

# The Christian Sabbath Examined, Proved, Applied, Chapter 5

## The Meaning of the Sabbath

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Having observed that the Scriptures teach that the Sabbath is moral and perpetual, the important question that must now be answered is: How is the sabbath ordinance to be obeyed? The commandment says, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8). “The precept is, *sanctify it, or keep it holy*. Sanctifying of it is twice mentioned in this command. 1. In this end, it’s said God *hallowed* or *sanctified* it, that is by separation, destination, and appointment for holy uses, and as part of worship. So he sanctified the temple, altar, etc., not by infusing any holiness in them, but by appointing them for holy uses. Thus only God can sanctify a day, or any other thing, so as to make it a part of worship, and no man or power on earth whatsoever can do that. 2. In the precept itself we are commanded to sanctify it, that is, by the application of it unto the uses wherefore he has set it apart; thus we sanctify what he has sanctified when we use it and employ it according to his appointment.”<sup>1</sup> The Sabbath is to be sanctified or set apart unto God in two ways: First, it is a day of rest from work, a day of cessation from the normal daily routine (the Hebrew word for sabbath is clearly related to the Hebrew verb *shabeth*, which means to rest or cease). Second, the day is set apart unto the service and worship of God.

### 1. The Sabbath Rest

A study of the Scriptures reveals that the sabbath rest is a rest from one’s normal worldly employments (except works of necessity and mercy) and from recreations.<sup>2</sup> The Lord has given man six days in which to work and take care of his business, house, factory or farm; therefore, there is no excuse to engage in servile labor on the Lord’s day. Not only should people refrain from working on the Sabbath, but they should not engage in activities that encourage and cause others to break the Sabbath. Christians should not ordinarily go out to eat, buy gasoline, go grocery shopping, go to the shopping mall, etc., on the Lord’s day. Our attitude should be that of righteous Nehemiah who labored to stop such profanation:

In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions. Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, “What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day?” (13:15-17).

---

<sup>1</sup> Durham in Coldwell, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> The fourth commandment uses a very broad term when discussing what is forbidden. “*Mela’cah* work (cf. Gen. ii, 2), as distinguished from ‘*abodah* labour, is not so much a term denoting a lighter kind of labour, as a *general and comprehensive term* applied to the performance of any task, whether easy or severe” (C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 2:119; emphasis added).

“Unlike many modern public figures, Nehemiah was determined to put a stop to this flagrant sin. First of all, he testified against the merchants on the very day on which they sold their merchandise; he protested on the Sabbath as soon as he caught them red-handed, not even waiting for the morrow and the working days which were to follow, on which to voice his complaints (Neh. 13:15). Next, he approached the local politicians, the civil authorities. Contending with the nobles of Judah, he roundly accused them of themselves doing evil and themselves profaning the sabbath, by virtue of their own permissive connivance regarding the public desecration; and he went on to threaten them that God would bring even more wrath upon Israel than the previous sabbath curse of the captivity, if they did not act against that evil (Neh. 13:17-18).”<sup>3</sup> This is in stark contrast to today’s fundamentalist pastors who have Super Bowl parties on the sabbath evening in place of public worship, or Reformed pastors who discuss the need for Christian reconstruction on Sunday afternoon at the International House of Pancakes. “It may be observed, that in those places where the sabbath is well kept, religion in general will be most flourishing; and that in those places where the sabbath is not much noticed, and much is not made of it, there is no great matter of religion [i.e., Christianity] in any way.”<sup>4</sup>

The cessation of one’s normal employments should also extend to one’s thoughts and conversation. The business person who takes Sunday off, yet spends the day meditating on how to conduct business in the next week and discussing company strategy, certainly has not kept the Sabbath. Schools do not hold classes on Sundays, yet many students spend the day studying science, mathematics and the liberal arts. “The Sabbath is not a day for such exercises as the reading of history, the studying of sciences.... People should not give their orders for the week’s work on the Lord’s day, nor converse about their worldly business.”<sup>5</sup> “These texts may tend to reprove those tradesmen, who, on the sabbath, post their books, state their accounts, or prepare their goods which are to be exposed to sale on the following day. And if we do not run these

---

<sup>3</sup> Lee, p. 175. Nehemiah echoes the warning given by God through Jeremiah to rebellious Judah before the captivity: “Thus said the Lord unto me; Go and stand in the gate of the children of the people, whereby the kings of Judah come in, and by the which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem; and say unto them, Hear ye the word of the Lord, ye kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, that enter in by these gates: Thus saith the Lord; Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; neither carry forth a burden out of your houses on the sabbath day, neither do ye any work, but hallow ye the sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers. But they obeyed not, neither inclined their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear, nor receive instruction. And it shall come to pass, if ye diligently hearken unto me, saith the Lord, to bring in no burden through the gates of this city on the sabbath day, but hallow the sabbath day, to do no work therein; then shall there enter into the gates of this city kings and princes sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their princes, the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: and this city shall remain for ever.... But if ye will not hearken unto me to hallow the sabbath day, and not to bear a burden, even entering in at the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day; then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched” (Jer. 17:19-25, 27 KJV).

<sup>4</sup> Edwards, 2:102. “The keeping of the sabbath is a high spiritual act, the expression of hope and faith on the part of the Christian sojourner in the midst of this present world. It is for this reason a very evil omen, a sign of apostasy, of a lack of spiritual life, of a sick faith and a waning hope, when they that call themselves Christians, that outwardly join the band of Christian pilgrims in the world, evince no longing to keep the sabbath properly, desecrate it, and more and more join the world, to follow after their own desires, speak their own words, and do their own evil works” (Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism* [Grand Rapids: Reformed Free, 1972], 3:269). We live in a time when the vast majority of professing Christians take pride in sabbath desecration. That is because most churches *reject* the fourth commandment. Furthermore, those who believe in the moral and perpetual nature of the Sabbath are accused of being legalists and Judaizers. Is it any wonder that evangelical and even Reformed churches are more and more adding gimmicks and entertainment to public worship, to compete with Hollywood and the NFL?

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993), 2:194.

lengths in profaning the sabbath, yet we are highly guilty when our thoughts and discourse run after our covetousness, which is, in effect, a saying as they did who complained, ‘When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat?’ [Am. 8:5].”<sup>6</sup> Is it a hard thing to set aside one’s worldly employments, cares, thoughts and preparations for one day out of seven, for God who created all life and Jesus Christ who gives life eternal?

The Sabbath is also a day of resting from all worldly recreations. This is taught implicitly in the command itself, which teaches that the day is separated unto God and not our own pleasures. It is taught explicitly in Isaiah: “If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken” (58:13-14). Sabbath sanctification involves more than leaving the plow in the barn. The Jews had turned from true sabbath observance to doing their own pleasure; that is, they did not delight in the day and in Jehovah, but spent their time serving their own interests.

