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## **Sabbatarianism Re-Examined**

**Editorial Introduction—pg. 2**

**Chapter 1 - Procedural Methods—pg. 4**

**Chapter 2 - The Life Situation of the Apostolic Church—pg. 6**

**Chapter 3 - The Pauline Epistles—pg. 17**

**Chapter 4 - Galatians 4:10, 11—pg. 20**

**Chapter 5 - Colossians 2:16—pg. 30**

**Chapter 6 - Romans 14:5—pg. 38**

**Chapter 7 - Two Forms of Christian Judaism—  
pg. 46**

**Chapter 8 - What about the Ten  
Commandments?—pg. 50**

**Chapter 9 - Applying the Letter of the Sabbath  
Law—pg. 57**

**Chapter 10 - Cultic Judaism and Catholic  
Faith—pg. 61**

**Chapter 11 - Test Truth—pg. 66**

**Chapter 12 - The Reality of the Sabbath—pg.  
71**

**Chapter 13 - New Testament Ethics—pg. 78**

**Chapter 14 - The Liberty of the Gospel—pg.85**

## Editorial Introduction

Sabbatarianism is a system of thought which maintains that a particular twenty-four-hour period of time must be regarded as holy and set aside for religious purposes. The Jews, Seventh-day Adventists and Seventh-day Baptists are Sabbatarians who regard Saturday as God's holy day. A large group in the Christian church, especially in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, believes that Sunday is God's holy day. Among these are devout Presbyterians (who take the Westminster Confession seriously), the Lord's Day Alliance, the Banner of Truth Trust and others scattered throughout many of the Protestant bodies. These may be called Sunday Sabbatarians.

The Sabbatarian issue touches some of the most crucial questions which confront the church. First, it highlights the problem of hermeneutics. How can Christians who read the same Bible come to such different conclusions? Is there a right way and a wrong way to establish a position from the Bible? Sabbatarianism also raises the issue of the relationship between law and grace. It underscores both Luther's call for the freedom of the Christian man and the Puritans' call for obedience to the law of God. Is Sabbatarianism a form of legalism? Is non-Sabbatarianism a form of antinomianism?

This writer comes from a strong Sabbatarian background. I was raised a Seventh-day Adventist, trained for the ministry in an Adventist college and remained a member of the denomination until 1962. My parents became Seventh-day Adventists in 1913, but they were already Sabbatarian. My father came from a family of Wesley's followers in England. As Australian Methodists, my father's family kept Sunday as strictly as Seventh-day Adventists now keep Saturday. My father used to tell an amusing incident about the bold Methodist who first brought an automobile to church. It had no electric starter. There were furrowed brows among the pious brethren and clucking tongues among the devout sisters when the driver undertook the arduous task of cranking the contrary machine in full view of the congregation— clearly doing more work than was considered permissible on the Lord's Day! My mother came from French Huguenots who had fled to Scotland. In her pious Anglican family no playing was allowed on the way home from Sunday school.

A childhood incident illustrates how seriously Sabbath-keeping was impressed upon my conscience. When I was ten or eleven years old, I occasionally walked home from church on Saturday morning. The distance of several miles took me through the delightful Sherbrook forest of Victoria. On one such occasion I was alone, and before reaching home I felt the need of refreshment. Passing a kiosk which sold ice cream and soft drinks, I was suddenly tempted to do the unthinkable— buy something to drink on the Sabbath! I looked around to see if any eyes were peering at me from the forest, then nervously crept into the little shop. But before I could accept my change, someone else entered, and I fled like one who had just robbed a bank. That was only

the beginning of terrors. Before my guilty steps could bring me safely home, a fierce thunderstorm struck like the vengeance of the Almighty. As I bounded home, I vowed to God that I would never do it again. And I didn't.

Several things could be said in favor of my Sabbatarian heritage. Sabbath-keeping is more than devoting one day a week to worship and religious instruction. It gives the family time together in a relaxed social atmosphere. Some of my happiest memories are associated with the weekly celebration of the Sabbath. Sabbatarianism also has positive theological features. It promotes a strong orientation toward the Old Testament, profound respect for the order of creation and great reverence for the law of God. In an age of Darwinism and the disintegration of moral absolutes, Sabbatarian Christians have often resisted the influences of a permissive age better than others. No responsible Sabbatarian ever claims that Sabbath-keeping makes any contribution to his salvation. He simply accepts the Sabbath as one of the Ten Commandments and keeps it for the same reason that a decent man is faithful to his wife.

A few years ago God's gracious providence opened to me a door into the theology of Luther, and from Luther to Paul. I came to see that St. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone must call all teaching and all tradition into serious and radical question. I began the sometimes painful process of testing my religious heritage and biases at the bar of the gospel.

Last year Verdict Publications released my critical review of the theology of Seventh-day Adventism. Entitled *Judged by the Gospel: A Review of Adventism*, that book was written especially for Adventist readers. I am writing "Sabbatarianism Re-Examined" for a wider audience, because the Sabbatarian issue is germane to the recovery of apostolic Christianity.

It will be difficult for some to dispassionately examine the evidence presented in this review. We all tend to imagine that a thing is true simply because we fervently believe it. But genuine faith rests on a sufficiency of evidence. It never fears to re-examine the facts. To believe on the basis of insufficient evidence is not faith but folly. To doubt in the face of sufficient evidence is not prudence but hardness of heart.

William Barclay expresses my feelings when he says:

**In teaching my first desire has always been to interest the listener; if I don't interest him, he will soon stop being a listener. But I have never been eager that he should think as I think, but only that he should think. I hope that he will agree with me, but, if he does not, I shall be well content if he will examine his own beliefs in the light of what I say. The only kind of person who really 'offends' me, to use Somerset Maugham's word, is the person with the shut mind who refuses even to think about what is said to him, the person who deliberately misunderstands, the person who substitutes parrot cries for thought, and, worst of all, the person who criticizes a writer without ever having read a word of his books. I hope that I have always taught in order to stimulate and to awaken, and never to indoctrinate and stifle.**

Come, let us reason together. R. D. B.

# Sabbatarianism Re-Examined

Robert D. Brinsmead

## Chapter 1

### Procedural Methods

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Two basic rules will govern our use of the Bible in this review of Sabbatarianism:

1. The New Testament must interpret the Old Testament.
2. The New Testament Epistles must interpret the Gospels. 1

These two principles mean that we should read the Bible in light of the gospel and judge every matter by it. Whatever is out of harmony with the gospel, especially as it is expounded in the New Testament Epistles, is to be rejected, even if it comes buttressed with numerous "proof"-texts. It is not sufficient to affirm the Bible is true. Even Jehovah's Witnesses do that. We need to affirm that the gospel is the truth of the Bible. All doctrinal questions should be determined in the light of the gospel.

We say that the New Testament must interpret the Old Testament because the Old Testament is the preliminary and fragmentary revelation. Its institutions are shadows of the reality to come. Its prophecies veiled promises of a salvation not yet revealed. But in the New Testament gospel of Jesus Christ, God's secret is out and His glory is unveiled. Here is God's final word "beyond which there is no more to be seen or experienced" 2

The apostles did not come to believe the incarnation and the resurrection of Christ by their ingenious exegesis of the Old Testament. Rather, they were confronted with these historical realities. They then read and understood the Old Testament in light of the transcendent Christ event. We should do the same.

We should not build a doctrinal edifice out of Old Testament scriptures nor pour the New Testament gospel into an Old Testament mold. Jesus Christ cannot be contained by Old Testament forms. While He fulfilled the hopes and destiny of Israel, He transformed them. For example, the Old Testament prophecies could only couch

God's eschatological salvation in terms of blessings on Palestine, prosperity for Jerusalem and favor to the house of David. All that God promised to Israel was fulfilled when He raised Christ and inaugurated His reign (Acts 13:32, 33). But how exceedingly above any literal reading of the prophecies is the glory of His exaltation and the favor showered upon His people! In fulfilling the Old Testament, therefore, Jesus shattered and broke through the limited forms of Judaism, whether those forms were its legal system or its prophetic vision. The gospel of Jesus Christ was the new wine which could not be contained in the old wineskins of Judaism. In Christ old things passed away and all things became new (2 Cor. 5:17).

The coming of Christ transformed the apostles' understanding of the Old Testament. It should transform our understanding of the Old Testament as well. We must not come to the New Testament from the Old, but to the Old Testament from the New.

Not only must the New Testament interpret the Old Testament, but the Epistles must interpret the Gospels. While Jesus was still with the apostles in the flesh, He did not say all that He desired to tell them. He declared: "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12, 13)

After the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, the New Testament Epistles systematically explained the meaning Christ's death and resurrection. Some of Christ's sayings recorded in the Gospels remain rather enigmatic. Without the clarifying light of the Epistles, they could be misunderstood. Luther's opponents, for example, thought they found "proof"-texts for justification by works in the teachings of Christ.

On the issue of Sabbatarianism, the final court of appeal must be the New Testament Epistles. We should be suspicious of any major doctrinal assertions not clearly supported by the New Testament Epistles.

## Notes and References

**Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.**

1. In his book, *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, Edward J. Carnell lists five rules for biblical interpretation. His first two rules are mentioned here.

2. Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, p.10

## Chapter 2

# The Life Situation of the Apostolic Church

Twentieth-century biblical studies have demonstrated the inadequacy of the proof-text method of handling the Bible. It is not difficult to arrange a group of texts to support a particular kind of Sabbatarianism, nor is it difficult to assemble other texts to support non-Sabbatarianism.

The entire Bible is written in a certain historical context, and what is written is conditioned by that context. It is most unsatisfactory to approach the Bible as though God had revealed Himself in abstract propositions which could be understood apart from the historical situation in which the words were spoken. For example, Paul said, "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Gal 5:2). We do not apply this text indiscriminately today. Its true meaning can only be understood against the background of the actual life situation in the churches of Galatia. Of course, thoughtful Bible students have always practiced the historico-grammatical method of Bible study to some extent. But recent gains in the biblical sciences have highlighted the danger of superimposing our own concerns and our Western thought forms on what was written in a cultural context and a historical situation far removed from us.

In the last fifty years, society witnessed breathtaking technological progress. This has been virtually been matched by increase in knowledge about the background of the Bible. Details of the social, economic and political situation in first century A.D. help us gain a better understanding of the many New Testament passages. Documents such as the Dead Sea Scrolls have given us a more accurate picture of the religious background of the New Testament. Archaeological expeditions unearthed, inscriptions, documents and other artifacts which have helped clarify the historical picture of the apostolic era. New Light has been thrown on old traditions. Archaic arguments have been deposed as either false or inadequate.

Recent biblical research has revealed great diversity which existed in the primitive church. Ever since Eusebius wrote the first major history of the Christian church, there has been a tendency to idealize the primitive church. We have imagined it had a monolithic government and a uniform pattern of worship. But it is now known that such uniformity did not begin until the second century. The primitive church was a charity community (in the proper sense) and as an eschatological community it was more unstructured than we have generally thought. People came to Christianity from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. They developed different patterns of worship as well as different theological emphases. There was, of course, a profound unifying



principle in the Christian movement, but this must not blind us to the great diversity and even tensions which existed among such groups as the Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians.

Efforts to return to the ideal pattern of worship in the early church are misguided, because there was no uniform pattern. Even if we could discover a first-century norm, we could not assume that the twentieth-century church must conform to that norm. How can we say that the church in any century must be restrained by some tidy system of worship which never changes from century to century? The Christian church is a dynamic, charismatic, pilgrim community which is given great freedom to adjust its institutions and its mode of worship to suit its historical and cultural context. There are, of course, bounds to any legitimate freedom, but those bounds are not as restrictive as we have tended to make them.

## **The Hebrew-Speaking Jewish Christians**

The first Christians and their leaders were all Hebrew (or Aramaic-) speaking Jews. When they became followers of Jesus, they did not think of themselves as anything but Jews. In fact, they believed that they were the true eschatological remnant of Israel. They certainly did not regard themselves as apostate from their Jewish heritage, nor did they repudiate it. And they saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism, not its negation.

The first Christians were anxious to prove to their Jewish brothers that they were good Jews. Apparently they were somewhat successful, because Luke records that they enjoyed "the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:47). James the Just, the Lord's brother and the leader of the Jerusalem church, had a reputation for great piety among the Jews. Many of them considered his murder about A.D. 62 a crime which invited God's judgment on the nation.

These Jewish Christians (Nazarenes, as they were called in Palestine) did nothing to offend the ancient customs. They continued to attend Jewish synagogues, worshipped at the temple, paid the temple tax and circumcised their children. Even Paul had Timothy circumcised to avoid being a stumbling block among his people. They kept the Sabbath like other pious Jews and obeyed the Levitical food laws. Some years after Pentecost, Peter was able to declare that he had never eaten any "unclean" food (Acts 10:14). Paul described Ananias, at whose hands he was baptized, as "a devout observer of the law" who was "highly respected by all the Jews" living in Damascus (Acts 22:12). As a prisoner in Rome, Paul declared to the leaders of the Jews living there, "I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors" (Acts 28:17). It is clear that Paul had no objections to the Jewish Christians continuing their inherited way of life. Says F.F. Bruce of Paul:

**In Jewish company he would naturally, observe the Jewish food laws, from common courtesy, not to speak of Christian charity, nor would he outrage Jewish sentiment by violating the sanctity of holy days. 1**

On Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, James and the elders of the church said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law" (Acts 21:20).

We, can therefore, lay to rest the old argument over whether the primitive Jerusalem Christians changed the day of worship and abandoned the ancient Sabbath. Says a Baptist writer, Robert A. Morey:

**That the early Christian Jews could change the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day and not get involved in a controversy with the Jews or Judaizers is so foolish as to be self-refuting. 2**

It would be difficult to find one good Bible dictionary or one competent scholar in early church history who does not acknowledge that the first Christians— the Hebrew-speaking believers— continued their observance of the Sabbath. The following statements are typical:

**Jesus' disciples appeared to be much less radical in their attitude to the law and sacred tradition than he himself had been. Their leaders attended the temple services and conducted themselves in general as observant Jews, enjoying popular good will. 3**

**They accepted Jewish institutions and presented themselves as the Israel of the latter days. 4**

**As Jewish Christians still sacrificed in the temple (Mt. 5:23) and paid the temple tax (Mt. 17:24-27), so they kept the Sabbath holy in obedience to the Law. 5**

**So far as we can tell the earliest Christians in Palestine maintained the traditions of Jewish worship virtually unchanged....And they continued to observe the law and the "tradition of the elders" (including the sabbath) with faithfulness. 6**

**They apparently continued to observe the law without question, not interpreting their traditions of Jesus' words and actions in a manner hostile to the law. 7**

**Judaism has always observed the sabbath upon the seventh day of the week, Saturday. This was the practice likewise of the early Jewish Christians. 8**

**The early Christians kept the 7th day as a Sabbath, much after the fashion of other Jews. 9**

Adventist scholar, Sammule Bacchiocchi, is therefore quite correct when he argues that Jerusalem was not the birthplace of Sunday observance. 10 There was, no grounds for continuing the argument over whether or not these first Christians pioneered the observance of a new day of worship.



## The Greek-Speaking Christians

The Greek-speaking Jews were called Hellenists (Acts 6:1). They differed from the Hebrew-speaking Jews not only in language but also in culture. They were less conservative and more relaxed in their attitudes toward Jewish customs. They more readily adopted Greek culture and were regarded as less than ideal Jews by their more conservative brothers.

A division arose between the Hebrew and Hellenist Christians. Scholars generally think the issue involved more than the care of widows recorded in Act 6. It really involved the development of two different strands of primitive Christianity. While a few scholars think that some have exaggerated the divisions between these two groups (and exaggeration always remains a possibility), there is general agreement on their existence.

At a time when even the apostles were still attending the daily services at the temple, Stephen (a Hellenist Christian) began contending that the coming of Jesus profoundly changed the status of the temple and the Mosaic Law. The Jewish authorities accused him of speaking against the temple and the law. There was some truth in their charge. Since Roman law gave the Jews authority to execute those who desecrated the temple, Stephen was stoned according to Jewish law. Dunn and others suggest that at his trial Stephen was probably deserted by the Hebrew Christians, including the leaders of the church. 11 Did they think that Stephen's imprudence had brought him to unnecessary disaster and might needlessly precipitate the hostility of the Jewish authorities against the church?

Persecution did break out against the Jerusalem church, but it was principally directed against the Hellenists. How else could the apostles have remained unmolested in Jerusalem? (Acts 8:1) The Hebrew Christians were tolerated in Palestine, except for a brief period of persecution by Herod a few years later. James even enjoyed the popular acclaim of being "James the Just". The expulsion of the Hellenists from Jerusalem had two significant results. First, it meant that the Jerusalem Church was purged of its more liberal element and remained a church of Hebrew Christians. This had an important influence on subsequent events. Second, it meant that the foremost missionaries of the Christian movement were Hellenists. This was providential. The Hebrew Christians would not have taken the daring steps of their more liberal brethren. In baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip, a Hellenist, clearly disregarded the law (Acts 8:26-39; Deut. 23:1). But the major missionary breakthrough took place at Antioch. Here the Hellenists were astonishingly successful in preaching the message of Jesus not only to the Jews of the Dispersion and the God fearing Gentiles, 12 who met with them in their synagogues, but to the pagan Gentiles as well (Acts 11:19-30).

## The Gentile Christians

The first Christians were reluctant to venture beyond the borders of Judaism. The mother church at Jerusalem thought of herself as a fulfilled form of Judaism. News of large scale accessions to the faith from among Gentiles made them apprehensive about maintaining the standards of their own heritage.

Making Gentile proselytes was no problem, because the Pharisees themselves were keen proselytizers. But when a Gentile became a proselyte of the Jewish faith, he was required to be circumcised, to undergo a ceremonial bath ("proselyte baptism"), to offer a sacrifice, to keep the Sabbath and to observe Jewish food laws. If those engaged in the missionary enterprise at Antioch were bringing the Gentiles "all the way into the truth", no questions would have been asked. The Jews could not have accused the Jesus party of relaxing the standards. But how could the church defend itself if Gentiles were accepted into the fellowship of Jews without performing what had always been expected of proselytes? How could the church claim to be the true Israelite remnant of the last days if its members did not become Jews?

Not surprisingly, an influential group in the Jerusalem church insisted that the Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Why should not the Gentiles also conform to the same standards as the first Christians? How could they tolerate one part of the church adhering to the Jewish legal system while another part disregarded it?

But Paul was one of those Antioch "rebels" who saw otherwise. The church at Antioch enjoyed a liberty that he was prepared to defend with great stubbornness. One of his companions was the Greek convert, Titus. When some Jewish Christians insisted that Titus be circumcised, Paul refused to accede to their demands (Gal. 2:3-5).

Thus, the battle over circumcision and the law was joined. The Jerusalem conference, recorded in Acts 15, was called to find a way through the impasse. This conference is vital to the Sabbatarian argument. Sabbatarians say that the silence of the conference on the Sabbath question proves there was no argument on this matter, and therefore all sides must have agreed to keep the Sabbath. They reason that if the proposition that circumcision was no longer binding caused such an uproar, would not the proposition that the Sabbath was no longer binding have caused an even greater uproar? Since there was no uproar over the Sabbath, they assume that all were united in keeping it.

There is a fatal flaw in this "argument from silence". To the Jew (whether Christian or not) circumcision stood for subjection to the law. As Paul said, "Circumcision has value if you observe the law" (Rom. 2:25). When a proselyte was circumcised, it was

a token that he had accepted the yoke of Jewish law. He became "obligated to obey the whole law" (Gal. 5:3). That is why so many New Testament passages place circumcision and subjection to the law in apposition (e.g., "the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses." – Acts 15:5; cf. Acts 21:21). Therefore the real issue of the Jerusalem Conference was whether Gentile believers should be subject to the law.

It is also a fallacy to suppose that the issue at the Jerusalem conference merely involved the fate of ritual aspects of the law. Among other things, the conference made a ruling regarding sexual immorality (Acts 15:20) – hardly a ceremonial matter! The New Testament nowhere tells us what parts of the Law of Moses should be considered ritual and what parts should be considered moral. We may make such a distinction, and such a distinction may well be theologically correct, but we must not read our own categories of thought, however correct in themselves, back into the New Testament. The Jerusalem conference dealt with the law as a complete legal corpus.

The conference was therefore concerned with the entire ministration of Jewish law, including the Sabbath and food laws given under the old covenant. The real issue debated at the Jerusalem conference was whether Gentile believers must be subject to the law and live as Jews. The outcome was freedom for the Gentiles in this matter. The compromise measure adopted was obviously aimed at facilitating amicable fellowship (especially table fellowship) between Jewish and Gentile believers. The Gentiles were asked to abstain from meat offered to idols, from strangled animals, from blood 13 and from sexual immorality. They were not burdened with anything else. (Acts 15:28, 29)

The conference was a great victory for Paul and the progressive party, even though in some respects it was a compromise. Paul himself did not carry out the stipulation about food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8) nor does he mention the Jerusalem accord in any of his letters. So Jewish Christians were obviously unhappy at the way Paul was prosecuting his mission to the Gentiles. They infiltrated his churches and urged the yoke of Jewish law upon his converts.

