

The Christian Sabbath Examined, Proved, Applied: Introduction

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God's Word declares, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (Ex. 20:8-11).¹

This Scripture, known as the fourth commandment, has received very little respect among professing Christians during the twentieth century. It has been misunderstood, disregarded and even maligned in many pulpits throughout the land. Dispensationalists teach that the fourth commandment (with the whole Old Testament law) has been set aside by Christ. Many others accept nine of the commandments as binding, yet reject the fourth as ceremonial in nature. They regard the Sabbath as a purely Jewish institution which is no longer binding on the New Testament church. There are others who accept the binding nature of the Sabbath yet fail to recognize Christ's authority as Lord of the Sabbath (Mt. 12:8) to change sabbath observance from the seventh day to the first day of the week (e.g., Seventh-day Adventists). The orthodox Christian position regarding what is required in the fourth commandment is best set forth by the *Westminster Larger Catechism*: "The fourth commandment requireth of all men the sanctifying or keeping holy to God such set times as he hath appointed in his word, expressly one whole day in seven; which was the seventh from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, and the first day of the week ever since, and so to continue to the end of the world; which is the Christian sabbath, and in the New Testament called The Lord's day."²

Since the fourth commandment has been assaulted by modern evangelicalism to such a degree, the one seeking to restore the biblical teaching must first answer a number of questions regarding the binding nature or morality of this particular command. First, is the commandment universal or binding on all men, without regard to national distinction? Second, is the moral principle of one day of rest in seven perpetual from creation to consummation? Third, if the Sabbath is perpetual, is there scriptural warrant for changing the day from the seventh to the first day of the week? After these questions are answered, there will follow a consideration of how the Sabbath is to be observed, the time of the Sabbath, the application of the Sabbath, and the meaning of the six days of labor.

1. The Sabbath as Creation Ordinance

There are a number of reasons why the sabbath pattern of six days of labor and one day of rest must be considered universal and perpetually binding upon mankind. The first is that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance. Creation ordinances are ethical norms which are based upon the work of God in creation. They "depict 'the constitution of things' as they were intended to be from the Creator's hand. They cover and regulate the whole gamut of life: bearing children,

¹ All Scriptures NKJV, unless otherwise noted.

² Answer to question 116.

superintending the earth as a responsible steward before and under God, responsibly ruling the creatures of all creation, finding fulfillment and satisfaction in work, labor, resting on the Sabbath, and enjoying marriage as a gift from above.”³ That creation ordinances have a universal ethical obligation inherent in them is clear from Jesus’ teaching on divorce (Mt. 19:4 ff.), and the reason given in the fourth commandment in Exodus for obeying the Sabbath: “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (20:11).

Genesis 2:2-3 says, “And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.” The fact that the Holy Spirit records that God rested from His creative labors on the seventh day, blessed it and sanctified it (i.e., set it apart from the other six days) is significant. “What could be the meaning of God’s resting the seventh day, and hallowing and blessing it, which he did, before the giving of the fourth commandment, unless he hallowed and blessed it with respect to mankind? For he did not bless and sanctify it with respect to himself, or that he within himself might observe it: as that is most absurd. And it is unreasonable to suppose that he hallowed it only with respect to the Jews, a particular nation, which rose up above two thousand years after.”⁴ “God’s mode of operation is the exemplar on the basis of which the sequence for man is patterned. There can be little doubt, therefore, that in Genesis 2:3 there is at least an allusion to the blessing of the seventh day in man’s week: and, when we compare it more closely with Exodus 20:11, there is strong presumption in favor of the view that it refers specifically and directly to the sabbath instituted for man.”⁵

“In Scripture the number seven implies perfection. It is, therefore, apt for denoting perpetuity.”⁶ The weekly sabbath and the seven-day week are a God-created aspect of our existence on earth. “The week is not of astronomical, astrological, numerical, historical or logical, but of divine origin, as is its sabbath demarcator, which originated not after the exile nor even at Sinai, but in Eden, when God finished and rested from His creation works and blessed and sanctified the sabbath pre-eminently to God Himself, to the land, to the animals, and possibly also to the angels.”⁷ God speaking in special revelation reveals to man the particular day in which he is to rest and worship.

