

Towards a Christian Understanding of the Sabbath

Introduction

The question of the Christian's relationship to the Sabbath commandments of the Old Testament is no easy one. Over the centuries, many schools of interpretation have sprung up and many exist still. Our purpose in this article is to examine one particular school of interpretation, a school which originated with the Puritans and which still dominates British Reformed thinking on this subject. It is our conviction that this view has several important weaknesses and it is the intention of this study to display these weaknesses and to offer an alternative model for our understanding of the Sabbath. In so doing, we shall also defend the Sabbath laws from those who would claim that they are without relevance to the Christian.

The Puritan Understanding of the Sabbath

The puritan understanding of the Sabbath is conveniently summarised in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, the twenty first chapter and seventh section of which reads:

“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 on 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 understanding of the Sabbath has enjoyed continuing popularity amongst Reformed theologians down to this day. In the eighteenth century it is to be found in Jonathan Edwards' *Three Sermons on the Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath*¹; in the nineteenth century this view was defended by James Bannerman², and also in an article by A.A.Hodge the substance of which is summed up in its title, “The Day Changed and the Sabbath Preserved”.³ In this century, the most able defender of the Puritan understanding of the Sabbath has been professor John Murray.⁴ This is only a representative sample of the many who have upheld this interpretative tradition.

Like a table standing upon four legs, this view of the Sabbath rests upon four basic suppositions:

1. The weekly Sabbath is a creation ordinance. By this, it is not meant simply that the weekly Sabbath is rooted in God's six days of creation work followed by one day of rest, this is not contested, but that the weekly Sabbath cycle was imposed upon man at creation. According to this view, the Sabbath legislation is applicable to all mankind. In the words of Professor Murray,

“The Sabbath Institution was given to man as man, for the good of man as man, and extended to man the assurance and promise that his labour would issue in a Sabbath rest similar to the rest of God himself.”⁵

2. The weekly Sabbath is part of the unchanging moral law of God. Reformed theologians have commonly divided Old Testament law between three categories: moral, civil and ceremonial law. The ceremonial law finds its fulfilment in Christ and is no longer binding. The civil law, it was argued, was given to regulate Israelite society and, while still useful as an exemplar, is no longer binding upon

¹ *Works*, Vol.2, pp.93-104

² *The Church of Christ*, Vol.1, pp.392-405

³ Reprinted in *The Banner of Truth*, no.183, Dec. '78, pp.14-22

⁴ see *Principles of Conduct*, pp 30-35 and *Collected Writings*, Vol.1, pp.205-230

⁵ “The Sabbath Institution”, *Collected Writings*, Vol.1, p.206

contemporary civil government. The moral law however is unchanging. The moral law expresses God's ethical demands of those whom he has created in his own image. It is a reflection of God's own character and is therefore as unchanging as God himself. The moral law is summed up in the ten commandments of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The weekly Sabbath is the fourth of these commandments and is therefore unchangeably binding upon all men. The argument is strongly expressed by Hodge who writes:

"The moral law, expressed in the ten commandments written by the finger of God on stone, and made the foundation of his throne between the cherubim and the condition of his covenant, must remain, while the types, the special municipal laws of the Jews, and whatever is unessential in Sabbath or other permanent institutions, must be changed."⁶

3. The Old Testament Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day are identical except for their position within the week. This is the principle enshrined in the title of Hodge's work, "The Day Changed and the Sabbath Preserved". It is recognised that Christians celebrate something greater and more glorious than the creation of the universe, they celebrate redemption through the work of Christ. It is for this reason that Christians observe their day of worship on the day of Christ's resurrection, the first day of the week. Nevertheless, this day is to be observed as a Christian Sabbath; its observance is required by the moral law of God.