Isaiah is *not* saying that the Sabbath is to be unpleasurable, or a day of gloom and sadness, but that the day is to be focused on God (His person and works), not focused on pleasing ourselves. Isaiah focuses on three areas in which the Jews needed repentance. “The first of these, *not doing thy ways*, is parallel in thought to the earlier *doing thy pleasure*. There is no need to restrict these phrases to matters of business. The ‘way’ is a course of conduct and refers to all courses and actions that men choose in preference to the commands of God. These courses and actions may be right and legitimate on other days, but when they obtrude in the place of that delight, which is to find expression in the observance of the sabbath, they are to be refrained from. Secondly, *not finding thy pleasure* also refers to one’s own pleasure in distinction from what pleases God; and the third expression, *speaking words* (the noun is best understood as collective), probably refers to idle and vain talk, in which God is forgotten or ignored. What is mentioned tends to draw the heart away from God to the consideration of one’s own occupations. This is wrong conduct on the holy sabbath.”<sup>7</sup>

If one is to abstain from doing one’s own pleasure and even engaging in idle talk<sup>8</sup> on the Sabbath in order to delight in the Lord, then obviously recreations are forbidden. They are not to

---

<sup>6</sup> Ridgely, 2:355. “Q. 4. What is it that makes a work servile? A. If it is done for our worldly gain, profit, and livelihood; or, if by prudent management, it might have been done the week before; or, if it be of such a kind, as may be delayed till after the Sabbath, Exod. xxxiv. 21. Six days thou shalt work, but on the seventh thou shalt rest: in eaning time and in harvest thou shalt rest” (*Fisher’s Catechism*, p. 66).

<sup>7</sup> Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:427. Matthew Henry writes, “On sabbath days we must not walk in our own ways (that is, not follow our callings), not find our own pleasure (that is, not follow our sports and recreations); nay, we must not speak our own words, words that concern either our callings or pleasures; we must not allow ourselves a liberty of speech on that day as on other days, for we must then mind God’s ways, make religion the business of the day; we must choose the things that please him; and speak his words, speak of divine things as we sit in the house and walk by the way. In all we say and do we must put a difference between this day and other days” (*Commentary*, 4:341).

<sup>8</sup> “We may add, that it is not lawful, on the Sabbath Day, for persons to divert themselves by talking of news or common affairs. Such unseasonable discourse often gives a check to those lively frames of spirit we have had under the word preached; and by indulging it, we not only break the Sabbath ourselves, but, by our example, induce others to do the same. I do not deny that it may be seasonable to meditate on the providence of God towards the church and the world, on the Lord’s Day, as well as at other times; but then we must take heed that his glory, and not merely our own diversion, is the great inducement to such meditation” (Ridgeley, 2:356).

be practiced, watched on television, or even discussed on the Lord's day.<sup>9</sup> God did not set the day apart from other days in order for man to play football, soccer, tennis, racquetball, baseball, swim laps, go bike riding, jogging, golfing, weight-lifting, hiking, and so on. The day was not sanctified for the NFL, NBA, NHL, professional baseball or tennis, concerts, theater attendance, movies, television, etc. The whole day is set apart for the public, family, and private worship of God. The day is for a holy resting where God and His works are meditated upon, discussed and celebrated by God's people. This view, which is taught in the Westminster Standards and was practiced by Puritans and Presbyterians for centuries, may now be considered overly strict, unrealistic, and even legalistic, but it is clearly taught in God's Word.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Works of Necessity and Mercy Permitted

The Bible teaches that certain works are permissible on the Sabbath: works of necessity and mercy. In the section above regarding Christ's teaching on the Sabbath, it was noted that works necessary to the proper observance of the public worship of God are permitted on the

---

<sup>9</sup> The watching of TV on the Sabbath (other than videotapes of sermons, religious lectures, church history, etc.) is sinful in at least two ways. First, one is guilty of desecrating the Sabbath by ignoring God and doing one's own pleasure. Second, one is guilty of *participating* in the blatant sabbath desecration of others. This is particularly true of Sunday sporting events. Paul says that people who practice certain sins (e.g., murder, homosexuality) are worthy of death. But not only are those who practice such things guilty; so are the people who "*approve* of those who practice them" (Rom. 1:32). Thus, Christians who delight in watching baseball, basketball and football players break the fourth commandment are guilty themselves also, for they are approving of their behavior. There is simply no biblical way to justify the watching of sporting events on the Lord's day without resorting to dispensational and antinomian arguments. If someone from a distant time visited twentieth century America on the Lord's day and observed the behavior of professing Christian men, he would likely conclude that football was some type of religious ordinance. If the professing Christian men of America were as enthusiastic about God, worship, the Bible and theology as they were about football, America would probably be a Christian nation.

<sup>10</sup> When someone suggests a return to the strict sabbatarianism of the past, or attempts to be specific regarding the requirements of the fourth commandment, he is often met with charges of pharisaical harshness, legalism and lack of Christian liberty, even by those who belong to conservative Presbyterian denominations. There also seems to be a general unwillingness to discipline sabbath violators by church courts. It appears that certain unwritten traditions regarding the Sabbath have developed among many modern Presbyterians. One seems to be that the Sabbath is best left vague and undefined. Many churches basically let individuals define the requirements of Lord's-day observance for themselves, as if the Westminster Standards did not exist and the Scriptures were unclear on the matter. Another seems to be that breaking the Sabbath is not a serious sin, and thus Sabbath violators should be ignored. There has been a subtle shift away from the Westminster Standards in many conservative Presbyterian bodies throughout the twentieth century. Presbyteries routinely license men to the ministry who have a lax view regarding recreation and entertainment on the sabbath day. Presbyterian denominations should be open and honest and either alter the Westminster Standards to reflect current practice or return to the rigor of their spiritual forefathers. The teaching on the Sabbath by the Puritans and early Presbyterians was based on the careful exegesis of God's Word by many of the best Christian scholars the world has ever seen. If they are wrong, then let's see the exegetical evidence! But if the Westminster Standards are correct (which they are), then Presbyterians should be consistent and biblical in their teaching and in their courts. How are the purposeful ignorance and vague blather currently advanced by many supposed to help God's people obey the Sabbath? Do not confuse a love of God's law and the Lord's day with legalism and harshness. If strict sabbatarians are guilty of adding their own requirements to the fourth commandment, then point out the additions. "How well is it worth our while to improve this day, to call upon God and seek Jesus Christ! Let awakened sinners be stirred up by these things to improve the Sabbath Day, as they would lay themselves most in the way of the Spirit of God. Improve this day to call upon God; for then he is near. Improve it for reading the Holy Scriptures, and diligently attending his word preached; for then is the likeliest time to have the Spirit accompanying it. Let the saints who are desirous of growing in grace, enjoying communion with Christ, improve the Sabbath in order to it" (Edwards, 2:102).

Lord's day (Mt. 12:5): preaching, teaching, collecting tithes, the singing of psalms, travel to and from worship, etc. If the priests could do religious work in the service of the temple without breaking the Sabbath, then certainly religious work done for the greater Temple, Jesus Christ, is permissible. Another necessity is the refreshment of the body with food and drink (Mt. 12:3-4). One cannot properly worship and meditate upon Christ and His works when one is famished or dying of thirst. The Lord's day is a day of joy, celebration and victory (Ps. 118:22-24), and thus under normal conditions is not a day of fasting, sackcloth and ashes. One must care for one's animals on the Sabbath by feeding and watering them. Works of necessity also involve taking care of emergencies: invading armies, fighting fires, floods, earthquakes, car accidents. If it is permissible to save the life of a beast on the Sabbath (Mt. 12:11-12), then it is permissible to save human life also. "But in all these things it should be regarded, that the necessity be real, and not pretended: for it is not enough that the work can be done to such advantage on another day; for that might let out people on the Sabbath, if it be a windy day or so, to cut down their corn, whom yet God has in a special manner provided against, Exod. xxxiv. 21."<sup>11</sup>

Christians must never confuse an inconvenience with a genuine necessity or emergency. If worship is to be missed, it should be because of a real sickness or hazard. Some treat a slight fatigue as a serious flu or a half inch of snow as a blizzard simply because they are lazy and do not really want to attend to the means of grace. Others break the Sabbath who turn ordinary providence into a crisis. These are motivated out of greed rather than laziness. "Hence though the weather and season is rainy, yet it is not lawful to cut down or gather in corn on the sabbath, their hazard in this case being common and from an ordinary immediate providence. Yet suppose that a river were carrying away corn, or that winds were like to blow them into the seas, it were lawful in such a case to endeavour to prevent that, and preserve them. Because (a.) that comes by some more than ordinary dispensation of providence in the weather, and affects and puts in hazard this corn more than others. (b.) Because there is no probability of recovering these in an ordinary way, though the weather should alter, but there is hope of gathering in of such as are in the fields [outside] that reach of hazard, if the Lord alters the season."<sup>12</sup> Those who turn necessity into a loophole to mow lawns, chop wood, harvest crops or pull weeds are perverting the commandment to their own detriment and destruction.<sup>13</sup>

Works of mercy are also permitted. Jesus said that "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Mt. 12:12). If it is appropriate to have mercy upon an *animal* in distress on the

---

<sup>11</sup> Boston, 2:195.