The fact that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance proves that it applies to all mankind and not just to the Jews, for Adam was the covenant representative of the whole human race. Furthermore, every human being (except Jesus Christ) descended from Adam by natural generation. The separation of humanity into distinct language groups did not occur until long after the fall at Babel (Gen. 11). If Adam had not fallen, the sabbath ordinance would still have regulated the activities of himself and his posterity. The seventh day in which God rested was

³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1983), p. 31. “Verse 11a provides the motivation clause (*ki*) for the command in terms of Yahweh’s six days of work and his resting on the seventh. Verse 11b is an independent sentence, joined by a connective result particle, which draws the implications of Yahweh’s action: ‘he blessed it and hallowed it’” (Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* [Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1974], p. 414).

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “The Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath” in *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974 [1834]), 2:95.

⁵ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 32.

⁶ John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 2:62.

⁷ Francis Nigel Lee, *The Covenantal Sabbath: The Weekly Sabbath Scripturally and Historically Considered* (London: Lord’s Day Observance Society, 1966) p. 312.

man's first full day of existence, the first full day of unfallen communion and fellowship with God. Thus, not only was Adam to pattern himself after the divine example, but Adam's rest was spent in celebration of God the Creator. The sabbath rest was not just the cessation of labor but a time of worship, fellowship and the celebration of God. God fully intended that unfallen man in his task of godly dominion would "need to suspend his weekly labours in order to refresh himself with the exercises of concentrated worship."⁸ This fact is often overlooked because as fallen creatures we tend to view rest as an autonomous time of self-centered relaxation. Yet rest for the people of God is not just the cessation of work; it is also leaning upon the breast of Christ in worship and communion.

The fact that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance dispels another misconception: the idea that the weekly sabbath is part of the ceremonial law and thus has been abrogated by the death of Christ.⁹ This assertion cannot be true because the sabbath was instituted *before* the fall of Adam into sin. Through types the ceremonial laws taught the people of God certain things regarding the Messiah to come, and their separation from the pagan nations around them. When God instituted the weekly sabbath, there was no sin in the world, and consequently no need of a savior. Therefore, the weekly sabbath is not, and cannot be, ceremonial.¹⁰ The idea that the weekly sabbath was ceremonial comes from a confusing of the various Judaical ceremonial sabbaths with the weekly sabbath. The weekly sabbath is a creation ordinance which was in effect before the fall, but the various ceremonial sabbaths were instituted under Moses for the distinct purpose of pointing to Jesus Christ. Thus they are called by Paul "beggarly elements" and "shadows of things to come."¹¹

The three New Testament passages which have repeatedly been used by anti-sabbatarians as proof texts against the weekly Christian sabbath (Gal. 4:10, Col. 2:16, Rom. 14:5-6) actually refer to the ceremonial sabbaths of the Mosaic economy. This is clearly established in the context of each passage. "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the *weak and beggarly elements*, to which you desire again to be in bondage?"

⁸ Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, p. 34.

⁹ "Q. 27. How do you prove the observation of [one whole day in seven] for a holy Sabbath to the Lord, to be of a moral and perpetual obligation? A. From the time of the first institution of the Sabbath; from its being placed in the Decalogue, a summary of moral precepts; and from there being nothing originally ceremonial, or typical, in the scope or substance thereof.... Q. 29. How is the morality of the Sabbath evidenced from the first institution of it? A. Being instituted while Adam was in innocency, and consequently before all types and ceremonies respecting an Atonement for sin; and being appointed him upon a moral ground, without any particular reference to an innocent state, more than any other, it must therefore be of perpetual obligation" (James Fisher, ed., *The Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism Explained by Way of Questions and Answers [Fisher's Catechism]* [Philadelphia: A. Walker, 1765], 2:60).