4. All mankind are obliged to observe the first day of the week as a day of Christian worship. This final proposition is the consequence of the previous ones. The first day of the week, the Sabbath of the New Covenant, is to be a day in which people withdraw from normal worldly pursuits and devote themselves entirely to the worship of God. Activities such as work and recreation which are quite good and right in themselves, and quite appropriate to other days of the week, should not be pursued on a Sunday. We again quote Hodge:

"The Sabbath, as divinely ordained in the Old Testament, is just what all men need today. It was commanded that all should cease from worldly labour and keep the time holy in devoting it to the worship of God and the good of men."⁷

It is our view that these propositions are misfounded and will not stand up to close Scriptural scrutiny. They are open to at least the following objections:

1. Genesis 2:2,3 says nothing about a weekly Sabbath being given to Adam. Genesis 2:2,3 affirms only that God rested from *his* labours on *his* seventh day, and that *this* seventh day (i.e., God's) was hallowed by him. It says nothing about a weekly day of rest being given to Adam. Francis Nigel Lee, in his book *The Covenantal Sabbath* reluctantly acknowledges this when he writes,

"At the beginning of the human race, God very probably revealed to Adam the idea of a weekly Sabbath ... Written on Adam's heart was the substance of "Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work, but the seventh is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God."⁸

Such recourse to the "very probably" and "written on Adam's heart" is a curious way of affirming one's confidence in what is not written in the word of God.

2. The Old Testament will not support the required clean division between moral, civil and ceremonial law. According to the Old Testament, the *weekly* Sabbath is one part of a larger body of Sabbath laws. In Exodus 23:10-12, the land Sabbath, according to which the land was to be allowed rest from being tended every seventh year, is brought into closest connection with the weekly Sabbath. The land Sabbath in turn is closely linked with the year of Jubilee, the Sabbath year of Sabbath years (see Leviticus 25). Those who have insisted on the perpetuity of the weekly Sabbath have never claimed the like for the land Sabbath or the year of Jubilee. Why not? It is not good enough to say that the weekly Sabbath is moral law and the others are ceremonial or civil, that is to echo the question as if it were the solution. By what criteria is the one separated from the others?

⁶ "The Day Changed", p.16. See also Murray, "The Sabbath Institution", p.207.

⁷Ibid. p.15

⁸F.N.Lee, *The Covenantal Sabbath*, pp.2 and 17.

3. The observance of the seventh day is an essential part of the Old Testament Sabbath law. The argument that the day can change while the Sabbath law remains unchanging requires the presuppositions that the day of the week is incidental to the law as originally given: that the law essentially demanded that a seventh part of the week to be devoted to God⁹. Hodge writes:

"It is evident that the particular day set apart is not in the least of the essence of the institution, and that it must depend upon the positive will of God which of course may substitute one day instead of another on suitable occasions for adequate reasons."¹⁰

The law given in the Old Testament required that the Sabbath be observed on the seventh day because this reflected God's own creative activity. It is far from evident that the place of the day in the week was incidental to the commandment. Hodge's argument amounts to special pleading.

4. The New Testament nowhere demands that the first day of the week be set apart as the Christian Sabbath.¹¹ There is impressive evidence, both in the writings of the early church, and in the New Testament itself, that from the earliest days of the Christian church, it was customary for Christians to meet together on the first day of the week.¹² On this day they commemorated the resurrection of Christ and worshipped God their Saviour. But this evidence does not prove that the first day of the week had become the Christian Sabbath. If God commanded that the seventh day of the week should be observed as Sabbath, the Sabbath cannot be shifted to the first day of the week except by similar command of God. The New Testament records no such command,¹³ but rather seems explicitly opposed to such an understanding of the Sabbath (see Romans 14:5; Colossians 2:16).¹⁴

5. The Puritan view of the Sabbath does not do justice to the close biblical relationship between Sabbath and redemption. Richard Gaffin acknowledges this relationship and the tension it creates for the Reformed view of the Sabbath in his article "The Sabbath: A Creation Ordinance and Sign of the Christian Hope."¹⁵ The insistence that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance, applicable to man quite apart from redemption, makes it difficult to do justice to the way in which the Sabbath functions within the Old Testament as a redemptive theme.

⁹Edwards presents several rather unconvincing arguments purporting to prove that the fourth commandment did not require the day of rest to be on the seventh day but only one day in seven. See *Works*, Vol.2, pp.96a-97a.

¹⁰"The Day Changed" p.15, emphasis mine.