<sup>12</sup> Durham in Coldwell, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> An incident commonly cited by those who argue that the Sabbath was meant to be kept more strictly under the Mosaic administration than today under the gospel administration is the case of the man stoned to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36). Many argue that the sabbath law was harsh and unreasonable and that the horrible sabbath yoke or burden thus needed to be lifted by Christ. This type of thinking reveals a poor understanding of the case of the man gathering sticks. First, Christ declared that "the Sabbath was made for man" (Mk. 2:27); that is, for man's good and benefit, while the church was still under the Mosaic administration. Second, for Christians, the Sabbath is not a burden but a privilege and a blessing. Third, one should not assume that the man was an innocent poor soul who just needed a few sticks to help his family; he may well have been a seller of firewood. "Moreover, it is reasonable to suppose that he persisted in this practice presumptuously, publicly, and in defiance of the divine command, after having been reprov'd for it; and he might obstinately vindicate it, and resolve, for the future, to persist in it; for to do so is the nature of a presumptuous sin. It is plain, indeed, that he sinned presumptuously. For, in the verses immediately foregoing, God had threatened that 'the soul that doth ought presumptuously,' or, as it is in the margin, 'with a high hand' who 'reproach'd the Lord' herein, 'should be cut off'; and then the account of the man's being stoned for gathering sticks on the Sabbath Day, is brought in as an instance of a just punishment of a presumptuous sinner" (Ridgeley, 2:357).

Sabbath, then it is even more appropriate to help a *person* in distress (Mt. 12:11-12). Thus, caring for the sick and relieving the poor are good and lawful on the Sabbath. The church has always acknowledged that necessary hospital and nursing-home work are permissible on the Lord's day. If it is lawful and good to minister to man's temporal needs on the Sabbath, then it is also good to minister to man's spiritual needs (preaching the gospel, witnessing, ministering in retirement communities or prisons, counseling, passing out tracts, etc.). "Works of mercy and charity are very proper and acceptable to Christ on this day. They were proper on the ancient sabbath. Christ was wont to do such works on the Sabbath-day. But they especially become the Christian sabbath, because it is a day kept in commemoration of the greatest work of mercy and love toward us that ever was wrought. What can be more proper than that on such a day we should be expressing our love and mercy towards our fellow-creatures, and especially our fellow-Christians? Christ loves to see us show our thankfulness to him in such a way as these. Therefore, we find that the Holy Ghost was especially careful, that such works should be performed on the first day of the week in the primitive church,"<sup>14</sup> as we learn from Paul's exhortation to collect tithes for the poor saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

It is important that civil governments and employers acknowledge the Lord's day and accommodate those who are involved in works of necessity (e.g., police, firemen, the military) and mercy (e.g., doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, hospital workers) in such a way that they can attend public worship as often as possible. Thus in a society that honors God's law, a rotation system should be used so that people could have at least two or three Sundays off each month in order to worship God publicly and partake of the Lord's supper. On the weeks in which Sunday employment is required, a day of rest must be given in place of Sunday, to follow the pattern of one day of rest in seven as closely as possible. "Further, if necessity obliges us to engage in secular employments on the Lord's day, as in the instances of those whose business is to provide physic [care] for the sick, let us, nevertheless, labour to possess a spiritual frame, becoming the holiness of the day, so far as may consist with what we are immediately called to do."<sup>15</sup> One must also make sure that one is truly engaging in a work of necessity. There are many medical procedures (e.g., plastic surgery, removal of warts) that do not need to be scheduled for the Lord's day. "Finally, if we have a necessary call to engage in worldly matters, and so be detained from public ordinances, we must endeavor to satisfy others that the providence of God obliges us to act as we do; that so we may not give offense to them, or they take occasion, without just reason, to follow their own employments, to do which would be a sin in them."<sup>16</sup>

### 3. The Sabbath and Modern Industrial Civilization

There are certain industries that are crucial to dominion and the well-being of civilization that cannot be completely shut down on the Lord's day. A few anti-sabbatarians have seized upon this fact as an argument against sabbath-keeping. Gary North writes, "Rethinking the sabbath question will involve a rethinking of the whole of Western industrial civilization. It will certainly involve the questioning of the last two centuries of rapid economic growth. Strict sabbatarians should at least be aware of the possible effects of their proposals. If the world should be conformed to Christian standards of Biblical law, and if the standards of Hebrew sabbath practice are, in fact, still the rule for the Christian dispensation, how would those

---

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, 2:103.

<sup>15</sup> Ridgely, 2:358.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 2:358.

standards be imposed on the population at large? Would it not make impossible our modern version of industrial specialized society? In other words, if such standards had been enforced for the past two centuries, could this civilization, which most modern Christians accept as far as its technological conveniences are concerned, have come into existence? How much of our economically profitable, efficient Sunday technology would we be forced to destroy? The costs, I suspect, would be considerable. It is time for strict sabbatarians to count these costs.”<sup>17</sup> North ignores the abundant biblical proofs for a moral and perpetual sabbath. Instead of a frontal exegetical attack on the Puritans, North constructs an economic straw man, implying that Christians must choose between modern industrial civilization and sabbath keeping.

The argument that obedience to the fourth commandment would entail the economic fall of western civilization is ludicrous. Sabbatarians acknowledge that certain economic activities and industries cannot be completely shut down on the Sabbath. One example is the steel industry. If the smelter in a foundry takes several days to reach its proper temperature, then it cannot be shut down every Lord’s day without shutting down the whole steel industry. Thus, at least a minimal crew is needed to keep the operation running through Sunday. But the benefits of steel for mankind (e.g., safer cars and buildings, the need for steel for the military) render it a necessity (wooden sailing ships would not have fared well against Japanese destroyers in the battles of the Pacific). Another example would be certain types of shipping. An oil tanker could not reach Japan from a port in Alaska in less than a week and thus would be in transit on the Sabbath (the shipping of oil is a necessity, since energy is needed for large populations to heat buildings, and for generating electricity). God does not require people to deforest the countryside or freeze to death in order to keep the Sabbath. Power and electric utilities and telephone companies must maintain service on the Lord’s day. Hospitals, churches, homes, retirement communities and nursing homes need heat and electricity to preserve life and minister to the sick. Communication facilities need to operate for emergencies. Industries involving animals need to care for those animals (for example, cows must be milked every day or they will stop producing milk).

Industries that have a genuine need for labor on the Sabbath are few in number. The percentage of people working on the Lord’s day should be very small compared to those who work on a given week day. The vast majority of economic activities on the Sabbath in America are totally unnecessary and sinful (e.g., shopping malls, sporting events, restaurants, movie complexes, newspapers, retail outlets). Those industries which require sabbath labor should rotate staff so that working on the Lord’s day is kept to a minimum for each worker. Workers must also be given another day off in place of the Lord’s day.