We must ask the Saturday Sabbatarian for evidence Paul imposed the Sabbath on the Gentile churches. And we must ask the Sunday Sabbatarian for the evidence that the great apostle to the Gentiles substituted one form of Sabbatarianism for another. We suggest the following historical evidence is damaging to the Sabbatarian thesis:

1. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. He raised up many churches and wrote them letters of instruction. He preached the full gospel (Rom. 15:19) and declared the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) Where is the evidence that he urged any kind of Sabbatarianism on the Gentiles?

The "argument from silence" might favor Sabbatarianism if the Pauline letters were addressed to Jewish Christians. It could then be said that silence proves the Sabbath was taken for granted and was therefore not an issue. But Paul's letters were addressed to Gentile Christians who had no background in Sabbath-keeping. If these young Gentile churches were new Sabbath-keepers, as the Sabbatarian must assume, how strange that they needed no instruction, warning or encouragement from Paul on this matter! They certainly needed reproof and instruction on nearly every other important matter.

2. When Paul speaks of "sin", he generally means sin as a ruling power. But when he speaks of "sins", Paul generally gives them their proper names— e.g., sexual immorality, jealousy, drunkenness, and selfish ambition. In many of his letters he lists sins which will keep those who commit them out of the kingdom. In Galatians 5 he mentions fifteen sins (Gal. 5:19-21; cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-11; Eph. 5:5-7). As a faithful pastor, Paul names those sins which grieve God. He does not leave the young churches guessing, for he says such sins are obvious (Gal. 5:19). Why is Sabbath-breaking— a great sin according to Puritan tradition— conspicuously absent from every Pauline list of sins? How strange it would be for the Gentile converts to fall into every kind of sin except this one!

3. In the first century A.D., slavery was an institution throughout the Roman World. It is clear from the New Testament that there were Christian slaves in the Pauline churches. They had no forty-hour work week in those days. Saturday was not a public holiday, nor was Sunday a holiday for the slaves. If Paul's converts were Sabbatarian, they would have had continual problems over Sabbath privileges. If Paul was a Sabbatarian evangelist, why did his converts (especially the slaves) give no evidence of any Sabbath conflicts?

Historical research has given us a rather accurate account of the reasons why early Christians were persecuted in the Roman world. Both Christian and non-Christian authorities left records of the conflict between Christians and society. There are even records that the Jews were despised by the Gentiles because of the Sabbath. Yet there is no evidence that the Gentile Christians suffered any hardship or persecution because of the Sabbath.

The stubborn facts of early church history, therefore, give us no indication that Paul urged Sabbatarianism on the Gentile churches.

## **The Tragedy of the Jewish Church and the New Judaism at Rome**

We have already seen that with the departure of the Hellenists, the Jerusalem church was predominately composed of Hebrew Christians. They were much less radical in their attitude to the law and Jewish customs than Jesus himself had been.

14 With the passing of time, they increasingly regressed towards Jewish legalism, undoubtedly in part because of pressure from their Jewish environment. 15

Tension always seemed to exist between the apostle Paul and the Jerusalem church. John J. Gunther persuasively argues that most of Paul's theological opponents came from the Jerusalem church. 16 Bengt Holmberg suggests that the Jerusalem Christians visited the Gentile churches in order "to correct possible mistakes and complement some vital points that had been neglected in the teachings of Paul". Theirs was a "concerted move to instill Palestinian piety and Palestinian orthodoxy". 17

The wiser leadership among the Jewish Christians was willing to abide by the agreement of the Jerusalem conference. But they were clearly unhappy with the wide spread reports that Paul was teaching the Jews of the Dispersion to become lax in their devotion to the law (Acts 21:21).

In first-generation Christianity the Jerusalem church had a position of great authority in the Christian movement. But the march of events quickly changed that situation. As many Hebrew Christians had feared, Gentile believers soon vastly outnumbered Jewish believers. Furthermore, the Jerusalem church and its leaders fled to Pella in A.D. 66 to escape the predicted catastrophe on Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This meant that the Jerusalem church had to function as a church in exile. The events from A.D. 70 to A.D. 135 resulted in the complete dispersion of the Jewish people from Palestine and broke the stranglehold which the Jerusalem church had on burgeoning Christianity.

After A.D. 70 the Jews became increasingly hostile toward their fellow Jews who believed in Jesus. They began to expel them from the synagogues. But not only were the Jewish Christians rejected by their own people; they were increasingly distrusted by Gentile Christians. At first the Gentile Christians, following instruction of Paul in Romans 14, tolerated their reverence of Jewish institutions and ways. But because Jewish Christians often urged their Jewish heritage on Gentile believers, tension developed between these two branches of the church. Ignatius, who was bishop of Antioch a few years after the apostolic period (A.D. 98-117), was unhappy with the influence of Jewish Christians in Asia Minor. 18 By the middle of the second century Justin Martyr said that he knew Jews who believed in Christ and kept the law without insisting that all Christians should do likewise, yet he knew other Jewish Christians who urged obedience to the law on Gentile believers. Justin Martyr felt that Jewish Christians were free to keep the Sabbath, but he admitted that there were Christians not willing to be tolerant. 19

The picture emerges of Jewish Christianity which, having lost its influence on the predominately Gentile church became increasingly isolated. It lost vital contact with



Gentile Christianity, so that Gentile Christianity was largely cut off from its Jerusalem roots. This has been a tragedy for both branches of the church.

By the time of Irenaeus (in the late second century) Jewish Christianity was regarded as a real heresy. 20 Some Jewish Christians were called Ebionites ("the poor ones"), while others were called Nazarenes. They kept the Sabbath and persevered in a Jewish way of life. They were generally vegetarian. Some even refused to eat eggs. Their hero was James; their archenemy was Paul.

The most serious heresy of the Ebionites was failure to confess Christ's full divinity. Furthermore, although they believed Jesus was sinless, they taught that he possessed sinful human nature like the rest of mankind. 21 Yet it is a remarkable fact that the heretical Ebionites traced their lineage back to the original Jewish Christians and claim to be their true successors. James Dunn makes these illuminating comments on the relationship between the Ebionites and the first Christians:

*Indeed on the basis of this evidence, heretical Jewish Christianity of the later centuries could quite properly claim to be the true heir of earliest Christianity more than any other expression of Christianity.*

However, that is only one side of the picture; to leave such a claim unchallenged would give a false impression. For, there are two other important differences between Ebionism and earliest Christianity. The first we might call the difference in *tone*. The faith and practice of the primitive Jerusalem community was not something thought out, clearly crystallized in debate; it was simply the first stage in the development from a form of Jewish messianism to Christianity proper, from Jewish faith with some peculiarities to a distinctively Christian faith. Consequently an important difference between the two forms of Jewish Christianity does emerge: the practice and beliefs of the primitive Jerusalem community were marked by development and transition, there was nothing fixed and final, everything was fluid; whereas Ebionism is a self-conscious faith held in opposition to other expressions of Christian faith (notably Paul), thought out and clearly articulated. A link can certainly be traced between the two, a continuity of tradition; but Ebionism has hardened and petrified a tradition that was initially fluid and developing.

The second difference follows from the first— a difference in *time*. The primitive Jerusalem faith and practice was the first tentative attempt to express the newness of belief in Jesus as Messiah, risen and coming again— to express it, that is, in a totally Jewish environment. Ebionism came to expression in quite different circumstances— when Christianity had expanded right out of Judaism, had become predominately Gentile— and, most importantly, after at least several crucial debates and controversies on the relationship of the new faith and the Judaism which cradled it in its infancy. In other words, we might justifiably conclude that *Ebionism was rejected because in a developing situation where Christianity had to develop and change, it did not!*

Here then is an interesting definition of heresy. Heretical Jewish Christianity could claim a direct line of continuity with the most primitive form of Christianity. It could certainly claim to be more in accord with the most primitive faith than Paul, say. If the earliest church is the norm of orthodoxy, then Ebionism measures up pretty well; if primitiveness means purity, then Ebionism can claim to have a purer faith than almost any other. But Ebionism was rejected— why? Because its faith did not develop as Christianity developed. It clung to an expression of Christian faith which was acceptable at the beginning of Christianity in a context of Judaism. In the wider environment of the second and third centuries, with formative documents of Christianity already written, the simple Jewish



messianism was no longer adequate. In short, *heretical Jewish Christianity was a form of stunted, underdeveloped Christianity*, rigid and unfitted to be the mouthpiece of the gospel in a new age. 22

When the Jerusalem church ceased to exercise significant influence in the universal church, the vacuum was filled by the Church of Rome. The factors which favored Rome's assuming the role of the Jerusalem church seemed to be as follows:

1. Rome was a second Jerusalem center. As many Jews lived there (about 50,000) as in Jerusalem.
2. Rome was the center of the Roman world.
3. Rome had one of the largest Christian communities anywhere in the world.
4. Peter and Paul had labored in Rome and had been martyred there.

Early in the second century Rome revealed a tendency not only to advise but to dictate to her sister churches. It was not long before she began issuing decrees on which days Christians should fast and on which days of the yearly and weekly calendar Christians should celebrate Christ's redemptive acts. This is well documented in Samuele Bacchiocchi's thesis, *From Sabbath to Sunday*. A new kind of legalism began to rear its head quite early in the second century. It was the substitution of one form of Judaism for another. In the final outworking of history Rome became as Judaistic in principle as the original Judaism from which Christianity had separated.

## Notes and References

1. F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, pp. 346-47
2. Robert A. Morey, "Is Sunday the 'Christian Sabbath'?" *Baptist Reformation Review* 8, no. (1979): 15.
3. Bruce, *Paul* p. 64
4. Joseph R. Tyson, *A Study of Early Christianity*, p.278
5. Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7: 30
6. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p.127
7. Ibid., p.238
8. J. Morgenstern, art. "Sabbath", in George Arthur Butrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:135.
9. John Richard Sampey, art, "Sabbath", in James Orr, gen. ed, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. 4:2631.
10. See Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*.
11. See Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*

12. God fearing Gentiles were sympathetic to Jewish religion but were not full proselytes.
13. Among some Gentiles it was a custom to mix blood with drinking water.
14. See Bruce, *Paul*, p.64
15. See Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, pp. 73, 80, 122.
16. See John J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background*.
17. Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power*, pp. 44-5
18. See Ignatius, *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:59-65. See also Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, p.213; Jean Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, p.342.
19. See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:218. See also Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, p.240; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p.22.
20. See Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p.23. See Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, pp. 240-45.
21. See *ibid.* See also Gunther, *Paul's Opponents*, pp. 68, 90, 104-5; Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* pp. 55-63.
22. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, pp. 244-45 (italics supplied).

## Chapter 3

# The Pauline Epistles

The New Testament Epistles are the final word on the meaning and application of Christian faith. They were written after the events described in the four Gospels and after Pentecost had given the apostles inspired insight into the significance of what had taken place in Christ's death and resurrection.

The Gospels, of course, were also written after Pentecost— even after Paul had written his Epistles. But the Epistles expound the implications of the Christ event in the actual situation of specific churches. They particularly address the Gentile problem, which was undoubtedly the great problem of the early church. The Gospels, on the other hand, do not address this problem but record the tradition of the Christ story up to the time of the resurrection.

Some of the radical exponents of form criticism contend that the four Evangelists simply put those words on Christ's mouth which bear on the issues they faced in the church at the time of writing. It is said that they thereby skillfully manipulated the Jesus tradition for their own apologetic purposes. We suggest, however, that the evidence of the Gospels indicates how restrained and true to life the Evangelists were in narrating the works and sayings of Jesus. Jesus is depicted as a real Jew living in Jewish culture. Although He freed the Sabbath from petty rabbinical restrictions, He did not discourage people from respecting this ancient institution. How could this fact, however, be used to prove that Jesus imposed Sabbath-keeping on all His followers for all time? Jesus did nothing to discourage people from offering sacrifices, being circumcised, submitting to priestly functions and paying the temple tax either. The issue is not whether Jesus discouraged Jews from living like Jews. Even the apostles after Him did not command Jewish Christians to stop circumcising their children, to cease their Sabbath-keeping or to refrain from observing food laws. The issue is whether the Gentile Christians were commanded to observe these customs also. The distinct fact is that the Gospels concentrate on what Jesus said and did before Pentecost. It is clear that He did not address the problem of Sabbath-keeping among Gentile churches. On the other hand, Paul was given a special commission for the great Gentile mission, and he therefore addressed the matter of whether Gentile Christians should be subject to Mosaic laws.

The central concern of Paul's writing— especially of his Galatian and Roman letters— was the Gentile mission. The apostle was called from his mother's womb for the special assignment of enlightening the Gentiles in fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham, Isaiah and Jeremiah (Gen 12:2, 3; Isa 49:1, 6; 60:1-3; Jer. 1:5; Acts 9:15;

26:16- 18; Gal. 1:15). Paul was dominated by the overwhelming consciousness that the decisive hour had arrived when God's secret plan concerning the nations was to be accomplished (Eph. 3:2-6). The gates which guarded God's bounties within Judaism were to be thrown open, and the nations were to be invited to share in the blessings of Abraham. Christ had inaugurated a new day in which the Gentiles could come into the family of Abraham without becoming proselytes to the Jewish law. Paul saw that they must be evangelized, not proselytized. All barriers which hindered the Gentiles from embracing the gospel had to be removed. If the regulation of the written code were an obstacle, they must be set aside. It was more important to bless others with the gospel than to preserve the regulations of an abstract law (cf. Gal. 2:11-14 with 1 Cor. 9:20-23).

Paul is not silent on the issue of Sabbatarianism, as some have suggested. The reason he is not silent on the matter is because he confronted the stormy issue of whether or not the Gentile churches should be subject to Jewish laws. The Jewish Christians revered their heritage and continued their distinctively Jewish way of life. Some of them insisted that Gentile converts must also be inducted into their culture and live like Jews in obedience to the law. If these Jewish Christians had had their way, Christianity would have remained another sect of Judaism. The Jerusalem Christians were too conservative. They lacked breadth of vision to see that the message of Christ was to burst from the narrow confines of the Jewish culture to become a faith for all nations. Like many Christians today, they identified Christianity with their own culture and wanted to press other believers into their own pattern of life and worship.

Paul's version of Christianity for the Gentiles won a great victory at the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15). This conference decided that the Law of Moses was not to be imposed on the Gentiles. Yet the battle was not over. The Pauline letters show that the apostle to the Gentiles had to fight both against the legalism of Jewish Christians and the antinomianism of Greek libertines. But troublesome Jewish Christians overshadowed the libertine element as the major problem in the Pauline churches. Consequently, there are many allusions to the presence of these Jewish Christian agitators in such letters as Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, Timothy and Titus. They did not always agitate the same form of Christian Judaism. Apparently there were many forms of it in the first century, just as there were many sects within Judaism itself. But these agitators all insisted that some aspect of Jewish piety or precept must be added to Paul's gospel.

The three major things which characterized the Jewish faith were circumcision, the Sabbath, and the food laws. <sup>1</sup> Since these were the heritage of Jewish Christians, we should not be surprised to find Paul intimating conflict over circumcision (Gal 5:2, 3; Phil. 3:2, 3), the Sabbath (Rom. 14:5, 6; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16) and food (Phil. 3:18, 19; Col. 2:16-23; 1 Tim. 4:1-5) wherever Jewish Christian agitators had penetrated. Paul

is only silent on Sabbatarianism in not urging it on his converts. But he is certainly not silent on Sabbatarianism.

Given the historical situation, it is difficult to argue that the following scriptures are not referring to conflict over the Sabbath:

**You are observing special days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. Gal 4:10, 11**

**Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. Col. 2:16**

**One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. – Rom 14:5, 6**

Since there is good reason to suspect that text without context is pretext, we will examine each of the preceding scriptures in its respective context.

## **Notes and References**

1. See Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, pp. 9-13.

## Chapter 4

### Galatians 4:10, 11

**You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. - Gal. 4:10, 11**

The book of Galatians was possibly Paul's earliest Epistle. A plausible date for writing it is about A.D. 49— just before the Jerusalem conference recorded in Acts 15. This would mean the book was written from Antioch just before Paul attended the conference. Jerusalem Christians had arrived in Antioch contending that unless the Gentile believers were circumcised and lived in subjection to the law like Christian Jews, they could not be saved (Acts 15:1). Some of these Christian Judaizers had also gone to Galatia and had persuaded Paul's converts that they must be circumcised and observe "days and months and seasons and years" (Gal. 4:10; cf. 5:2, 3).

Paul, who has already been involved in the "law" controversy at Antioch, is indignant when he receives the report that Jewish Christian agitators had infiltrated the churches in Galatia. His letter to the Galatians is his most vehement defense of his apostleship and of his gospel. It has been called the Magna Charta of Christian liberty.

In chapter one Paul defends his apostleship. He declares that he was not commissioned to preach by the Jerusalem apostles, but by Christ Himself. The infiltrators had obviously ascribed superiority to the Jerusalem church and its apostles. No doubt they argued that since all the apostles were circumcised and observed the Jewish sacred calendar, why should not the Galatian Christians follow their example?

In chapter two Paul tells the Galatians that when the Jewish Christians demanded that his co-laborer, Titus, be circumcised he refused to yield to their demand. In this he had support of the Jerusalem apostles (Gal. 2:2-5). The Titus incident proves that the infiltrators were not telling the truth. The apostles had not decreed that the Gentiles should be circumcised.

Paul then proceeds to relate the incident at Antioch in which Peter had been bold enough to set aside the law and participate in table fellowship with Gentiles. But when his more conservative Jerusalem brethren who "came from James" arrived in Antioch, Peter broke off table fellowship with the Gentile brethren. His example influenced other Jewish Christians, including Barnabas, to do the same (Gal. 2:11-13).



Paul relates how upset he was over this hypocrisy and how he rebuked Peter to his face for a course of action when denied the gospel (Gal. 2:14). In this context of confrontation with Peter, Paul then launches into the theme of justification by faith apart from the works of the law. His point is essentially that the law cannot justify anyone before God but can only curse and condemn. If anyone relies on keeping the law for acquittal on the day of judgment, 1 he denies the gospel and makes Christ's death of none effect (Gal. 2:16-21).

There are two important things to notice in Paul's argument at this point:

1. He shifts his argument away from circumcision in particular to the law in general. All parties in the circumcision dispute well understood that circumcision was merely a sign or token of subjection to the law (Rom. 2:25; Gal. 5:3). The real issue was whether Gentile believers should submit to the yoke of the Jewish law.

2. The word *law* (*nomos*), repeatedly used in Galatians 2-4, is the Greek counterpart of the Old Testament word *Torah*. It does not refer exclusively to the ceremonial law or exclusively to the moral law. It means the entire law or legal system which was given to Israel through the Mosaic administration (see Gal. 3:10-13, 17, 19, 24, 25; 4:21, 22, where it is manifestly impossible to restrict the term "law" to either ceremonies or ethical precepts).

We today may make a distinction between moral and ceremonial law, and this distinction may be theologically valid. But we should not assume that the men of Bible times used our modern thought forms. To the Jew there were 613 commandments in the Torah, and they were all regarded as moral duties since they were commanded by God. Nowhere does Paul give us a formula or a list to inform us which Old Testament laws are moral and which are ceremonial. 2 Galatians 2-4 is concerned with the entire corpus of law embodied in the Jewish legal system.

There are two reasons why it is vital to see that Paul embraces the law as a whole:

1. It is essential to his argument about justification by the work of Christ alone. If we suppose that Paul merely has the ritual law in view, we could conclude that, while keeping the ritual law plays no part in our acceptance with God on the Day of Judgment, keeping the moral law does. 3 But we gain nothing if we run from the bear of ritualism only to be met by the lion of moralism. Salvation by a good character can be a more subtle form of legalism than salvation by ritualism. By using the word *law* to include the entire law, Paul excludes all legalism.

2. The wholistic use-of the word *law* is vital to Paul's entire approach to Christian ethics. The Jerusalem infiltrators apparently thought they could be selective with the law. But Paul was too logical and too good a theologian to allow this. Even his

rabbinical training had taught him that a breach of one part of the law was a breach of all of it. 4 He knew that the law pronounces a curse on those who fail to keep it in its entirety: "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (Gal. 3:10). Since circumcision is a token of accepting the yoke of the law, Paul presses this point with ruthless logic: "Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law" (Gal. 5:3). If the law must be kept, it must be kept in its entirety— all or nothing. The other side of the argument is equally valid. If any part of the law is abolished, it is all abolished— again all or nothing. 5

The Jerusalem infiltrators had doubtless urged reverence for the law on the ground of its great antiquity. Was it not given on Sinai at the birth of the Hebrew nation? Paul, however, meets this argument by showing that his gospel can claim even greater antiquity. "The gospel", he says, was "announced....in advance to Abraham", 430 years before the giving of the law (Gal. 3:8, 17). Moreover, the inheritance was based on a gracious promise rather than on a reward for keeping the law (Gal. 3:16-18; cf. Rom. 4:13-16).