¹⁰ "We are but using logic parallel to that which the apostle Paul employs in a similar case. He is proving that the gospel promise made to the Hebrews in Abraham could not have been retracted when the law was published on Sinai. His argument is (Gal. iii:17): 'The covenant that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul.' So reason we: if the Sabbath was instituted long before, it did not come with Judaism, and does not go with it" (Robert Lewis Dabney, "The Christian Sabbath: Its Nature, Design, and Proper Observance" in *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967], 1:500).

¹¹ If the weekly sabbath ordinance was ceremonial and was abrogated by Christ, then it would be *immoral* for Christians to observe the Lord's-day sabbath rest, because Christians are told repeatedly not to return to "the beggarly elements." Such a notion is most absurd, especially when one considers that if Christians were required to work on the Lord's day, there would be no opportunity for rested, focused worship. Beside the reasons already given to dispel such falsehoods is the obvious fact that if one day of rest and worship were not a part of the new covenant administration, then at this one point the new covenant day of worship would be inferior to the old covenant day. This simply cannot be.

You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain” (Gal. 4:9-11). Note that Paul refers to the keeping of these days as a return to “the weak and beggarly elements.” He was refuting the error of the Judaizers, who believed that it was necessary for Gentile believers to keep the ceremonial laws in order to be saved. They taught that a person must first become a Jew in order to become a Christian. They also believed that law-keeping contributed to one’s salvation. Paul condemned the keeping of Mosaic ceremonial sabbath days, new moons, festival seasons and jubilee years, because they were *shadows* which were *replaced* by the reality, Jesus Christ.

Paul reiterates this same thought in Colossians 2:16: “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.” Again Paul uses language that identifies these sabbaths as a shadow; therefore he is speaking of the ceremonial sabbaths.¹² “Moreover, that he intends no more than the ceremonial sabbaths, or Jewish festivals, is evident from what follows, ‘Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink,’ as well as ‘in respect of an holy day’...forbidden by the ceremonial law; and he thus intimates that the distinction of meats is removed under the gospel-dispensation.”¹³

So once again the question must be answered: How can the creation-ordinance pattern of six days of work and one day of rest be considered ceremonial, when there was no sin and thus no need of the ceremonial types? The divine exemplar simply cannot be considered ceremonial in any way. “The etiology [of Ex. 20:11] grounds the sanctity of the sabbath in the creative act of God... The sabbath commandment is not given to Israel for the first time at Sinai (cf. Ex 16:22 ff.), but at Sinai Israel is only exhorted to remember what had been an obligation from the beginning.”¹⁴ While it is true that certain ceremonial rituals occurred on the weekly sabbath, they were added under the Mosaic administration. The fact that sacrifices occurred on the Sabbath does not make the Sabbath itself ceremonial. The manner in which the Jews under the old covenant sanctified the day involved types and symbols that pointed to the coming Redeemer. Once Christ came, the shadow (Heb. 10:1; 8:4-5), the inferior (Heb. 9:11-15), the obsolete (Heb. 8:13), the symbolic (Heb. 9:9), and the ineffectual (Heb. 10:4) were put away.¹⁵ But the keeping

¹² In his monumental work on the Sabbath, Francis Nigel Lee makes the case that Col. 2:16 does include the weekly Jewish sabbath, but only refers to the Mosaic ceremonial appendages to that day. “In other words, one must distinguish in point of permanence between the Pre-Sinaitic moral weekly sabbath on the one hand, and the Sinaitic *ceremonial* weekly *form* of that permanent and purely moral weekly sabbath on the other.... [Paul] means that the Sinaitic weekly sabbath, that temporary ceremonial weekly form of the permanent moral weekly sabbath (like the non-weekly other ceremonial sabbatical feasts or ‘holy days’), was a shadow of Christ, and was nailed to His cross.... But not so the permanent moral weekly sabbath itself, of which the Sinaitic weekly sabbath was only the temporary form.... The (Saturday) sabbath of the Jews having been abolished in the New Testament, Sunday or the Lord’s day must now be solemnly hallowed by all Christians” (*op. cit.*, p. 31). If Lee is correct, then Col. 2:16 is an excellent proof text against the Seventh-day Adventist heresy requiring keeping Saturday instead of the Lord’s day. In any case, there is such abundant evidence in the New Testament that God has changed the day from the seventh to the first day of the week that Lee’s interpretation of Col. 2:16 is not necessary to prove first-day observance.