---

<sup>17</sup> North in Rushdoony, *Institutes*, p. 836. North calls the Sabbath a ceremonial ordinance (p. 824) yet fails to explain *why* a ceremonial ordinance was needed *prior* to man’s fall into sin. He mentions the “creation ordinance” argument in one sentence, yet offers no arguments against it (one would think that North would deal with an argument that completely destroys his antinomian and unbiblical view of the fourth commandment). He does not explain why a purely ceremonial law, a law that refers to God’s creation rest, is found in the ten commandments. North—a theonomist—apparently believes there are only *nine* commandments! He mentions Calvin’s view of Heb. 4 with approval (p. 825), a view that many of Calvin’s followers rejected (Heb. 4 is actually an excellent proof text *for* sabbatarianism [see above, pp. 26 ff.]). North’s only scriptural argument is an appeal to Rom. 14:5 and Col. 2:16-17 (p. 830), but these passages deal with *ceremonial* sabbaths (see above, p. 5). Until North explains how a creation ordinance is put away prior to the second coming, and how one of the ten commandments is abrogated, he has not really dealt with the sabbath question; his arguments are peripheral. It is like the anti-theonomist who focuses on Rushdoony’s refusal to eat pork, yet ignores his central core arguments. Although the author disagrees with North’s view of the Sabbath, his call for consistency and rigor among sabbatarians is needed and welcomed.

The central thesis of North's argument is that modern sabbatarians are hypocrites, because the fourth commandment, if followed today, would require that Christians refuse to use electricity and heating in their homes and churches on the Sabbath. North writes, "We often pride ourselves on the efficiency of modern technology, forgetting that many men and women must go to work and operate the machines that provide the power—the fuel—for our gadgets. These workers are committing sabbatarian capital crimes each Sunday, and every Christian sabbatarian who uses these gadgets, apart from some legitimate emergency, sends people to hell every Sunday, morning and evening, as he sits in the comfort of his air-conditioned church. If the sabbatarian creeds are correct, then sabbatarians are weekly condemning others to the flames of eternal torment, just so they can sit in 75-degree comfort."<sup>18</sup> North builds his case on Exodus 35:2-3 and Numbers 15:32-36. In Exodus 35 the Israelites were commanded not to kindle a fire in their homes on the Sabbath. The Numbers passage records the execution of a man for collecting sticks (firewood) on the Sabbath. Do these passages forbid Christians from using heat and electricity on the Lord's day? What are the facts?

The Exodus passage, as virtually all commentators (including North) acknowledge, does not forbid having a fire in one's home for heat; it refers either to the starting of a fire from scratch or to the kindling of a fire. "Orthodox commentators have taken two basic views of this passage. First, that 'kindle' must have referred to the starting of a fire, literally and figuratively from scratch. It was a difficult task to light up a fire once it had gone out, and this constituted extra labor which could have been avoided merely by paying attention to the home fire which should have been started a day before. The second view holds that 'kindle' refers to a fire used in business, such as in the case of a blacksmith. The latter view is singularly unconvincing. (A third possibility, that no fires were going in Israel, even in the cold of winter, is unlikely, especially in the light of Jesus' liberal interpretation of sabbath observance [Matt. 12:1 ff].) Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that it was illegal to start a fire on the sabbath, but legitimate to keep yesterday's fire burning."<sup>19</sup> The passage in Numbers 15 forbids the collection of materials used to build a fire on the Sabbath. North points out that unlawfully collected sticks could be used for heating, lighting, cooking and selling.<sup>20</sup> He also notes that this commandment requires that fuel must be obtained and stored before the sabbath day.<sup>21</sup> North maintains that using electricity or heat on the Sabbath is no different than paying someone to collect sticks on the Sabbath;

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 834.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 828. Ridgely argues for the second view: "Now it could not have been hereby forbidden to kindle a fire for refreshment in cold weather; for that was as necessary as any of the other conveniences of life, such as eating, drinking, sitting down when we are weary, &c. It was done, too, with very little pains or difficulty; so that it would not much hinder the religious exercises of the sabbath. On the other hand, the not making a fire, provided the season of the year was extremely cold, would indispose men for the worship of God. It is most probable, therefore, that the meaning of the text in question is this, that as at the time when this law was given, many of the Israelites were employed in the work of building and adorning the tabernacle, a work which, as all artificers know, required the kindling of fires for the melting of metals, heating of iron tools, &c., and, as the people might be apt to think that, because the building of the tabernacle required expedition, they might kindle fires and therewith employ themselves in the work of it, on the sabbath day; Moses tells them, that it was not a work so absolutely necessary that it required that they should attend to it on that day. This seems to be the reason of the law which prohibited the kindling of a fire on the sabbath day" (2:356-57). Ridgely's interpretation is the majority view of older commentators (e.g., Matthew Henry, Matthew Poole, John Gill, Jamison-Fausset-Brown, and Keil-Delitzsch). Dabney believes that the climate in Sinai was so mild that the command only refers to the preparing of food, because heat for the home was unnecessary (1:520-21).

<sup>20</sup> North in Rushdoony, *Institutes*, p. 831.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 833.

therefore (according to North), heating one's home or church is no different than going to the shopping mall or eating at a restaurant on the Lord's day.<sup>22</sup>

North's analogy is clever but does not hold up under close scrutiny. He fails to consider the major differences between a decentralized form of energy consumption (for heat or light) and a centralized form. The Hebrews were to gather their firewood six days a week but not on the seventh. They were permitted to have a fire in their homes as long as they did not start it from scratch on the Sabbath or use it for business. Thus, on the Sabbath each family was permitted to add wood to the fire to maintain heat and light in the home. In modern industrialized culture, man uses a centralized power production source to maintain heat and light in the home; this is *necessary* (at current technology levels) because of the huge increase of population since ancient times, and the massive population centers that have arisen with industrialization (cities of a million or more people are common). A decentralized form of energy consumption using wood or coal would ravage the environment (e.g., deforestation) and greatly increase air pollution and the diseases that accompany it. If a centralized form of energy production based on oil, natural gas or nuclear power can save human life, protect the environment and provide energy to populations that otherwise would not have it, then is it not a necessity? The medical and environmental benefits alone render a central, dependable, clean source of energy a necessity. Christ said it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath, to save human life (Mt. 12:12; Lk. 6:9). Does North believe that hospitals should burn filthy wood- or coal-burning stoves on the Sabbath, or that elderly people should be allowed to die of heat stroke in the summer, or that children should be allowed to freeze to death in winter? No, but he apparently likes to go out to dinner after church.<sup>23</sup>

A centralized power source would actually enable a Christian society to keep God's sabbath better. The Hebrews were permitted to burn fires in their dwellings on the Sabbath, as long as they did not use the fire for business purposes. The burning of a fire requires a certain amount of attention (i.e., work). Furthermore, a certain amount of smoke irritates the eyes and lungs. Although a central power system requires a crew to man it on the Sabbath, it enables millions of people to rest and worship God in a healthy, clean environment. In a Christian culture, those who work at the power plant would be rotated so that working on the Lord's day would be rare among power plant workers. There likely will come a time in the future when technology will enable power plants to run automatically with a skeleton crew for observation and security purposes. The keeping of the Sabbath is indeed compatible with modern industrial culture. God does not require Christians to return to the Stone Age every Lord's day.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 834.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin Reed writes, "I perused Gary North's fire-breathing essay on 'The Economics of Sabbath-Keeping.' Now here's a man who tells you plainly what he thinks about sabbatarianism. While presenting some valid questions, North resorts to caricature in order to ridicule sabbatarianism and discredit the position of the Westminster Confession.... On another occasion, I attended a conference at the prominent reconstructionist church in Atlanta, Chalcedon Presbyterian Church. During my visit, I was given a very nice rationale on why it is appropriate to routinely resort to restaurants on Sunday after church, in spite of the fact that the fourth commandment mandates a rest for servants and 'the stranger who is within your gates' (Ex. 20:10). I mention these experiences because they raise another perplexing question about the commitment of reconstructionists to the first table of the law. Is this not another case where theologians display an inadequate adherence to God's law?" (*The Antinomian Streak in the Reconstructionist Movement* [Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1988], pp. 10-11).