The question naturally arises: Why was the law necessary at all if the covenant of promise was complete 430 years before the dispensation of the law began? Paul answers that the law was an emergency and temporary measure until the coming of the Messianic age:

**What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promised referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator however does not represent just one party; but God is one.**

**Is the law, therefore opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.**

**Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. – Gal. 3:19-25**

Even as a rabbi, Paul had learned that the age of law was to be succeeded by the age of the Messiah. 6

**If the "Days of the Messiah" have commenced, those of the Torah came to their close. On the other hand, if the Law, the Torah, still retained its validity, it was proclaimed thereby that the Messiah had not yet arrived. 7**

In Galatians 3: 24 Paul likens the law to the Greek *paidagogos*, which is variously translated "schoolmaster" (KJV), "tutor" (NASB, NEB), "custodian" (RSV), "guardian"

(Beck, Jerusalem). These terms do not all accurately reflect the meaning of *paidagogos*. In an excellent essay on "The Law as *Paidagogos*", J.W. MacGorman says:

The term represents a combination of two Greek words: *pais* meaning "boy" and *agogos*, "leader". Thus it literally means boy-leader. It designated the man, usually a household slave, to whom the father of Graeco-Roman society entrusted the upbringing of his son. He attended the boy wherever he went, providing the needs, guidance, and protection. He exercised constant oversight of him from childhood to maturity and had authority to administer discipline as required. He took the boy to the schoolmaster (*didaskalos*) but was not the teacher himself. A.W.F. Blunt indicated that he was generally represented on vases and the like with a stick in his hand. In the school situation this made certain that the boy had a mind for learning. His task was to see to it that the boy negotiated the years from childhood to manhood in such a way as to be ready to take his place in society as a mature and responsible person. 8

MacGorman goes on to show that in one of Socrates' dialogues:

...the *paidagogos* was the slave whom a well-to-do man had placed in charge of his son. He was to continue in this responsibility until the son attained the desired level of maturity and wisdom. He was not the teacher but rather took the boy to his teacher (*didaskaloī*). However, this one task should not be overdrawn to obscure the fact that he exercised a general supervision of the boy. 9

There is no English word that adequately translates *paidagogos*, for no one in our culture performs his function. The choice either remains to transliterate the word with a brief marginal explanation or to settle for some functionally descriptive term that is only an approximation. If the latter course is chosen, preference should be given to the terms that are *custodial* (e.g., "custodian", "guardian", "attendant",) rather than *educative* (e.g. "schoolmaster", "tutor", "instructor", or even "pedagogue").

Not only does this seem more consonant with the role of the *paidagogos* in ancient Graeco-Roman society, but also it draws support from the immediate context in Galatians. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:23, "Before this faith came, we were being kept under guard by the law, being confined unto the faith that was about to be revealed" (author's translation). The verb translated "we were being kept under guard" (*phroureo*) was used in Philippians 4:7 to mean "guard" in a protective sense. But here it means "guard" in the sense of holding in custody. This is confirmed by the following participle, "being confined" (*sugkleio menoī*), which occurs in the New Testament in a restrictive sense only. Thus Paul taught that before Christ came they were being held in custody under the law. It was in this connection that he introduced the analogy of the *paidagogos* to portray the function of the law (Gal. 3:24-25).

Additional support for this interpretation is found in Galatians 4:1-7, where Paul likened the law to the guardians and trustees appointed to the custody of a minor child. Though destined to receive the full inheritance at the time set by the father, the son differed nothing from a slave during the years of his nonage. Once again in the application of the analogy to redemptive history, the coming of Christ marked the end of the law's guardianship: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). Bertram added, "Sonship as immediacy to the Father is rather different from dependence on even the best pedagogue."

And what of the law now? It has fulfilled its purpose nobly. Men who have been justified by faith in Christ and who have entered upon their full inheritance as sons no longer have need of the restrictive custody of the law. The attempt of the Judaizers to extend the tenure of the *paidagogos* beyond the time of Christ's coming was to lose sight of the law's provisional status and preparatory function. It

was to nullify the grace of God and to render meaningless the death of Christ on the cross (Gal. 2:21).  
10

Whereas Galatians 3:24 likens the temporary nature of the law to a *paidagogos*, Galatians 4:1-7 likens it to the guardians and trustees of an infant son:

What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Just as we must govern and discipline our little children by all kinds of rules and regulations ("Be in bed by nine o'clock," "Don't leave the yard unless you tell us where you are going," "Eat all your vegetables before dessert," etc.), so the fledgling Hebrew nation, designated as God's little son (Hosea 11:1-4), had to be governed and disciplined by all kinds of arbitrary rules and regulations laid down by Moses. Paul says that this subjection to the law was a kind of "slavery under the basic principles of the world" (Gal. 4:3). The word translated "basic principles" is from the Greek word *stoicheia*, which means "elements." The New International Version evidently takes the expression to mean elementary regulations, rudimentary rules, ABC's or kindergarten stuff. 11 The Mosaic Law bound the Jew to regulations about food and drink, holy days and feast days, places of worship, planting and tilling, borrowing and repaying. Luther even says that Moses "goes so far that some of the prescriptions are to be regarded as foolish and useless." 12 Perhaps this comment is too harsh, but Paul's estimate of the strictures of the law is not much better. In Galatians 4:9 he dares to call them "weak and miserable *stoicheia*."

Of course, all this was a severe slap in the face for the Jewish-Christian infiltrators and their doting listeners. The false teachers had no doubt presented their "gospel" of subjection to the law as advanced teaching for those who wanted to go on to perfection (Gal. 3:3). But Paul utterly derides it as returning to the infants' class. He had already brought them the advanced teaching of the gospel, which called them to the freedom and responsibility of being grown-up sons, but now they wanted to return to regulations suited for infants.

Then Paul makes an amazing statement which has perplexed some commentators and thrown others off the right exegetical track. "How is it," inquires the apostle of his converts, "that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (Gal. 4:9-11). Before their conversion the Galatians were not Jews but pagans. Some commentators have therefore concluded that Paul accuses them, not

of accepting the Mosaic regulations, but of reverting to their pagan practices. Yet this is inconsistent both with the context of Galatians 4 and with the entire sweep of the Epistle. The false teachers were Jewish Christians who urged that the Galatians should be subject to Jewish rather than pagan institutions. The suggestion that Galatians 4:10 refers to the special days of pagan festivals has been generally discredited, and rightly so, among biblical scholars— e.g.:

**Inasmuch as Paul's argument is entirely directed against Judaism, the days presumably refer to Sabbath days, the months to the days of the new moon, the seasons to the Jewish feasts, and the years to the Sabbath and jubilee year. 13**

**The terms used [in Gal. 4:10] refer to Mosaic regulations. 14**

There is no reason to differ with the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* when it says that the "days" of Galatians 4:10 "are in the first instance Sabbaths, though they include other days too, e.g., the Day of Atonement." 15

There is a final compelling reason to believe that Galatians 4:10 is referring to the Jewish Sabbath laws. Galatians 4:10 and its context are similar to Colossians 2:16 and its context. Both Epistles are dealing with the problem of Jewish-Christian intruders. In both passages Paul derides submission to the "*stoicheia* of the world" (Gal. 4:3; Col. 2:20). And in both passages he talks about the observance of days, months and years.

### **Galatians 4:3, 10**

***Stoicheia* of the world . . . special days and months and seasons and years.**

### **Colossians 2:16, 20**

**. . . a religious festival [Yearly], a New Moon celebration [monthly] or a Sabbath day [weekly]. . . *stoicheia* of this world .**

But how can Paul accuse the Galatians of returning to pagan slavery when they were not intending to go back to the observance of pagan festivals but forward to the observance of God-given Mosaic regulations? Paul discerns the identity between Jewish slavery to Mosaic regulations (Gal. 4:3) and Gentile slavery to pagan regulations. Both Jews and pagans were in slavery under the *stoicheia* of this world, and both needed to be redeemed from this "weak and miserable" servitude.

But again the question intrudes: How can Paul say that the observance of God-given Jewish regulations is equivalent to the observance of pagan regulations? We will try to recapture the thrust of Paul's thought in the following comments.



Pagan man was incurably superstitious because he was incurably religious. His was a religion of taboos about food and drink, about days and places— all carnal, external and childish elements (*stoicheia*) of this world. He had his sacrifices, superstitious rites, holy shrines, lucky and unlucky days, omens, bodily afflictions and useless prescriptions for moral improvement or the manipulation of the gods. God knew that the Jew was no better. In his sinful immaturity, he was also incurably committed to external rituals, visible shrines, bodily exercises, food taboos and days that were determined to be good or bad by the arbitrary movement of planetary bodies. So God took the Jews where they were and gave them regulations which were a concession to their infantile stage of development. Since they must have these visible, carnal and external *stoicheia* of this world, God would give them rituals, gorgeously-robed priests, altars, a temple, incense, sacrifices, regulations about food and drink, as well as an elaborate sacred calendar. But God would consecrate these things to become ordinances to remember His mighty acts and to be shadows of His coming salvation in Christ. They were only "weak and miserable *stoicheia*," "external regulations applying until the time of the new order" (Heb. 9:10), or as Peter said, "a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). The law of God as administered by Moses was an emergency and temporary measure, a *paidagogos*, *stoicheia* of this world to prepare a people for the new era of the gospel.

What are these "weak and miserable principles" that the Galatian Christians were subjecting themselves to? Paul names some of them in Galatians 4:10: "Days you are carefully observing and months and seasons and years!" (Lenski's translation). In Galatians 5 the apostle lets freedom ring: "Christ has set us free.... Do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery," he appeals to the Galatians (Gal. 5:1). This yoke is subjection to the law, of which circumcision is the sign (Gal. 5:1, 3; cf. Acts 15:10). Then the apostle makes this great statement, which expresses the entire sum and substance of Christian duty: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6).

Faith and love are everything— they are the whole duty of man. This theme is reiterated everywhere in Paul's Epistles (Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4, 5; 1Thess. 1:3; 3:6; 2Thess. 1:3; 1 Tim. 1:14; 2 Tim. 1:13). This is the real law behind the law. It is the eternal law behind the Law of Moses. Whoever understands Moses knows that the real intent of the law is to enjoin faith and love. Luther is bold enough to say that all laws ought to be broken if they conflict with the demands of faith and love— and he even gives examples from the Old Testament to show that sometimes "kings, priests, and heads of the people often transgressed the laws boldly, at the demand of faith and love." 16

At times this eternal law behind the temporal law can be glimpsed in the teaching of the prophets. They often deride the externalism of Israel's religion and call for a truly



spiritual religion of the heart. But what is only hinted in the prophets breaks through with transparent clarity in the new age of the gospel. Faith in God's work for us in Christ and love for the brother are all that God has ever required. This is what He was trying to inculcate even in the legal system given to the Jews. The sins of the New Testament are sins of two kinds— sins against faith (Rom. 14:23) and sins against love (James 4:17).

The apostle John also tells us that God's commandments consist of faith in Jesus Christ and love for one another. When Jesus instituted the new-covenant supper with His disciples, He explained what was expected of them. As Moses wrote out what was required of the people in a book before he sealed it with blood, so Jesus outlined what was required of His people before He sealed the new covenant with His blood. 17 Participation in Christ's body and blood essentially demands two things: "Trust in God; trust also in Me.... Love each other as I have loved you" (John 14:1; 15:12). And in his Epistle John says, "this is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He commanded us" (1 John 3:23). John warns the church that the spirit of antichrist is to deny Christ and to hate the brother (1 John 2) – i.e., to sin against faith and love.

Then Paul proceeds in Galatians 5 to utter his great Christian paradox about the freedom of faith and the servitude of love: "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13). The Galatians are urged to concentrate on love, for evidently their preoccupation with external regulations had led them away from what we have called the real law behind the law. Thus, Paul says:

**The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.**

**So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit, what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.**

**The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace; patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. – Gal. 5:14- 23.**

Then in chapter 6 the apostle uses the word "law" in a new way altogether. Throughout the Epistle "law" has been used mainly in a negative sense. Paul chides the Galatians for wanting to be "burdened" with it. Now he points the Galatians in the direction of a better burden: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill

the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). The old law is a yoke which is impossible to bear (Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1), but the new law of Christ is an easy yoke and its burden is light (Matt. 11:30).

At first glance (and indeed on the level that Paul has to address the foolish Galatians) there is a great contrast between the Law of Moses and the law of Christ. This, however, is only because of the veil upon the heart when Moses is read (2 Cor. 3:15). The prophets knew that the real spirit and intent of Moses was justice, mercy and faith. The gospel dispensation, with its new commandment (1 John 2:7), is not really the repudiation of the legal dispensation but its fulfillment (Matt. 5:17; Rom. 3:31; 8: 4; Gal. 5:14).

## Summary

The Sabbatarian will not find any support in the book of Galatians. Neither can he derive any comfort from the supposed argument from silence. As we have seen Galatians is not silent on the issue of enforcing the observance of days (any day) on the consciences of people. The Sabbath laws are part of the Jewish legal system which Paul simply designates as "the law". 18

Circumcision is the token of taking the yoke of the law– the entire law. There can be no selectivity with this legal corpus called "the law". Either the Mosaic administration is all binding, or none of it is binding. Paul is clear on which option he takes. The age of the law has been superseded by the age of the Messiah.

The dispensation of the law was an emergency, temporary and preparatory measure. Subjection to it was a form of slavery necessary for God's infant people but contrary to God's will for those mature full-grown sons by the coming of the gospel. Observing days or months or years of the Jewish calendar (or, for that matter any calendar) as if this were in some way necessary for justification at God's judgment seat is a denial of the gospel and a form of slavery to "weak and miserable principles."

Faith and love are all that God requires. Of course, the New Testament gives concrete instruction on the meaning of faith and love in light of Christ's death and resurrection, but nowhere does it suggest that faith and love mean adherence to the letter of the Old Testament Sabbath laws.

## Notes and References

1. This is essentially the meaning of "justification" in Paul. It is an eschatological word which relates to the verdict of acquittal on the day of judgment (Rom. 2:13). Believers have this future acquittal in the present by faith (Matt. 12:36 37; John 5:24).

2. It is difficult to analyze the Law of Moses on the assumption that we must distinguish which laws are ceremonial and which are moral. Such a procedure leads to endless arguments over food laws, Sabbath laws, tithing laws, etc. Paul warned Titus about "foolish controversies . . . and arguments and quarrels about the law" (Titus 3:9).
3. We must remember that justification is not merely a matter of Christian initiation but is the verdict of acceptance on the Day of Judgment.
4. See F. F. Bruce. Paul: *Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p. 51.
5. "One could not pick and choose among the ordinances of the law; it was all or nothing. The law pronounced an explicit curse on all who failed to keep it in its entirety" (ibid. p. 181).
6. See ibid., pp. 70, 181, 190.
7. L. Baeck, "The Faith of Paul", *Journal of Jewish Studies* 3 (1952): 106 quoted in ibid., p.70
8. J.W. MacGorman, "The Law as Paidagogos: A Study of Pauline Analogy", in Huber L. Drumwright and Curtis Vaughan, eds., *New Testament Studies*", p. 106.
9. Ibid., p.108
10. Ibid. pp. 110
11. *Stoicheia* may simply refer to elements such as food, places, times (the calendar and movement of planets), etc.
12. Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the Old Testament," *Luther's Works*, 35:239.
13. Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, p. 162. See also his comments in footnote 6.
14. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistles to The Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy to Titus and to Philemon*, p. 213.
15. Eduard Lohse, art. "The Sabbath in the New Testament," in Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:30, footnote 232.
16. Luther. "Prefaces to the Old Testament," p. 240.
17. Much of Christ's final discourse to His disciples, recorded in John 13-16, is taken from the closing chapters of Deuteronomy. The words of Jesus are reminiscent of the covenant renewal which Moses made with the people before his death. John 13-16 is therefore covenantal. Here the terms of the new covenant are presented.
18. No Sabbath law appears before the time of the Exodus and the giving of the covenant to Israel.

## Chapter 5

### Colossians 2:16

**Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. – Col. 2:16.**

The Colossians were a church of Gentile Christians in Asia Minor, not far from the church of Laodicea. In fact, Paul asked that his letter to the Colossians be sent to the Laodiceans. Like most of the churches in that region, the Colossians were susceptible to the influence of Jewish Christianity.

While there was a basic similarity between the Jewish-Christian intruders in Galatia and Colosse, there were also some differences. This should not surprise us when we remember that first-century Judaism was divided into many sects and exhibited a profuse variety of thought. There were Pharisees, Essenes, Hellenists, Zealots and Apocalyptists, with divisions among these groups. Many of these became Christians and, not surprisingly, brought to Christianity the coloring of their particular background. For example, it is recognized that the Jewish-Christian intruders in Galatia had been Pharisees. At the end of the last century, the English scholar, Lightfoot, identified the Colossian intruders as Jewish Christians who had been Essenes. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and further scholarly research in recent years, have essentially confirmed Lightfoot's analysis of the Colossian error. Research has also suggested that the Colossian error was an amalgamation of Jewish legalism with oriental astrology or early Gnosticism. 1

In Colossians 2 Paul refers to the interest of the Colossian believers in ascetic dietary regulations, in visions and angels, and to their devotion to the Sabbath and the Jewish calendar. We know that the following features were characteristic of Essene-Jewish Christianity:

1. They were generally vegetarian, and some even forbade the eating of eggs. They urged their ascetic dietary practices as aids in reaching spiritual perfection. Unfortunately, they devoted more time to the relative spiritual value of food and drink than they devoted to Christ.

2. As Apocalyptists, with their spiritual roots in the Qumran community, they were preoccupied with such things as the order of the cosmos, visions and speculative information about angels.

3. They had an elaborate angelology, which partly reflected the influence of oriental astrology. Yet we should be careful not to exaggerate non-Jewish influences,

because Jewish Apocalyptists also had a history of interest in angelology. They believed that angels participated in giving the law (a view which Paul himself shared [Gal. 3:19]). It was thought that angels guarded the decrees of the law and punished offenders. They may also have thought that angels were in charge of the movement of planetary bodies and of the recurring seasons. Reverence for angelic powers was expressed by attention to taboos about food and drink and by careful observance of the Jewish sacred calendar, especially the Sabbath.

The false teachers at Colosse directed the attention of the believers to ascetic practices, visions, angels, Sabbaths and the calendar. By these means they were supposed to enjoy a "fullness" (Greek: *pleroma*) in their Christian faith which they had not yet attained by the gospel received from Paul (Col. 1:19; 2:9).

The apostle responds to this false teaching by an unexcelled exaltation of the person and work of Christ. It is in Him that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells (Col. 1:19; 2:9). It is by His work on the cross that God reconciles all things to Himself and presents all believers holy and free from all accusation (Col. 1:2-23). Paul affirms that God commissioned him "to present to you the word of God in its fullness" (Col. 1:25). The Christ who is present among the congregation in His gospel is the church's hope of glory, because it is through Him that every man is presented perfect (Col. 1:27, 28). Those who stand on this gospel and continue in this faith (Col. 1:23; 2:6) lack absolutely nothing, because in Christ are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3) and all the fullness of the Deity (Col. 2:9). Believers "have been given fullness in Christ" (Col. 2:10). Christ is over every power and authority (Col. 2:10). There is no need to fear, placate or reverence angelic powers.

Then Paul declares that the real circumcision has taken place by the church's baptism into Christ's death and resurrection (Col. 2:11, 12) 2 He continues with this passage, so relevant to the Sabbatarian question:

**When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.**

**Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of things that were to come; the reality however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.**

**Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to**



perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. – Col. 2: 13-23.

Paul prefaces his thrust against the ascetic Jewish visionaries with a statement of Christ's victory over our three greatest enemies. First, "He forgave us all our sins" (Col. 2:13). Second, He "canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross" (Col 2:14). Third, He "disarmed the powers and authorities" that threatened to enslave us (Col. 2:15). The cross is declared to be the means of Christ's threefold triumph.

The second aspect of Christ's threefold triumph now demands our closest attention. What is the meaning of Colossian 2:14: ". . . having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross."

The Puritans, who were great Sabbatarians, made valiant efforts to prove that this passage refers only to the ritual law. They were pressed to do this in order to maintain their defense of Sabbatarianism and their opposition to antinomianism. Traditionally, Seventh-day Adventists have also followed this interpretation. 3

The problem with such an interpretation is that Paul does not make a sharp distinction between the moral and ceremonial law. There is, of course, a distinction between temporary external rituals and eternal ethical principles. But as we have already seen from our survey of the book of Galatians, it is characteristic of Paul to deal with the law in its entirety. Nowhere does he give us a formula to determine what parts of the Old Testament law are moral and what parts are ceremonial.

