
The Sabbath: mark of distinction

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As a Briton resident overseas, I try to follow events in my home country and have been struck by the amount of hot air generated recently over the question of Sunday trading. It has caused a lot of thought, and I believe we must continue to consider the Christian attitude to Sunday, especially as the forces which would 'abolish' Sunday in Britain and elsewhere are still active.

In brief, my view is that, if the Sabbath is primarily a gift of God for his own, it is not something that should be imposed on others. If, however, it is given to believers as good, it is likely to be good for society as a whole, and Christians should try to convince society of the value of a day of rest. Perhaps Christians themselves need convincing; there are real practical difficulties if, as I think will happen in any case, a Christian who seeks to keep one day special has to try to live and work in a society which does not.¹ It is perhaps particularly ironic that the traditional Sunday or Sabbath is under attack in Britain just when most people's financial circumstances make work unnecessary for more than five or sometimes even four days a week.

Why the fuss over the Sabbath?

It is clear from a reading of the gospel accounts that the opposition to Jesus that eventually led to his crucifixion was stirred up to a significant degree by his attitude to the Sabbath, although there were many other factors involved as well. It would seem that Jesus deliberately healed on the Sabbath day when it is likely that he could easily have delayed until the following day; and various other incidents, such as the disciples' plucking of ears of corn as they went through the field (Mk. 2:23f.) indicate something of the attitude that is forcibly expressed in the sayings, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mk. 2:27); 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath' (Mk. 2:28).

The Jewish leaders found his attitude intolerable, so much so that they considered it worthy of death. We naturally side with Jesus on this matter, not only because we are Christians, but also often because we fail to understand the attitude of these Jewish leaders to the question of the Sabbath. Many Christians believe that, although for Jesus' contemporaries it was a vital matter, for us in a freer age it is almost an irrelevancy. After all, they reason, the law is abolished for us (Rom. 7:4), there is no repetition of the fourth commandment in the NT, and in particular, whereas it was practicable to keep Sabbath in the OT environment, it is hardly possible in the modern world where so many things just have to be kept going seven days a week (although on closer examination some are not so essential!).

In order to appreciate the attitudes of the Jewish leaders it is necessary to go back to the exile. Two matters are significant here:

(a) The prophets and other parts of the OT clearly suggest that the reason for the exile was not a simple political matter of a strong empire adding to its conquests, but that God allowed, even caused, the exile as a punishment for disobedience to his law. Now the major aspect of this disobedience was the replacement of the worship of God by the worship of idols, but there was also direct disobedience to the laws of God, which included the Sabbath. Jeremiah thunders:

But if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden and enter the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched (Je. 17:27).

Now the Sabbath should not be taken here simply as one of the laws which were being broken, but as a sign of the covenant between God and his people such that Sabbath-breaking was symptomatic of the whole attitude of apostasy (Ex. 31:13f.).

This means that on the return from exile, the people were determined that disaster should not befall them again. Therefore they came back to Jerusalem utterly determined to be strictly monotheistic, and also to be scrupulous in obedience to the law of God. Thus the Sabbath, as a sign of covenant and as a facet of the law, became of great importance, and a great number of regulations were laid down to ensure obedience. (It is worth pointing out here that Jesus did not actually break the OT law at all, but only the Jewish regulations which surrounded the law.²)

(b) The big danger for a people undergoing the experience of exile was that they would disappear as a people, as seems to have happened to the Northern tribes after their deportation by the Assyrians in 722 BC. It is easy for the first generation in a foreign land to maintain their distinctiveness, but their children will very likely 'fall away', adopting habits, customs and the language of the host country. This was, after all, the motive behind deportation, which very effectively destroyed any possibility of resistance. This assimilation is clearly seen today in the children of immigrants, for example in Britain, where even racial differences are readily overcome; and where these are not present, such as with my own children in 'white' South Africa, cultural shift easily takes place.

Now Israel, or rather Judah, was in an invidious position, being separated from nearly everything that made them distinct as a nation. They were separated particularly from their land, which was central to their thinking since the promises to Abraham, and from their worship, as they could not visit the Temple, which in any case was soon destroyed, and, with their king captured, from their social organization. However, one of the things which could maintain their distinctiveness was the Sabbath, so it is not surprising that once again it became of overriding importance. That this was so can be seen at the return to Jerusalem, where Nehemiah strictly enforces the Sabbath prohibition against trade (Ne. 13:15ff.).

Thus at the time of Jesus, when again there was an experience of foreign domination and the ever-present threat

to their existence as a nation by the Romans, it is not surprising that any perceived attack on the Sabbath was viewed in a very serious light.

However, if this is the case, then the Sabbath should be seen as a particular sign of the covenant with Israel and thus belongs to their particular nature as an individual people, and so is no longer relevant to us who are Gentile Christians. The existence of the people, it may be argued, was to bring forth the Messiah; now he has come, it is no longer relevant, and the Sabbath also must fall away. It was a sign of the old covenant, and Christians have a new covenant in Christ. In a sense in his rest in the grave on the Saturday, he completely fulfilled the Sabbath for us.