## 4. Preparing for the Lord's Day

Before turning to the question of how the day is to be sanctified, it is appropriate to discuss the need for preparation for the Sabbath. In modern hedonistic culture, Saturday evening is usually spent in various entertainments. Many people (especially those who are young and single) stay up very late watching TV or going to movies or social events (sports, theater, parties, concerts, etc.). While a certain amount of entertainment and fellowship is lawful and good for one's well-being, people must remember their duty to be ready in body and mind for the important spiritual exercises that are to take place on the Sabbath. A person who stays up late and misses public worship, or who comes to church so fatigued that his attention is not focused upon God and His Word, has violated the Lord's day. One of the most common reasons given by young adults for missing public worship is lack of sleep. Do you love the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you understand the depths of degradation and humiliation and the immense suffering that He endured for His people? You call yourself a Christian, a follower of Christ, yet you neglect His appointed means of grace so that you can watch TV or go to the movies. What a mockery, what hypocrisy!

Not only must Christians go to bed at a decent hour, but they must also prepare their affairs in such a way as to avoid the temptation of engaging in unnecessary labor or commerce on the Lord's day. If the house is dirty, clean it on Saturday, so that if people come to lunch after church, you will not be tempted to rush home and clean up. Make sure that the car has plenty of gasoline in order to go to and from public worship (or for emergencies). Businessmen and students must prepare for Monday's affairs on Saturday, not on Sunday. Paperwork or homework must be finished on Saturday. The preparation for Monday's activities should be thorough, so that on the Lord's day the mind may be fixed upon God and His works. Thorough preparation will help one avoid the temptation of thinking about the Monday morning business meeting, algebra exam or sales conference.

Housewives should prepare for sabbath meals as much as possible on Saturday. There are many kitchen duties, such as the kneading and baking of bread, preparing stuffing, cooking and mashing potatoes, that do not need to be done on the Sabbath. Moses spoke to this point in Exodus 16:23: "This is what the LORD has said: 'Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.'" "The meaning of this is, that they were to gather the manna, working which would take up a considerable time, and to grind or prepare it for baking or seething. This was a servile or laborious work, and might as well be done the day before. Accordingly, they were commanded then to dispatch or finish it, that they might rest in and sanctify the Sabbath immediately following."<sup>24</sup> This law does not make it unlawful for

---

<sup>24</sup> Ridgely, 2:353-54. Although most commentators believe that the baking or boiling of *all* the manna was to take place prior to the Sabbath, the word *today* is not in the Hebrew, and thus the laying up of all that remains may refer to the uncooked manna. Matthew Poole writes, "The words *to-day* are not in the original, and possibly are better left out than taken in; or if they be taken in, they do not seem to me, as they do to many others, to prove that they were commanded to bake or seethe on the sixth day all that they were to eat both that day and the following sabbath, or that they were forbidden to bake it or seethe it upon the sabbath day; for there is not a word here to that purpose; and it is apparent from the whole context, that the rest of the sabbath is not opposed to their baking or seething of it, but to their going out in the field to gather it. Nay, the contrary is here implied, because after they had baked and sodden what they intended to bake or seethe, part of the manna did, as is here expressly added, remain over, and was reserved for the sabbath day's provision" (*op. cit.*, 1:151; cf. John Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament*, 1:407). Whatever interpretation one holds, it is clear that spending an inordinate amount of time laboring over food in the

Christians to prepare and heat up food on the Lord's day (for a certain amount of preparation is necessary), but it does teach that food preparation should be handled as much as possible on the day prior to the Sabbath, that we may apply ourselves more diligently to the means of grace and rest.

There is also a spiritual preparation for the Lord's day. This, of course, involves, first of all, repenting of any known sins to God. Second, if there is any known enmity between oneself and another Christian, reconciliation should be sought if at all possible (Mt. 5:23-24). Third, we should pray fervently that God would not only forgive our sins but also fill us with His Spirit on the approaching day. We should pray for God to subdue our fleshly appetites, worldly cares and unclean thoughts in order that we may focus in worship upon Christ, study His Word, and feed upon Him spiritually at His supper. We also should pray for the special assistance of God in the preparation and delivery of His Word by the teaching elders of the church, and that the Holy Spirit would convince and convict hearts unto a greater sanctification. Even the Apostle Paul exhorted the Ephesians to pray "for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19). "We ought to be very importunate with God, that he would sanctify and fill our thoughts, from the beginning to the end of the Lord's day, which he has consecrated for his immediate service and glory."<sup>25</sup> Fourth, we should read and meditate upon the preacher's text for the next day, if it is known. We should "desire the pure milk of the word that [we] may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:2). What a wonderful privilege to have the Lord's day, a day in which the cares and vanities of life are forgotten, a day of blessed fellowship, communion and celebration with our Lord Jesus Christ.

## 5. The time of the Lord's Day

The sabbath law teaches that man is to sanctify to the Lord one whole day in seven. A question that needs to be answered is: "When does the Christian sabbath begin?" Some argue that the Christian sabbath begins on Saturday evening, while others argue that it runs from midnight Saturday to midnight Sunday. Those who argue that it runs from evening to evening point to the Jewish ceremonial sabbaths for support: "On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the Lord's Passover" (Lev. 23:5). The Hebrew word translated "twilight" (NKJV, NASB, NIV, NTHSMT<sup>26</sup>) or "evening" (RSV) literally means "between the evenings." "The meaning of the phrase is much discussed. Most commentators think it means 'in the evening' (cf. Deut. 16:6, 'at sunset'), or more precisely, the period between sunset and complete darkness. The orthodox Jewish view is that it means 'between midday and sunset,' and this is supported...on the grounds that it would have been impossible to kill all the passover lambs in the temple between sunset and darkness. In NT times the passover sacrifice began about 3 p.m."<sup>27</sup> The evidence for

---

kitchen is not in keeping with the spirit of the sabbath ordinance, especially in view of the fact that modern kitchens are equipped with refrigerators, microwaves and other labor-saving appliances.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 2:354.

<sup>26</sup> *New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962).