More recently in the history of interpretation, some commentators have seen in Colossians 2:14 a reference to a bond of indebtedness. They point out that the expression translated "written code" comes from the Greek word *cheirographon*, which means a handwritten document or some kind of legal bond. Scholars have discovered instances where the word *cheirographon* was used in ancient times to refer to a signed bill of indebtedness (a kind of IOU). It should be pointed out, however, that most scholars who suggest this interpretation recognize that the document of indebtedness and the regulations of the law are the same. 4

Adventist scholar, Samuele Bacchiocchi, argues that the *cheirographon* of Colossians 2:14 does not refer to the law at all but is simply "the instrument for the remembrance of sin" or "the record of our sins."5 Bacchiocchi acknowledges that if this Pauline passage does refer to the ordinances of the Mosaic Law, "there exists a legitimate possibility that the Sabbath could be included among the ordinances nailed

to the cross." 6 But he thinks that his interpretation of cheirographon relieves Sabbatarianism of any embarrassment.

There is, however, a grave weakness in Bacchiocchi's argument about the word *cheirographon*. The meaning of *cheirographon* as a document of indebtedness is only one meaning of the word in non-biblical Greek. Lenski points out that *cheirographon* does not always refer to a debtor's bond but may refer to a labor contract, to a document giving authority to act or even to business agreements. 7 It is misleading, therefore, to say that *cheirographon* means an instrument for remembering or recording a debt. *It simply means a written document*. The kind of written document referred to in Colossians 2:14 must be determined by the context.

We are not left in doubt as to the kind of written document Paul is referring to. The *cheirographon* consists of "regulations" ("ordinances," "decrees," from the Greek word *dogmasin*). Colossians 2:14 is not describing a document we have signed, much less written, but something which has been written in divine decrees. The same word *dogmasin* appears in Ephesians 2:15, where Paul is obviously discussing the Mosaic ministration of the law. That Colossians 2:14 and Ephesians 2:15 are concerned with the same document is indicated by the following comparison: 8

### **Colossians 2: 14**

**... having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross.**

### **Ephesians 2:15**

**... by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations .**

When we examine the context of Colossians 2:14, we see that it is preceded by a reference to circumcision and is followed by a reference to festivals, New Moons and Sabbaths. Paul then calls these regulations "principles [*stoicheia*] of this world" (Col. 2:20), just as he did in Galatians 4. Furthermore, Paul is writing to oppose Jewish Christians who are imposing the law on Gentile Christians. The New International Version is therefore justified in translating the phrase *cheirographon tois dogmasin* as "the written code, with its regulations."

Bacchiocchi sees an overwhelming objection to this straightforward interpretation of Colossians 2:14. How can God be represented as crucifying the holy Mosaic Law? (Rom. 7:12). How can guilt be removed by destroying law codes? 9 With such questions Bacchiocchi allows his theological presuppositions to override the plain sense of the passage. We would suggest, however, that the problem is solved, not by qualifying or softening what the apostle says, but by letting Paul state his case in his own way, irrespective of what that does to our presuppositions. We must resist the

temptation to hack and hew the words of Paul in order to fit them into our own system. However contrary it may sound to our theological ethics, however much we may fear antinomianism, we cannot escape Paul's declaration that the regulations of the Mosaic Law have been nailed to the cross. If this is difficult for the reader to accept, we appeal to him to be patient, for that is not the entire Pauline picture of the law question— as we will see in the next chapter.

The third aspect of Christ's victory is His triumph over "the powers and authorities"(Col. 2:15). These, together with sin and the law, are represented as holding us in bondage. In view of our Lord's threefold triumph, the apostle then declares:

**Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ....**

**Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?" These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. – Col. 2 16, 17; 20-23.**

The context demands that we understand "a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day" as the regulations of the Jewish sacred calendar. The Puritans, and the Seventh-day Adventists following them, have argued that Paul is not talking about the Sabbath of the Decalogue but only about the Sabbaths of the ceremonial law. Aside from theological presuppositions which make it difficult for them to see that Paul could be talking about the Sabbath, they have "seen" two things in Colossians 2 which seem to justify their position:

1. They argue that there were two types of Sabbaths in the Old Testament— the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue and the ceremonial Sabbaths of the yearly festivals (Lev. 23).

2. They also argue that the Sabbath under consideration in Colossians 2 is "a shadow of the things that were to come" (Col. 2:17). Since the weekly Sabbath was a memorial of creation (Exod. 20:8-11), they argue that it could not be called a "shadow" (Gen. 2:2, 3). Colossians 2:16 must therefore be referring to the ceremonial rest days brought to view in Leviticus 23. 9

These arguments are unsound for the following reasons:

1. The sacred times of Colossians 2:16 are called "a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day." The sequence "implies annual, monthly and weekly

observances." 11 Bacchiocchi agrees, even saying that this is "the unanimous consensus of commentators." 12

2. This same annual, monthly and weekly sequence appears five times in the Septuagint— i.e., 2 Chron. 2:4; 31:3; Neh. 10:33; Ezek. 45:17; Hosea 2:11.

3. Whenever the Old Testament links the New Moon celebration with the Sabbath, as in Colossians 2:16, it is referring to the weekly Sabbath (2 Kings 4:23; 1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; Neh. 10:33; Isa. 1:13; 66:23; Ezek. 45:17; 46:1; Hosea 2:11; Amos 8:5).

4. When the Old Testament refers to the yearly Sabbaths, such as the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23), it calls them "a Sabbath of rest," which the Septuagint consistently translates with the compound Greek expression *Sabbata sabbaton*. Colossians 2:16 simply has *sabbaton*, the same word which Matthew 28:1 uses for the weekly Sabbath. 13

5. It has been argued that since Paul calls the Sabbath of Colossians 2:16 "a shadow of the things that were to come", he could not be referring to the Sabbath of the Decalogue. But Colossians 1:16 has already declared that all things were made by Christ and exist for His sake. Adam himself was "a pattern of the One to come" (Rom. 5:14). Of course, the Sabbath, like all the great festivals recorded in the Old Testament, was instituted to point back to the mighty acts of God in creation or in the Exodus. But they not only pointed back; they also pointed forward to God's new creation and new act of deliverance at the end of time. It was common for the Jews to speak of the Sabbath as a foretaste of the unending Sabbath of the age to come. 14 Hebrews 4 is true to this tradition when it typologically links the seventh-day rest with the rest offered us in the gospel.

We cannot, therefore, avoid the conclusion that Colossians 2:16 is referring to the weekly Sabbath. Bacchiocchi agrees with this but then uses a new approach in defending Sabbatarianism. He argues that Paul does not condemn the keeping of the Sabbath as such, but only its perversion by Jewish restrictions and oriental astrology.

Here Bacchiocchi is partially correct. As we will see in the next chapter, Paul did not condemn the Roman Christians who kept a Sabbath to the Lord (Rom. 14:5, 6). The apostle, however, does not approve making the Sabbath celebration a law which is binding on the conscience. Paul does not merely tell the Colossians that the perverted regulations of the false teachers were nailed to the cross. He cuts all the ground from under their feet by saying that even the divine decrees respecting the Sabbath have been canceled. It is as if Paul were saying in Colossians 2:14, 16: "If God has canceled the regulations of His written code, you do not have to submit to the regulations supposedly imposed by angels or their agents."

Furthermore, it is the Old Testament Sabbath rather than the perverted Sabbath of Jewish ascetics which is "a shadow of the things that were to come." Paul is not merely saying that the Jewish perversions of the Sabbath are not binding on the conscience. He says that the Sabbath which was a true shadow of Christ is no longer binding on the conscience.

There is a hint that the Colossian intruders were teaching that angelic powers governed the course of the planets and other heavenly bodies. Observing the Jewish calendar was therefore a token of submission to their authority. But even if one does not believe that angels govern the movement of heavenly bodies, does not one's subjection to a calendar in religious matters mean an infantile subjection to "the elements of the world" (Gal. 4:1-5, KJV). Does this kind of subjection do justice to the freedom of those who by the gospel have come of age and who, by virtue of their union with Christ, have dominion over the created order? (Gen. 1:28, 29). Is not Paul telling us in Galatians 4 and Colossians 2 that the consciences of those who have graduated from the infants' class are not ruled by the movement of planetary bodies or regulated by the calendar?

## Conclusion

We must conclude that the great teachers of the Christian church, from Ignatius to Jerome and from Augustine to Luther and Calvin, had valid reasons for saying that the Old Testament Sabbath laws are not binding on the Christian's conscience. They simply accepted Colossians 2:16 as the final word on this matter.

## Notes and References

1. See C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, p. 154.
2. This is another indication that Paul's opponents were Jewish.
3. See Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1958) p. 365
4. See Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:494; E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, pp. 237-38.
5. Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp 350-51 .
6. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
7. See R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, p 114.
8. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* presents a more sober explanation of Colossians 2:14 than Bacchiocchi does. It acknowledges that Colossians 2:14 and Ephesians 2:15 are both discussing the Mosaic law. See Francis D. Nichol, ed. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:204.



9. See Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, p 348

10. See Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:204: White. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 48, 365. It is interesting that on this point Bacchiocchi dissents from the position of *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* and Ellen G. White. He acknowledges that Colossians 2:16 is a reference to the weekly Sabbath, and he presents arguments which devastate the traditional Sabbatarian explanation of this passage.

11. John J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background*, p. 89

12. Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* p 358

13. *Sabbaton* is only one of a number of Greek words which are plural in form but sometimes singular in meaning. No informed scholar can seriously consider the argument that the *sabbaton* of Colossians 2:16 is plural and therefore must refer to the ceremonial Sabbaths of Leviticus 16. Bacchiocchi adamantly declares "Colossians 2:16 cannot refer to any of the annual ceremonial Sabbaths" (ibid., p. 360) An Adventist scholar must be bold to contradict Ellen G. White so obviously!

14. See Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:8.

## Chapter 6

### Romans 14:5

**One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. – Rom 14:5**

The book of Romans was probably written about ten years after the book of Galatians. Most commentators seem to think that Romans is an expansion of the message to the Galatians. A difference exists among some scholars as to whether Galatians or Romans should be considered the primary statement of the Pauline thesis on law and grace.

It is not difficult to demonstrate, however, that Paul's treatment of law in the book of Romans is in some respects quite different from his treatment of law in the book of Galatians. Considerable confusion exists because it is too readily assumed that one book is merely an expansion of the other.

Paul's treatment of the law in Galatians is overwhelmingly negative. He says that the law was introduced as an emergency and temporary measure 430 years after the covenant of promise was given to Abraham. The law was a *paidagogos* whose tenure of office terminated at the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:19). It was a guardian during Israel's infancy. Its regulations held the people "in slavery under the basic principles of the world" until Christ came to redeem them (Gal. 4:1-5).

The essential thrust of Colossian is no different. The "written code, with its regulations," was nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14). Ephesians 2:14, 15 says essentially the same thing:

**For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.**

In this scripture Paul is probably alluding to the screen in the precincts of the temple court which divided the Jew from the Gentile. The law gave the Jew occasion to despise the Gentile, and the Gentile occasion to hate the Jew. The three major aspects of the law which made this separation conspicuous were circumcision, the Sabbath and the food laws. The apostle declares that Christ has removed the hostility between Jew and Gentile by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations." The entire law or legal dispensation is here designated, for as we have seen, there is no selectivity with the law in Paul.

In 2 Corinthians Paul again confronts the problem of Jewish-Christian infiltrators (2 Cor. 11:22). In chapter 3 he declares the ministration of the letter, "written . . . on tablets of stone," has been superseded by the ministration of the Spirit, "written . . . on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:3-11).

The tone of the Pauline Pastoral Epistles is quite similar to 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians. Paul is still waging his battle with Jewish Christians on the one hand and with libertines on the other— but more with the former than the latter. The goal of his teaching, the apostle declares, "is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). Then he adds:

**Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.**

**We know that the law is good if a man uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for good men but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which He entrusted to me. – 1 Tim. 1: 6-11.**

Throughout his letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul clearly emphasizes faith and love, expressed in righteousness, godliness, endurance, gentleness, humility, etc. (1 Tim. 1:14; 4:12; 6:11, 12; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:18; 3:10; Titus 2:2, 11-14; 3:1, 2). He warns the young pastors against "quarreling about words" (2 Tim. 2:14), "foolish and stupid arguments" (2 Tim. 2:23), "the circumcision group" (Titus 1:10), "Jewish myths" (Titus 1:14) and "quarrels about the law" (Titus 3:9). Apparently the "meaningless talk" which he continually attacks in these letters comes from those who "want to be teachers of the law" (1 Tim. 1:6-11).

Thus, in the context of opposing the Jewish Christians who insist on urging the law upon Gentile believers (which is the background of 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), Paul's estimate of the law is consistently negative.

In the book of Romans, however, we find an altogether different appraisal of the law. Here the apostle has many positive statements to make about it. Far from saying that the law is abolished (Eph. 2:14, 15) or nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14), Romans declares that the law will measure the righteousness of all men on the Day of Judgment. Only those who attain to what the law requires will be justified (Rom. 2:12-16). Far from abolishing the law, those who place their faith in the great transaction at Calvary "uphold the law" (Rom. 3:31). The apostle can even say, "In my inner being I delight in God's law" (Rom. 7:22; cf. Ps 119). In Romans 8 Paul proceeds to say that God did for us in Christ what the law could not do, "in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3, 4, RSV). Then follows the most positive statement of all: "The

sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Rom. 8:7). The inference here is that the spiritual man is one who is subject to the law. This hardly sounds like Paul is saying that the law is abolished!

How do we account for such a positive estimate of the law in view of what Paul has said in the book of Galatians? How can the apostle chide the Galatians for wanting to be subject to the law but tell the Romans that those hostile to God are not subject to it?

The answer to this problem will not be found by saying that Paul is disparaging the ceremonial law in Galatians, while he is praising the moral law in Romans. As we have already seen, the apostle does not make a sharp distinction between the ceremonial and moral aspects of the law. Rather, he deals with the law wholistically.

It is disappointing to read the comments on Galatians by most of the scholars in the Reformed tradition. They use the book of Romans to blunt the sharp, cutting edge of the book of Galatians. They do not allow Paul to say what he has to say in Galatians without qualifying it and hedging it about with statements from Romans. It may be theologically correct to say that the law becomes a rule of life for the regenerate believer. There may be truth in the Puritan saying that the law points us to Christ as the way of salvation, and Christ points us back to the law as the rule of duty. But this is not what Paul says in Galatians. Here he says nothing about the law as a rule of life after Christ has come. Rather, he says that the justified have no more use for the *paidagogos*.

On the other hand, those who derive their major thesis on law and grace from the book of Galatians do not do justice to those positive statements on the law in the book of Romans. They are inclined to blunt the sharp edge of Romans by importing comments from the book of Galatians. But we should allow the words of Paul to have their full force in both Galatians and Romans. Truth is never found by blunting the sharp edges of biblical paradox or by finding some middle ground between the two poles. We must accept the sharp truth of apparently opposite perspectives.

This does not mean that truth is a contradiction. There is no contradiction between Galatians and Romans. In Galatians (and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians) Paul is discussing the law as it is ministered in the Mosaic legal system. Here religious and ethical duty, are placed in a rigid written code. Right and wrong are defined by the letter of the law. Conduct is controlled by a multitude of regulations, many of them quite arbitrary. The entire Mosaic ministration of law is depicted as an infantile rule-book approach to right and wrong which adult gospel believers must no longer tolerate.

On the other hand, Romans is not written to a Gentile church but to a mixed Jewish-Gentile community. There were as many Jews in Rome during the first century as there were in Jerusalem (about 50,000). One branch of the church in Rome was composed of Jewish Christians. Paul evidently respected their sensitivities about the law too much to approach the law question as he did in his letter to the Galatians; He began his letter to the Romans by focusing on the law as a divine *standard* rather than the law as a code of regulations. By "standard" we do not mean a rule book which defines precise regulations about where to worship, when to worship, what to eat, etc. This is not the kind of standard Paul refers to in Romans, for he says that even the Gentiles, "who do not have the law [as a written standard] . . . show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts" (Rom. 2:14, 15). It is obvious that Gentiles did not have such external things as Sabbath laws, food laws, sacrificial laws or many other Mosaic regulations written on their hearts. But they did have written on their hearts the consciousness of their responsibility to God, in whose image they were made. These positive statements about the law, therefore, are not referring to the regulations of the Mosaic code but to the real intent or spirit of the law (Rom 7:6).

Whether in written form (as given to the Jew) or in unwritten form (as possessed by the Gentiles), the law is an unrelenting *ought* which accuses those who fail to live up to its demand. Behind the Mosaic regulations was the oft-repeated divine command, 'You must be holy, for I am holy.' The Mosaic ministration made one thing clear— the law was unrelenting in its demand for total fidelity to the will of God. Yet even the conscience of the pagan was an echo of the divine justice which will require an unblemished life on the Day of Judgment. Justice requires of man just what it has always required— life of perfect conformity to the character of God.

The human predicament is that no one can meet the demands of this divine standard. But the gospel proclaims that such a righteousness can be found by faith in the righteousness of that Substitute Man who lived and died in our place.

The death of Christ does not negate the standard of righteousness demanded by the law in either its written or unwritten form, but it pays tribute to the law. The gospel of Christ does not blunt the keen edge of this perfect standard but sharpens it far beyond its expression under the Mosaic ministration. The timeless ethical principles found in the Old Testament are taken up and given great depth and spirituality in the New Testament. When the New Testament demands faith and love as the whole duty of man, it does not present a new standard but the true intent of the Law of Moses. The righteous requirements of the law which are fulfilled in the believer (Rom. 8:4) are not meticulous compliance with the letter of the Mosaic regulations. In Romans 7:1-7 (a passage which comes closest to the thought of Galatians) Paul says that he has become dead to this kind of obedience by the death of Christ. He now serves "in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6). That new



way is the way of faith and love, which is developed in the practical instruction given in Romans 12-15.

Here is a subjection to the law of God on the part of the believer, but it is not a subjection to the letter of the Mosaic code. There is a higher kind of righteousness than compliance with the letter of a written code. Before his conversion Paul was married to the letter of the law. Such devotion to the law made Paul a blasphemer and persecutor of the church. When Peter withdrew from table fellowship with the Gentiles, he did nothing against the written code. In fact, he was pressured by the Jerusalem delegation to comply with the stipulations of the written code. Yet Paul rebuked his behavior because it was "not acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). On the other hand, David and his men ate the shewbread, which was forbidden by the letter of the Mosaic code. And Jehoiada carried out an armed insurrection against wicked queen Athaliah on the Sabbath day (2 Kings 11:5, 7, 9). These actions were contrary to the letter of the Mosaic code, but they are recorded in the Bible as deeds of righteousness. Luther cites other Old Testament examples of men who boldly transgressed the written code at the demand of faith and love. It is possible to obey the letter of the law and do evil (like Peter) or to transgress the letter of the law and do good (like David).

A code of regulations cannot adequately cover such things as a hasty temper, a premature judgment, and a spirit of revenge or a lack of humility. Nor can it adequately enjoin the nobler attributes of the human spirit. For example, parents may impose rules of conduct on little children for the purpose of training them to consider others. But a child may comply with these rules without being considerate. A rule book can neither enforce nor produce a good character.

The prophets of the Old Testament are forerunners of Jesus and the apostles in pouring scorn on the religion of externalism. They speak of a new covenant to come in which the true spirit of the law will be written on the heart. But what is only hinted by the prophets is expressed with revolutionary clarity in Paul. Before his conversion the law as a written code was the center of Paul's life. Indeed, he was "married" to it (Rom. 7). But after his experience on the Damascus road, Christ became the center of his life. He then knew that "whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil [which covers the heart when Moses is read] is taken away" (2 Cor. 3:15, 16). He realized that the ministration of Moses, which required compliance with the letter of its regulations, had to pass away and be superseded by the superior ministration of the Spirit. Yet this new way of obedience, which springs from devotion to Christ, does not negate the standard of the law but fulfills it.

The real intent of the Law of Moses was "truth in the inner parts" (Ps. 51:6). The law as a "letter" or "written code" is a "law of sin and death" because it does not restrain sin but actually stimulates all kinds of evil (Rom. 7:8-13). But "the law of the Spirit of

life in Christ Jesus" sets a believer free "from the law of sin and death" in order that the real intent of the law— faith and love— might be realized in his life (Rom. 8:2-4, RSV).

When Paul considers Christian ethics in Romans 12-15, we may call this "the third use of the law" after the fashion of Reformation theology. Any imperative, any "ought," is law. In this sense much law is imposed on Christians in the Pauline Epistles. But the ethics of Romans 12-15 does not restore the letter of the Mosaic Law code in order to make Christians slaves to arbitrary regulations all over again.

After showing that the true intent of the law is love (Rom. 13:8-10), Paul proceeds to describe what this means in the concrete situation which existed in the church at Rome. This Christian community was composed of both Jews and Gentiles. Their churches were small home fellowships. There was great diversity among them. Evidence from the catacombs indicates that they not only met in different localities, but at different times. Some gatherings for worship were conducted in Hebrew, others in Greek. The Jewish Christians had scruples about eating food which had been consecrated to idols, or food which was unclean. Others had no such scruples because they had no background in the Jewish food laws. Some believed in total abstinence from wine; others did not. There were also differences over holy days. Jewish Christians were Sabbatarian. This was the context of the following passage:

**One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God....**

**Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. – Rom. 14:5, 6, 13.**

The Puritans and those who have followed their Sabbatarian tradition have tried to argue that Paul could not be referring to the weekly Sabbath in this passage. But when we reconstruct the historical situation of a Jewish-Gentile church, it is utterly incredible to assume that Paul is referring to every day of the Jewish sacred calendar except the weekly Sabbath. In Romans 14 Paul declares that Christianity is not a matter of arguing over food taboos:

**For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness peace and joy in the Holy Spirit because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. – Rom. 14:17, 18.**

Paul might just as well have said, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of arguing over which day is holy, etc."

