume could be produced on a Sunday. For example, the farmer who grew the wheat from which our bread was made could have harvested it on a Sunday, or parts in our computer could have been manufactured on a Sunday in Indonesia, the mail we receive on Monday may have been sorted on Sunday, etc. In theory, we would have to boycott everything in this world and could no longer live in it. It may be that there is a legitimate distinction between asking or requiring someone to work on Sunday on our behalf or using a service on a Sunday which requires someone to work, and using a service later in the week which may have involved their working on Sunday. For example, the Monday edition of a paper could be produced on Saturday, if the newspaper wanted to observe the Sabbath. We are not the ones requiring Sunday work by our actions. Paul’s instructions on questioning secondary causes (1 Cor 10.25, 26) may give us some guidance in this area. If so, we can purchase the items without considering when they were made and how they got to the market.

### Should We Wash the Dishes on Sunday or Leave Them Until Monday?

We must be cautious that we do not become overly precise with respect to making rules about keeping the Sabbath so that its observance becomes a burden rather than a joy. Also, we should not rely on a list of “do’s and don’ts”. A heavy-handed Pharisaism makes one rule for all people, and makes keeping man-made rules a measure of saintliness and a means of earning blessings from God. When we are confronted by questions such as these we should ask:

- What is our motivation for Sabbath observance?
- What is our motivation or reason for undertaking a particular work-action on Sunday?
- Are we looking for justification to participate in worldly affairs?
- Are we being consumed by the world or the word?
- Is our objective to draw closer to God and his people on the Lord’s Day?
- Does the action contribute or hinder our joy in the Lord?
- Is the action good for us—body and soul?

If we are in real doubt about whether or not to do a particular task around the house, then it is wise to refrain (Rom 14.22-23). “... along with church worship [the Sabbath] should be characterized by a cessation from paid employment, a respite from commercial activity, an investment in relationships, a receptivity to divine wisdom, a celebration of creation, and intentional acts of kindness.”<sup>62</sup>

We can sum up the answer to this question by reminding ourselves that while the details are important (Mt 5.20; 23.23) our focus should be on the heart (motive and reason) more than on the specific details of how we apply the Sabbath principles to works of necessity. The *Larger Catechism* provides a good summary:

Q. What are the sins forbidden in the Fourth Commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the Fourth Commandment are, all omissions of the duties required, all careless, negligent, and unprofitable performing of them, and being weary of them; all profaning the day by idleness, and doing that which is in itself sinful; and by all needless works, words, and thoughts, about our worldly employments and recreations.<sup>63</sup>

## Civil Administration

Nehemiah 13.19-22 provides us with lessons about Sabbath-keeping that go beyond personal and congregational observance. The example of Nehemiah speaks to the civil administration of the Sabbath. In this section we will briefly consider:

---

<sup>62</sup> “Take Back Your Sabbath,” Editorial in *Christianity Today*, Nov 2003, pp. 42-43.

<sup>63</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q 119.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- Who, beside the Jews, Nehemiah considered accountable for keeping the Sabbath.
- Why Nehemiah understood that the Sabbath Law applies to all men.
- How Nehemiah enforced the Sabbath Law, and what justification he used for his action.
- What the consequences should be for those who break the Sabbath Law.
- Modern attitudes to the role of the civil magistrate in regulating Sabbath-keeping.
- Historical examples of civil magistrates enforcing the observance of the Sabbath.
- Why it was considered proper in the past to legislate Sabbath-keeping, but is no longer considered proper.

### Nehemiah's Understanding of the Role of the Civil Magistrate

Nehemiah not only held the people of Israel (the Jews) accountable for keeping the Sabbath and for meeting the covenant commitments they had made earlier, he also held accountable the people from the territories around Judah that were part of the Persian Empire. He told the foreigners that they should not spend the evening and night before the walls, hoping to go into the city to sell their goods on the Sabbath. He commanded them to desist from selling their goods and then took specific action to enforce his commands. He ordered the doors of the gates to be shut during the Sabbath so that merchandise could not be transported through them into the market squares in the city, and he placed guards at the gates to ensure that his command was enforced. It is probable that he had a horn or trumpet blown to announce publicly the start of the Sabbath. It was likely blown from under a canopy or awning (2 Kings 16.18).<sup>64</sup> The Biblical text does not provide this information. However, Josephus does refer to this activity:

[T]he zealots threw their darts easily from a superior place, ... having the advantage of situation, and having withal erected four very large towers aforehand, that their darts might come from higher places, ... the last was erected above the top of the Pastophoria, where one of the priests stood of course, and gave a signal beforehand, with a trumpet at the beginning of every seventh day, in the evening twilight, as also at the evening when that day was finished, as giving notice to the people when they were to leave off work, and when they were to go to work again.<sup>65</sup>

The fact that Nehemiah drove away the merchants who wished to sell on the Sabbath within the area of his jurisdiction shows that he understood that the Sabbath Law was applicable to both Jews and Gentiles. He did not take the modern view heard so often from the mouths of political leaders: "I believe it is wrong to \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in the blank: perform abortion, endorse same sex 'marriages', conduct commercial activity on the Sabbath, or whatever], but I can't impose my morality on other people." Nehemiah did not make a distinction between morality and law. He held the view, that in the area of morality, either an action is right or it is wrong. If an action is immoral, it should be illegal, and only what is immoral should be illegal. If it is wrong, then it applies to all people, regardless of what they may believe. He did not consider it inconsistent with God's righteousness to apply the power of the civil magistrate to those who did not agree with the law. Nor did he consider it necessary to tolerate, and permit, contrary opinions and the beliefs of other religions or the irreligious, when it came to demanding obedience to God's Law.

