

The Sabbath and Modern Industrial Civilization: A Critique of Gary North's "The Economics of Sabbath Keeping"

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In our post-Christian apostate culture any biblical reformation of business must involve a scriptural concept of the sabbath as well as a consistent implementation of God's fourth commandment. The Puritans rightly recognized that the duties to our fellow men enumerated in the second table of the law are logically and foundationally dependent on the first table of the law. As Matthew Henry has noted: "The stream of all religion runs either deep or shallow, according as the banks of the sabbath are kept up or neglected."¹ Given the importance of this subject we want to turn our attention to the sabbath as it relates to modern industrial civilization. Is sabbatarianism compatible with modern civilization? In order to answer this question we will interact with a critique of sabbatarianism from the noted theologian author Gary North.² The central thesis of North's critique is that there are certain industries that are crucial to dominion and the well-being of civilization that cannot be completely shut down on the sabbath. Therefore, if sabbatarians were to be consistent they would have to abandon modern culture with its comforts. As we examine this question we will see that North misunderstands sabbatarianism and thus bases his whole argument on an economic straw man.

North begins with the assertion that strict sabbatarianism and modern industrial specialized society are incompatible. He 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

¹Matthew Henry, *The Complete Works of Matthew Henry: Treatises, Sermons, and Tracts* (Grand Rapids: 1979, [1855]), 1:131. There was a time not long ago when virtually every Protestant and Baptist denomination upheld strict sabbatarianism. Sadly, there has been a radical shift away from sabbatarianism during the last one hundred and twenty years. The shift began in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and continued until by the 1960s the concept of a Christian sabbath was virtually non-existent among evangelicals. The decline can be primarily attributed to three factors. 1.) There was the rise of Modernism or liberal theology. Modernist theologians viewed God's law as a product of the religious evolution of the Israelites. They theorized that the law was a redaction of power-hungry priests who wanted more control of the people. Such a view obviously does not bode well for sabbath observance. 2.) Simultaneously with the growth of modernism was the great rise in popularity of dispensationalism. Dispensational theologians, pastors and authors taught the people that God's Old Testament law, including the Ten Commandments, was only for the dispensation of law. That is, it only applied to the old covenant era or the Jewish people. The dispensational hermeneutic presupposes that believers are only to look to the New Testament for ethical norms. As a result, most churches began teaching that the fourth commandment was something that only applied to the nation of Israel. 3.) As modernist and dispensationalist teachers were destroying a biblical conception of God's law among "main line" and "fundamentalist" churches, American society was becoming more secular and pragmatic. Further, there was a great increase in industrialization. The biblical concept of a day of rest set apart to worship God seemed out of place in a modern competitive "capitalist" culture.

²Gary North, "The Economics of Sabbath Keeping" in Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed), Appendix 4.

rule for the Christian dispensation, how would those 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.”³ Before we consider North’s central question there are a number of things that need to be noted regarding North’s article. 1.) North approaches the subject from a prior commitment to anti-sabbatarianism. A sabbatarian would never examine society’s economic situation and ask whether the sabbath was too costly. Obedience to God’s law-word should never be contingent upon a cost analysis. Indeed, as North knows there are societal blessings that accompany faithfulness to God’s law.⁴ 2.) North’s critique of sabbatarianism is not a frontal attack on the puritan-Presbyterian conception of the Lord’s day,⁵ but rather is an attempt at making modern sabbatarians look inconsistent and arbitrary in their application of this law. 3.) North’s interactions with traditional proofs for sabbatarianism are minimal or non-existent. He calls the sabbath a ceremonial ordinance⁶ yet fails to explain *why* a ceremonial ordinance was needed *prior* to man’s fall into sin. He mentions the “creation ordinance” in one sentence, yet offers no arguments against it.⁷ He does not explain why a purely “ceremonial law,” a law that refers to God’s creation rest, is found in the Ten Commandments.⁸ North (a theologian) apparently believes there are only *nine* commandments in the new covenant era. He mentions Calvin’s view of Hebrews 4 with approval,⁹ yet fails to mention that Calvin, the ministers of Geneva and the civil magistrates required all businesses to be closed on the Lord’s day (cf. Calvin’s *Sermons on Deuteronomy* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987], pp. 203-204, where Calvin refers not only to businesses being closed, but also condemns “playing and gaming” on that day). North’s only major appeal to Scripture is his use of Romans 14:5 and Colossians 2:16-17. He regards these passages as an explicit abrogation of the fourth

³*Ibid.*, p. 836.