<sup>27</sup> G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 302. A passage that may be helpful in defining the beginning of the O.T. Sabbath is Dt. 23:11: "But it shall be, when evening comes, that he shall wash with water; and when the sun sets, he may come into the camp." "Evening" apparently is set in parallel with the sunset. If the ancient Jews had two evenings, one beginning at 3:00 p.m. and another at 6:00 p.m. or sunset (as some scholars assert), then this passage could mean "at the first evening (at 3:00 p.m.) wash yourself with water, then at sunset (the second evening) come into the camp." Lee argues that the Jewish ceremonial sabbaths were sunset-to-

an old covenant evening-to-evening sabbath is quite strong (cf. Lev. 23:32; Ex. 12:6, 30:8). Hendriksen believes that the Jewish sabbath began at 6 o'clock Friday evening: "According to the ancient Hebrew way of speaking, there were 'two evenings' (cf. Exod. 12:6 in the original). The first 'evening' which we would call 'afternoon' began at 3 p.m., the second at 6 p.m. Something of this is probably reflected in the phrase 'When evening fell,' for we cannot imagine that Joseph of Arimathea, a Jew, would have approached Pilate on Friday, 6 p.m., asking for the body of Jesus when the sabbath was beginning."<sup>28</sup>

Although the Jewish sabbath was probably from evening to evening (or sunset to sunset), the passages in the New Testament which discuss the Lord's day (the new covenant sabbath) point to a midnight-to-midnight observance. A passage which indicates that the inspired apostles no longer held to the old covenant system of a sunset-to-sunset sabbath is John 20:19: "Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, 'Peace be with you'" John is very specific in noting that this event took place on the first day of the week. "'On that day' would be enough, yet John adds, 'the first one of the week.'"<sup>29</sup> "It was evening. In light of Luke 24:29, 33, 36 we have a right to conclude that it was no longer *early* in the evening when the great event recorded in the present paragraph took place. As the Jews compute the days, it was no longer the first day of the week. But John, though a Jew, is writing much later than Matthew and Mark, and does not seem to concern himself with Jewish time-reckoning."<sup>30</sup> It is very significant that John emphasizes that the disciples gathered on the first day of the week, yet also records that it was evening, for if the apostolic church had maintained a sunset-to-sunset sabbath, then John would not have regarded it as the first day, but as the second. There then would be no reason at all for John to emphasize the time, for while the New Testament often emphasizes and singles out the first day (Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:2; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1, 19, 26; Ac. 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10), the second day holds no significance at all.

Another passage which indicates that the apostolic church had forsaken the sunset-to-sunset sabbath for a midnight-to-midnight<sup>31</sup> sabbath is Acts 20:7: "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight." Luke describes a church service that occurred on the first day of the week, yet says very specifically that Paul did not finish his message until midnight. If the Christian church had followed the Jewish synagogue practice, Paul would have concluded his message before sunset on Sunday, and not late at night.<sup>32</sup>

---

sunset, but the seventh-day sabbath was morning-to-morning (*op. cit.*, pp. 72-75). There is strong historical evidence that the Jews celebrated the *weekly* sabbath evening-to-evening, not morning-to-morning. Edersheim writes, "And now the weekly Sabbath, the pledge between Israel and God, had once more come. To meet it as a bride or queen, each house was adorned on Friday evening. The Sabbath lamp was lighted; the festive garments put on; the table provided with the best which the family could afford; and the *Qiddush*, or benediction, spoken over the cup of wine, which, as always, was mixed with water..." (2:437). The Qiddush (or Kiddush) ritual signifies Sabbath sanctification; it is recited in Jewish homes and synagogues at the beginning of the Sabbath (i.e., on Friday evening).

<sup>28</sup> William Hendriksen, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), p. 979.

<sup>29</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943), p. 1364.

<sup>30</sup> Hendriksen, *John*, p. 458.

<sup>31</sup> Jn. 20:1 precludes a daybreak-to-daybreak sabbath, for Mary Magdalene came to Jesus' tomb "on the first day of the week...while it was still dark."

<sup>32</sup> While the Ac. 20 passage undoubtedly teaches that the apostolic church met for worship on Sunday and not Saturday; and points strongly to a midnight-to-midnight sabbath, there are practices recorded that seem rather unusual. First, they apparently ate the Lord's supper after midnight (v. 11) which in a culture that burned oil lamps is very late indeed. Second, they talked throughout the night, even till daybreak (v. 11). The length of the evening's

“Certainly, one would almost expect the midnight-to-midnight demarcation, not only in the light of the particulars surrounding Resurrection Sunday, but especially considering that Troas was a Roman colony possessing the *Jus Italicum* and which therefore certainly followed the Roman midnight demarcation as a colony. It is clear that the congregation at Troas met for worship at night well after sunset, for ‘there were many lights in the upper chamber, where they were gathered together’ (Acts 20:8). Seeing that ‘the disciples came together to break bread’ in ‘the upper chamber,’ and seeing that there is no instance whatsoever in Scripture of religious meetings on Saturday night after sunset, it is reasonably certain that the disciples at Troas gathered on Sunday nights perhaps even before and certainly after sunset, even as their risen Lord had appeared to His Emmaus disciples on Resurrection Sunday and broken bread with them in the late afternoon, and long after the sunset of ‘the same day at evening, (still) being the first day of the week,’ had congregated with the Jerusalem disciples in the upper room.”<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, it is recorded that Paul departed at daybreak, or the break of the *next* day. If Luke had been following the sunset-to-sunset day demarcation system of the Jews, Paul would be described as leaving “later on the *same* first day of the week.”<sup>34</sup> But Luke says of Paul on Sunday evening that he was “ready to depart the *next* day” (i.e., early Monday morning at daybreak). Thus there is considerable evidence that the inspired apostles abandoned the Jewish method of day demarcation for a midnight-to-midnight system. Although the matter of sabbath day demarcation may seem trivial, it is important that the church and society follow the inspired apostles’ example for the sake of uniformity, determining when church discipline is appropriate, preparing properly for the Sabbath, and refuting heretics (such as Seventh-day Adventists). “The Jews are supposed to begin every day, and consequently their sabbaths, at the evening, in remembrance of the creation, Gen. i. 5, as Christians generally begin their days and sabbaths with the morning, in memory of Christ’s resurrection.”<sup>35</sup>

---

activities was probably due to two factors: first, the service was interrupted by the death of Eutychus, who fell asleep and then fell to his death on the street below. His death and subsequent healing by Paul certainly caused excitement and the flowing of adrenaline. Second, Paul knew that he was departing in the morning, and thus spent more time in teaching and fellowship with those he dearly loved. Although one-seventh of the week is set apart unto God each week, God obviously does not expect His people to worship the full twenty-four hours. Staying up all night discussing theology is good yet unusual and not required. Thomas Boston concurs: “Now, it is the whole day that is thus to be spent, i.e. the natural day. Not that people are bound to be in these exercises without intermission all the twenty-four hours; for God has not the Sabbath to be a burden to man, but that we should continue God’s work as we do our own on other days, where we are allowed necessary rest and refreshment by sleep in the night” (*op. cit.*, 2:196).

<sup>33</sup> Lee, pp. 221-22. What is particularly interesting is the fact that Christ apparently used the Roman system of midnight-to-midnight day demarcation when speaking of His being buried three days and three nights. Lee writes, “Counting the ‘three days’ as Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, it is clear that Christ must have been in ‘the heart of the earth’ on part of Friday as well as on part of Sunday. But as He was not buried until Friday *evening* (Mt. 27:57-60), it seems clear that the end of each of the three days does not run from evening to evening (as Jews and Seventh-day Adventists allege), but from a point between evening and dawn—probably midnight—to the corresponding point twenty-four hours later. The ‘three days and three nights in the heart of the earth’ of Matt. 12:40 etc. would then be: sunset on Friday to midnight after Friday = the first ‘day and night;’ the midnight after Friday to the midnight after Saturday = the second ‘day and night;’ the midnight after Saturday to the sunrise on Sunday = the third ‘day and night;’ and the whole period in the grave from sunset on Friday to before dawn on Sunday morning = ‘three days and three nights,’ which expression is an idiom denoting a period of exactly three days and three nights (seventy-two hours) OR denoting any consecutive shorter parts thereof, such as the approximately thirty to thirty-six hours during which Christ was in the tomb” (Ibid, p. 273).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 222.