¹³ Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993 [1731]), 2:344.

¹⁴ Childs, p. 416.

¹⁵ “The weekly sabbath dates from Eden, but the ceremonial non-weekly sabbaths only from Sinai. The relationship between the ‘moral’ sabbath and the ceremonial sabbaths is analogous to that between the moral law and the ceremonial law or ‘Law of ordinances.’ The distinction between these two kinds of law has been questioned by some, but the distinction is Scriptural (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 25)...and, as Thomas Boston writes of the weekly sabbath, ‘It was appointed and given of God to Adam in innocency, before there was any ceremony to be taken away by the coming of Christ, Gen. 2:3’” (Lee, p. 28).

of one day in seven, being a pre-fall creation ordinance, was not put away (the change of the day from the seventh to the first day will be considered later).

The other passage used against the perpetuity of the Sabbath is Romans 14:5-6: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it." Is Paul saying that the keeping of one day in seven holy to the Lord is optional for Christians? Is he telling the Roman believers that Christ's death has made the creation ordinances optional? No, not at all. Paul is dealing with a situation unique to the early church. There were Jewish believers who "regarded the holy days of the *ceremonial economy* as having abiding sanctity."¹⁶ Virtually all commentators concur that the days spoken of in this passage refer specifically to the ceremonial holy days of the Levitical institution and *not* the Christian sabbath. Paul allows for diversity in the church over the issue of Jewish holy days (i.e., the ceremonial sabbaths) because of the unique historical circumstances. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, the ceremonial aspects of the law (e.g., animal sacrifices, Jewish holy days, circumcision) were rendered obsolete and were abrogated. Yet, prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, the apostles allowed certain practices by Jewish Christians as long as no works-righteousness was attributed to these practices. In Acts 21:26 the Apostle Paul even goes to the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification. Jewish believers who were already accustomed to keeping certain holy days of the Mosaic economy were allowed to continue doing so for a time. But once the temple was destroyed, the canon of Scripture was completed, and the church had existed for a whole generation, these unique historical circumstances ceased.

The idea that Paul was teaching that obedience to the creation ordinance of six days of work and one day of rest was optional for believers cannot be true, because it would involve Paul in blatant contradiction with his own teachings. When Paul taught on the subject of the relationship between men and women in the home and in the church, he repeatedly pointed to the creation of Eve and the creation ordinance of marriage (1 Cor. 11:8-9; Eph. 5:31; 1 Tim. 2:13). Furthermore (as noted in detail below), there is abundant evidence in the New Testament that after Christ's resurrection the church always met for public worship on the first day of the week (Ac. 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10). Thus, although the day was changed, the creation-ordinance pattern of six days of work and one day of rest was not changed. The day of rest and the day of concentrated worship have always been one and the same. Therefore, Paul could not have been arguing that some believers, *if they so desire*, can attend to the means of grace and sanctify the Lord's day, while others, *if they so desire*, can sleep in or go to the beach. "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching" (Heb. 10:24-25).

A portion of Scripture which clearly disproves the notion that the weekly sabbath was new to the Mosaic administration—and therefore Jewish and ceremonial—is found in Exodus 16:

"And it shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily."... And so it was, on the sixth day, that they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. And all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. Then he said to them, "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

¹⁶ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 177-78.

up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.”... Then Moses said, “Eat that today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, there will be none.” Now it happened that some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found none. And the LORD said to Moses, “How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? See! For the LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day (Ex. 16:5, 22, 23, 25-30).