Paul believes in being subject to the law of God (Rom. 8:7), but not as it is administered in the regulations of the old written code. What he does appeal for in Romans 14 is behavior which is determined by the demands of faith and love:

**Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.**

**So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.**

**We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please Himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insulted You have fallen on Me." – Rom. 14:19-23; 15:1-3.**

While Paul was scornful of the foolish Galatians for observing the sacred days the Jewish calendar (Gal. 4:10), he tells the Romans that those who regard one day as sacred above another should not be condemned. Why was the apostle intolerant of Sabbatarianism in one situation and yet tolerant of it in another? There were two reasons. First, Jewish Christians in Rome, like the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, kept the law, including the Sabbath, but not in order to be justified before God. Second, Sabbath-keeping was a part of their heritage. The gospel gave them the liberty to continue living as Jews. Furthermore, Paul discerned that it might not even be safe for a Jewish Christian to repudiate his customs and violate inbred sensitivities. (Rom. 14:23).

I once met a Jew who had become an evangelical Christian leader. He told me that he could not bring himself to eat fish without scales even though he knew that he was not bound by the law in this matter. Those reared in a devout Seventh-day Adventist home could relate to what he said. According to Paul, neither the evangelical Jew nor the evangelical Adventist is compelled to demonstrate his liberation by defying the sensitivities of his culture. And even if he were "strong" enough to do this, he should not flaunt his liberty before his own people. F. F. Bruce beautifully grasps the spirit of Paul when he says:

**Some people cannot readily distinguish between the essential and the non-essential: if they abandon an old order for a new one, they feel it necessary to give up everything associated with the old order— neutral or even helpful features as well as others. But this is to exchange a positive form of legal obligation for a negative form. Thus, at the opposite extreme from those Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who followed the ancient customs as a matter of course there may have been others elsewhere who discontinued them on principle. Paul's policy was different from both. Truly emancipated souls are not in bondage to their emancipation. Paul conformed to the customs or departed from them according to the company, Jewish or Gentile, in which he found himself from time to time, making the interests of the gospel the supreme consideration. In Jewish company he would, naturally observe the Jewish food laws, from common courtesy, not to speak of Christian**

charity, nor would he outrage Jewish sentiment by violating the sanctity of holy days, however much for his own part he esteemed all days alike. True, he was dismayed when he heard that his Galatian converts had begun to "observe days, and months, and seasons, and years" (Galatians 4: 10); but they were Gentiles, and had no good reason for adopting the Jewish sacred calendar, least of all for adopting it by way of religious obligation. Once Paul had himself inherited the observance of that calendar by way of religious obligation, but he had learned as a Christian to enjoy complete freedom with regard to its observance or non-observance.

It is certain that in Jerusalem, of all places, he would live as a practicing Jew, if only out of consistency with his declared policy, to "give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God" and to "try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of the many, that they may be saved" (1 Corinthians 10: 32 f.). There were few "Greeks" in Jerusalem, but both the Jews and the church of God in that city would be scandalized if he failed to observe the "customs".

But if Paul claimed liberty of action for himself in such matters, why would he deny it to other Jewish-Christians? Provided they shared his attitude to the traditional practices of Israel as no longer divine requirements but as voluntary actions which might be undertaken or omitted as expediency directed, they might freely go on with them. It was no more necessary for them than for Paul to be in bondage to their emancipation. If they wished, for what seemed to them to be good and proper reasons, to circumcise their children, Paul would remember that he had circumcised Timothy for what seemed to himself to be good and proper reasons. His letters give us no indication of his advice in these respects to Jewish Christians, except that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians alike should respect each other's scruples— or lack of scruples. 1

## Notes and References

1. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, pp. 346-47.

## Chapter 7

### Two Forms of Christian Judaism

A strong case can undeniably be made for Sabbatarianism by a particular use of the Bible. The Puritans, for example, were giants in biblical learning, and they buttressed their Sabbatarianism with voluminous biblical support. The Westminster divines and other great students of the Word such as Charles Hodge, Arthur Pink and John Murray did likewise. Seventh-day Adventists have "won" three million Christians to their Sabbatarian viewpoint, and they support their case with many scriptures.

Some of my Sabbatarian readers have undoubtedly been mentally reviewing the Scriptures for texts which counter the evidence I have presented from the Pauline Epistles. It is not difficult to find "proof"-texts for or against Sabbatarianism. Those who do not acknowledge this have not candidly examined the opposing view.

It does not help to deride the mentality, much less the motives, of those who take another viewpoint. But we need to be reminded that there is a correct and an incorrect way to read the Bible.

The Old Testament is divided into the law and the prophets. The New Testament proclaims that Jesus fulfills both. Therefore the Gospels interpret both.

#### The Prophets

For illustrative purposes, we will consider the Old Testament prophets first. The prophets were Jews, and they spoke to Jews about God's glorious purpose for His people. The only way they could describe the coming salvation was to use the imagery and language of Palestinian geography, history and culture. Thus, the prophets spoke of the coming salvation in terms, of blossoms in the desert, springs in the parched places, prosperity in Jerusalem, the restoration of David's fallen tent, the conquest of the Edomites and great blessings upon the house of David. The New Testament everywhere announces that all these promises have been fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ, in the inauguration of His reign and in the outpouring of His Spirit on His believing people. It takes the same kind of faith to believe this as it takes to believe the gospel. In fact, believing that Jesus fulfills all these promises, *is*, believing the gospel (Acts 13:32, 33).

If one begins with the Old Testament and holds to the letter of the Palestinian promises, those promises certainly do not sound like New Testament realities. A literal reading of Amos 9 does not sound like the missionary thrust of the early church



(cf. Amos 9:11, 12 with Acts 15:14-19). Isaiah 40:3-5 does not sound like John the Baptist. (Did he build highways in the desert?)

It was not their study of the Old Testament prophets which led the apostles to believe that Jesus was God incarnate or that He rose from the dead. Nor was the starting point for the apostles' theology a particular view of the Old Testament into which they fitted the story of Jesus. Rather, they were confronted with the historical reality of Jesus— His life, His miracles, His death and His resurrection. They then read the Old Testament and interpreted it in the light of God's final revelation in Christ. They saw that Jesus was the new Creation, the new Adam, the new Moses, the new Temple, the new David, etc. They also saw that Jesus and His people were the new Israel, the eschatological remnant which had inherited all the promises God made to Israel.

The apostles did not interpret the Old Testament prophets according to the letter of their Palestinian language— as though springs in the desert meant the irrigation of avocados in Palestine or as though God's defense of Jerusalem meant British bombers defending the holy sites during World War II. They interpreted the Old Testament prophets with a great deal of prophetic freedom. For when Jesus fulfilled the hopes of Israel, He transformed them. How could the prophets adequately convey the wonder of Christ's act of redemption and the glory of His reign?

Yet popular evangelicalism (dispensationalism) insists that the prophets must be fulfilled to the letter— Palestinian baggage and all. The desert means the desert, rivers mean rivers, rain on Palestine means rain on Palestine (even though Peter interpreted rain to mean the outpouring of the Spirit [cf. Joel 2:23, 28-32 with Acts 2:15-21]), and Jerusalem means Jerusalem (even though Paul says that Hagar means earthly Jerusalem and that the Jerusalem community means the Christian church). By insisting on the fulfillment of the letter of prophecy, dispensationalism tries to squeeze the awesome eschatological acts of God into a Judaistic framework. But the mighty act of God in Christ was completely beyond the limits of prophetic expression. When Jesus Christ fulfilled the prophets, He far surpassed the narrow vistas of the Judaistic hope. The new wine of His gospel cannot be contained within the old wineskins of Judaism. The prophets must therefore be interpreted, even reinterpreted, by the New Testament message.

In attempting to restore the letter of Old Testament prophecy, thereby establishing a place of privilege for the literal Jews, dispensationalism preaches Christian Judaism. Paul may well have had to meet such teaching from apocalyptically-minded Jewish Christians.

## The Law

Just as dispensationalists have insisted on interpreting Old Testament prophecy by the letter, so Seventh-day Adventism has insisted on interpreting the Old Testament law by the letter. But just as we must allow the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament prophets in its own way (i.e., in light of the gospel), so we must allow the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament law in its own way (i.e., in light of the gospel). The Christ event made a great difference in the way the apostles read the Old Testament prophets, and it made a great difference in the way they read the Old Testament law. They reinterpreted the law with the same prophetic freedom with which they reinterpreted the prophecies. For example, Paul reinterpreted the Mosaic Law concerning oxen as follows:

**Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain. Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely He says this for us, doesn't He? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 1 Cor. 9:7-11.**

In Jesus Christ, God has made all things new. As Paul declared, "The old has gone the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Because of Christ's coming, we cannot read the prophets in the same way anymore; nor can we read the law in the same way.

Yet Seventh-day Adventism builds its theological base from the Old Testament. It derives its ethics from the letter of the Old Testament law and then tries to fit the New Testament message into this Judaistic framework. But this is simply an attempt to pour the new wine of the gospel into the old wineskins of Judaism.

This occurs not only with Seventh-day Adventism's treatment of the Sabbath commandment, but with its application of the Levitical aspects of the law as well. For example, Adventism has meticulously studied the two-apartment sanctuary schema in Leviticus. Then, reasoning from the premise that what was done in the type must be done in the antitype, it has projected this two-partite Levitical sanctuary into heaven.

Actually, dispensationalism is British born Adventism, and Seventh-day Adventism is American-born Adventism. Both movements are branches of an Anglo-Saxon apocalyptic movement which began on opposite sides of the Atlantic in the 1830's and 1840's. And interestingly, both movements have attached a Judaistic understanding of the Old Testament to the Christian message. Dispensationalists have done with the prophets what Adventist has done with the law. If dispensationalists read the law as they read the prophets, they would be Adventists; and if Adventists read the prophets as they read the law, they would be dispensationalists.

I would like to suggest to my dispensationalist and Adventist friends (for I heartily recognize both as my brethren in Christ) that establishing either our ethical or prophetic presuppositions from the Old Testament and then trying to adapt the New Testament to them is an unsatisfactory use of the Bible. We must allow the New Testament to interpret the Old. If our ethical prophetic system finds no support in New Testament, we ought to call it into question.

## Chapter 8

# What about the Ten Commandments?

The Sabbatarians' main thesis is simple and can be quite appealing. It is this: The Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are not a temporary ceremonial law but a changeless moral law. Calvary proves that God takes His law seriously. In bearing the penalty of sin, Christ showed that even God could not change His law; otherwise Christ need not have died. The gospel, therefore, does not abolish God's law but upholds it (Rom. 3:31).

This thesis contains much good, orthodox Christian theology, and we therefore should be careful lest we summarily reject it. To begin with, the Ten Commandments have traditionally been highly respected in all the great churches, both before and after the Reformation. Much of Luther's Large and Small Catechisms is devoted to an exposition of the Ten Commandments. And the Ten Commandments are included in the catechisms of most Protestant churches.

The argument that Calvary proves that God takes His law seriously is also the orthodox Christian doctrine of the atonement. It is found in the teachings of Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Spurgeon, Hodge, Buchanan, Berkouwer and Billy Graham.

In this chapter I wish to respond to the Sabbatarians' thesis on the perpetuity of the law of God. Assumptions are often made regarding the Ten Commandments which should not go unchallenged, because they may lead to false conclusions. We therefore consider the following points:

### 1. The Ten Commandments Are Not Eternal.

That which is eternal has no beginning and no ending. The existence of an eternal law of God is as certain as the existence of an eternal will of God. But it is *not* the Ten Commandments. Since the Sabbath was made for man, there could be no Sabbath commandment before the creation of the human race (Mark 2:27; Gen. 2:2, 3). Neither could there be a commandment governing the relations of male and female before the beginning of human history, for sexuality does not belong to the nature of angels.

Furthermore, the very wording of the Ten Commandments implies that they were given after the fall of man and not before. Theologians have long recognized that the predominantly negative form of the Ten Commandments ("You shall not...") presupposes the inclination to sin. <sup>1</sup> This indicates that they were written for fallen

man. The Sabbath law speaks of servants and beasts of burden, which do not belong to man's un-fallen state.

Just as the Ten Commandments were not relevant to sinless man in the beginning, so they will not be relevant in that future life where they neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matt. 22:30). What relevance would the letter of the Sabbath commandment have in the city of the redeemed, where "They count not time by years, and there is no night there"?

If Isaiah 66:23 is used to prove that the letter of the Sabbath law will be kept in the age to come, this scripture can also be used to prove that the Jewish New Moon feasts will be celebrated in the age to come— for Isaiah mentions both. Will the saints "labor" in a six-day work week in heaven? Is it not much more reasonable to recognize that Isaiah's prophecy of the glory of the Messianic age is written in Palestinian language which is not fulfilled according to the Judaistic letter but according to the spirit of the new age?

God's law, like Himself, has no variableness or shadow of turning. The moral principles behind the Ten Commandments are eternal. But it cannot be proved that the *letter* of the Ten Commandments is eternal.

## **2. The Ten Commandments Are Not All-Inclusive.**

There is a tendency among Sabbatarians to exaggerate the all-inclusive nature of the Ten Commandments. Ecclesiastes 12:13 is a favorite "proof"-text: "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." But nothing in this text indicates that Solomon was thinking only of the Ten Commandments. A pious Jew reading this scripture would more likely think of the 613 commandments of the Torah. The Christian might also legitimately include such commandments as "Be baptized" or "Go into all the world and preach the gospel."

We do not know why the Testimony, as it is called, contains just Ten Commandments (Exod. 34:27-29). Some scholars have suggested that they are an elementary code of morality structured to correspond to the ten fingers as a catechizing aid for a simple agrarian people. It is clear that the letter of the Ten Commandments does not cover the entire range of human responsibility.

There are numerous offenses which do not violate the letter of the Ten Commandments. There is no written code which condemns a hasty temper, a premature judgment, a vain imagination or a lack of humility. No written code can cover the entire range of human duty.



Which letter of the law did Peter break when he terminated table fellowship with the Gentiles? The fact is that he committed this offense against faith while strictly following the letter of the Law of Moses.

How much more do faith and love demand of us than the letter of any written code, including the Ten Commandments! When Paul made this discovery, he was constrained to declare, "We serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6).

### **3. The Ten Commandments Contain Cultic as Well as Universal Features.**

When God gave the Ten Commandments, we cannot assume that He gave a law which was not conditioned by the cultural and historical situation of Israel. If the wording of the Ten Commandments was adapted to the needs of man, and not angels; to fallen man, and not sinless man, might not God also adapt the Ten Commandments, to the needs of Israel? This suggests that the Ten Commandments contain cultic features as well as universal principles.

For example, the introduction to the Ten Commandments is prefaced by a cultic feature: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod. 20:2). We may apply these words to ourselves in a spiritual sense, since Christ's resurrection is the great exodus of the New Testament age. But when we take that liberty with the letter, of the law, are we not employing the principle of reinterpretation? And, if we reinterpret one part of the law, might it not be possible, in fact necessary, to reinterpret, other parts of the law?

The commandment, "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12), is also wrapped in Jewish swaddling clothes. In its natural context this is a promise of a long life in Palestine. But the Sabbatarian says that we are justified in applying the principle of this promise to ourselves. Certainly we are, but this is a reinterpretation of a Jewish feature of the law.

The Sabbath commandment also includes a cultic Jewish element, for the version which appears in Deuteronomy says:

**"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."— Deut. 5: 15.**

The letter of the entire Decalogue, therefore, cannot be indiscriminately applied to everyone without some adaptation or reinterpretation. In the last fifty years or so, great advances in the biblical sciences have demonstrated that we have not always

made sufficient allowance for the way the Bible comes to us clothed in the language and culture of its time. More care should be taken to distinguish between cultic regulations and universal principles. A naive literalism, either in the application of Old Testament prophecies or Old Testament law, does not reflect the prophetic freedom of Jesus and His apostles.

Even in reading the New Testament, we should distinguish between what is cultic and what is universal. Paul gives the specific command, "Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss" (1 Thess. 5:26). Yet most Sabbatarians (at least Anglo-Saxon ones) prefer to exercise some creative freedom when they substitute a hearty handshake.

#### **4. The Letter of the Ten Commandments Should Not Always Be Kept.**

There is more to keeping the law than keeping the letter of the law. Since "the law is spiritual" (Rom. 7:14), no one keeps the law unless he keeps it in spirit and in truth. Yet sometimes it is not possible to do this without breaking the letter of the law. Examples of this are scattered throughout the Bible. Naaman, the leper, was allowed to transgress the letter of the second commandment with Elisha's approval, as the following incident illustrates:

**Namaan . . . said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel . . .**

**"But may the Lord forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also— when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive your servant for this."**

**"Go in peace," Elisha said. – 2 Kings 5:15, 18, 19.**

David ate the consecrated bread, which was contrary to the letter of the law (1 Sam. 21:6). Jehoiada participated in an armed insurrection against the wicked queen on the Sabbath day (2 Chron. 23:3-15). In the time of the Maccabees an entire company of Jews were slaughtered because they refused to defend themselves on the Sabbath. After that, fight or flight was permitted on the Sabbath if life was in danger. And will not Christian Sabbatarians transgress the letter of the Sabbath law if some urgent mission of mercy demands it?

While even the Sabbatarian feels free from the letter of the Sabbath law in the event of dire necessity, who can say that we are ever free to be disloyal to God? This proves to us that behind the letter of the written code there stands a higher law which must never be broken. That higher law is the demand of faith and love. Luther declares:

**Therefore faith and love are always to be mistresses of the law and to have all laws in their power. For since all laws aim at faith and love, none of them can be valid, or be a law, if it conflicts with faith or love. 2**

The pages of history are strewn with innumerable instances of the greatest evils and injustices committed by devotees of the letter of the law.

## **5. The Ten Commandments Are No Longer under the Ministration of Moses.**

In the Old Testament situation the law is in the hands of Moses. He explains to the Jewish people what it means to keep God's commandments. The regulations with which he binds them to serve God are adapted to their situation and to God's great plan in history. Moses, therefore, is the interpreter of the law, including the Sabbath commandment.

In the New Testament the ministration of Moses gives way to the superior ministration of Him who is clearly the new Moses (Deut. 18:15):

**"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool' will be in danger of the fire of hell....**

**"You have heard that it was said, 'do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart....**

**"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is His footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King....**

**"You have heard that it was said, 'eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." – Matt. 5:21, 22, 27, 28, 33-35, 38, 39.**

The timeless ethical principles found in Moses are not weakened by Jesus Christ; they are spiritualized, radicalized and strengthened. But the external features of the Mosaic regulations are relaxed or reinterpreted by Jesus and His apostles. 3

Since the Ten Commandments, including the Sabbath law, are no longer in the hands of Moses (his regulations having been abolished [Eph. 2:14, 15; Col. 2:14]), the burden is on Sabbatarians to prove that Jesus and His apostles continued to interpret the Sabbath commandment according to its Judaistic letter. In the New Testament every other commandment of the Decalogue is amplified and reapplied to the Christian community. We must therefore insist on knowing what the Sabbath means and how to keep it according to the new ministration of the gospel. We suggest that the answer is found in Hebrews 4:1-10.

We have made five points about the Ten Commandments: They are not eternal, they are not all-inclusive, they are not without cultic features, not every part of them is absolute, and it makes an important difference whether they are interpreted by the Old Testament or the New Testament. This leads us to reflect on the adequacy of the word *moral* as applied to the Ten Commandments.

The Bible itself does not use the word *moral* to distinguish the Ten Commandments from the rest of the law. In fact it nowhere gives us a formula to distinguish which parts of the whole law are moral and which parts are ceremonial. At one time, a Sabbatarian sect presented studies to show that the moral law was placed in the ark, while the book of the ceremonial law was placed in the side of the ark. This argument failed because any thoughtful person could see that the book of the law contained "moral" precepts as enduring as the Ten Commandments.

It is not always easy to distinguish between the moral and ceremonial laws of Moses. The labels "moral" and "ceremonial" are not a magic formula to resolve all difficulties. In fact, the terms themselves are not altogether adequate.

Let us consider the word *moral*. This non-biblical term may have a variety of meanings. In theology "moral law" generally describes "the relation that exists between God and men, and between man and man, and that will continue as long as the perfections of God and the faculties of men exist; without change, amendment or repeal." <sup>4</sup> A law which can be ignored or modified in the event of dire necessity would not qualify as "moral" according to the preceding definition. Neither would any commandment which had either a beginning or an ending. Stating that the Ten Commandments are altogether moral is therefore dubious.