Nehemiah viewed it to be the responsibility of the civil magistrate to enforce the laws of God. Nehemiah did not consider it proper to enforce the laws of the Persian King but inappropriate to enforce the laws of God. He did not want the ceremony of worship to be hindered by commercial activities that would distract the worshipers. He viewed the civil administration of the Law to be an important aspect of preserving the proper worship of God. He did not believe in the supposed separation of church or religion and state. The civil magistrate was to work with the religious authority (the priests and Levites)

---

<sup>64</sup> Excavators found a stone from the remains of Titus' siege of the Temple with this inscription: "for the place of the blowing (of the trumpet)." This may refer to the place where the priest or Levite stood.

<sup>65</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 4.9.12.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

for the just administration of society. The authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* held essentially the same view as Nehemiah:

God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under Him, over the people, for His own glory, and the public good; and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers.

It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto; in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth ...<sup>66</sup>

Nehemiah used his government-appointed personal soldiers and guards to enforce the Sabbath laws. Later he also used the Temple guards (Levites), once they had purified themselves (they may have fallen out of the discipline of this procedure during the period that Nehemiah was out of the territory), to enforce the Sabbath laws. It may be that he used the Temple guards in addition to his own soldiers because he wanted to establish a permanent pattern. He and his troops would be returning to the Persian capital and he needed to leave behind a permanent administration. He could justify the use of civil officers to enforce the Sabbath Law because he did not believe it was contrary to the correct use of the power of the civil authority.

### How Nehemiah Threatened to Punish Sabbath Breakers

Not only did he enforce the Sabbath Law under the Persian government but he also threatened to apply the corporal (or capital) punishment prescribed in the Law against those merchants who persisted in their commercial activities on the Sabbath. He threatened to “lay hands” on them, which probably means that he would have taken them into custody and punished them. Nehemiah took the first step in administering justice by informing the merchants that their action was wrong. Only if they persisted in the action would he have arrested them. He didn’t have to exercise penal consequences against their actions because the people took him seriously and the commercial activity on the Sabbath was discontinued.

Assuming that the Sabbath law continues to apply today, and the civil magistrate is supposed to administer it, how should he punish those who break the Sabbath? What should be done to stop, for example, a Jewish (Moslem, pagan, professed atheistic, etc.) merchant who defied the authorities and continued to sell furs or operate a drug store? These are not hypothetical questions and actually had to be answered in recent history in Ontario in cases where Jews broke the law by opening their stores on Sunday.<sup>67</sup> As we will see (below) the framers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia and New Haven statutes did not think that capital punishment was inappropriate for someone who continually breached the Fourth Commandment (in one case it was for a third offence and in another case it was for a willful grievous breach).

God considers a breach of the Sabbath to be a serious offense. In the OT law, the punishment for Sabbath breaking included execution (Ex 31.14; 35.2; Num 15.32-36). One writer has said:

Knowing that God’s standard of righteousness (which includes temporal, social relations) is as immutable as the character of God Himself, we should conclude that crimes which warrant capital punishment in the Older Testament continue to deserve the death penalty today.<sup>68</sup>

We are, of course, considering punishment in the context of an essentially pagan society that has thrown out all consideration of God’s laws. We are, practically speaking, a long way from the administration of the God’s Law, let alone having to consider what punishment should be associated with a breach of a Sabbath Law. It is not my purpose, in this study, to argue for a reinstatement of

---

<sup>66</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 23: “Of the Civil Magistrate,” paragraphs 2 & 3.

<sup>67</sup> See for example: *Hy and Zel's Inc. v. Ontario (Attorney General)*, File No. 22556, 1993: February 25 and *Paul Magder Furs Ltd. v. Ontario (Attorney General)*, File No. 22559, 1993: October 21.

<sup>68</sup> Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1977), p. 442.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

capital punishment for Sabbath breakers. Rather, I will only ask a few rhetorical questions to generate some thought on the topic of punishment of Sabbath breakers, *assuming* that the civil magistrate should enforce the Sabbath laws:

- Why is it too harsh to put to death a flagrant, public Sabbath breaker? How can it be too harsh when God instituted the punishment? Can man be more merciful than God, who is good, merciful, kind, and loving?
- What bearing, if any, does Hebrews 2.2, 3, which speaks of every violation and disobedience receiving its just punishment, have on the matter of determining whether or not it was/is proper to apply capital punishment for Sabbath breaking?
- What NT principles, if any, change the penalty for Sabbath breaking?
- Why was it considered proper under English Common Law, for about 1,000 years, to punish (even with capital punishment) Sabbath breakers?.
- What gives late 20<sup>th</sup> century or early 21<sup>st</sup> century man the monopoly on defining what constitutes good laws and proper punishments? Do a few men in black robes (the high-priests of secular humanism) have the final authority on law? Does majority opinion determine what is right?
- God will punish eternally those who persist in breaking his law. Assuming that a person didn't murder, steal, etc., but only broke the Sabbath regularly without repentance, would he be subject to eternal condemnation?

Nehemiah's reforms appear to have been somewhat successful. Almost 500 years later, at the time of Jesus, it seems that the Jews of Jerusalem were still rigorously applying the prohibition against commercial activity on the Sabbath. However, by the time of Jesus the form had become perverted with legalism, and the spirit had been sucked out of the principle.

### Was Nehemiah Intolerant?

Most people today find Nehemiah's actions peculiar. They find it strange that he used the power of the civil magistrate to enforce the Sabbath laws and that he imposed God's Law on the pagans and threatened them with punishment. As a result, they would say that Nehemiah was being 'politically incorrect' and 'intolerant' and would claim that his actions were at best those of a dictatorial ruler in a non-democratic age and therefore are meaningless in our pluralistic and democratic age, or relegate them to a Jewish theocracy. However, Nehemiah was not operating under a Jewish theocracy. He was operating as an appointed governor of a Persian province. Also, we should note that Nehemiah expected God to recognize his actions as legitimate (Neh 13.22). He asked God to remember him in mercy and love for what he had done. Nehemiah believed that he was doing the will of God and that God would reward him for doing so.