¹¹This issue is examined in detail in Max Turner's study, "The Sabbath, Sunday and the Law in Luke/Acts" in the massive study edited by D.A.Carson *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, Zondervan, 1983. No serious study of the Sabbath issue can afford to ignore this book.

¹²A good review of this evidence can be found in Paul K. Jewett's, *The Lord's Day*, pp.56-72.

¹³Bannerman recognises this difficulty, but seeks to address it by saying, "The change of the Sabbath from the last to the first day of the week is demonstrated by Scripture examples. That there is no precept expressly appointing the change, and enjoining the observance of the first day of the week as the Christian Sabbath, is freely admitted. But it is a general principle, which cannot be denied, that Scriptural example in regard to any duty, when it is the example of inspired men, and not referable to their extraordinary office or character, is as binding as Scripture precept." *The Church of Christ*, Vol 1, pp 403,404. This principle "which cannot be denied" is one that we would judge most unsafe. Peter withdrew from eating with Gentiles in Antioch during the visit of Jews from Jerusalem. Apostolic practice is no safe guide for the Christian; our practice is to be modelled not upon apostolic example but upon the precepts of God.

¹⁴In his study, "The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus", in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, Douglas R de Lacey makes the telling point that Paul is content to allow Christians the liberty to observe the seventh-day Sabbath if they wish to do so. This he could hardly have done if there were a binding requirement to observe Christian Sabbath on the first day of the week.

¹⁵*The Banner of Truth*, no.93, June 1971, pp.22-26. See particularly p.25 where he seeks to reconcile the creational and redemptive elements in the two records of the decalogue.

6. The Old Testament gives no support to the view that the Sabbath is to be used exclusively for worship. The puritan view is expressed with great clarity in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

“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 are also taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”¹⁶

In his magnum opus on the law, Rushdoony strongly reacts against this view stating:

“The Sabbath in the Old Testament law was not primarily a day of *worship* but of rest. The pattern of weekly worship did not exist in the Old Testament law.”¹⁷

This is an over-reaction. The Old Testament does include commandments concerning special Sabbath sacrifices (Numb. 28:9,10), and there is evidence that the Sabbath was a special festal day (Lev. 23:3; cf. 1 Kings 4:23; Hosea 2:13). Nevertheless, Rushdoony’s first point is valid, the Sabbath in the Old Testament was not *primarily* a day of worship.¹⁸

7. The Old Testament Sabbath is not based on a contrast between what is earthly and what is spiritual. The puritan view of the Sabbath, outlined in the passage from the *Westminster Confession* quoted above, is pushed to its logical conclusion by Jonathan Edwards who writes,

“We are strictly to abstain from being outwardly engaged in any worldly thing, either worldly business or recreations. We are to rest in remembrance of God’s rest from the work of creation, and of Christ’s rest from the work of redemption... We should avoid talking about worldly matters, and even thinking about them... We ought therefore to give the world no place in our thoughts on the Sabbath, but to abstract ourselves from all worldly concerns, and maintain a watch over ourselves, that the world do not encroach, as it is very apt to do.”¹⁹

The relationship between the Sabbath and the rest of the week is here viewed in terms of an antithesis between life with God and life in the world, the two cannot be mixed. W.H.Mohon makes the point bluntly when he says,

“Even reason teaches this same truth, for none can devote their undivided attentions to God and his truth while the mind and body are engaged in worldly employments.”²⁰

This powerful argument for monastic asceticism receives no support from the Sabbath laws of the Old Testament. The view of Sabbath as a day devoted to God *and therefore quite separate from everything to do with this world* is not only quite foreign to the Old Testament concept of *rest*, but is practically its complete opposite.

8. The Sabbath law of scripture cannot be used to demand civil legislation concerning Sunday observance. It is argued that the weekly Sabbath is a creation ordinance perpetually binding upon men. This commandment, along with other elements of the moral law such as “Do not murder”, should be enforced by civil legislation. Advocates of this view recognise that not all of the moral law is capable of being turned into civil legislation (e.g. the tenth commandment), neither would it necessarily seem desirable that all should be turned into legislation (e.g., the first commandment). A compromise is therefore sought such as that advocated by Mohon:

¹⁶ Chapter 21, section 8

¹⁷ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p.30.