On the other hand, saying that the Ten Commandments are altogether non-ceremonial is also dubious. What do we mean by the term *ceremonial*? Most of us would agree that a wedding service is a ceremony. Baptism is also a Christian ceremony. The Lutherans may say that baptism is more than a memorial ceremony of Christ's death, and they are right, of course; but it is at least that.

The Bible says that the Sabbath is a memorial of creation (Exod. 20:8-11). Some also want to say that it is a memorial of the new creation of Jesus Christ. Would not a command to have a day of remembrance be a command to have a ceremony of remembrance?

The ceremonial nature of the Sabbath law has been confirmed by Mendenhall's 1954 discovery that the Ten Commandments conform to the structure of treaties between Hittite kings and their vassals. Annexed to the stipulations of a Hittite treaty was a provision for a periodic ceremony to rehearse the treaty between the lord and the vassal. Meredith Kline beautifully demonstrates that the Sabbath law in the middle

of the Ten Commandments is the counterpart of a Hittite treaty memorial celebration with respect to its provision for the rehearsal of God's covenant. The Sabbath law, therefore, was a law requiring a ceremony of covenantal rehearsal. 5

Furthermore, the Sabbath is called "a sign" in the Old Testament (Exod. 31:17; Ezek. 20:12) and "a shadow" in the New Testament (Col. 2:17). Circumcision is also called a sign (Gen. 17:11; Rom. 4:11), and no one objects to calling it the ceremony of circumcision. The temple services were called a shadow, and everyone acknowledges that they were ceremonies. If the Sabbath is merely a sign to represent some reality, why object so strenuously to calling it a ceremony?

A group of Seventh-day Adventist scholars recently wrote a series of essays on the Sabbath under the title, "Festival of the Sabbath." Is not a festival closely related to a ceremony?

Of course, proving that the Sabbath is a kind of ceremony does not in itself mean that the Old Testament law is abrogated. But it does establish that it is just as unsatisfactory to say that the Ten Commandments are altogether non-ceremonial as it is to say that they are absolutely moral.

Some people have thought that all problems would be settled if we would simply review the Old Testament laws to decide which are moral and which are ceremonial. They conclude that we could then retain those that are moral and discard those that are ceremonial. But Christian communities can saddle their consciences with all kinds of burdens when they bring their uninspired wisdom to bear on the laws in the Bible. The more excellent way is to uphold the New Testament's interpretation and application of the law of God.

## Notes and References

1. Paul said, "We also know that law is made not for good men but for law breakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious: for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers— and for whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me" (1 Tim 1: 9-11)
2. Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the Old Testament", *Luther's Works*, 35:240-41.
3. For example, on the subject of Old Testament food laws "Jesus declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). Paul said: "I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.... All food is clean" (Rom. 14:14, 20). But the plain words of the New Testament do not convince some, because they have allowed Moses to veto the words of both Jesus and Paul. This illustrates what happens when we come to the New Testament from the Old rather than to the Old Testament from the New.
4. John Leland, "The Sabbath Examined" and "Sabbatical Laws", *Baptist Reformation Review* 9, no. 4 (Fourth Quarter, 1980): 33.
5. See Robert D. Brinsmead, *Covenant* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Verdict Publications 1979) pp. 29-35.



## Chapter 9

# Applying the Letter of the Sabbath Law

On the assumption that the letter of the Ten Commandments is eternal and all-inclusive, universally applicable and absolutely binding, Sabbatarianism insists that Christians are obligated to fulfill the letter of the Old Testament Sabbath commandment. Every feature of the Sabbath law given to an ancient nation is supposed to be binding on a civilization removed from the cultural situation of Israel by 4,000 years. 1 No allowance is made, for the fact, that the Mosaic Sabbath regulations were given to one nation living in Palestine with a simple agrarian economy, nor that ours, is a highly complex space-age society. The fact that the ancients knew nothing about a round world or the International Date Line is thought to have no bearing on the matter. The letter of Mosaic regulations is supposed to be followed in a post-Copernican world.

The best way to discredit an untenable thesis is to insist that it be carried to its logical end. We will proceed to do this with the Sabbatarian thesis.

The Seventh-day Sabbatarian says that we must rest not just one day in seven, but on the very day of the week on which God rested after He created the world. That is supposed to be 6,000 years ago. But even conservative Sabbatarian scholars are now constrained to admit that the world is more than 6,000 years old. The ancient Egyptian dynasties can be traced nearly that far back. How strange that we could lose a few thousand years from human records yet insist that not a single day has been lost!

Where does this original seventh day begin on a round world? Where does the sun rise first? Does the seventh day begin in Palestine, in Greenwich or at a place that our modern society calls the International Date Line? How do we know that the international community fixed the date line (which is not even a straight line) where God decreed it should be? *The World Book Encyclopedia* says that the "International Date Line is an imaginary line which marks the spot on the earth's surface where each new calendar day begins." 2

Some Sabbatarians argue that since God Himself designated the seventh day in Palestine, we should reckon that each new calendar day begins in the Middle East. Since the earth rotates so that the day moves westward, the Sabbath in Australia would begin six hours after it begins in California, not eighteen hours before. This would make Sunday the seventh day for Australians.

A few years ago I met a seventh-day Sabbatarian who had given serious thought to this question. He argued that if we followed the letter of the law, Australians and all others on the same side of the International Date Line would keep the Sabbath after instead of before it is kept in the Western world. According to this reasoning, Sunday would be the Australians' seventh day. The fact is that calling any twenty-four-hour period the seventh day is both arbitrary and imaginary.

There seem to be about four ways to follow the letter of the Sabbath law on a round world. Three have been seriously proposed by groups of Sabbatharians. The first is to keep the Sabbath when those in Jerusalem keep the Sabbath. The second is to begin the Sabbath in the Middle East (assuming that the first day began in Eden and assuming that Eden was somewhere in the Middle East). This would not affect Western Sabbatharians, but it would mean that all Sabbatharians in the Far East would have to move the Sabbath forward one day. The third possibility is to begin the Sabbath at that "imaginary line" called the International Date Line. This would give us an "imaginary" seventh day. The fourth possibility is for the international community to alter the "imaginary line," which would require many Sabbatharians to change their day of worship. And why not, since they gave the international community the right to decide where to put the "imaginary line" in the first place? Would not one "imaginary line" be as good as another?

Determining the time to begin the Sabbath is also a problem. Seventh-day Sabbatharians generally prefer sunset, while first day Sabbatharians generally prefer midnight. The Bible seems to indicate that the Sabbatical period extends from "even to even." But when is "even"? Early Seventh-day Adventists hotly debated whether "even" meant six o'clock in the evening or sunset. Ellen G. White's vision in which she saw that "even" was sunset settled the question. But in recent years some specialists in the history of the ancient Middle East have shown that the Semites considered it to be "even" when they could see the stars, some time after sunset.

But what are Sabbatharians supposed to do north of the Arctic Circle, where it remains dark for several months each year? "Easy," some tell us. "Just calculate from the lowest and highest points of the sun." When I was in Norway recently, the Adventist Sabbath began in the Arctic Circle at 11:30 Friday morning. Sabbatharians were required to lose Friday as either a working day or a school day. Some were agitating a return to a six p.m. Sabbath commencement as a solution to this difficult problem. One of those pressing for a more liberal interpretation of the law was a high-school teacher. He said, "We have to recognize that the law was drafted to suit the needs of an agrarian people living in Palestine, not a highly industrialized society living within the Arctic Circle." 3 A measure of sanity indeed!

Then we could ask about applying the letter of the Sabbath law to airline pilots, international travelers or astronauts.

Even Sabbatarians may now say, "These are silly, nit-picking questions". Of course they are! But those who choose to apply the letter of the law must find an answer to such silly, nit-picking questions. Letter-of-the-law Sabbatarianism is as viable in our modern world as the Flat Earth Society.

After deciding the correct time to commence the Sabbath, the real hassle begins. What is permissible and what is forbidden on the Sabbath? It is easy to ridicule the petty Sabbath restrictions of the Pharisees, but even the mighty Puritans found that once they committed themselves to the letter of the law, there was no end to its oppressive power. At the height of Puritan glory, one could dress a baby on the Sabbath but not kiss it. A man could comb his hair but not shave his beard. When a minister skied to church, his board of elders accused him of desecrating the Sabbath.

"Why, mon, ye skied on the Lord's holy day," said one of the elders.

The minister protested: "But that was the only way I could have come to the services. The snow was too deep to drive."

"Thae's not the p'int," the chairman shot back at him. "The p'int is this: Did ye enjoy it?"

Seventh-day Adventists today would smile at the fastidious Sabbatarianism of the Puritans, yet their own communities have an elaborate tradition of what is permissible or not on the Sabbath. 4 A nature walk is good. A swim in the ocean is not. A pleasant nature ride is permissible if you take a bicycle but not a horse. You may enjoy a ride into the country in a car but not down the river in a boat. A nurse who works on the Sabbath is accepted in good and regular standing, but not a policeman— although both kinds of work may be equally necessary.

Such Sabbatarian traditions have an astonishingly strong hold on people— the kind of hold that Paul chides the Colossians for submitting to. Samuele Bacchiocchi argues that Colossians 2:16 does not disapprove of Sabbath-keeping but only of burdening it with arbitrary Jewish restrictions. Yet might not arbitrary Adventist restrictions be just as bad? Does not Bacchiocchi himself err when he contends for the letter of the law in the Saturday versus Sunday debate? How far is he prepared to press the letter of the law?

The fact is that no one can ever satisfy the letter of the law, and the entire history of Sabbatarianism proves this. Those who are married to the letter of the law can never be sure that they adequately perform it. What kind of a marriage is it when the husband is never satisfied with the wife's devotion and the wife is never sure that she complies with her husband's demands? (Rom. 7:1-6).

Pressing the letter of the law not only causes uncertainty, but it creates hostility. It creates secret hostility toward the law of God, which we ought to love (Ps. 119; Rom. 7:22). It also creates hostility between people, because it divides those who ought to be united. Devotion to the letter of the law inclines Christians to judge and accuse each other of breaking the commandments. Paul saw that "the law with its commandments and regulations" was a dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14, 15). No wonder he opposed those who wanted to erect this wall within the Christian church! 5 No wonder he said that "the letter kills"! (2 Cor. 3:6). The good news is that marriage to the letter of the law is terminated by the death of Christ (Rom. 7:1-6). The cross has canceled "the written code, with its regulations" (Col. 2:14). The spiritual energies of believers should not be distracted, much less dissipated, in arguments over the calendar. Believers should concentrate on that which increases faith and love. A religion committed to such external things as keeping days and observing food taboos has seriously misunderstood the spirit of New Testament faith.

## Notes and References

1. There is no record of a Sabbath law prior to the Exodus. Genesis 2:2, 3 mentions the Sabbath but not a Sabbath law.

2. William Markowitz, art. "International Date Line", *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corp., 1974) 10:263.

3. In 1900 when Ellen G. White was confronted with certain problems relating to Sabbath-keeping above the Arctic Circle, she wrote the following advice to G. A. Irwin, then president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists:

("In the countries where there is no sunset for months and again no sunrise for months the period of time will be calculated by the records kept. *But God has a world large enough, and proper and right for the human beings He has created to inhabit it without finding homes in those lands so objectionable in very many, many ways*" (Letter 167, 23 Mar. 1900[ italics supplied]).... (On pages 219 and 225 of his book, *The Lords Day on a Round World* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Assn. 1970) Robert L. Odom cites portions of this letter from Ellen G. White but eliminates the previous italicized material just above. This part of the Ellen G. White letter has never been released by the Ellen G. White Estate for publication. The obvious reason for not releasing these words is that they constitute a patently foolish comment on the Arctic Circle problem. Even the White Estate realizes that Arctic Circle communities confronted with the practical problem of Sabbath observance cannot have their common sense insulted by telling them that they should not live in such an objectionable place. Unfortunately, such selected releases of inspired Ellen G. White statements are all too common. It is also unfortunate that we had to resort to unusual means to discover what was actually stated in this letter, so carefully guarded by the White Estate. But we can vouch for its authenticity. Since the leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are still using selected portions of this letter to settle an intrachurch debate in Norway, we suggest that the only honest thing to do is to acknowledge exactly what Ellen G. White said.)

4. *The Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* lists about 500 things either to do or not to do on the Sabbath. See *Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn. 1963) 3:2311-15.

5. The visionary Ellen G. White declared, "I saw that the holy Sabbath is and will be the Separating wall between the true Israel of God and unbelievers" (Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* [Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald Publishing Assn., 1945], p. 85).

## Chapter 10

# Cultic Judaism and Catholic/Universal Faith

God's purpose in history required that the people of Israel maintain their distinct identity until the coming of Christ. They had to be a people living apart from all other nations (Num. 23:9). In the Law of Moses, God imposed regulations that had the practical effect of keeping the covenantal nation separate.

First, there were food regulations which strictly forbade the consumption of "unclean" animals. "Unclean" did not mean dirty or unhealthy. If a food is not suitable for man's diet, God has left man to discover this from general revelation. In the Mosaic food laws, "unclean" was a ritual taboo associated with the religious cultus. Anyone who ate "unclean" food was also considered "unclean." These religious prohibitions had the practical effect of keeping the Jews separate from all other people. They could not even eat with "unclean" Gentiles without risking defilement. Devout Seventh-day Adventists can appreciate how difficult it is for those who take these food regulations seriously to socialize with other people. Those who cannot eat together will seldom become close friends. Because man is a social creature, food taboos create a formidable barrier between people.

In the law, God also designated an approved place of worship. Sacrifices were acceptable only at the appointed place in Jerusalem. In the primitive world of the Old Testament, holy places were generally associated with some mountain. The pagans had their sacred hills. As a concession to this primitive religious tendency, God designated Mount Zion as the place where the worship of Yahweh was to be conducted by the religious cultus. This law had the practical effect of separating Israel geographically from all other people.

The law not only designated where God should be worshiped, but when God should be worshiped. An elaborate sacred calendar, enjoining yearly, monthly and weekly festivals, was imposed on the Jews. The obligation to worship God and even to devote a portion of time to corporate assembly and divine teaching is a perpetual moral obligation, but we should recognize that the selection of times is in the same category as the selection of places. Israel's entire existence revolved around the Mosaic calendar, and as long as it did, it guaranteed her separate identity.

Although the law as administered by Moses fulfilled the divine purpose despite Israel's sinfulness, the perversion of the divine purpose was also a factor in Israel's history. The Jew took occasion from the law to despise the non-Jew. Every day the pious rabbi would thank God for two things— that he was not a woman and that he



was not a Gentile. The Gentile also took occasion from the law to hate the Jew. The major barriers— the middle wall of partition— between Jew and Gentile were circumcision, the Sabbath, the food laws and the holy places, from which the Gentile was excluded. There was a wall in the outer court of Herod's temple which barred a Gentile from entering further. A notice in three languages (Hebrew, Greek and Latin) warned the non-Jew on pain of death not to pass beyond this dividing wall.

To Paul this wall was a symbol of the Mosaic ministration of law. He saw that God did not design that this should last forever. It was an emergency measure only necessary until the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:19). 1

**For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.— Eph. 2:14-16.**

The cross put an end to the distinction between Jew and Gentile, male and female, as far as worship in the one family of God is concerned: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Maintaining the idea of Jewish national privilege is to Judaize and to deny the gospel just as much as advocating the continuance of Mosaic regulations. The coming of Christ ended all cultic distinctions. The new age of Christ inaugurated a religion that was truly catholic or universal. Judaism had prepared the way for this by its monotheism and covenantal faith. In this there is continuity between Judaism and Christianity. But Judaism is cultic, whereas Christianity is catholic.

The regulations of the written code, adapted to the needs of the pre-Christian cult, gave God's people a conscience which attached defilement or holiness to *substances, places* and *times*. Such a conscience is infantile. It does not belong to the maturity of Christian faith.

First, let us consider the conscience regarding "unclean" substances. The New Testament emphatically declares: "No food is unclean in itself.... All food is clean" (Rom. 14:14, 20). "Uncleanness" is a spiritual reality which exists in a man's heart (Mark 7:17-23) and in his attitude. "If anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean" (Rom. 14:14). "To the pure, all things are pure" (Titus 1:15). 2 Only a person who has not come of age in the gospel can impute religious uncleanness to an amoral substance.

Then there is the matter of ascribing religious value to geographical places. The woman of Samaria wanted Jesus to enter into the age-old argument over whether

Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim was the right place to worship. In reply Jesus affirmed the Law of Moses by saying that Jerusalem was the place which God had chosen. ("Salvation is from the Jews.") But He also declared: "A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-24). That is to say, the Christian faith will ignore the kindergarten letter of the law with respect to places of worship. This it had to do if it was to become a catholic faith transcending all national and geographical boundaries. While the prophets speak of the nations being gathered to Mount Zion (e.g., Isa.2), we should not interpret this according to the Palestinian letter but according to the New Testament spirit.

Apparently Stephen, a Hellenist, was one of the first to grasp the implications of the gospel in the matter of holy places. While the Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians were still worshipping at the temple, Stephen declared that God did not dwell in temples made with hands (Acts 7:48). The Old Testament prophets had hinted at these things, but the New Testament openly declares them. The Mount Zion to which we gather is not found in Palestine but is equally accessible to God's people everywhere (Heb. 12:22). Holiness is no more found in a place than defilement comes from a substance. The Christian faith needs no holy mountains, temples or shrines. Jesus Christ has become the reality of which all these things were only a shadow.

Finally, there is the matter of the times prescribed as holy according to the law. Just as a truly catholic faith must transcend places, so it must also transcend times. No time is holy in itself any more than any place is holy or any substance is unclean. Strict laws regarding places and times were temporary regulations imposed on the religious cultus until the time of reformation. Christ is Lord. Therefore the whole earth is His footstool and every day is the Lord's Day, ideally suited "to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42, 46).

The infantile conscience of Judaism imputed defilement or holiness to substances, places and times— to mere things which Paul calls "the elements of the world" (Gal. 4:3, KJV). The Christian faith rises above all this because it recognizes that holiness is found only in a Person. Now that He who is the reality of all shadows is come, we cannot maintain the cultic regulations of the Old Testament without being involved in a superstitious regard for substances, places and times.

The person who thinks he cannot worship with others on Saturday without Judaizing is as weak in the faith as the one who fears he cannot worship with others on Sunday without paying homage to Rome or the pagan sun god. If those strong in the faith can eat food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8), they can worship on days consecrated to pagan festivals. A religion which maintains the superstitious reverence of holy places and holy times disqualifies itself as the universal faith for the salvation of the nations. The

imputation of either defilement or holiness to substances, places and times is cultic. Yet various cultic forms are often found within the Christian church. Those who insist that members within their church must obey the letter of Mosaic laws (or any laws for that matter) in these external, non-ethical matters disqualify their church from being truly "an house of prayer for all people" (Isa. 56 :7, KJV)

Does not a religious group qualify as a cult when it cannot receive into Christian fellowship those who follow necessary and honorable vocations? For example, it is difficult for an airline pilot or policeman to become a Seventh-day Adventist. In the judgment of Seventh-day Adventism, no one who breaks the regulations regarding holy times is entitled to Christian fellowship. I have personally met people who were forced to choose between remaining in the police force and becoming a Seventh-day Adventist. But would not society benefit by having Christian airline pilots and Christian policemen? And if they are truly Christian, how can they be disqualified from the "remnant church" which all are supposed to join if they are going to be saved in the final generation?

Still another matter needs to be pressed. Are not those who bar such believers from fellowship rather hypocritical because they themselves are glad to have the beneficial services of airline pilots and policemen— even on the Sabbath day? And what of other essential services (besides medical care) which minister to the Sabbatarian's needs on the Sabbath? Will he refuse to use his electric lights on the Sabbath because power stations must be manned then? Or will he be like certain Jews who will not light a candle on the Sabbath yet have a Gentile light it for them?

I once met a gentleman who was a member of a large Sabbatarian community and was employed in one of its educational institutions. As a key maintenance engineer, he worked every Sabbath. It was his job to check the boilers and other facilities so that Sabbath-keepers would not freeze during Sabbath services. This gentleman was accepted in good and regular standing in the church because his work was considered essential. But his church would not tolerate a member who did the same work for the municipal authorities. In such a case a person would be forced to resign his job or leave the church. Anomalies of this kind are rather common in Sabbatarian communities.

The Old Testament Sabbath laws, like other regulations in the Mosaic ministration, were adapted to the needs of one nation living in Palestine. 3 Israel was a primitive agrarian society. The regulations of the law did not have to deal with the technical problems of a round world, 4 the social problems of a highly industrialized society or the economic problems of an international community. If we are to enjoy the benefits of our modern society, there are services and facilities which must be maintained seven days a week. Do Sabbatarians seriously want everyone to become

Sabbatarian? If so, the entire society would have to return to a simple agrarian economy.