The noteworthy matter in this portion of Scripture is that the weekly sabbath institution is discussed as a binding institution *before* the giving of the law at Sinai. Furthermore, in this passage God was not now instituting a new ordinance. “If the sabbath had now been first instituted, how could Moses have understood what God said to him (v. 5), concerning a double portion to be gathered on the sixth day, without making any express mention of the sabbath? And how could the people so readily take the hint (v. 22), even to the surprise of the rulers, before Moses had declared that it was done with a regard to the sabbath, if they had not had some knowledge of the sabbath before?”¹⁷ The fact that a double portion of manna was given on the sixth day (but no manna was given on the seventh day) proves that the weekly sabbath rest was already built into the created order. Thus, at this point the sabbath ordinance looks back toward Genesis 2:1-3. The Sabbath is a creational reality for all peoples and all times. If, as some assert, Exodus 16 refers to the institution of the Sabbath for the first time (and for Israel alone), then why, in the fourth commandment (Ex. 20:11), does God point Israel back to the creation week and not to the giving of the manna? Would not the explanation of the commandment read, “For in six days the Lord gave you manna in the wilderness but withheld it on the seventh day...”? “The setting apart of one day in seven for holy work, and, in order to that, for holy rest, was a divine appointment ever since God created man upon the earth, and the most ancient of positive laws. The way of sabbath-sanctification is the good old way.”¹⁸

2. The Sabbath is Part of the Ten Commandments

The morality, universality and perpetual nature of the weekly sabbath are also demonstrated by its location in the decalogue, or ten commandments. Did God place a temporary, purely Jewish ceremonial law in the midst of the summary of His moral precepts?

¹⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, Virginia: MacDonald), 1:343. “This passage shows that the sabbath was certainly made known to Israel before the giving of the law at Sinai. The Israelites did not arrive at Sinai until the following month (16:1; 19:1). This passage also shows that this was not the first institution of the sabbath. The incidental manner in which the matter is introduced and the remonstrance of the Lord for the disobedience of the people both imply that the sabbath had previously been known. The Lord’s inquiry, ‘How long do you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws?’ sounds as if it had long been in existence. In fact, the equation of the sabbath with the seventh day, the statement that the Lord gave the Israelites the sabbath, and the record that the people, at God’s command, rested on the seventh day, all point unmistakably to the primeval institution of the sabbath” (*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], 5:184).

¹⁸ Henry, *Commentary*, 1:343. “Q. 35. How can the observation of the Sabbath be said to take place immediately after the creation, when the scripture is wholly silent about the observation of it till the time of Moses? A. It might as well be argued, that the Sabbath was not observed after Moses’ time, during the government of the Judges, which, according to Acts xiii. 20. was about the space of four hundred and fifty years, there being no mention of the church’s observing a Sabbath during the whole of that long period: and yet it cannot be supposed, that so many godly men, as the Judges were, would suffer the observation of the Sabbath to go into entire desuetude [disuse]” (*Fisher’s Catechism*, p. 61).

Absolutely not! The number ten in the holy Scriptures signifies completeness and perfection. The idea that God has really only given His people nine commandments is absurd. The fact that the fourth commandment is part of the decalogue proves that it is of the same *kind* or *nature* as the other nine precepts; that is, it is *moral*. As part of the ten commandments, the Sabbath received the *same* special, awesome introduction (Ex. 19:16 ff.), dignity and honor as the other nine commandments.