¹⁸ Gaffin also recognises this point when he writes, “To conclude that a rest day was commanded simply in order to permit a time for public and private worship is a significant reduction and distortion of the biblical message”, “The Sabbath”, p.26

¹⁹ *Works*, Vol.2, pp.102b-103a.

²⁰ “The Lord’s Day”, *The Banner of Truth*, No.72, Sept. 1969, p.31

“Christians do not wish to impose church attendance or religious worship on their fellow citizens by legislation and are not opposed to legal reform, particularly where ambiguities and anomalies exist. On the other hand we must be opposed to any legislative change which fails to give due regard to the eternal and unchangeable commandments of God.”²¹

But on what ground can the appeal for Sunday legislation be supported? If it is argued that civil law must enshrine and uphold the moral law of God then the civil law must also command weekly Christian worship in accordance with the first commandment and must consequently prosecute members of other faiths or those who profess none. If, on the other hand, Sunday legislation is justified on creational and humanitarian grounds (that all men need one day of rest in seven), on what grounds can it be argued that this day must be Sunday and that the state may legislate on *Sunday* observance? I can see no coherent model of the relationship between God’s law and civil law which would support the enforcement of Sunday closing by civil legislation but not demand enforcement of Christian worship.

By these criticisms, we have sought to show that the puritan model of the Sabbath is fundamentally wrong. It is full of inconsistencies, and its advocates often resort to special pleading to prop up the creaking structure. It is our conviction that the fundamental weakness of this view is that it has a static concept of the Sabbath: creation Sabbath is the same as Israelite weekly Sabbath is the same as Christian Sunday. In consequence it reads the fourth commandment back into Genesis 2 and forward into Christian first day worship. The model then has difficulty in handling the evident differences between Old Testament Sabbath (including land Sabbath) and New Testament Lord’s Day - and no wonder!

The understanding of the Sabbath expounded below differs significantly from that commonly held by Reformed Christians, though we readily acknowledge our indebtedness to many of the writers whom we have criticised above. The following exposition of the Sabbath also differs radically from popular dispensationalism which would simply reject the Sabbath as Old Testament religion. It is our intention to show that the Sabbath, rightly understood, is of great relevance and value to the Christian.

In what follows we shall argue that the Sabbath is not a static and unchanging institution but a dynamic redemptive theme. Creation Sabbath is not identical with Israelite weekly Sabbath and neither is identical with the Christian’s Lord’s Day. Nevertheless, the three are bound together within the redemptive work of God.

The Creation Sabbath

The creation Sabbath recorded for us in Genesis 2:2,3 comes at the climax of the creation narrative of Genesis 1. In chapter 1 we have the record of the progressive creation of the universe, culminating in the creation of man in the image of God. On the sixth day, man²² is instituted as lord over creation. It was for man that creation was made, and man was made for creation that under his rule all things might glorify their creator.

With the creation of man on the sixth day, God's creative work is complete. "By the seventh day God had finished the work that he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work." (Gen.2:2) After six days of creative work there follows the seventh in which God enjoys his completed work and the creation enjoys its perfection before God. This is God's day of contemplative rest, his Sabbath.

But God does not rest for a limited period before resuming his creative activity. Having finished his creation he rests for ever. The seventh day is therefore not simply another day of limited duration within the sequence but rather it encompasses (what promises to be) the everlasting future of the perfect creation. John Murray recognises this point:

"The seventh day referred to here is unquestionably the seventh day in sequence with the six days of creative activity, the seventh day in the sphere of God's action, not the seventh day in *our* weekly cycle. In the realm of God's activity in creating the heavens and the earth there were six days of creative action and one day of rest. There is the strongest presumption in

²¹ "The Lord’s Day”, p.29

²²The term 'man' is used here, and in what follows, generically to mean mankind.

favour of the interpretation that the seventh day is not one that terminated at a certain point in history, but that the whole period of time subsequent to the end of the sixth day is the Sabbath rest alluded to in Genesis 2:2."²³

This much may then be granted: in six days God created the heavens and the earth; the seventh day is his everlasting Sabbath rest.