One evidence for the inspiration of the New Testament apostles is the way they responded to the mandate to take the gospel to all nations. They did not bind the gospel with regulations which would have imposed great difficulties on other cultures and other civilizations. They erected no barriers to prevent the saving gospel from reaching every culture and age. They taught that faith in Christ and love for one another are all that ultimately matter. Such Christianity transcends all boundaries of place and time.

## Notes and References

1. It is interesting to compare Paul's comments about the dividing wall in Ephesians 2:14 with Ellen G. White's remarks: "I saw that the holy Sabbath is, and will be, the separating wall between the true Israel of God and unbelievers" (Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* [Washington D.C.: Review & Herald Publishing Assn., 1945], p.85).
2. Paul says this in the context of opposing Jewish Christians who are evidently urging Jewish food laws on Gentile Christians (Titus 1:10, 14).
3. There were no Sabbath laws prior to Moses. Genesis 2:2, 3 contains none of the regulations imposed on Israel.
4. It was not until Magellan's men sailed around the world in 1519-1522 and discovered that they were a day off in their reckoning of time that the International Date Line was found to be necessary.

## Chapter 11

# Testing Truth

Seventh-day Adventists are some of the most successful Sabbatarian proselytizers. Although they adopted the practice of Saturday observance from the Seventh-day Baptists, Adventists have been more successful than Seventh-day Baptists in convincing people to keep Saturday as the Sabbath. The reason for this is that Sabbath keeping in Seventh-day Adventism is a vital part of an apocalyptic movement. The major arguments for the Adventists' Sabbath are derived from their interpretation of the books of Daniel and Revelation.

In the Adventist system the Sabbath assumes great eschatological significance. It becomes one of the two great identifying signs of the remnant or true church of the last days (Rev. 12:17). 1 It is the eschatological "seal of the living God" which everyone must have to survive the great tribulation and be ready for the coming of Jesus (Rev. 7:1-4). Although Adventism says that Christians who "do not have the light on the Sabbath" may presently be justified, they will not be among the saved of the final generation unless they have this "seal of God." 2

In its apocalyptic schema, Seventh-day Adventism foresees Protestants and Catholics taking the arm of the state (beginning in the USA) to enforce Sunday observance on the entire world. In this "coming crisis" the Saturday Sabbath will be the "final test" by which the eternal destiny of every soul will be decided. Those who keep Sunday in obedience to the decrees of the church-state alliance will receive the "mark of the beast." Those who remain loyal to the commandments of God in the face of the great boycott (Rev. 13:17) will receive the "seal of God." 3

An increasing number of Seventh-day Adventists no longer take this nineteenth century apocalyptic fantasy seriously, but many still do. After all, this interpretation of Revelation 13 and 14 has the emphatic endorsement of the visionary Ellen G. White. 4

Even now, the Sabbath is the "testing truth" for the Adventists. 5 Accepting Saturday observance is synonymous with "coming into the truth." In the interest of good public relations, the offensive nature of this "testing truth" may be kept in the background, but ultimately all other Christians will be judged by the simple test of whether or not they keep the Sabbath. Seventh-day Adventism, by virtue of its apocalyptic Sabbatarianism, is unrelentingly hostile to every other Christian system which adopts another pattern of worship.



What shall we say in response to such a "testing truth"? First, it appears in suspicious company. American Adventism arose in response to William Miller's prediction that the Lord would come in 1843. When the world did not end as predicted, his followers were not daunted but revised the date to October 22, 1844. To speculate about the very day of Christ's coming is bad enough, but what shall we say about making the acceptance of this date a test to decide the fate of the entire world? 6

As far as the early Adventists were concerned, the October 22 date was such a test. Christians who did not accept this message based on time were increasingly regarded as blind, unintelligent and dishonest. 7 By the summer of 1844 the Millerites were calling the opposing churches and parties "Babylon." Many Millerites even made separation from these "harlot churches" a test of salvation along with the acceptance of the October 22 date. 8

When Christ did not come and destroy the Millerite opponents, the pioneers of Seventh-day Adventism proclaimed that their salvation was past anyway. The Bridegroom had supposedly come to the marriage in heaven instead of on earth, and He had shut the door on those "foolish" virgins (Matt. 25:10) - i.e., the non-Adventists. Between 1845 and 1851 this stance toward all other Christian groups was known as the shut-door doctrine. It was held so dogmatically that it too became a test question whose acceptance was necessary for salvation. 9 In view of the fact that the date-setting of the first message had been called "a test" and the separatist shut-door doctrine had also been made "a test" it is hardly surprising that when the Adventists added the Saturday Sabbath to their system, it became the great "final test." 10

In addition to the tests already mentioned, belief in the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White, the novel doctrine of the investigative judgment and belief that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the remnant church have all, more or less, become test questions within the Adventist community. All this illustrates that Adventism has had a tendency to make each of its distinctive doctrines a test— even those it has outgrown and would like to forget.

Before Adventism is too soundly condemned for either its naiveté or arrogance, let us reflect how other branches of the church have made the same mistake in principle. Do not denominations, groups and subgroups tend to unite on the basis of their distinctive teachings more than on the basis of the unambiguous certainties of the common faith? Is it not all too common for these distinctive denominational emphases to become the means of testing whether or not other Christians are sound in the faith? How often has a certain mode of baptism (sprinkling, pouring, dipping or drowning) been made the test of soundness in the faith? But this is worse than making a test of Sabbatarianism. At least the Sabbath touches one-seventh of a person's lifetime, while baptism is simply a once-in-a-lifetime ordinance. In other

branches of the church, one may repent of sin, receive Jesus as Lord and Savior and believe all that was spoken by the prophets and apostles, yet if he does not subscribe to a certain view of the supper; he is not received into fellowship. Thus, the supper becomes the "test question." Another segment of the church makes the prohibition of singing hymns other than those taken directly from the Bible a test of orthodoxy. Still another group makes the banning of all instrumental music in the church the issue which tests whether Christians are willing to "go the whole way." Then there are those who make a certain view of the "divine decrees" (which we may reasonably suspect were made in Holland rather than in heaven) the test of orthodoxy. Everyone is examined by the "five points," and those who fail this test are adjudged unsound in the faith. Moving closer to the popular evangelical scene, how often is a particular view on the rapture, the tribulation or the millennium made the test of who will be accepted in the mission field or in an academic position? Or is a certain view of biblical inspiration the touchstone of evangelical orthodoxy? Or whether or not someone can speak in tongues?

What shall we say in response to all these test questions, including Sabbatarianism? As far as the New Testament is concerned there is one final testing truth which God wants everyone to hear— and that is the gospel of His Son. By the word of the gospel which goes forth in the last days God judges people (John 3:18, 19). Those who obey the gospel are constituted children of God. They are justified and given life eternal (John 5:24; Acts 13:38, 39; Rom. 3:24, 25). They are sealed with the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption (Eph. 1:13, 14). Those who disobey the gospel are condemned already. The wrath of God remains upon them (John 3:18, 36). This means that the coming judgment of the last day is already mysteriously present in the gospel (John 3:18, 19; 5:24; 9:39; 12:31).

In the New Testament the one test question is this: Do you "confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead"? (Rom. 10:9). This Jesus is not the Jesus of anyone's imagination but the Jesus who fulfills the Old Testament by being conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified for our sins and raised again for our justification. His sinless manhood, His inherent divinity, His Lordship at God's right hand, His salvation by grace alone, His indwelling Spirit and His coming again to judge the living and the dead are so intrinsically a part of faith in Jesus that we may question whether true faith exists wherever these articles of the common faith are denied. But church history amply demonstrates that genuine faith has existed with or without Sabbatarianism, with or without certain views of baptism, the supper, election, the millennium or certain theories of inspiration, etc.

One may argue that there can be no genuine faith in Jesus where there is no turning from those sins which violate God's commandments. This argument is perfectly true, but we hasten to emphasize that those sins which defy God's authority

and arouse His anger are plainly stated in the New Testament. Again and again the apostles give proper names to those sins which will keep those who profess the faith out of the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-8). But the so called "tests" are never found in the lists of gospel denying sins.

With respect to forms of worship and church order, there was far greater diversity in the early church than we have generally recognized. Hebrew-Jewish Christians, Hellenist-Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians from many cultures all developed distinctive forms of worship and congregational life. There were even different theological emphases among various Christian congregations. There was, of course, an underlying unity in the common faith, but there was also great diversity in the form of worship and structure of fellowship. We must be cautious, therefore, in trying to establish a norm of form and fellowship from the early church.

The gospel gives Christians the liberty to keep a day to the Lord. This may be their way of expressing their unity with the Old Testament community. They may find value in the discipline of a regular weekly period for private and corporate worship. Their particular heritage may have invested a certain day with hallowed memories so that they do not feel right if they treat that day like all others. No one should condemn them for this (Rom. 14:5). It is one thing for a group to adopt a pattern of worship through which they purpose to honor God. It is, quite another thing, however, if they assert that this pattern of worship is the only legitimate one and all others are condemned. For a group to make their own pattern of worship the special point of their testimony is contrary to the entire spirit of the New Testament. External concerns such as the observance of days and food taboos belong to Judaism, not to New Testament Christianity. Jesus nowhere suggested that the observance of a day would be a sign of His people. A man might be a dietary ascetic and yet be a devil. (Hitler was a vegetarian.) Being a Sabbatarian is no proof of allegiance to God. (The ancient Jews nailed the Son of God to the cross and then hurried home to keep their Sabbath.) But Jesus gave this sign: "All men will know that you are My disciples if you love one another" (John 13:35). No man can love and not belong to Christ. "Whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16). To make the observance of a day (which is nothing unique anyway) the great issue of Christianity utterly fails to represent the spirituality of Christ's teachings. <sup>11</sup> In His description of the final judgment, our Lord shows that the sheep and the goats will be separated by one single criterion: How did they treat their fellow men? (Matt. 25:31-46).

## Notes and References

1. The other distinguishing mark is said to be "the Spirit of Prophecy"—believed to be manifested in the life and ministry of Ellen G. White.

2. See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1950), pp. 603-13, 640.

3. See *ibid.*

4. See *ibid.*

5. See Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), 5:80-81; *idem.* *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, Calif. Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1943), pp. 118-89: *idem.* *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C., Review & Herald Publishing Assn., 1946), pp. 233-35.

6. See Robert D. Brinsmead, *Judged by the Gospel: A Review of Adventism* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Verdict Publications, 1980), p. 304.

7. See George Storrs. "Go Ye Out to Meet Him," *Midnight Cry*, 3 Oct, 1844, p. 99; *idem.*, "The Finale," *Midnight Cry*, 10 Oct, 1844 p.107; Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C, Review & Herald Publishing Assn., 1945), pp. 74, 232, 234-35.

8. See William Miller, "Letter from Wm. Miller," *Midnight Cry*, 5 Dec, 1844, pp. 179-80; White, *Early Writings*, pp. 237-50.

9. See James White, in *A Word to the "Little Flock "* (1847: facsimile reproduction, Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald Publishing Assn., n.d.), pp. 2, 5, 8.

10. See White, *Early Writings*, pp. 42-3. 85. 254: *idem.* *The Great Controversy*, pp. 603-12. In the pioneer period of Seventh-day Adventism (1844-1851) the two features which formed the basis of the new movement were the shut-door doctrine and the seventh-day Sabbath. The visionary Ellen G, White declared, "Then I was shown that the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ relating to the shut door could not be separated" (*idem.* *Early Writings*, p. 42). James White said, 'The principle [sic] points on which we dwell as present truth are *the 7th Day Sabbath and Shut Door*" (White to Brother and Sister Hastings, 2 Oct. 1848).

11. Said Ellen G. White: "the Sabbath is the great question to unite the hearts of God's dear waiting saints.... Its observance was of sufficient importance to draw a line between the people of God and unbelievers" (White, *Early Writings*, p. 85).

## Chapter 12

# The Reality of the Sabbath

The Sabbath was given to Israel as a sign of her election. It was designed to remind her that He who had created the world had created the nation of Israel for Himself.

**"The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between Me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He abstained from work and rested." – Exod. 31:16, 17.**

**"Also I gave them My Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the Lord made them holy [i.e., separated them, set them apart]. – Ezek. 20:12.**

The sanctification (or separation) of the seventh day was a sign of Israel's sanctification or separation from all other people. It was the distinguishing mark *par excellence* of the Jew.

Much harm is done, however, when the sign and the thing signified are not distinguished. When Israel mistook form for reality, the prophets declared that God detested their Sabbath celebrations (Isa. 1:14; Amos 5:21). In post exilic Judaism there was a tendency to glorify the Sabbath day while neglecting what the Sabbath was supposed to represent.

The same thing may be said about circumcision or even Christian baptism. Both Moses and Paul understood that the reality of circumcision was regeneration of the heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Rom. 2:25-29). The Judaizer who said that a man could not be saved unless he was circumcised would have been correct if he had spoken of the reality instead of the transitory sign.

There are Christians today who insist that baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation. Their "proof"-text is 1 Peter 3:21, which says that we are saved by baptism. It is true that we cannot be saved unless we have been baptized or incorporated into the holy history of Christ's death and resurrection (Rom. 6:2-6; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 2:20). The rite of baptism is designed to express this reality. That is to say, it should visually depict the gospel. But we need to distinguish between the form and the reality. Christians have sometimes tenaciously argued over the form of baptism. Should candidates be poured, sprinkled, dipped or, according to Zwingli's stance toward the Anabaptists, drowned? To the shame of Christianity, the sectarian spirit has sometimes proclaimed: "Unless you have our form of baptism (the biblical one, of



course!), you cannot be saved. Our way of doing this is the only legitimate one. Every other way is illegitimate."

While we should try to adopt the form which most honors the reality, does not church history demonstrate that God has people who subscribe to different forms? And if God accepts them as His sons, why cannot we accept them as our brothers? If God does not make something a condition of fellowship with Himself, should we make it a condition of fellowship with one another?

We may say the same about the Sabbath as we have said about baptism: Unless we accept God's Sabbath rest, we cannot be saved. The book of Hebrews, which was written to Sabbatarian Christians, declares, "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9). This Sabbath rest is not the seventh day but the rest offered us in the gospel. "We who have believed enter that rest" (Heb. 4:3). God's purpose of leading His people into this rest has existed since creation. The seventh day was merely a reminder of this grand goal of salvation history.

It is significant that the only New Testament commentary on the meaning of the Sabbath is found in Hebrews 4. There is no hint in this passage (or anywhere else in the New Testament) that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath. The gospel gives us Christ, and He alone gives the true rest apart from which no one will be saved. It is not a coincidence that Matthew introduces an account of one of Jesus' Sabbath controversies with His invitation:

**"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." – Matt. 11:28.**

## **The Primeval Sabbath**

We should keep the distinction between form and reality in mind when we read about the primeval Sabbath.

**By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing, so on the seventh day He rested from all His work. 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. – Gen. 2:2, 3.**

This scripture, along with the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20:8-11, is the chief weapon in the Sabbatarian's armory. But aside from the mistake of beginning with the Old Testament instead of the New, the Sabbatarian reads more into Genesis 2:2, 3 than is warranted. The Puritans, for example, taught that the observance of one day in seven was a creation ordinance and must therefore be a perpetual obligation. Calvin, however, was somewhat wiser. Although he also recognized the great antiquity of the Sabbath, he did not call it a creation ordinance. As we will see, there are good reasons for Calvin's reserve.



The institution of the family and the cultural mandate to govern the earth are widely acknowledged to be creation ordinances. These ordinances are specifically commanded in Genesis and are accompanied with specific examples. This, however, cannot be said of the weekly Sabbath. Genesis 2:2, 3 does not mention a command or precept requiring man to rest every seventh day of the week. 1 It is true that the Mosaic Sabbath law is patterned after the six days of creation and seventh-day rest mentioned in Genesis 1-2. But those who try to project this law back into Genesis have serious difficulty with the passage which speaks of servants and beasts of burden— things which did not belong to sinless Eden.

Finally, there is no example in Genesis of anyone who kept the weekly Sabbath. There is therefore no proof in Genesis that the weekly Sabbath was a creation ordinance. Someone might say that this is inferred, but dogmatic assertions require better support than an inference. When we are anxious to prove a point, it is easy to take too much for granted and to press Scripture beyond what it actually says.

Each of the six days of creation are said to have a beginning and an ending:

And there was evening, and there was morning— the first day. – Gen. 1: 5.

And there was evening, and there was morning— the second day. – Gen. 1: 8.

And there was evening, and there was morning— the third day. – Gen. 1: 13.

And there was evening, and there was morning— the fourth day. – Gen. 1:19.

And there was evening, and there was morning— the fifth day. – Gen 1: 23.

And there was evening, and there was morning— the sixth day. – Gen. 1: 31.

Why is not the same said about the seventh day? Why is every day said to end except the seventh? The work of creation was absolutely finished on the sixth day (Gen. 2:1). And because God's work was designed to endure forever, might not the rest also have been designed to endure forever?

We suggest, therefore, that the original Sabbath was an open-ended day, and unlike the other days, it was never designed to close. It was the real Sabbath, which lasts forever. Here both God and man could rest, not because either had become weary, but because both could rest in the fellowship of the kingdom of God. The banquet of love was fully prepared. What more could either God or man do but enjoy it forever? Nothing is said about interrupting this festival with six days of toil.

Since this was the original Sabbath, the sin of man was great and bitter— bitter for God as well as for man. For in his rebellion man marred the creation and abolished

the Sabbath. God must now work again to restore that which was lost and to make all things new. Although this too would be God's labor of love, it would bring Him pain and agony and an infinite outlay of Heaven's treasure. But no price was too dear to pay for the object of His love. Thus, Jesus declared, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17). In context, Jesus was saying that God did not cease working on the weekly Sabbath, and neither did His Son. Both were working earnestly for man's restoration.

The Sinaitic Sabbath law, enjoining six days of labor and one day of rest, was a teaching device to point man back to God's original creation. Each seventh day, man was to have respite from his "painful toil" (Gen. 3:17) and wearing "labor" (Exod. 20:9). He would thereby enjoy a little taste of the Eden Sabbath and remember from whence he had fallen. But like all the great festivals of the Mosaic calendar, the Sabbath would not only point back to God's first work but forward to God's last work, when He would make all things new. The weekly Sabbath therefore stood as a perpetual witness to the fact that the God who acted in creation and the Exodus (cf. Exod. 20:8-11 with Deut. 5:15) would act again at the end of the ages to restore the everlasting Sabbath. Thus, even Judaism understood that the weekly Sabbath was "a foretaste already of eternal glory, which will be an unending Sabbath." 2

That the weekly Sabbath was not the reality but a shadow which pointed forward to the reality is made clear by Paul's statement in Colossians 2:16, 17. Here he includes the weekly Sabbath in things which "are a shadow of the things that were to come." And then he adds, the reality [of the Sabbath], however, is found in Christ." He is our rest as well as our peace and righteousness (Matt. 11:28; Eph. 2:14).

The New Testament proclaims that in Jesus Christ the real, eternal Sabbath of the age to come has already broken into history. It is offered us in the gospel, just as all other blessings of the last day are offered us in the gospel. Paul uses the word "justification" to depict what is offered us in the gospel. John calls it "eternal life." The writer to the Hebrews calls it "a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9). Paul, John and the writer to the Hebrews were all describing the same reality.

Christ toiled and suffered to accomplish the new creation. But His work of redemption is done. Sin has been put away, the enemy has been defeated, and death has been abolished. It is no coincidence that it was also on the sixth day that the crucified Creator proclaimed, "It is finished" (John 19:30; cf. Gen. 1:31; 2:1). The gospel invites us to enter His rest— a rest which is as permanent as His work. By the comforts of the gospel and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we begin that Sabbath festival that shall never end. In the life to come we shall experience that rest in its immortal fullness.

In his book, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, Samuele Bacchiocchi ruins the case for Sabbatarianism when he concedes that Colossians 2:16, 17 teaches that the weekly Sabbath was a shadow of gospel realities. 3 Although he acknowledges the distinction between shadow and reality, he argues that the shadow of the weekly Sabbath is still needed to point us to the reality. We applaud him for warning us that this shadow "must never become the substitute for the reality." 4 But Colossians 2: 16, 17 contain no argument for retaining the shadow now that the reality has come. The writer to the Hebrews uses words almost identical to Colossians 2:16, 17:

### **Colossians 2: 16, 17**

**. . . a Sabbath day . . . a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.**

### **Hebrews 10: 1**

**The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming– not the realities themselves.**

Bacchiocchi would surely agree that the book of Hebrews gives no encouragement to maintain the Levitical shadow. How then can the words of Colossians 2:16, 17, be construed as encouragement to preserve the Sabbatical shadow?

It is impossible to appreciate how Bacchiocchi reaches these conclusions from Paul's Epistle unless one first understands his theology of the Sabbath, presented in the early part of his book. Significantly, this theology is based on the Gospels. Bacchiocchi interprets the Epistles in light of conclusions drawn from the Gospels.