The ten commandments were spoken directly to the people by Jehovah Himself from the mount (Ex. 20:1, 19). They were written on tablets of stone by God Himself to signify their importance and perpetual nature (Ex. 24:12; 32:16). They were taken and placed within the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:16). None of these “privileges were conferred upon the *ceremonial law*.”¹⁹ “And if these and other prerogatives did put a difference, and show a difference to be put between the other nine commands, and all other judicial or ceremonial laws, why not between them, and this also?”²⁰ Furthermore, the wording of the fourth commandment reveals its universal nature, because the heathen and even the animals were required to rest. “The sabbath was not only enjoined to be observed by the Israelites, who were in covenant with God, together with their servants, who were made proselytes to their religion, and were obliged to observe the ceremonial and other positive laws; but it was also to be observed by the stranger within their gates, namely, the heathen, who dwelt among them, who were not in covenant with God, and *did not observe the ceremonial law*.”²¹ “To see the convincing force of this fact the reader must contrast the jealous care with which the ‘stranger,’ the pagan foreigner sojourning in Jewry, was excluded from all share in the Levitical worship. No foreigner could partake of the passover; it was sacrilege. It was at the peril of his life that he presumed to enter the inner courtyard of the temple, where the bloody sacrifice was offered. Now, when this foreigner is required to keep the Sabbath along with the families of Israel, does not this prove that rest to be no ceremonial, no type like the passover and the altar, but a universal moral institution designed for all nations and times?”²²

Some have suggested that the introduction of the law (“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”), as well as the restatement of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy (which discusses the Jews’ deliverance from Egypt instead of God’s creation of the world), is evidence that the Sabbath was an ordinance for the Jewish nation and not New Testament believers. Such an argument falls to the ground when one considers that the preface concerns *all* the commandments, not just the fourth. No one would hold that lying, adultery, theft and murder were permissible outside the Jewish nation. Furthermore, the salvation of Israel from Egypt *typified* the salvation of believers from their slavery to sin and the world. “In Exodus, reference is made to the creative work of God undertaken in six days, after which God rested on the seventh day. The two reasons [Ex. 20:11; Dt. 5:15] complement each other and both emphasize man’s dependance on God. To rest on the sabbath day was to remember that man, as a part of God’s created order, was totally dependent on the Creator; man’s divinely appointed task to have dominion over the created order (Gen. 1:26) carried with it also the privilege of sharing in God’s rest. The Exodus, too, was a type of *creation* and thus forms an analogy to the creation account in Genesis. The Exodus from Egypt

¹⁹ *Fisher’s Catechism*, 2:61.

²⁰ James Durham, “The Fourth Commandment,” in Christopher Coldwell, ed., *Anthology of Presbyterian and Reformed Literature* (Dallas: Naphtali Press, winter, 1989), p. 6.

²¹ Ridgeley, 2:343.

²² Dabney, 1:507.

marks in effect the creation of God's people as a nation, and the memory of that event was also a reminder to the Israelites of their total dependence upon God."²³

The confusion among scholars regarding the morality of the weekly sabbath is to a degree understandable, in that the moral sabbath was incorporated into the Mosaic administration in a unique way. The ceremonial sabbaths and ceremonial temple system were imposed upon the ancient moral sabbath as clothes are placed upon the body. The Sabbath was also incorporated into the judicial laws of Israel. Furthermore, the Sabbath was made a perpetual covenant and sign between Jehovah and the Jewish nation. These elements are brought out in Exodus 31:12-18:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.'" And when He had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

An attempt must be made to distinguish between the permanent moral sabbath and the temporary Mosaic additions to it. The ceremonial sabbaths, the ceremonies of the central sanctuary, the Sabbath as a covenant sign, and the civil death penalty provisions are additions to the moral sabbath. The priests carried on their duties about the tabernacle. The bread of the presence was to be set on the table in the holy place on the sabbath day (Lev. 24:8). A special sacrifice, in addition to the ordinary daily sacrifice, was to be offered on the sabbath day (Num. 28:9-10). The rite of circumcision was performed on the Sabbath, if it was the eighth day after the child's birth (Lev. 12:3; Jn. 7:22). The Sabbath is listed among the sacred festivals, "the appointed feasts of the LORD" (23:1-3). It, like them, was proclaimed to be "a holy convocation" (23:3).²⁴ The restatement of the sabbath law at the conclusion of a whole series of laws dealing with the temple cultus, taken together with the death penalty provision and the Sabbath as a perpetual covenant, points to Israel's close personal relationship to Jehovah, its separateness from the pagan nations, and the ceremonial cultus (the shedding of blood) which makes this covenantal relationship and separateness from the heathen possible. Jehovah is honored corporately in worship every sabbath day, yet He is approached and worshiped through propitiatory sacrifice. Since in the old covenant Christ is represented in the tabernacle with its sacrifices, the Sabbath had to be intimately connected to the ceremonies. "The law of the sabbath had been given them before any other law, by way of preparation [Ex. 16:23]; it had been inserted in the body of the moral law, in the fourth commandment; it had been annexed to the