In Genesis 2:3 we read, "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." God did not bless and hallow the seventh day for himself; this action is an act of God towards creation - towards man and towards the rest of the created earth. It is for man's sake that this day is blessed and made holy. This much may also be granted, but the crucial question remains, which day is it that God blesses? Does God bless and hallow the recurring seventh day of man's week, or does he bless the eternal seventh day of his own creative activity?

John Murray argues back from the Sabbath legislation given to Moses that the day which God hallowed was the seventh day of man's weekly cycle: "God blessed and sanctified the seventh day of our week precisely because he sanctified the seventh day in the realm of his own creative activity."²⁴ We do not consider that this is the best interpretation, and that for three reasons.

Firstly, this would require the term "seventh day" to bear two different meanings in Genesis 2:2,3 where no transition of meaning is demanded by the text. Having entered into his rest on the seventh day (God's seventh day), God hallows the seventh day. He hallows the seventh day because in it (that is, in God's seventh day) he rests from his creative work. It would be unnatural, without the most compelling of reasons, to interpret these seventh days to be days of totally different kinds. The phrase "because in it" demands that the seventh day which God hallows should be one and the same with the seventh day in which he rests.

Secondly, if Genesis 2:2,3 is interpreted as the institution of man's weekly Sabbath cycle, then what is the nature of the distinction between the Sabbath and the rest of man's week? In Genesis 2 man has not yet fallen into sin and is not yet subject to the curse of arduous and sweated labour. His days are spent in the careless enjoyment of the creation in fellowship with the Creator. What is different about the Sabbath? Those who adopt this view can only answer that man's observance of the Sabbath consists in his turning aside from all earthly things, things which have to do with everyday created life, in order to devote himself undividedly to the worship of God. But if this is so then the weekly Sabbath is essential to man so long as he remains part of the creation: it is essential to him even in his resurrection body in the new creation! This view of the Sabbath can only be retained by abandoning the biblical view of salvation in favour of the Greek which sees redemption in terms of a flight from the earthly and material to the divine.

Thirdly, the rest which God gives to his people is elsewhere spoken of as God's rest (see Ps.95:11; Heb.4:3ff). The connection of these passages with the creation Sabbath may not be immediately obvious, but this we hope to demonstrate more fully below. Our point here is simply that the analogy of Scripture welcomes the view that in Genesis 2:2,3 man is called to enter into God's seventh day everlasting rest.

To sum up: after the six days of creative work, God enters upon a seventh and everlasting day of rest. This rest is a contemplative enjoyment of a perfect creation which reflects God's own glory. God hallows and blesses *his* everlasting seventh day of rest, and by this act he calls upon man, and with man creation, to enter into the rest of God. Man, as created on the sixth day, is immediately called upon to share in the eternal rest of God.²⁵ In his active rule over creation, day by day he enjoys God's Sabbath

²³*Principles of Conduct*, p.20

²⁴*Ibid.* p.31

²⁵A similar view is advocated in Harold Dressler's study, "The Sabbath in the Old Testament", *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*. Dressler, however, fails to give due weight to the fact that these words were spoken prior to the Fall: in Genesis 2 they are eschatological only in the sense of fully realised eschatology.

rest. It is not in man's separation from worldly pursuits that he enjoys rest and fellowship with God; rather, in the everyday pursuit of his creatorial office, in the midst of creation, with creation, and at the head of creation, man enters into the rest of God.

This is the primary meaning of Sabbath: it is man's entrance into the rest *of God* as he enjoys a perfected creation.

This picture of man's entrance into God's rest, his enjoyment before God of the perfect creation, is radically altered by man's sin and God's curse. No longer does man possess rest in the earth. Far from entering into contemplative enjoyment of creation man finds creation to be at war against him as a cursed earth mediates God's wrath. It is into this context that God gives to Israel a new Sabbath institution.