A creation ordinance

Contrary to this idea is the view that the Sabbath originated at creation. The codification of this then took place at Sinai, and then it continued until Jesus, when the resurrection provided the impetus for a change to Sunday. The basic idea however remained the same: as God is recorded as having created in six days and then rested the seventh, the keeping of one day in seven is fundamental not to Jews only but to the entire created order. All should therefore observe a Sabbath.³

Supporting this view is the fact that men, and indeed creation as a whole, do seem to function better if a Sabbath rest is observed, and that, strikingly, the cycle of seven does seem to be the most efficient. Thus Luther and Calvin only advocated keeping a Sabbath for practical reasons, the need for rest and a time for worship.⁴ Experiments have been made to dispose of the cycle, such as in post-revolutionary France and Russia, where the church was thrown out with all that was old, but a cycle of five or ten, although more in keeping with our system of counting, just did not seem to work. There is also some evidence that in nature as well, the seven-year cycle of rest for trees and the land is beneficial, although here the seven does not seem to be so well established (for example, cows need milking every day, and of course man-made industry totally ignores any biological rhythm).

This is the thinking behind the insistence of the Seventh Day Adventists and others, who insist on continuing Sabbath-observance, either on a Saturday, to keep the Jewish Sabbath literally, or on a Sunday to retain the spirit of the legislation. Some argue that even if the Sinaitic law is abrogated by Christ, if the Sabbath is fundamental to creation, then it should be retained absolutely even today.⁵ Others distinguish between moral, civil and ceremonial law, and say that only the last two categories are abrogated and also that the Sabbath, as part of the commandments, belongs to the moral law and therefore remains valid. The view of Davies⁶ is noteworthy: as a day of rest, looking to the eschatological rest, it is for all, but as a day of worship it is Mosaic, and fulfilled in Christ.

A number of points should be made against this idea:

(a) There is no record of any Sabbath observance whatever before the Exodus and its formulation in the ten commandments.⁷ Jewett⁸ sees no reason to doubt the Mosaic origin of the Sabbath, seeing evidence for this in Ezekiel 20:11-12 and Nehemiah 9:12-24. It is argued that if it were in fact fundamental to creation then there would be at least some indication of it before Sinai. This incidentally is an

amount of time. This is a very appropriate reminder of salvation, since all are saved on the same basis through Christ. The Sabbath likewise, in its reminder of creation, reflects human equality in that it refers to our essence of being human, in which we are equal, rather than to our roles, which are different.²⁸

(k) *Worship.* Again a closely related idea is that we have an obligation to be regular in our worship.²⁹ This is a NT injunction (Heb. 10:25) as well as an OT one, where it was obligatory for all males to attend the festivals. The reformers therefore, although not retaining the Sabbath because of any legal reason, sought to retain it to give time and opportunity for worship.³⁰ I am a little hesitant simply to connect the idea of Sabbath to worship as there is nowhere in the OT which actually makes that explicit connection; Leviticus 23:2-3 calls it a feast, but that is by no means the same. However, it has been asserted by Rordorf³¹ that the OT Sabbath started as a day of rest and became a day of rest and worship, whereas the Christian Sunday started as a day of worship and became a day of worship and rest. In this case there is no actual inconsistency between the basic ideas of Sabbath and Sunday. Rest, as well as being an opportunity for worship, may be in itself a response of worship,³² and one free from idolatry (if not from legalism), as no object of worship is involved.

(l) *Identification.* Barth³³ makes an interesting point in that he sees in the injunction to keep the Sabbath a call to participate in the life of God. Thus keeping the Sabbath is identification with the creator, particularly significant as an aspect of salvation in that we receive the life of God, eternal life, by union with God in Christ. However it is then also identification more specifically with redemption, in that a day of rest is identified with the day Christ 'rested' in the grave, and we are saved by participation in Christ's experience (Rom. 6:1-11). (I am not arguing that salvation depends on our Sabbath observance, or even that we keep Saturday. It is the principle that matters.) Barth also observes³⁴ that there is no corresponding call to participation in the creative work of God. This means that our subduing the world is not a creative activity, so our dominion (Gn. 1:28) is not absolute, but we have a responsibility not to abuse the created order (for example to over-exploitation in excessive capitalism).

(m) *An acknowledgment of the basis of Christianity.* In a day when there are so many competing ideologies, the keeping of the Lord's day is a reminder that Christianity is based on real historical events. On the one hand, although there was no fundamental reason for so doing, the early church continued to observe one day in seven for worship, thus acknowledging its Jewish origins. On the other hand, by observing Sunday, we are reminded that without the resurrection our faith is vain (1 Cor. 15:17). By observation of the first day, rather than the seventh, the church avoids the extremes of both Judaism and Marcionism.³⁵

What the Sabbath does not mean

It is possible to make a couple of observations from the nature of the OT Sabbath to deny some erroneous beliefs.