⁴See Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), pp. 64-67.

⁵The Reformed or Presbyterian doctrine of the sabbath has received its fullest confessional expression in the *Westminster Standards* (Confession of Faith, 21:78; Larger Catechism, answers to questions 116-121; Shorter Catechism, answers to questions 58 to 62).

⁶Gary North, “The Economics of Sabbath Keeping,” in Rushdoony, *Institutes*, p. 824.

⁷*Ibid.*, 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, superintending the earth as responsible stewards 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” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1983], p. 31.). Robert Lewis Dabney writes: “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” (“The Christian Sabbath: Its Nature, Design, and Proper Observance” in *Discussion: Evangelical and Theological* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967], 1:500).

⁸For a thorough exegetical defense of the purpitude of the fourth commandment see Brian M. Schwertley, *The Christian Sabbath: Examined, Proved, Applied* (Holt, MI: Reformation Forum, 1996), pp. 1-30. This essay is based on a section of chapter 6.

⁹Gary North, “The Economics of Sabbath Keeping,” p. 825.

commandments.¹⁰ Unfortunately, he does not recognize that these passages are dealing with ceremonial sabbaths and have nothing to do with the non-ceremonial pre-fall creation ordinance that is restated in the decalogue. 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.

This brings us to North's central question. Would a strict obedience to the fourth commandment entail the economic fall of western civilization? No. Such a thought is ludicrous. North completely ignores the fact that works of mercy and necessity are permissible on the Lord's day. 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.

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

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 830. For a refutation of North's understanding of Hebrews 4, Romans 14:5 and Colossians 2:16-17 see Brian M. Schwertley, *The Christian Sabbath*, pp. 5-7, 26-30; Francis Nigel Lee, *The Covenantal Sabbath: The Weekly Sabbath Scripturally and Historically Considered* (London: Lord's Day Observance Society, 1966), p. 31ff. John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 177-178. Thomas Ridgely, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993 [1731]), 2:344.

eternal torment, just so they can sit in 75-degree comfort.”¹¹ 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. 12:1ff].) 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.”¹² 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.¹³ He also notes that this commandment requires that fuel must be obtained and stored before the sabbath day.¹⁴ North maintains that using electricity or heat on the Sabbath is no different than paying someone to collect sticks on the Sabbath; 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.¹⁵

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

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 834.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 828.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 831.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 833.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 834. The case of the man stoned to death for gathering sticks (Num. 15:32-36) is commonly cited by those who argue the sabbath was meant to be kept more strictly under the Mosaic administration. 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 reprovved 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 forgoing, God had threatened that ‘the soul that doth ought presumptuously, ‘or, as it is in the margin, ‘with a high hand’ who ‘reproached 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). But what about the penalty? Are Christians required to execute sabbath violators in a Christian commonwealth in the new covenant era? No. The puritans and early Presbyterians never instituted the death penalty for sabbath desecration. They (generally speaking) believed that the sabbath penalty in Numbers 15:32-36 was an extraordinary historical case pertaining to Israel’s unique circumstances and/or believed that while the sabbath itself was moral and perpetual the penalty in the wilderness was positivistic.

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?¹⁶

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.

Although Gary North should be commended for calling our attention to the need of applying the fourth commandment to modern culture in a consistent non-hypocritical manner, his call to reject the fourth commandment has no biblical foundation. If we are going to work for a reformation of business and the Christian reconstruction of society we must point society to the

¹⁶Jesus 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 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," (Jonathan Edwards, "The Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath" in *Works* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974 (1834)], 2:103.)

day set apart to honor the King in which we celebrate the whole work of redemption. “This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24).

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