The Israelite Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-11 is the first detailed record of the weekly Sabbath legislation which God gives to his redeemed people. Deuteronomy 5:12-15 repeats the commandment within the context of a review of the law. These two passages correspond practically word for word up until the point where they give the reason for the command to observe the Sabbath. Exodus cites the creation Sabbath of God as the basis for the weekly Sabbath to be observed by his people. Deuteronomy roots Sabbath observance in the redemption from Egypt. Here we see something of the complex relationship between the creation Sabbath and the Sabbath given to Israel, a relationship involving both continuity and discontinuity. This new Sabbath law once more summons man to enter into the rest of God, the rest which he was to enjoy at creation. But the summons is no longer addressed to man as man, but to man as redeemed man.

To understand the role of the Sabbath in Israel we have to appreciate the nature of redemption. It is our contention that redemption is basically re-creation.²⁶ It is that process by which God restores man to the state which he enjoyed at the first but which was lost through man's sin. It is therefore a process which is to end in Sabbath, when redeemed man enters into God's rest in the enjoyment of the newly perfected creation.

In the Old Testament, the primary act of redemption is God's deliverance of his people from the Egyptian bondage and his gift to them of the land of Canaan. In this redemptive movement, Canaan functions typically as the renewed creation or as Eden restored (see Deut.26:5-9). The goal of this redemptive movement is that God's people should enter into his rest as they possess the promised land, at peace from every oppressor (Ps.95:11).

But the movement from Egypt to Canaan was not the final and perfect redemption, neither was Canaan the final inheritance of the people of God. That land proved to be much as any other, it yielded its plenty only with reluctance and man still ate his bread in the sweat of his brow.

It is into this situation, the situation of a people redeemed and yet still waiting the consummation and perfection of redemption, that God gives the Sabbath laws to Israel. For six days man is occupied in arduous labour, and in this he is reminded that he lives still in a fallen world, a world under curse. But on the seventh day, redeemed man puts away his labour and eats without sweat on his brow.

The Sabbath day is therefore a ceremonial anticipation of the day of redemption's consummation. The cycle of man's week reflects in miniature the redemptive work of God.²⁷ While God yet works for man's redemption, man must yet live under curse and strive for life within a fallen world. But as the six days are followed by the seventh, so redeemed man is reminded that the day of redemption is coming. In celebrating the Sabbath he knows and enjoys his own interest in that day.

²⁶To be more pedantic, redemption is the *means* by which salvation is accomplished. Salvation is complete only with the regeneration of creation. Redemption and re-creation are not therefore identical but are inextricably linked in Biblical revelation.

²⁷Even as the day, in Hebrew thought, reflects the creative act of God who brings light out of darkness in that each day begins with darkness and ends with light.

The seventh year land Sabbath and the year of jubilee are extensions of the same principle. For one whole year in seven Israel was to eat the fruit of the land without sweat or labour and in so doing anticipate, ceremonially at least, the complete removal of curse and the perfection of redemption in the renewal of creation. The theme of paradise restored is prominent in the account of these institutions in Leviticus 25: there is to be no arduous labour (vv.4,5,11); servants, strangers and cattle all enter into rest (vv.6,7); men are to enjoy the fruits of the land as the gift of God (vv.7, 12, 19); there is to be release from bondage (v.13 etc.); God's people are to dwell with him in the land (v.23). Concerning this celebration Rushdoony writes,

"The jubilee marked a two-year holiday in which covenant man celebrated the foretaste of the great Sabbath of the new creation. Because the jubilee began on the evening of the Day of Atonement, it made clear the foundation of the new creation, atonement through the blood of the lamb of the covenant. Creation and recreation were thus basic to the Sabbath: man's rest in God's finished work of redemption proclaimed before time. By faith, man, anticipating the final victory and rejoicing in the present deliverance, lives by faith in the sufficiency of God."²⁸

This complex of Sabbath laws focuses the attention of the people of God upon a redemption promised. In Canaan this redemption is possessed in earnest, but the Sabbath ceremonies prevent faith from degenerating into a complacent satisfaction with the present state of the redeemed; they focus faith upon the future perfection of God's redemptive work. Unlike the ungodly who glory in the work of their own hands, God's people' in celebrating Sabbath confess that their work lies under curse and that their faith rests only in God's work of re-creation. In the celebration of redemption which is Sabbath, God's people know already something of the joys of the age to come.