²³ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 157. "In Exodus xx. 11 a worldwide and permanent ground for the Sabbath command is assigned: 'For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth,' etc., while nothing is said about the exodus. The explanation is clear. The Hebrews had all the reason to keep the Sabbath which the whole human race has—God's sanctifying it at the creation of the race and commanding it to all the race. *But they had this additional reason*: that God had now blessed them above all other tribes. Hence they were bound by gratitude also to keep the Sabbath" (Dabney, 1:509; emphasis added).

²⁴ *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5:184.

judicial law [Ex. 23:12]; and here [Ex. 31:13-17] it is added to the first part of the ceremonial law....²⁵

Some have argued that the Sabbath could not be a special sign between God and Israel if it had been morally binding on all nations, because then it would have held no special significance for Israel. This argument fails to take into account that the other nations of the world did not observe the Sabbath because they were not the recipients of divine revelation; they had not been set apart, as the people of Israel had, through miraculous redemptive acts; they did not have the ceremonial system in which to approach God; and they were not a called-out theocratic nation. The Sabbath was a sign between Israel and Jehovah only because of God's grace. While the moral foundation for the Sabbath is the creation ordinance, the knowledge of the day and the manner of keeping the day are both revealed by special revelation and special grace. "God, by sanctifying this day among them, let them know that he sanctified them, and set them apart for himself and his service; otherwise he would not have revealed to them his holy sabbaths, to be the support of religion among them.... If we sanctify God's day, it is a sign between him and us that he has sanctified our hearts."²⁶ When the Jews kept the sabbath day holy, they were declaring to the world that they worshiped the true God who created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. "The general apostasy of the nations made this duty of visible Sabbath-keeping, which God enjoins on all men of all ages, a badge and mark of those who still fear him."²⁷

3. The Sabbath and the Prophets

The prophets treated the Sabbath as a moral ordinance that was also binding on the Gentiles. In Isaiah 56 Jehovah speaks not just to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles, concerning the duties which all men owe to one another and to God: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for my salvation is about to come, and my righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who lays hold on it; who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing any evil" (vs. 1-2). Note that keeping the Sabbath is as much a duty to the Gentiles as keeping justice and not doing evil.

Not only does Isaiah apply the Sabbath to the Gentiles and place it within the category of the moral law, he also applies it prophetically to the Gentiles in the gospel dispensation. Lee writes,

As Bickersteth points out, Is. 56:2 "must refer to the moral duties specified in the preceding verse; so that, as the passage refers to the future times of the Christian Church, it is deserving of particular notice that the Sabbath is not only spoken of as an institution still existing in that

²⁵ Henry, *Commentary*, 1:405.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 405.

²⁷ Dabney, 1:510. "It is objected that God made the Sabbath 'a sign' between him and the Hebrews (Exod. xxxi. 13-17; Ezek. xx. 12, 20). The attempt is made to infer hence that the Sabbath was a mere type to the Hebrews, and thus has passed away like all the other types, since the antitype, Christ, came. Again I reply: if its being 'a sign' between God and Israel proves it a type, then the same argument proves that the great first law of love itself was a type, and has been abrogated; for in Deut. vi.6 Israel is commanded to make this 'a sign.' Such is the absurdity of this argument" (*Ibid*, 1:509). Furthermore, is it not true that the Lord's day (the Christian sabbath) *still* functions as a sign distinguishing between obedient Christians and the heathen? For the biblical Christian is found worshiping with God's people on the Lord's day, while the heathen watch football, play golf, go to the beach, etc., and thus serve their own interests.