There are probably a number of reasons why most people today would view Nehemiah's actions as suspect, but in the end they all revolve around a faulty understanding of God's Law. For example, one writer has said, with respect to Nehemiah's actions:

Glowing with the success of those religious purges occasioned by his architectural and political interests, Nehemiah now frankly busies himself with cult. Like many amateurs, he seems unaware of the profound values of human freedom enshrined in the harshly formulated principle *odiosa sunt restringenda*. [something to the effect: vexatious it is to bind fast; but it is usually applied in the context of religious liberty] Loopholes in good laws will always be misused by evil men, but the effort to close them results progressively in an iron juridicalism.<sup>69</sup>

The author does not explain why Nehemiah, a senior official from the Persian court who was considered worthy of appointment of a regional province by the king, should be construed as an

---

<sup>69</sup> Raymond Edward Brown, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* [computer file], edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy. With a foreword by Augustin Cardinal Bea (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968); Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

amateur when he enforces one of the commands from the first portion of the Ten Commandments. The author also does not explain why ‘human freedom’ includes the right to break God’s law, or what is harsh about Nehemiah’s edict, or the grounds upon which Nehemiah’s actions should be called an ‘iron juridicalism’. If Nehemiah’s actions really usurped true human freedom or were harsh, he could not have appealed to God to be remembered for his work. If Nehemiah was not doing the will of God he was wrong. If, however, he was doing the will of God, then his actions were correct and fair. The author of this comment on Nehemiah’s work of reforming Sabbath-keeping has clearly ignored the fact that God’s laws are not to be trifled with.

We could dismiss the quotation above as just being the view of some liberal who has a faulty view of God, Scripture and the work of the prophets. However, Evangelicals and even Reformed Presbyterians have the same difficulties with the enforcement of the Sabbath law by the civil magistrate. For example, consider the following:

We believe that God has given to civil government, not individuals or the church, the duty to bear the sword for justice and safety. Civil authorities should not punish beliefs, but some behaviors rooted in beliefs—such as killing, assault, or theft—may be outside the law and therefore punishable by the civil authority. Which behaviors are legally prohibited in a society based on freedom of belief and religion will be determined in a process of persuasion, debate, and election of representative lawmakers, with checks and balances provided by the executive and judicial branches and by constitutional safeguards for the rights of minorities.<sup>70</sup>

In this case the author makes the civil magistrate responsible for enforcing and punishing breaches of the second portion of the Ten Commandments such as theft, but not the first portion of the Ten Commandments such as idolatry or breaking the Sabbath.

Another writer says the following:

I cannot object if you want to work on Sundays. You are a free agent and I have no right to dictate to you on this matter. But I do object if, because you are working, I have to put up with more noise, more traffic, more environmental damage and more interference with my day of rest and worship.<sup>71</sup>

In brief, he says: “I cannot object if you want to work on Sundays. You are a free agent and I have no right to dictate to you on this matter. But I do object if, because you are working, I am inconvenienced.” His argument for not allowing others to work is if it inconveniences other people, not because it is contrary to God’s Law. You can see the inconsistency in this idea if you imagine that the passage said: “I cannot object if you want to *steal*. You are a free agent and I have no right to dictate to you on this matter. But I do object if, because you are stealing, I am deprived of my goods.”

The creation of a dichotomy between the first four of the Ten Commandments and the second six commands has become popular among modern Christians. It appears to be the result of view that has swept through Western cultures that claims that one has to separate religion from civil government. This view holds that we cannot hold the civil magistrate responsible for enforcing the entire Ten Commandments, but only the laws that are ‘non-religious’. While this view is popular, there really are no legitimate grounds for making this separation. Since all true law is ultimately from God, it cannot be any less proper for the civil magistrate to enforce on non-Christians the commandments related to murder (and its broader implications such as prohibitions against abortion, euthanasia, and suicide, and to impose capital punishment), adultery (and its prohibitions against homosexuality and requirements for sexual purity) and theft (and to prohibit gambling) than to prohibit polluting the worship and name of Creator of the universe and stealing his glory.

There are undoubtedly many reasons why so many Christians conclude that it is okay for the civil magistrate to enforce (selectively) the second six commands of the Ten Commandments but not the first four. These include the fact that we have been duped by the idea that religious tolerance, and

---

<sup>70</sup> John Piper, “Eight principles: How Christians should relate to those of other faiths,” *World*, October 12, 2002, Volume 17, Number 39.

<sup>71</sup> Donald Matheson, “News: Compulsory Sunday Working,” *The Monthly Record—The Magazine of the Free Church of Scotland*, January 2003, p. 7.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

tolerance in general, means that the civil magistrate must allow people to do things that they believe to be proper (e.g., perform same-sex ‘marriages’, licence prostitutes, abort children, conduct Druidic religious observances, practice witchcraft, etc.).