The Sabbath and the Work of Christ

With the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the age to come has broken into our own. Jesus' miracles are signs of the kingdom (Matt.12:28), in which the final doing away of curse and regeneration of creation have appeared before time. Jesus often healed on the Sabbath day, indeed John 5:16 seems to suggest that it was his custom or habit to heal especially on this day.²⁹ Jewett comments on the significance of Jesus' Sabbath healings as follows:

"Hence we have in Jesus' healings on the Sabbath, not only acts of love, compassion and mercy, but the true 'sabbatical acts', acts which show that the Messianic Sabbath, the fulfilment of the Sabbath rest of the Old Testament has broken into our world."³⁰

The same is true of Jesus' relationship with the Old Testament year of jubilee. The jubilee of the Old Covenant had been a ceremonial anticipation of the final work of God in liberating creation from sin, vanity and curse. In Isaiah 61 the prophet looks forward to the fulfilment of jubilee; he speaks of the year of the Lord's favour in which the captives and prisoners will find liberty. These words, says Jesus, are fulfilled in his own ministry (Lk 4:18-21). In Jesus' ministry that final redemption, of which jubilee was the ceremonial anticipation, has broken into our age.

The theme of Sabbath fulfilment found in the ministry of Jesus is focused especially in his death and resurrection. By means of his incarnation, the Son of God enters into a fallen world and takes upon himself a fallen humanity. In Jesus' death, a world under curse is brought to judgement. In his resurrection, Christ is the beginning of the new creation. Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of the resurrection of the Christian, for Christ is the firstfruits of the new humanity (1 Cor.15:20). Moreover, the regeneration of the Christian is the earnest of a far greater regeneration (Matt.19:28), it is the firstfruits of the new creation (Jas.1:18). It is therefore in and through Christ's death and resurrection that this present world is brought to judgement and a new creation, though not yet manifest, is brought into being.

²⁸*Biblical Law*, p.141. See also the appropriate section of Andrew Bonar's commentary on *Leviticus*.

²⁹This might well be the force of the imperfect tense. For the six occasions when it is stated explicitly that Jesus healed on the Sabbath see Matt.12:1-12 and parallels; Mark 1:21-28 and parallels; Lk 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Jn 5:1-18 with 7:21-24; Jn 9.

³⁰*Lord's Day*, p.42

These themes are brought together by Paul at the close of his letter to the Galatians. Writing against those who glory in circumcision, Paul says, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation" (Gal. 6:14,15). The Christian is one who is in Christ, he has died with him and has been raised with him; he is already a creature of the age to come (2 Cor. 5:17).

What has all of this to do with the vexed question of the relationship between the Old Testament Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day?

Christians have worshipped on the first day of the week from the earliest days of the Christian church. The risen Christ met with his disciples on that day (Matt.28:9; Luke 24:15-31, 36; John 20:19, 29). Perhaps precisely because of this, the first day of the week became the primary day of Christian worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), a day on which Christians commemorated and celebrated the resurrection of their Lord. The vital question therefore is not whether we can justify the change in the day of worship from the seventh to the first day of the week, but whether the Christian Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10), has any connection with the Old Testament Sabbath.

We believe that there is a very strong link between Old Testament Sabbath and Christian Lord's Day, but the link is not one of identity but of continuity within the progress of redemption. On the Sabbath, Israel remembered the past redemptive work of God and anticipated the future perfection of God's redemption when creation would be freed from curse. The focus was on a future perfect work, and this was reflected in the structure of the week in which the Sabbath came at the end. The Christian also looks back to a past redemptive work of God as he commemorates and celebrates the death and resurrection of Christ. But *this* past work was not provisional and typical but was a perfect work in which the new creation has already come into being. This also is reflected in the structure of the Christian's week in which the Lord's Day comes at the beginning: the week is lived in the light of the 'already' of the new creation. But, like the Old Testament saint, the Christian also looks for the consummation of redemption. For this reason, the Lord's Day, like the Old Testament Sabbath, is also a day of anticipation; it is a day in which - as far as is practicable - we live the life of the age to come. On the Lord's Day, we should be found in the company of the Lord's people, the community of the age to come. On this day, like the Old Testament saint on the Sabbath, we lay aside our daily labour and eat without sweat; in conscious communion with God, we enjoy creation without curse.