more enlarged and spiritual condition of society, but as partaking of a moral character, which, indeed, from its place in the midst of the Decalogue, it possessed from the first, and demanding a sacred observance.... This prophecy pointing to a period when the house of God was to be called an house of prayer for all people; and at that period the man who should keep the Sabbath from polluting it should inherit the blessing of God.’ And commenting on Is. 56:6, Bickersteth states: ‘This is a particular phase of the same prophecy containing a distinct promise of the Divine favour and acceptance being extended to Gentile converts, and in this part of it a repetition of the Sabbath, in a manner so explicit that it is scarcely possible to imagine a stronger testimony could be given to the continued observance of the Sabbath in the Christian Church.’²⁸

The obvious objection of non-sabbatarians to Isaiah’s prophecy is the mention also of sacrifices, burnt offerings, the altar and the temple (i.e., “My house”) in verse 7. But if the New Testament is allowed to interpret the Old, it will be evident that all these terms are symbolic of the pure New Testament worship of God. Since the New Testament clearly teaches that God’s holy sabbath continues into the gospel dispensation on the first day of the week (the Lord’s day), we know as a fact of history that this prophecy has indeed been fulfilled.

A chapter that very clearly places the Sabbath within the moral law is Isaiah 58. This chapter deals with the hypocritical worship of the house of Jacob. The Jews were trying to impress God by their fasting; yet while they did so, they were continually breaking God’s moral law. The biblical method of fasting includes true repentance, which for the Jews involved letting the oppressed go free (v. 6), sharing one’s bread with the hungry, sheltering the poor, covering the naked (v. 7), stopping wicked speech, and helping the afflicted soul (v. 10). This chapter obviously is not dealing with ceremonial infractions but ethical lapses among the people. It is in this context that Jehovah says, “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” (vs. 13-14). The Jews in Isaiah’s day trusted in the ceremonies or rituals, yet flagrantly disregarded the duties of the moral law. Thus, “the main scope of this fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah is to dissuade the Jews from a ceremonial righteousness by showing its worthlessness when unaccompanied by spiritual holiness. They are ardently urged to offer God, instead of ritual service, the duties of inward righteousness, and especially of charity. To these the blessing is promised. Now, it is in this connection that the prophet also urges a spiritual Sabbath observance, and to it he repeats the same promises. He also connects this right kind of Sabbath observance immediately with the glorious Messianic triumphs of Zion, which we know

²⁸ *Bickersteth’s Bible Commentary* on Isa. 56:2, 6, cited in Legerton, *The Sabbath Day Only a Shadow?* p. 28, as quoted in Lee, p. 167. James Durham (1622-1659) argues that Isa. 66:23 and Ezek. 43-46 also prophecy of sabbath observance in the New Testament era: “It is clear that these places relate to the days of the gospel, as none can deny but they do so eminently. It is clear that though they prophesy of the services of the gospel under the names of sacrifices, etc., proper to the Old Testament administration, and of the sanctified and set-apart time of the gospel, under the name of Sabbath which then was determined, and whereto men were then bound by the fourth command as they were to sacrifices by the second. Yet these prophecies infer not by virtue of the fourth command the very same day to be under the gospel, which was under the law, more than the same services by virtue of the second, which none will deny to be in force, notwithstanding of the change of services. And there is as little reason to deny the fourth to be still in force as to its substance, notwithstanding of the change of the particular day” (Durham in Coldwell, p. 5).

from all subsequent history, occur only under the new dispensation.... It is simply impossible for the candid reader to take in the anti-ceremonial aim of the whole passage, and to believe that Isaiah here thought of Sabbath observance as only a typical duty.”²⁹

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²⁹ Dabney, 1:501.