It is also possible that the concept that there are two tables of the Law has contributed to the faulty view that there are two classes of laws? The Bible speaks of two stone tablets that contained the Ten Commandments, that were filled on both sides (Ex 32.15, 16). The implications are that there was no room for man to add more commands and that none could be removed or the stones would have contained a blank space. In other words, the set of commands as given by God was perfect in their completeness. The complete set of the ten commands covered *each* stone. Contrary to popular view (e.g., as portrayed in Renaissance art), the commands were not divided into two sections with each part enscribed on a different stone. It is clear that all the text could have easily fit on one stone, especially since the text was enscribed on both sides of the stones. Also the text of the two proposed ‘tables’ are not nearly equal in length, and there is no boundary suggested in the structure of the commandments. Both of the two tablets contained a complete copy of the Law (the Ten Commandments). One copy was provided for each party in the covenant. Both God’s and man’s copies were placed inside the Ark of the Covenant (1 Ki 8.21) in the inner sanctuary. God’s copy was symbolically in heaven and his glory was resting on Law. Man’s copy was symbolically placed under God’s presence. Both copies were placed under the atonement cover. The atonement cover was over the demands of the Law. The blood was sprinkled on the cover, symbolizing Jesus and his blood covering the demands of the Law. The two tablets are the sign of the pact between God and man—the Eternal Covenant of Peace. It is important when we read of the two copies that we remember they point to the demands of the Law and to Christ the mediator of the Covenant.

The structure and coverage of the Ten Commandments as a unitary whole is important because the laws on the tablets cover all of our duty to God. As a whole they cover, in summary form, what God wants all men to believe and do with respect to his being, worship and honour, name, and possessions (the Sabbath is representative of the portion that man owes him in tribute); and what we are to do with respect for God’s earthly representatives (his image bearers), and covers our actions toward our neighbour’s life, dearest property (wife/helper), property in general, our words (man’s reputation) and our thoughts or attitudes. The Ten Commandments are the perfect will of God and as a whole provide the complete requirement for man. They provide the comprehensive standards for church, state, and family, and cover all personal and corporate relationships.

## Historical Examples of Sabbath Laws

People today think that their view of law (as some form of political contract or consensus) is correct and that the idea of natural and revealed law is obsolete. But this is largely a Post-Enlightenment phenomenon and is not the view that has been held throughout the history of Western civilization. Outside of Jewish society we find examples of the civil magistrate enforcing the observance of the Sabbath. This occurred in countries which had emperors or kings who claimed (even if nominal) to be Christian. For example:

- Constantine instituted a law (in 321 AD) that required tradesmen to rest on Sunday, but permitted tending of crops and vines on that day. But it does not appear that his rationale and reasons were consistent with the Biblical law, as he refers to the day as the “venerable day of the Sun”<sup>72</sup>
- Theodosius I (379-395) and Theodosius II (408-450) published laws forbidding all public games and theatrical displays on the Lord’s day.<sup>73</sup>
- The Third Synod/Council of Orleans in 538 (canon 27), though deploring Jewish Sabbatarianism, forbade “field labours” or “agricultural work” so that “people may be able

---

<sup>72</sup> *The Code of Justinian*, Book 3, title 12, law 3; trans. in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 3, 5th ed., 1902, p.380, note 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Cod. Theod.*, lib. 15, tit. 5; *De Spectaculis*, Leg. 2 and 5, quoted in: A. A. Hodge, “Sabbath, The Day Changed: The Sabbath Preserved,” <http://www.apuritansmind.com/TheLordsDay/AAHodgeSabbath.htm>.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

to come to church and worship” or “offer prayers to God.” This seemed to be endorsed by Justinian I, Roman Emperor (527-65).<sup>74</sup>

- Sabbatarian laws from Wihtrud (Anglo Saxon king of Kent 690-725) and Ine (king of Wessex, 687 - 726) are mainly of the nature of amendments to customs: “If anyone proceeds to bargain on a Sunday, he shall forfeit the goods, and 12 orcs [in addition] in a Danish district, and 30 shillings in an English district.”<sup>75</sup>
- “Charlemagne at Aquisgranum (Aachen) in 788 decreed that all ordinary labor on the Lord's Day be forbidden, since it was against the Fourth Commandment, especially labor in the field or vineyard which Constantine had exempted.”<sup>76</sup>
- Alfred’s (Anglo Saxon king, 871-899 or 901) *Dooms* opens with the Ten Commandments. The earliest portion of the Bible translated into early English.<sup>77</sup>
- Aethelred’s (King of the English, 978-1016) law code: “44. And that they should diligently abstain from marketings and public assemblies on Sundays”<sup>78</sup>
- The *Charter of Canute* (1020) states:

And I will that all people, clerk and lay, hold fast Edgar's law, which all men have chosen and sworn to at Oxford, for that all the bishops say that it right deeply offends God, that a man break oaths or pledges; and likewise they further teach us that we should with all might and main, alike seek, love, and worship the eternal merciful God, and eschew all unrighteousness; that is, slaying of kinsmen, and murder, and perjury, and witchcraft and enchantment, and adultery, and incest; and also we charge in the name of God Almighty, and of all his saints, that no man be so bold as to marry a hallowed nun or mynchen [female monk]; and if any have done so, be he outlaw towards God, and excommunicated from all Christendom, and answerable to the king in all he has, unless he quickly alter and deeply make amends to God; and further still, we admonish that men keep Sunday's festival with all their might, and observe it from Saturday's noon to Monday's dawning; and no man be so bold that he either go to market or seek any court on that holy day; and all men, poor and rich, seek their church, and ask forgiveness for their sins, and keep earnestly every ordained fast, and earnestly honour the saints that the mass priests shall bid us, that we may altogether through the mercy of the everlasting God and the intercession of his saints come to the joy of the kingdom of heaven, and dwell with Him who liveth and reigneth for ever without end. Amen.<sup>79</sup>
- “The First Sunday Law imposed on an American colony [Virginia, 1610] required church attendance, and prescribed the death penalty for the third offense.”<sup>80</sup> The specific law included the following: “Every man and woman shall repaire in the morning to the divine service, and Sermons preached upon the Sabbath day, and in the afternoon to divine service, and Catechising, upon paine for the first fault to lose their provision, and allowance for the whole week following, for the second to lose the said allowance, and also to be whipped, and for the third to suffer death.”<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Charles J. Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church*, trans. by Henry N. Oxenham (Edinburgh, 1896), Vol. IV, pp. 208, 209.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Stephen C. Perks, *Christianity and Law – An Enquiry into the Influence of Christianity on the Development of English Common Law*, (Whitby, England, Avart Books, 1993), p. 22; taken from F. L. Attenborough, ed. and trans., *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cambridge, 1922), p. 105.