<sup>35</sup> Poole, 1:249. Note that Moses defines a day as evening and then morning: “God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day” (Gen. 1:5). Christ’s work of re-

## 6. To Whom Does the Command Apply?

The fourth commandment is very specific. On the Sabbath, *no one* is to work. “The singular pronoun ‘you’ is supplemented by a list of six potential sources of labor, taking in the family, the employees, the work-animals, and even the visitor stopping temporarily with the Israelite.”<sup>36</sup> The commandment is very specific for a reason. Sinful hearts seek loopholes in God’s law; thus God plugs every conceivable loophole in advance. If the commandment were stated in an abbreviated form, a head of a household might attempt to circumvent the command by putting his children to work, or by hiring the heathen. But God says that no one, not even the work animals, is to work. “The sabbath rest is for all, rich and poor, master and servant, human beings and animals.”<sup>37</sup>

Although the fourth commandment applies to all, there is a special emphasis upon heads of households, or those in authority. The head of the house has a special responsibility to see to it that everyone under his or her authority rests on the sabbath day: children, servants, work animals and visitors. Two questions often asked by parents who take the sabbath law seriously are: (1) How does one instill in young children a knowledge of the difference between the Lord’s day and other days? (2) How does one control young children on the Lord’s day? The answer to both questions is: First, be a consistent *example* of a sabbath-keeper to your children. If you say one thing and do another, your children will likely imitate your hypocrisy. Second, engage your children in holy exercises on the Lord’s day. Children are full of energy. If you spend the day in worship, study, and the discussion of the things of God with your children, they will develop the habit of sabbath sanctification. This truth was exemplified in the life of A.W. Pink. “‘When we were little, all our toys were put away on Saturday night and pictorial editions of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, etc., were brought out.’ Of course, such practices were followed in many Victorian homes, but in the house in Claremont Terrace, the discipline was accompanied by the warm devotion to Christ.... Other memories of Sundays were of how ‘the day began by our father reading to us God’s Word,’ and also of how ‘quite a little of the time was spent in the singing of hymns.’ In later years Pink was often to quote a verse which he learned in childhood: A Sabbath well spent brings a week of content, and strength for the toil of the morrow, but a Sabbath profaned, whate’er be gained, is a certain forerunner of sorrow.”<sup>38</sup>

---

creation is so significant that it not only changed the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week but also gave priority to the morning over the evening. This is appropriate given the fact that Christ was buried in the evening, yet rose from the dead in the morning. Even the method of day demarcation in the new covenant honors Jesus Christ!

<sup>36</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 289. Although the commandment is given in the singular *you*, it encompasses all heads of households: husbands, wives, etc. Thus, the wife is included in the command. The Bible treats families covenantally, and thus a command to the head of the household usually respects both superiors (husband and wife). Those who argue that the wife is not specifically mentioned because of her domestic duties (e.g., cooking, diapering, etc.) ignore the *universal* nature of the command.

<sup>37</sup> Terrance E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1991), p. 230. “The command not to do any...work applied to both man and beast without exception. Those who were to rest are divided into two classes...*first*, free Israelites (‘thou’) and their children (‘thy son and thy daughter’); and *secondly*, their slaves (*man-servant and maid-servant*), and cattle (beasts of draught and burden), and their strangers, i.e. foreign labourers who had settled among the Israelites. ‘*Within thy gates*’ is equivalent to in the cities, towns, and villages of thy land...” (Keil and Delitzsch, 2:119).

<sup>38</sup> Iain Murray, *Life of A.W. Pink* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1981), pp. 3-4.

## 7. The Six Days of Labor

The Sabbath cannot be properly understood and appreciated without a consideration of God's positive command to work on the other six days. The command to labor is not incidental to the fourth commandment but a crucial aspect of it.<sup>39</sup> "The day of rest has no meaning apart from the background of labour. God's day of rest is the sequel to six days of creative activity and has no relevance in any other context. The sabbath institution implies labor; and its most significant feature in reference to labor is that it prescribes and defines, in terms of an established cycle, the extent of labor—six days of labor followed by one of cessation from that specific kind of employment which labor denotes."<sup>40</sup>

Thus the dominion or cultural mandate is intimately related to the sabbath ordinance. The ordinance of labor, like the Sabbath itself, is a creation ordinance. Both were instituted before the fall, and both were to complement each other. The dominion mandate declared to man, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28). The task of developing the earth for God's glory—God-honoring science, architecture, agriculture, arts, music, husbandry, etc.—was to be accomplished six days each week, followed by a day of rest, reflection, worship and celebration with God Himself. Although the earth and its resources were to be developed for man's pleasure, well-being and enjoyment, everything was to be done unto God's glory. Man was employed by God to develop God's earth under God's authority. "*The Sabbath presupposes work, work fulfilling God's creation mandate and performed under God's law, and the sabbath is the joyful rest from the exercise of this godly dominion.* On the sabbath, a man rejoices that the earth is the Lord's, and all the fulness thereof (Ps. 24:1). In that confidence man rests, and in that joy he surveys the work of his hands, knowing that his 'labor is not in vain in the Lord' (1 Cor. 15:58)."<sup>41</sup>

Because work is a creation ordinance, part of the fourth commandment, and crucial to the dominion mandate, Christians should view their work as a blessing and calling from God. The fall of man into sin has not nullified the task of dominion and labor; it has, however, made both much more difficult. The earth has received a curse, and man's nature has been polluted by sin. Thus, man has an interior and exterior impediment to godly dominion. The task of dominion can now only properly be achieved through redemption in Christ. "Without regenerating grace, man cannot keep God's law and discharge his duties.... The redeemed man is a citizen of the kingdom of God, and he abides by the laws thereof: that is his work, his duty, and his path to dominion."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> "'Six days shalt thou labor' is just as much a part of the commandment as is 'keep the sabbath day,' 'shalt thou labor,' ('*tha abod*'), is imperfect with imperative meaning, but probably less emphatic than is *zakor* ["remember"]. Certainly the commandment does not demand uninterrupted work for the whole of the twenty-four hours of each of the six days (as it does indeed demand the sanctification of the whole of the twenty-four hours of the sabbath day), nor does it demand that only one kind of work be engaged in for six days, and still less is it a bar to annual vacation or daily relaxation. The key to the meaning of this six days' work is found in the second part of the sentence: 'and do all thy work' ('*mlekttheka*'), as opposed to doing one's *own* work on *God's* day; yet—it is *all* of man's work ('*kalmlakah*') which is to be done on those six days, all of man's work as opposed to just his professional work, his '*abodah*'—for not even man's non-professional work or *melakah* is to be allowed to make inroads on the sanctification of God's sabbath day" (Lee, pp. 146-47).

<sup>40</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Rushdoony, *Institutes*, pp. 148-49.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 147.