Bacchiocchi draws attention to the Sabbatical setting of so many of Christ's works of deliverance and healing (i.e., the demon-possessed man in Luke 4:31-37, Simon's mother-in-law in Luke 4:38, 39, the man with the withered hand in Matthew 12:9-13, the crippled woman in Luke 13:10-17, the paralytic in John 5:1-10, the blind man in John 9:1-41, etc.). He correctly indicates that these scriptures demonstrate an intimate relationship between the Sabbath and the liberating power of Jesus. But then Bacchiocchi draws the strangest conclusion from this relationship. Jesus did these works on the Sabbath, he says, to draw attention to "the redemptive function of the Sabbath" 5 and "this liberating function of the Sabbath". 6 "The Sabbath is the time when believers experience God's merciful salvation" 7 "On the Sabbath, Christ intensified his saving ministry", says Bacchiocchi, "so that sinners . . . might experience and remember the Sabbath as the day of their salvation." (8) Christ was showing that the Sabbath is "a time to experience God's salvation accomplished through Jesus Christ," 9

We call this a strange conclusion because Bacchiocchi has Christ pointing away to the greatness of the Sabbath instead of having the Sabbath pointing away from itself

to the greatness of Christ. The Jews already, had a high view of the Sabbath. In fact they practically deified the day by attributing all kinds of powers to it.

Jesus had no need to call attention to the importance of the Sabbath. If anything, the Jews had already exaggerated its importance. Jesus performed mighty works on the Sabbath to emphasize that He was the reality to which the Sabbath pointed, that in Him God was offering man the true rest of which the day was only a symbol.

When Jesus proclaimed that He was the light of the world at the Feast of Tabernacles, was He trying to tell us that the fifteenth day of the seventh sacred month was the time to pass from darkness to light? When He died for our sins on Passover Friday, was He telling us that Easter is the time to experience liberation from our sins? Rather, are not the Gospels telling us that Jesus is the fulfillment and reality of the weekly and yearly festivals?

Bacchiocchi's thesis opens the door to what Calvin calls "the superstitious observance of days." 10 This is really no different from a superstitious pilgrimage to holy places. If there is "a time to experience God's salvation accomplished through Jesus Christ," it is certainly not just one day of the week, as Bacchiocchi suggests, but it is that day which Paul refers to when he says, "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

There is no liberating or redeeming power in a day but only in the person and work of Christ. He who is our righteousness, peace, wisdom and life is also our Sabbath. This Sabbath transcends all boundaries of time and space.

Who could object if a person or community should decide to observe a weekly day of rest on which to rehearse God's mighty act in Christ and to celebrate their liberation? But to bind a weekly celebration with arbitrary regulations which shackle the conscience or to ascribe to a weekly day a redemptive significance which belongs to Christ alone is to make a day compete with Jesus Christ.

## Notes and References

1. The first time a weekly Sabbath law appears in the Bible is in the story of the Exodus (Exod. 16, 20). While there was a consciousness of right and wrong from Adam to Moses and possibly some knowledge of a Sabbath, precise regulations did not enter until Moses (Rom. 5:13, 14, 20; Gal. 3:17-19). The Sabbatarian must presume far too much about the Edenic state. The actual conditions of time and space in the unfallen world are as impossible to accurately imagine as is the life to come. Why try to build a theology on Old Testament shadows when the New Testament gives us God's final word?

2. Gerhard Friedrich. ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:8.

3. See Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* pp. 358, 364

4. *Ibid.*, p. 364.

5. Ibid. pp. 29, 73.

6. Ibid. p. 36.

7. Ibid. p. 55.

8. Ibid. p. 73.

9. Ibid. Bacchiocchi's view of the Sabbath sounds astonishingly like the Roman Catholic view of the sacraments, which contends that grace is mediated through the elements of the bread and wine. Another Seventh-day Adventist scholar, Sakae Kubo, says:

"The Sabbath as a memorial of Creation is significant to us only after we see it as a memorial of our 'new creation.'..."

"The Sabbath for the Christian becomes a sign of what God has done in him.... He celebrates God's creative activity in his life for making him a new creation." (Sakae Kubo, "Man's First Full Day" *Ministry* Nov. 1980 p. 17).

This comes suspiciously close to making the Sabbath a distinguishing mark of the Sabbatarian's piety and a memorial of his infused righteousness.

10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 2, chap. 8, sec. 31.



## Chapter 13

### New Testament Ethics

By now it should be obvious that the issue of Sabbatarianism raises the broader issue of Christian existence and New Testament ethics. Is the Christian subject to law? And if so, in, what sense? The Reformation answered this question by saying that the law has three uses:

1. It has a social use since it exercises a restraining influence on society.
2. It has a pedagogic use since it points out sin and drives the sinner to Christ.
3. It has a guiding use since it acts as a rule of life for those who have been justified.

Luther laid greater stress on the second use of the law, while Calvin placed greater emphasis on the third use of the law. Some have suggested that Luther did not believe in the third use of the law. Although the expression "third use of the law" does not appear in Luther, 1 it is not difficult to find statements in which he speaks of the law as providing instruction in good works for the guidance of justified believers.

The Reformed branch of Protestantism, however, traditionally placed greater emphasis on the third use of the law. While the Lutheran tradition has tended to permit any form of worship except that which God has forbidden, the Reformed tradition has tended to permit only that form of worship which God has enjoined.

Puritanism was the outgrowth of Reformed theology. The Puritans searched the Bible for directives on liturgy, church government and the entire spectrum of Christian existence. They expounded the Ten Commandments in great detail and applied them with rigor, believing that they were the rule of life *par excellence*. The Puritans became the greatest exponents of Sabbatarianism in the history of the church.

Although mainline Puritanism was Sunday Sabbatarian, it is no accident that seventh-day Sabbatarian movements have developed on Puritan soil. Seventh-day Sabbatarians see themselves as carrying the theological premises of Puritanism to their logical end. If the Ten Commandments must be applied with exactness and rigor as the rule of life for Christians, why not keep the Sabbath which Jesus, the apostles and the primitive Jerusalem church also kept? Orthodox Puritans and their descendants have tried to argue that Jesus or the apostles changed the day of worship and commanded the church to observe a new day. But they are without

biblical support and consequently fall into the hands of their more consistent seventh-day Sabbatarian opponents.

What shall we say about this "third use of the law", as it was called in Reformation theology? First, we will examine some of its positive aspects:

1. There is no doubt that the third use of the law is theologically valid. The timeless ethical principles enjoined in the Old Testament are radicalized in the New Testament. (The Sermon on the Mount is an illustration of this.) The New Testament is strewn with imperatives-commands, prohibitions, warnings and exhortations. Law is the "ought," and there is no absence of "oughts" in the New Testament. The spiritual man is said to delight in the law of God and to submit to it (Rom. 7:22; 8:7). It is the wicked who are called *anomos*- which literally means "without law" or "lawless" (Matt. 7:23; 24:12; 2 Thess. 2:7; 1 Tim. 1:9; 1 John 3:4; etc.). Faith in the Lordship of Christ implies willingness to accept His authority and to submit to His word as absolute law.

The mainstream of the Christian church has always rejected the thesis that reborn believers, who are guided by the Spirit, need no law to guide and correct them. No antinomian has ever become an honored exponent of the Christian faith. The proposition that the believer is released from the law of God as a rule of life has rightly been condemned as heresy by all sound Christian teachers.

2. The doctrine of the law's third use preserves the strong moral imperative reflected in the Old and New Testaments. It affirms that the gospel must not allow us to tolerate sin or to be slack in reaching the highest ethical ideal.

The Reformers were keenly aware of their opponents' charge that the evangelical doctrine was permissive. The Augsburg Confession and Melanchthon's *Apology* reveal that the Lutherans were anxious to emphasize that the gospel leads to a life of good works and respect for the law of God. It was in the context of opposing the antinomians that Melanchthon first coined the expression "the third use of the law".

But it was Calvin's Geneva which was to demonstrate to the entire world that the Reformation gospel would produce a community zealous in obeying the law of God. And wherever Reformed Protestantism has gone, it has reflected Geneva's stern moral imperative. Sanctification was the forte of the Puritans. Whatever their faults, they were a terror to antinomianism. Although the zenith of Puritanism has passed, its influence is not spent. The Banner of Truth and Trust, the Arthur Pink disciples, many of the Westminster Confession adherents and the Seventh-day Adventists are leading exponents of the law's third use.

No one really understands Sabbatarianism unless he realizes that this is the way one group of Christians declares that they take the law of God seriously. At its best

Sabbatarianism is a confession that faith does not annul the law but establishes it (Rom. 3:31). Does not the substitutionary atonement teach us that God met the just demands of the law and thereby invested it with awesome honor? Sabbatarianism is the way one segment of the church confesses that, in view of Calvary, sin is not to be taken lightly and antinomianism is not to be tolerated. Thus, the church has sometimes benefited from the prophetic witness of the Sabbatarians.

3. The doctrine of the law's third use preserves the strong juridical element in biblical theology. A theology not vitally related to law is like a body without backbone. It tends to be mystical or sentimental. It does not do justice to the biblical portrait of the God of righteousness, of covenant, of wrath and of undeviating justice. The men of the Bible are not only comfortable using legal imagery in recounting the acts of God, but next to history itself, they seem to prefer legal terminology more than anything else. In presenting the meaning of the atonement St. Paul finds no better way to express his theology than in legal categories. "Redemption", "propitiation", "reconciliation", "forgiveness", "justification" and "adoption" are all law-related concepts. So are "witness" (testify), "judge", "accuse", "truth", "condemn", "Paraclete" and other words in the writings of John.

In the history of theology it is those who have subscribed to the third use of the law who have done justice to the juridical imagery of the Bible and especially to the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith. On the other hand, those who are lax on third use of the law tend to reduce Salvation to a subjective process which praises sanctification with justification.

## **"The Third Use" Misused**

Having acknowledged the strengths in the Reformation's doctrine of the third use of the law, we wish to examine the way it can and has been misused.

The theological validity of a thesis does not necessarily imply that a Bible writer formed the same categories of thought. For example, the distinction between moral and ceremonial law may be useful, but this must not be imposed upon texts of Scripture not concerned with making that distinction. The same thing can be said about the third use of the law. Commentaries on Galatians which stand in the Reformed tradition often end by trying to protect Paul from misunderstanding. They impose nineteenth-century third-use-of-the-law thinking on the book of Galatians. But if Paul is allowed to speak for himself in Galatians; he does not rescue the tarnished reputation of the law by a dissertation on its third use. The law is simply a *paidagogos*, a guardian for minors until the coming of Christ. There is no suggestion in Galatians that God's people need this *paidagogos* after Christ and justification have come. The problem in interpreting Galatians arises when the commentator thinks of the law as a principle or standard, knows intuitively that the standard which demands

right conduct is not abolished, and so he reads this into Galatians. But when Paul speaks negatively of the law in Galatians, he means that infantile, rule-book system of ethics which the Mosaic administration imposed on Israel until the coming of Christ.

Because of the ambiguity which exists at this point, there is real danger that the reformed doctrine of the third use of the law will return the believer to what Paul calls being "under the law". Under the guise of respect for the law of God as a rule of life, we would again be burdened with an infantile, rule-book system of ethics from which the gospel was supposed to deliver us.

The Puritans, Arthur Pink, John Murray, Philip Hughes, the Banner of Truth Trust people and Seventh-day Adventists plausibly argue that only the ceremonial aspects of Moses' law have passed away, while the moral aspects are retained. <sup>2</sup> Thus, the Law of Moses, shorn of Jewish ceremonies, becomes the Christian's rule of life.

Fine scholars such as Philip Hughes declare that the same law written on tables of stone is now written on the Christian's heart and exhibited in his life, not, of course, as a means of salvation, but as an evidence of salvation. <sup>3</sup> Does Hughes really mean that the letter of the Mosaic laws is imposed on the Christian's conscience?

No one should object to the proposition that the timeless ethical principles found in Moses, are carried over into New Testament ethics. But in the Reformed-Puritan tradition, New Testament ethics is too readily confined to a Mosaic code of regulations. Thus, Puritanism developed into a kind of Christian Judaism. Such a rigorous rule-book system of ethics is not a reflection of the Christian existence portrayed in the New Testament.

## **The Starting Point of New Testament Ethics**

One of the most striking things about Paul's letters is that he almost never defines right and wrong with a written law. He does not confront Peter at Antioch by saying, "You have violated Section 4, Clause B of the law". He does not charge Peter with breaking either the Ten Commandments or the 613 commandments. In fact, it was fear of breaking the old written code before the Jerusalem Christians which motivated Peter to end his table fellowship with the Gentiles. It would have been very difficult to convict Peter of any wrongdoing on the basis of the written code. But Paul explains the basis of his charge in these words: "They [Peter and his brethren] were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14).

The starting point of Paul's ethics was not a written code. It was God's act of righteousness in the death and resurrection of Christ. The apostle does not begin his letters with an exposition of Christian duty based on a Puritanical application of the Ten Commandments. He begins with a clear statement of what has been given us in

the gospel. 4 Romans 12:1 is typical of all his Epistles: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God— which is your spiritual worship".

Since God has forgiven us, we ought to forgive one another (Col. 3:13). Since He was generous, we ought to reflect His generosity (2 Cor. 8:9). We ought not to be selfishly ambitious, because Christ humbled Himself to the death of the cross (Phil. 2:3-8). Since God has graciously included us in the death of Christ, we ought to put to death all sinful deeds (Col. 3:3-5).

This is an ethic of grateful celebration. It is the believer's way of expressing gratitude for a salvation which is a gift from start to finish. It is an ethic of faith and love because it is based on faith in what God has done for us in Christ and it expresses itself in behaving toward others as God has behaved toward us (Gal. 5:6). It is an ethic of forgiveness because it lives by God's mercy and cannot help but reflect God's mercy to others. The forgiven man becomes a forgiving man. It is an ethic of freedom because there is no regulatory rule book to live by, only the twofold demand of Christ's covenantal love: "Trust in Me" and "Love each other as I have loved you" (see John 13-15).

But one says: "Surely no one should be left to define love for himself, so that eventually every evil may be permitted in the name of love. Must not love be objectively and concretely defined?" Yes, of course it needs to be objectively defined. But this cannot be adequately done by a written code, not even by the Ten Commandments. The commandments are an expression of elementary morality simplified and reduced to a bare minimum. But love is most fully defined by the cross of Christ (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-8; 2 Cor. 5: 14; 1 John 3:1; 4:10). This is no subjective definition of love, but one which is historically concrete and thoroughly objective.

In his Epistles Paul reasons from the gospel— the historical act of redemption— to deduce the nature of Christian duty and the content of Christian behavior. He touches an entire range of relationships and practical duties— duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, rulers and subjects, masters and servants, pastors and church members, strong and weak members of the church, the rich and the poor, the unruly and the immoral, the married and the unmarried, quarrelsome church members and false teachers. Such things and many more are considered as the apostle refracts the implications of the gospel into all these areas of human existence.

Yet we are not meant to construct an elaborate written code of right and wrong from Paul or from any other New Testament writer. The apostle says that the believer is not "under the law" (i.e., not subject to a rule-book religion) but is led by the Spirit. The Spirit directs the believer by helping him to apply the gospel in the concrete reality of daily life. There are so many ambiguous situations in real life that no written



code, however elaborate, could adequately tell us what is right and wrong. The New Testament writers apply the gospel in sufficient areas to provide some guidelines. They give us a framework in which we too can reason from the gospel to determine our Christian duty in every situation. Those things which are obviously sinful are clearly identified and condemned in the New Testament, so that we are not asked to chart a course through un-navigated waters. But those who want right and wrong to be minutely defined wish to be like infants under Moses rather than like adults under the gospel of Christ.

When a child learns to play the piano, he is disciplined by many elementary rules. But when he becomes a mature pianist, he transcends many of these early restrictions. In fact, he must do this to become a creative musician who can express his own personality in his renditions.

To live in the gospel maturity of New Testament freedom not only allows greater spontaneity and creativity in Christian experience, but it also demands greater responsibility. This is why many childishly prefer to have all their duties defined by a religious system. But to live as Paul envisages is to be open to the gospel and the application of that gospel in the rough and tumble daily existence. Because life is not precisely regimented for the mature gospel believer, he must pray without ceasing as he exercises his conscience to discern between good and evil (Heb. 5:14). He must seek for a constant inward renewing so that he "will be able to test and approve what God's will is" (Rom. 12:2). Rather than accept the responsibility which such freedom brings, many would prefer the security of rule-book ethics. They want the security of religion that carefully defines what is permissible and what is prohibited. With the passage of time, the list of taboos grows. Breaking the cultic taboos of a particular group is often regarded as worse than committing a sin against faith and love.

The fact is that we do not always have a chapter and verse to tell us how we should conduct a worship service, structure a governing board or relate to a company which wants to dump its waste in our neighborhood. The person who tries to settle a matter by simply relying on a proof-text may not be exhibiting his spirituality at all. Many atrocious actions have apparently had the sanction of a proof-text. Henry VIII found a proof-text in support of annulling his first marriage. Augustine found proof-text to force dissenters to attend church. The desire for a proof-text to settle vexing questions may easily become a substitute for creatively considering the implications of the gospel under the leading of the Holy Spirit. A letter-of-the-law ethic may all too easily be smuggled in under the banner of *Sola Scriptura*.

No biblical proof-text outlaws slavery. While Paul taught the gospel, he appeared to tolerate the institution of slavery as a fact of life. But in later history the Spirit led men to reason from the gospel to the condemnation of slavery. In this they went beyond the explicit teachings of the apostle. Yet they drew their conclusions from his gospel.

It was not a written law in either the Old or New Testament which convinced Wilberforce that slavery was wrong. In fact, many churchmen who used the Bible as a rule book were arch-defenders of slavery.

Neither the Bible in general nor duty in particular can be understood apart from the Bible's living center, which is Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead. We must be careful to make Him the starting point in all our thinking.

The New Testament gospel, therefore, must not only interpret the Old Testament in general but Christian duty in particular. The New Testament interprets the law of God with prophetic freedom just as it interprets the prophets with prophetic freedom. This does not mean that everyone is invited to interpret the law as he likes. The Spirit, given to the believer (and the whole church), is the Spirit who is clothed in the word of the gospel. He never comes to us apart from the gospel. The Spirit leads us by constantly bringing the gospel to mind and by teaching us to apply it when circumstances impel us to ask, "What should I do?" Apart from the gospel, no one can interpret the law of God correctly. Yet to those who live by the gospel, the promise is fulfilled, "Your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'" (Isa. 30:21).

## Notes and References

1. It was Melancthon who first coined the term "third used the law". The Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577) devotes an entire section to "The Third Use of the Law" and makes it an article of Lutheran orthodoxy.

2. There is, of course, some disagreement over what parts of the law are ceremonial. The only significant difference between John Murray and Seventh-day Adventists at this point is that the latter would place a few more stipulations in the "moral" category.

3. See Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 90.

4. Romans 1-2 is no exception, since this passage is not an exposition of Christian existence. Romans 1-2 convicts all men of sin, not by a detailed exposition of a written code, but by an appeal to the general revelation of law known even to the heathen.

## Chapter 14

# The Liberty of the Gospel

We have seen that the primitive Christians in Jerusalem continued to keep the Sabbath. No doubt the resurrection faith filled the ancient rest day with new meaning for them.

We have also seen that Paul opposed Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentile Christians should live as Jews with respect to the Sabbath laws. The gospel brought liberty in such external matters as the observance of days and Jewish food taboos.

We need to remember, however, that Christian liberty works two ways. Unfortunately, some Gentile Christians insisted that Jewish Christians should demonstrate their liberty by abandoning Sabbath observance. This Gentile attitude was as much a denial of the gospel as the disposition to impose Mosaic regulations on Gentile churches.

There are many people who keep a Sabbath to the Lord as an expression of their devotion to Christ, knowing that this makes no contribution to their salvation. Romans 14 is clear that God accepts this expression of devotion and that those who keep a Sabbath to the Lord must not be condemned. People have as much right to set aside an appropriate day to celebrate the redemptive acts of Christ as they have the right to set aside a daily quiet time. Such a day may well have great liturgical benefit.

People with a particular religious heritage may feel that keeping a certain day is most honoring to God. The gospel does not require violent dislocation from their heritage. It gives one person freedom to keep his Sabbath just as it gives another freedom not to keep it. Each needs to remember that if both should ransack the New Testament for evidence, neither could find support for imposing his pattern of worship on the conscience of the other. If what they do is to the Lord, both are accepted by God, and they ought, therefore to accept one another.

Jewish Christians were not required to violate their inbred sensitivities regarding holy days or unclean food. Neither is a Seventh-day Adventist. The gospel gives him the liberty to keep the Sabbath and to eat his gluten steaks. To insist that he must abandon his pattern of worship is to deny the gospel and to come under the censure of Colossians 2:16. Christian love will not make us insensitive to the religious scruples of others.

Those who think that a Jew or an Adventist must stop keeping the Sabbath or start eating pork in order to be justified (at least before others) are just as legalistic as those who insist that a Christian must keep the Sabbath and refrain from pork in order to be justified. So long as the gospel remains paramount, the Christian church is enriched rather than impoverished by diversity.

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