<sup>76</sup> W. W. Hyde, *Paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 261.

<sup>77</sup> [http://www.northvegr.org/lore/anglo\\_saxon\\_dooms/002.php#alfred](http://www.northvegr.org/lore/anglo_saxon_dooms/002.php#alfred)

<sup>78</sup> A. J. Robertson, ed. and trans., *The Laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I* (Cambridge University Press, 1925), p. 119.

<sup>79</sup> The Avalon Project at Yale Law School: Anglo-Saxon Law - Extracts From Early Laws of the English, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/medieval/saxlaw.htm>.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Force, *Tracts Relating to the Colonies in North America*, vol. 3, no.2, p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> Laws and Orders, Divine, Politique, and Martial, for the Colony in Virginia: first established by Sir Thomas Gates, knight, Lieutenant - General, the 24th of May, 1610.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- Connecticut had similar laws: “Whosoever shall prophane the Lord's day, or any part of it, either by sinful servile work, or by unlawful sport, recreation, or otherwise, whether wilfully, or in a careless neglect, shall be duly punished by fine, imprisonment, or corporally according to the nature, and measure of the sin, and offence. But if the Court upon examination, by clear, and satisfying evidence find that the sin was proudly, presumptuously, & 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, That all others may feare and shun such provoking Rebellious courses.”<sup>82</sup>
- Charles II (1660-85) enacted Sabbath laws: “Be it enacted . . . that all and every Person and Persons whatsoever, shall on every Lord's Day apply themselves to the Observation of the same, by exercising themselves thereon in the Duties of Piety and true Religion, publickly and privately; (4) and that no . . . Person whatsoever, shall do or exercise any worldly Labour, Business, or Work of their ordinary Callings, upon the Lord's Day, or any Part thereof (Works of Necessity and Charity only excepted;) . . (6) and that no Person or Persons whatsoever, shall publickly cry, shew forth, or expose to Sale, any Wares, Merchandizes, Fruit, Herbs, Goods or Chattels whatsoever.”<sup>83</sup>
- In Scotland, the first Scottish parliament to meet after the restoration (1661) passed 93 acts. Some of these condemned the Presbyterians, rejected the Solemn League and Covenant, and sentenced to death four of the Covenanters such as Samuel Rutherford (the author of *Lex Rex*, and one of the members of the Westminster Assembly). Nevertheless, at this parliament, “means were adopted to safeguard the observance of the Sabbath.”<sup>84</sup>

Sabbath, Sunday, or Lord’s Day laws continued to be applied by the civil magistrate in North America until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, in Ontario, Canada, the 1907 version of the *Lord's Day Act* governed activities on the Lord’s Day. This act can be traced through “An Act to prevent the Profanation of the Lord's Day in Upper Canada” found in the statute books of the Provinces and of Canada (1845) to earlier laws from Great Britain. The 1845 and 1907 (*Lord's Day Act*) Acts made it unlawful “to do or exercise any worldly labour, business or work of one's ordinary calling.” The 1845 Act exempted “conveying travellers or Her Majesty's Mail, selling Drugs and Medicines, and other works of necessity, and works of charity.” The 1907 Act included a somewhat longer list of “works of necessity” that are exempted.

Since the adoption of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) it may now be considered unlawful and discriminatory on the basis of religion to protect Sunday as the universal day of Sabbath. As a result, there was an impetus to change the Sabbath laws during the mid-1980s which has brought about more permissive practices relative to the operation of commercial establishments on Sunday. In addition, since the late 1980s, increasing economic pressures (e.g. NA free trade, pressures from a recession) have pushed legislators to liberalize legislation pertaining to Sunday closing.<sup>85</sup> It is interesting to note that it was pressure to conduct commercial activities that the Department of Labour refers to as influencing changes to the *Lord's Day Act*. It is precisely this area of activity (i.e., commercial activity) that Nehemiah addressed in his enforcement of the Sabbath law.

To conclude this section I present a number of rhetorical questions which I believe show the inconsistency of modern legislators and judges, and many Christians, with respect to Sabbath laws:

- Why was it justifiable for 1,500 years of English common law tradition and legislative enactments to have laws governing Sunday commercial activity, but now it is considered ‘intolerant’ and an ‘imposition of morality’?
- Were the kings and legislators of the past 1,500 years stupider than the legislators and judges of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, in that they accepted God’s law as the standard for civil behaviour?

---

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Charles J. Hoadly, *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven, From May, 1653, to the Union, Together With the New Haven Code of 1656*, p. 605 (1858 edition).

<sup>83</sup> Charles II, chap. 7, in [British] Statutes at Large (1763), Vol. 3, p. 388.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander Smellie, *Men of the Covenant* (London; Andrew Melrose, 1903), p. 45.

<sup>85</sup> Information taken from the Government of Canada Web site: [http://labour.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/psait\\_spila/lmnc\\_esc/eslc/stand7-e1.html](http://labour.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/psait_spila/lmnc_esc/eslc/stand7-e1.html)

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- Were there no Jews, pagans, members of other religions, and professed atheists within society during the past 1,500 years who were compelled to observe the Christian Sabbath by ceasing their commercial activities?
- Was there a greater number of true Christians in western society at any point during the past 1,500 years than there are today?
- Why is it any more of an imposition of God's law today than it was in the past?
- What reasons can we give for not continuing to enforce God's law?
- What were the real reasons that changes were made in the laws regulating Sunday activities?
- Was it really out of a concern that we not offend adherents of other religions, or even that merchants should be allowed to sell more, or because man does not want God's law?
- What does the change tell us about society? The Church?