Christians must avoid two prominent errors regarding work. The first regards work itself as a curse. Work, according to this view, should be done only when necessary. The goal of life is not to work hard in one's honest lawful calling but "to reach a position in life where work is unnecessary and where others can be commanded to work for you."<sup>43</sup> This view leads to slave-owning cultures where masters lead lives of leisure on the forced labor of others.<sup>44</sup> This philosophy stands behind the nomadic, idle beatnik and hippie cultures where people exist by leaching off the producers in society (i.e., parents, friends, dumpsters, food stamps, etc.). For the hippie youth culture of the sixties, work was avoided at all costs in favor of an idle, hedonistic, drug-induced uselessness. This view also stands behind the welfare class which with the help of the state has in a sense made slaves out of the producers in society (i.e., taxpayers). Ghettos are notorious places of idleness typified by soap operas, junk food, fornication and loitering around street corners. In some cultures men force their wives and children to work like slaves so that the men can relax in leisure with their friends. "Women in the African tribes are treated as little better than cattle; indeed, in some tribes, like the Masai, the cattle are considered more valuable."<sup>45</sup> "With the departure of Western man from the faith, a similar attitude has developed among Westerners. The goal of life has become vacations and retirement for all too many. The result of any such view, over a span of time, is a decline of productivity, a collapse in the standard of living, and an erosion of moral character."<sup>46</sup> Many people no longer see work as a divine calling, a holy task which contributes to dominion under God and for His glory, but merely as a prelude to pleasure. People work in order to play. "There is a marked flight from work; work is seen as a curse, and idleness as a blessing, a goal to be attained, and a state of bliss. Men work in order to be free from work and to be idle. Idleness is seen as the reward for and deliverance from work."<sup>47</sup> But the Bible is very clear that work is a pre-fall ordinance: work is commanded by God, and lawful work is good for man and the earth.

When man fell into sin, God did not place a curse upon *work*, but upon the *ground*<sup>48</sup>: "Cursed is the ground for your sake" (Gen. 3:17). Before the fall, work was naturally pleasing, fulfilling, joyful and pleasurable for man. But after the fall, all work is accompanied by fall-induced impediments (e.g., weeds, thorns, thistles, diseases, disasters). "There is always pain and toil involved when man seeks to achieve productive results. And there are always counteracting forces that tend to restrict those results. In every instance man is faced with painful, laborious toil until the day of his death. Just as was the case with the woman, the actual punishment lies in the accompanying circumstances. Work as such is not a punishment. The punishment lies in the difficulties that are involved in performing the work and the opposing forces that tend to curtail

---

<sup>43</sup> Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule*, p. 371.

<sup>44</sup> It is interesting that, historically, in societies in which slavery was a predominant factor in economic affairs (i.e., the ancient Greeks and Romans) innovations in labor-saving devices were not used because it was believed that with cheap human labor they were really not needed. Thus, slavery inhibited the dominion mandate. An unbiblical view of work inhibits progress in society.

<sup>45</sup> Sean O' Callaghan, *The Slave Trade Today* (New York: Crown Publisher, 1961), p. 59, quoted in Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule*, p. 371.

<sup>46</sup> Rushdoony, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

<sup>48</sup> "Work, however, was never meant to be a strain or curse. True, a curse was *connected* with labor after the fall in Genesis 3:17-19, but it never was put on work itself. The curse was to be found in the pain, frustration, and strain that now accompanied work. God's intention from the very beginning was that people would find joy, fulfillment, and blessing in the fact and constancy of work. Six days they were to work and then, like the Lord, they and their households were to rest" (Kaiser, p. 150).

the anticipated results.”<sup>49</sup> Although work is burdensome, the task of godly dominion is still in effect. The major difference is that now, it is a work of restoration in Jesus Christ. The recreation in Christ and the Great Commission parallel the original creation and dominion mandate. Although the church has a primary role to play in the work of restoration (church planting, missions, etc.) it is ordinary believers as they apply the Word of God to their vocations who fulfill the dominion mandate and develop Christian culture. The “Puritan work ethic” leads to economic prosperity, dominion and Christian culture. Modern Christians must not view work as the enemy—worldly or sinful—but as a command of God which brings great blessing.<sup>50</sup> “The reward for work is dominion and achievement. To tell men that the reward for work is leisure or idleness is the same as saying that the reward for sex is castration. The purpose of rest is not escape from work, but a rest in the Lord, and a refreshing before return to work.”<sup>51</sup>

The second error regarding work is to see it as a means of salvation or as an end in itself. Secular humanists of every variety (Marxists, socialists, fascists, welfare statist, etc.) have rejected God and adopted a secular version of the Christian postmillennial hope. But for humanists, work, economic growth and scientific progress are viewed as the saviors of humanity, not as aspects of dominion under God and for God’s glory. When work is divorced from its God-given meaning and intent it becomes first an idol and then an object of hatred and despair. For it is God and His plan that give work meaning. “If life is meaningless, work is also meaningless. Freud saw work as the chief means of binding an individual to reality, but if a man finds reality unpleasant, he will run from it into liquor, leisure, drugs, or some other means of escape.”<sup>52</sup> There was a certain dedication to the secular humanistic ideal of an earthly paradise through labor for a time, but as people gained a more consistent understanding of their apostate presuppositions, work was seen as mundane and meaningless. The secular humanistic hope has been superseded by the quest for instant gratification, hedonism, leisure and raw power. It is common today for students to cheat, lie, steal and do what it takes in the quest for money and power.

Work must never be separated from God, His plan and His law. Everything that man is to do is done in reference to God, His Word and His glory. Work in such a context has meaning and

---

<sup>49</sup> G. C. Alders, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 1:109.

<sup>50</sup> The Bible teaches that man should enjoy his labor: “Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God” (Eccl. 2:24). Man should rejoice in his works (3:22); labor and production are a gift from God (5:18-19); labor itself, apart from God, can never truly satisfy man (6:7); man should work very hard at his calling, for his work is limited by his lifespan (9:10); the worker should work as unto Christ and not unto man (Eph. 6:6; Col. 3:23-24); diligent labor leads to dominion, but laziness leads to slavery (Pr. 12:24); a consistent pattern of work and saving will increase wealth, but dishonest gain is quickly spent (13:11); a man skillful at his craft will be honored (22:29). There is nothing wrong with enjoying the fruit of one’s labor or enjoying times of leisure, but the focus of life should be on God—not money, things or leisure.

<sup>51</sup> Rushdoony, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 374. John Murray has pointed out that labor divorced from God often degenerates into pure self-interest: “And as we descend in the scale of human values, is it not a well-recognized fact that the bane of much workmanship is that the workman worked well only when he was under the eye of his master or supervisor? It is the same vice that explains the lack of pleasure in work; labour is boredom and about all that is in view is the pay-check. This evil that turns labour into drudgery is but the ultimate logic of eye-service and men-pleasing. Perhaps the most tragic result of all is the way in which eye-service betrays moral judgment. If we seek to please men, then, in the final analysis, it is expediency that guides conduct. And when expediency becomes the rule of life, obedience to God loses both sanction and sanctity and the workman is ready to be the accomplice in furthering ends which desecrate the first principles of right and truth and justice. God-service is the first principle of labour, and it alone is the guardian of virtue in all our economic structure” (*Principles of Conduct*, p. 88).

brings great satisfaction. The Protestant Reformers regarded all work, no matter how humble in appearance, as a wonderful calling from God.<sup>53</sup> When work is done for God's glory, according to His law, it is as virtuous, holy and fulfilling as being a missionary or a brilliant scientist. Thus the Christian is patient and content in his labors, knowing that his "labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Copyright 1997 © Brian Schwertley, Lansing, Michigan

[HOME PAGE](#)

---

<sup>53</sup> "That Adam's labour consisted in dressing the garden and keeping it informs us that it was highly worthy of man's dignity as created after the divine image to be employed in so mundane a task. This is eloquent warning against the impiety of despising and judging unworthy of our dignity the tasks which we call menial. And one cannot but suspect that the widespread tendency to take flight from agricultural and related pursuits springs from an underestimate of the dignity of manual toil and oftentimes reflects an unwholesome ambition which is the fruit of impiety. There is warrant for the judgment that economics, culture, morality, and piety have suffered grave havoc by failure to appreciate the nobility of manual labour" (Ibid, pp. 35-36).