The Everlasting Sabbath

To complete our picture of the biblical material we must say something about the eternal (or more accurately, everlasting³¹) Sabbath which is the future hope of the people of God. Most of what need be said has already been said in passing above, here we need only draw the threads together.

In the consummation of redemption, God will not only put away the sin of man, he will also redeem creation from curse (Rom. 8:18-23). After the destruction of this fallen world by fire there will be a new creation, new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:3-13). In their resurrection bodies, God's people will live in the new creation³². It is in that new creation that God's dwelling will be with men (Rev. 21:1-3). Redeemed man at last will enter into the eternal Sabbath rest of God (Heb. 4), as he lives with and before God in the perfected creation.

Summary of Biblical Material

This then is what we understand to be the structure of the biblical teaching on the Sabbath. At creation, God called upon man to enter into his everlasting Sabbath rest. This man would have done as he enjoyed the perfect creation before God. However, with man's sin, creation is placed under curse and man is without rest in the world and before God. Redemption shall be perfected when redeemed man enters at last into God's Sabbath rest in the new creation. The Sabbath laws of the Old Testament were

³¹ The final state is not eternal in the sense of being without, or outside of time, it is rather without end, everlasting.

³² Note the connection in Romans 8 between resurrection body and new creation - resurrection earth.

ceremonial anticipations of that final Sabbath rest. For Christians, the Lord's day focuses the hope of Sabbath rest in the redemptive work of Christ and declares that the new creation has already sprung into being in him. Nevertheless, standing alongside the Old Testament saint, we also anticipate the consummation of redemption in our observance of 'Sabbath' on the day set apart by Christ's resurrection.

Sunday Observance

The biblical teaching concerning the Sabbath is immensely practical, exciting and positive. It has relevance to us as we consider how we, as Christians, should celebrate the Lord's Day.

In our view, the Lord's day should be observed as 'sabbath' in that it should be a day of rest - rest in the positive biblical sense of the word, not in the contemporary sense of passivity. As far as is practical, and certainly without being legalistic, it should be a day freed from the normal pressure of daily work. It should be a day spent in fellowship with the Lord's people, and not just as we meet together for worship in a formal sense, but also in enjoyment of one another's company. It is a day to be enjoyed, a day to be marked by joy and by celebration as we taste something of the joys of the world to come in fellowship one with another and with the Lord. It is a day for enjoyment of God's world, for walks and for recreation. Enjoyment of the created world in the company of the redeemed can also be part of our foretaste of the new creation. We need to consider and to plan carefully how we may make each Lord's Day a foretaste of glory. I say this not naively, I know only too well how easily we miss out on these joys as the day degenerates either into a rush of frantic activity or into the inactivity of collapse. It is for this reason that we need to plan our celebration of the Lord's day that we may enjoy it as a gift of the Saviour to his people.

In working out how best to spend the Lord's Day we need to allow one another the liberty demanded by Scripture. We are not to judge one another in this matter but are to recognise that we are each answerable to the Lord (Rom. 14:5-8). We should be careful not to make the form of Sunday observance that we find helpful into a form we impose upon another.

What of the person who is not a Christian? All too often we have presented Sunday observance as legalistic, drab and boring. We have scolded our neighbour for cleaning his car on a Sunday or even for playing football with his children. We need to be careful to present Sunday observance not as law but as Gospel. There is more to life than the endless round of work; more than the lure of the shops. Let them see the joy and freedom which comes from finding rest in the Lord Jesus Christ, rest for the whole person, body and spirit. Show them how this joyful rest is lived out in the Lord's day, his gift to his people. The attractiveness of Christ ought to be reflected in the attractiveness of the Lord's Day, a day of rest, of fellowship, of joy and of glory. Those around us may still fail to see the joy of the Lord's day because they are blind to the glory of the Lord, but at least it will not be because we who know the Lord have spoken of it only as a day of negatives. Christian celebration of the Lord's Day, at church and in our homes, needs to be part of Gospel proclamation, a strong cord in the net which draws others to the Saviour.

History

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