## Covenant Accountability

Nehemiah (13.17) calls the Sabbath-breaking of the Jews of his day a wicked/evil action. He uses the same word that is used to describe the life style of pre-flood humanity (Gen 6.5). This implies that Nehemiah is using God's standard for judging their actions, not his own opinion about right or wrong. He puts Sabbath breaking in the same context as idolatry (1 Ki 14.9), divination (Gen 44.5), and adultery (Hos 3.1), which are all called wicked/evil. According to Nehemiah, the consequence of this wickedness is (Neh 13.18):

- Stirring up God's wrath against the people performing the wickedness.
- Making the people liable to punishment, either temporally or at the Day of Judgment.
- Asking for a punishment by exile (Jer 17.19-27).

He compares their actions with the actions of their forefathers and suggests that their actions could bring more wrath on the nation of Israel. The implication is that as individuals they have corporate responsibilities and their actions have corporate consequences. He views Sabbath breaking as a corporate or public sin, because collectively the people are operating within the context of covenant obligations and responsibilities. There is a logical connection between corporate responsibilities, Sabbath-keeping, and the Covenant because the Sabbath is a key sign of the Covenant.

The evidence that shows that the people of Nehemiah's day and Nehemiah himself, understood Sabbath-keeping to be associated with covenant keeping, includes the following:

- They promise in Nehemiah 10.31 to keep the Sabbath as part of their vows of covenant renewal.
- They resolved not to carry out *commercial activities* on that day (Ex 20.8-11; Dt 5.12-15) and not to carry out *agricultural activities* during the Sabbatical year and resolved to let the land lie fallow (Ex 23.10-11; Lev 25.2-7; 20-21), in accordance with the demands of the Covenant stipulations. In listing these two classes of work performed in ancient Jewish daily life they cover all forms of work: farmers, merchants, and craftsmen—rural and city dwellers—and ensure that all people were able to participate in the Covenantal Sabbath observances in a meaningful way. For example, farmers would still have to water, feed, and milk their animals on the Sabbath day. But on the Sabbath year they could participate in a Sabbath through a reduced workload.
- The Sabbath is a *holy* day (Neh 9.14). Holy days such as the festival days and Passover were associated with Covenant observance.
- Nehemiah specifically rebuked the nobles (Neh 13.17) who represented the people of their day. Covenants are administered federally through a representative or mediator (compare Dt 5.2, 3 with Dt 2.14, 15 and Num 14.28-35; 26.63-65). As representatives of the community they were:
  - Held to a higher standard.
  - Expected to set an example for those under their authority.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

- Expected to ensure that those under their authority consistently maintained adherence to God's requirements.
  - Accountable for the actions of those under their authority.
  - Acting on behalf of future generations. Covenants are perpetually applied to subsequent generations (Dt 7.9, Ps 105.8-10).
  - The ones (or represented the ones) who had signed the covenant renewal a generation before.
  - The ones who stood in the place of those who had been leaders at the time of the captivity. Generational connectivity under covenants is alluded to by Nehemiah's reference to their forefathers (Neh 13.18).
- Nehemiah set an example with the 'greatest' (the nobles) in society by holding them responsible for actions that were to be observed by all the people. If leaders are held accountable for their actions, then all in the society are viewed as being accountable under the federal representation of a covenant mediator.

The Sabbath was first introduced as a sign of the Covenant when the Covenant of Creation was instituted in the Garden (Gen 2.3). The Sabbath may also have been a sign under the Noachic Covenant (Gen 8.10,12). When the Mosaic administration of the Covenant was instituted, the Sabbath continued to serve as a sign of the Covenant (Ex 31.12-13, 17; Ezk 20.12, 20). The Sabbath continues to be a sign under the New Covenant, as the Lord's Day (first day of the week) and as a commemorative of the resurrection (Acts 20.7). Finally, the Sabbath is a sign of the Eternal Covenant (Heb 4.9). The Sabbath is the one timeless sign that applies across *all* covenant administrations (even into eternity).

Even though other signs were added to the Covenant, or replaced existing signs, through the various administrations (e.g., rainbow, circumcision, Passover, baptism, Lord's Supper) the Sabbath is the *only* perpetual sign of the Covenant. Being a sign, however, does not make it a type that would pass away or be replaced when Christ came to fulfill all righteousness. Because it is a sign, it does not necessarily mean that it is replaceable any more than the law of love, which itself was a type, can be replaced. In Deuteronomy 6.5-8 Israel is instructed to make the law of love into a sign. Jesus shows that the law of love continues under the NT economy (Jn 13.34).

God considers a breach of the Sabbath to be a serious offense, because the Sabbath is the *key* sign of the Covenant that is timeless and applies across *all* covenant administrations (even into eternity). To break the sign is to say, "I will not keep your covenant!" Breaking the sign (the Sabbath) is equivalent to rejecting the whole covenant (Ezk 20.12, 13, 16, 21, 24). This is probably the reason why Sabbath-breaking is a capital offence (Ex 31.14; Ex 35.2; Num 15.32-36).

Sabbath breaking has always been, and continues to be, a serious evil in God's eyes. Because we don't see any immediate consequences from a society and a Church that engage in flagrant Sabbath breaking does not mean that we should take lightly the seriousness of the offence. Rather, we should be thankful for God's enduring patience with the Church and society in the face of blatant disregard for his holy day. We should understand that a careful observance of Sabbath-keeping is a constant invocation of the covenant sign. Sabbath-keeping is covenantally equivalent to observing the Lord's Supper.

## Consummate Authority

To conclude this study on the Sabbath we will consider two fundamental questions:

- Why is it important that we keep the Sabbath command?
- Why should we *want* to keep the Sabbath holy?

In answering these questions, we won't address the principles we have already considered, such as whether or not the Sabbath is a perpetual obligation or how the Sabbath should be observed and kept holy. Rather, we will consider the consummate authority of the Sabbath—its important place in God's Law and its importance for us as Christians.

First, we will consider some reasons why it is important for us to keep the Sabbath command. When you look at the structure of the 10 commandments (Ex 20.1-21, Dt 5.6-21) you find that the Sabbath command is the longest of the commands. It is also found in the centre of the written form of the commandments. Apparently, in covenant documents in the Ancient Near East the most important

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

command was placed in the centre of the covenant document. In addition, the Sabbath command is unique because it straddles both our duty to God and our duty to our fellow men. The first three commands are specifically related to the worship of God and do not have a direct impact on our fellow men. The latter six commands (at least commands 5-9) have a direct impact on our fellow men (i.e., they are the summary laws relating to our duty to man); the tenth commandment is different in that it applies to our inner being. The fourth commandment straddles our duty to God and our duty to man. It has religious/worship elements, but it also has direct consequences for those around us and for our own wellbeing. To the extent that we keep this command, to that extent we allow our co-labourers (and animals) to rest with us.

In Nehemiah 10.31 only the Sabbath command, from the Ten Commandments, is referenced in the covenant renewal ceremony. The reason appears to be because the Sabbath command is the representative command for the rest of the Ten Commandments. Keeping the Sabbath is, as we've seen, a key sign of covenant faithfulness (Ex 31.15-17; Is 56.4-8). If we want to be faithful to the Covenant, then we will keep all of God's commands, but in particular we will be especially careful to keep that one command of the Ten Commandments that is the sign or symbol of the Covenant—the Sabbath.

In Nehemiah 9.14, Nehemiah calls the Sabbath holy. This is significant because holiness is God's supreme attribute. Holiness is the only attribute of God that weighs in with a three-fold emphasis (Is 6.3; Rev 4.8). The Sabbath was blessed (set apart, sanctified, made holy) on the last day of creation (Gen 2.3; Ex 20.11) and declared to be holy by God (Ex 16.23; 31.14), and is to be kept holy (Ex 20.8; Is 58.13; Jer 17.22, 24, 27). The Sabbath is holy because it is a symbol of God's holiness and separation from sin. The people in Nehemiah's day promised to be separate from the nations around them (Neh 10.30). So it is fitting that the command of separation be the one that they emphasized in their promise to be faithful to the Covenant.

In the Bible various things are blessed by God, such as the priests and Levites (Ex 32.29), and the people of God and their well-being, if they worship correctly (Ex 23.25). We also find that the Sabbath (Gen 2.1; Ex 20.11) is blessed by God. The Sabbath is something special, because it is an object of direct blessing from God.

The Sabbath command is *the* command of trust. In Nehemiah 10.31 the people promise to rest from commercial activities for a day per week and from agricultural activities for a year out of every seven. In contrast, the average merchant today feels that he will only be successful if he opens on Sunday. Most merchants today would view Sabbath-keeping as giving up a seventh (or more) of their potential income. We have to believe whole-heartedly that God will take care of us when we cease from commercial and agricultural (i.e., economic) activities on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath command has a positive component to it that is clear and visible in its observance. It is the only command, of the Ten Commandments, that is clearly visible when it is kept. The other commands are largely observed in their negative aspect—i.e., *not* doing something. Although each of the negative commands also includes an implied positive obligation. For example, the command not to steal implies that we are to look out for the welfare of our neighbour, and the command not to commit adultery implies that we are to encourage sexual purity and chastity. However, the keeping of the other nine commands is largely observed by the absence of overt sin. For example, everyone expects his neighbours not to murder each other. It is out of the ordinary when murders occur, and there is great concern and visibility when the command against murder is broken. In contrast, the Sabbath command is kept positively (by doing something) as well as negatively (not doing something). When men don't work on the Sabbath, it is clear what they are *not* doing. And it is even clearer that the Sabbath command is being observed, when Christians (believing Jews, in the OT economy) keep the Sabbath command in a pagan culture by attending the public assembly of worship. Sabbath-keeping is a visible witness to God's Law.

Finally, the Sabbath is the day for the standing or falling of the Church. It is the day set aside specifically for corporate worship of the Church. To the extent that the Christians keeps the Sabbath holy, to that extent the Church and Christianity move forward with strength. "The law of the sabbath was very strict and much insisted one, and with good reason, for religion is never in the throne while

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

sabbaths are trodden under foot.”<sup>86</sup> It is hard to imagine why God would bless his people and the Church while they are blaspheming the Sabbath.

In summary, why is it important that we keep the Sabbath command? Because it:

1. Hold's the central position in the Ten Commandments
2. Is the day associated with covenant renewal
3. Is a holy day
4. Is a blessed day
5. Is a day of trust
6. Provides a positive visible witness to God's Law
7. Is the day set aside specifically for corporate worship.

Because the Sabbath is a special command, Christians should strive to keep the day holy. However, keeping the Sabbath should not be a burden. We should *want* to keep the Sabbath holy.

The true Christian does not observe the Sabbath because he is forced to do it, nor merely because of pious parental instruction. John Angel James said that ‘The heart of a believer would claim it as privilege to keep holy the Sabbath day even if his conscience did not dictate it as a duty’. The believer, according to [Is 58.13,14] calls the Sabbath ‘a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable’. A heart without the grace of God finds the Sabbath irksome and tedious, but the fault is not in the day but in itself. But to the Christian the Lord's day is what the sun is to the day, what the oasis is to the traveler, what the dew is to the grass, what water is to the thirsty and bread to the hungry, what wings are to a bird, what a home is to the orphan, and what rest is to the weary. ... The Lord's day to the Christian is not only a sanctified day but a *sanctifying* day.<sup>87</sup>

We should want to keep the Sabbath because it pleases God (Is 56.6). Matthew Henry said: “Those that are jealous for the honour of God cannot bear to see his sabbath profaned.” And Robert Murray McCheyne said:

The Lord's Day is His property, just as the Lord's Supper is the supper belonging to Christ. ... All days of the year are Christ's, but He hath marked out one in seven as peculiarly His own. ... This is the reason we love it, and would keep it entire. We love everything that is Christ's. We love His Word. It is better to us than thousands of gold and silver. “O how we love His law! it is our study all the day.” We love His house. It is ... where He meets with us and communes with us from off the mercy seat. We love His table. It is His banqueting-house, where His banner over us is love—where He looses our bonds, and anoints our eyes, and makes our hearts burn with holy joy. We love His people, because they are His, members of His body, washed in His blood, filled with His Spirit, our brothers and sisters for eternity. And we love the Lord's Day, because it is His. Every hour of it is dear to us—sweeter than honey, more precious than gold. It is the day He rose for our justification. It reminds us of His love, and His finished work, and His rest. And we may boldly say that that man does not love the Lord Jesus Christ who does not love the entire Lord's Day.<sup>88</sup>

It is a sad irony that most people in the Church love the human-appointed days like Christmas and Easter far more than the Sabbath. They make these days more important than the Sabbath or Lord's Day because their hearts are not focused on doing what pleases God.

We should want to keep the Sabbath because of what it is intended to accomplish:  
[S]o much stress is laid upon the right observance of the Sabbath. Far more importance is attributed to that observance than to any merely ceremonial

---

<sup>86</sup> Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible* (on Nehemiah 13.15), (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers) 1997.

<sup>87</sup> Donald MacDonald (Pastor, Greyfriars Free Church of Scotland, Inverness, d. 1975), “How to Spend the Sabbath Profitably,” *The Banner of Truth*, Dec. 1975. pp. 10-19

<sup>88</sup> “I Love the Lord's Day,” Bible Message by Robert Murray McCheyne.

## The Sabbath – A Universal and Enduring Ordinance of God

institution. This command was designed to arrest the current of the outward life of the people and to turn their thoughts to the unseen and spiritual. Men are so prone to be engrossed by the things of this world that it was, and is, of the highest importance that there should be one day of frequent recurrence on which they were forbidden to think of the things of the world, and forced to think of the things unseen and eternal. It was intended to afford time for the instruction of the people, and for the public and special worship of God. By the prohibition of all servile labour, whether of man or beast, it was designed to secure recuperative rest for those on whom the primeval curse had fallen ...<sup>89</sup>

The Sabbath is of service to our bodies, minds and souls. It reminds us that we are not purely temporal and physical beings (Ex 20.9; 31.15). The Sabbath serves society by providing rest for everyone. It slows down the pace of society (Ex 20.10) and serves as a sign of grace that demonstrates that we are not slaves to our employers or our work (Ex 23.12). When a society or nation keeps the Sabbath, it changes the outlook of that society or nation from being driven by the moment and immediate pressures, to living with a focus on the future (e.g., we have to plan for the Sabbath; Ex 16.26-28). In addition, keeping the Sabbath strongly works against avarice and greed, just as Nehemiah stopped the merchants in his day from pursuing their selfish ends (Is 58.13-14).

We should want to keep the Sabbath because it reminds us that we are freed from sin (Dt 5.15) and provides us a symbol of hope for eternity in the Eternal Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath points us to heaven (Heb 4.9-10). Robert Murray McCheyne said the Sabbath is: “a relic of paradise and type of heaven”.<sup>90</sup> Another writer summed up the future focus of the Sabbath:

The Sabbath day ... gives purpose to the six days of work ahead—that the work has a culmination not in death, not in a bulging bank account, not in a fancy car and status symbols but in the final rest that ushers in the fullness of the Kingdom of God. The Sabbath day is therefore a day that points us to the end things. As Gerhardus Vos says, the main significance of the Sabbath is not in advancing the cause of religion or devoting the day to the promotion of religious interests, but rather in pointing us forward to the eternal issues of life and history.<sup>91</sup>

We should want to keep the Sabbath because it reminds us that we need each other (Heb 10.25; Col 3.16). If all we had to do was set aside some personal time with God, we would miss the collective togetherness. The *day* not just the *time* is holy. The Lord’s Day is *the* day under the NT economy for the assembly and fellowship of the saints in the spiritual house of God (Ps 35.18; 68.26; 149.1), to meet with the Triune God (our Father and our Brother and our Comforter) and with fellow Christians (our brothers and sisters).

In summary, why should we *want* to keep the Sabbath command? Because it:

1. Pleases God
2. Provides rest for our bodies, minds and souls
3. Serves society by providing rest
4. Is a sign of grace, demonstrating that we are not slaves to work
5. Works against avarice and greed
6. Provides a future focus for society
7. Reminds us that we are freed from sin
8. Focuses us on hope for eternity
9. Reminds us that we need one another in the Church
10. Is the day designated for corporate worship and fellowship in the assembly of the saints.

---

<sup>89</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, In Three Volumes. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Reprinted, May 1997), Vol. III, p. 322.

<sup>90</sup> “I Love the Lord’s Day,” Bible Message by Robert Murray McCheyne.

<sup>91</sup> Daniel Copeland, “Have a Happy Sabbath,” *Covenanter Witness*, October 22, 1975, pp. 14-15.