(a) *Bondage.* It should be clear from a number of the preceding sections that the intention of the Sabbath is to be

release and restoration, rather than a matter of bondage. It would seem that this is what was behind Jesus' protests concerning the Sabbath. Therefore he deliberately healed on the Sabbath day (e.g. Lk. 13:10f.) because that was the day most appropriate to demonstrate freedom from bondage to disease. Therefore the Sabbath must not become, however it is observed, a form of bondage in itself. In fact the OT, as Jesus pointed out, gives a number of permissible activities for the Sabbath day.³⁶ This is quite a contrast with some later Jewish casuistry.

Jesus points out that 'the Sabbath was made for man' and this is exactly true; it was 'for man', for his benefit, not for bondage. This freedom is reiterated elsewhere in the NT (e.g. Gal. 5:1; Col. 2:16), but has to be moderated by the idea that our attitude to keeping days must not be an offence to others (Rom. 14:5f.). When Jesus was accused of profaning the Sabbath he replied, '... the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath' (Mk. 2:28). It is notable here that it was in fact not Jesus but the disciples who were guilty, and so what Jesus is saying is that by their relation to him, they too are Lords of the Sabbath, so having authority over it. To put it another way, by our faith we are adopted as sons, with the rights and privileges that sonship brings.

(b) *Coupling to prosperity.* Whereas there is a promise of reward to those who are obedient to God, especially in the matter of the day, it would be erroneous to make a direct causal link between the two. Pagan religion essentially made that connection by holding feast days or holidays on days related to the agricultural calendar. The Sabbath in itself is entirely unrelated to external events. (The most likely suggestion is a quarter of the cycle of the moon; but then why a quarter, and why is it now allowed to get out of phase?³⁷) By maintaining a Sabbath, whether of rest or worship or both, the attention is then on God alone and not on any material benefits.

(c) *The other days regarded as not holy.* Observation of the Sabbath, particularly in an extreme form, led to a division in the ways the various days are regarded. If the Sabbath or Sunday is so holy, then the other days are not, so whereas keeping the Sabbath should consecrate the whole, it has, I believe, rather contributed to a division between the secular and sacred, and ultimately the growth of secularism of modern society, whereas if the Sabbath was not emphasized so much as different from other days, such a move would not be so likely to occur. However the separation or transcendence of God which observation of the Sabbath symbolizes is more adequately seen in a day of worship than a day of rest. If therefore a Christian Sunday emphasizes worship rather than rest it does not lead so much to secularization, although such an emphasis at this stage can hardly contribute to a stopping of the moves towards total secularization of society.

Keeping Sabbath

There is an insertion after Luke 6:4 in one of the early manuscripts (*Codex Bezae [D]*):

Jesus saw a man working on the Sabbath and said, 'Man, if indeed you know what you are doing, you are blessed, but if you do not know, you are cursed and a transgressor of the Law.'

Although it is doubtful whether this is authentic, it has been seen that the idea would seem scriptural that Sabbath-

keeping is not an absolute requirement (*cf.* also Rom. 14:23).³⁸ Observation of the Sabbath for no good reason will bring us under the condemnation that Jesus had for the Pharisees. Nevertheless it seems to me that there is sufficient reason given above for Christians to maintain the principle, although not slavishly, of one day in seven. It will be observed that the majority of reasons I have given are for Christians only. Hence just as the Sabbath provides a mark of covenant and distinction for Jews, it can do exactly the same for Christians, who have a new covenant with God. Yet some, such as the need for restoration, are good advice to anyone, even for Marxists who see the value of man in his work, and reject the desire for worship. It was given for the benefit of Israel, so its continued observation will be good for the church, even if not a command, and good advice for the church to give to the world. There is enough reason for Christians to urge society to retain a special day even if they cannot insist that the world obeys the command of a God that it does not acknowledge, particularly, as seems to be the case, if the Sabbath was only revealed as such to Israel in the Sinaitic covenant, and is part of Israel's distinctiveness. Christians, although they will benefit from the rest, will however continue to see the main value of the day in worship.

This day should preferably be Sunday. Keeping an arbitrary day (even the Saturday, as Sunday is the conventional day) will detract from the witness value. Bacchiocchi³⁹ believes that the biblical position is to keep a specific day rather than just the principle of one in seven, noting that otherwise the priests would have been given an alternative day of rest (Nu. 28:9,10; Mt. 12:5). The Didache urged Christians to fast on different days from the Jews in order to be different from them. Keeping a Sunday rather than a Saturday for that reason alone is hardly adequate, but the fact that Christ rose on the Sunday does hallow the day for us. My only concern here is that Christians may be so caught up with meetings on a Sunday that it fails to be a real Sabbath, and it may be necessary for the 'professional' to take a different day.⁴⁰ Ministers who find that everything is always left to Saturday before the Sunday may just need self-discipline!

Discipline, whether in work, rest or worship, is the heart of the matter, indeed of being a disciple of Christ, and I believe should, if at all possible, manifest itself in a distinctive day. However let Paul have the last word:

One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord (Rom. 14:5-6).

¹ The film *Chariots of Fire* highlighted this difficulty. Whether Eric Liddell was right to make his stand is debatable, but it is true that even today due to the film his stand then is having good effects for the kingdom of God.

² Lincoln, A. T., in Carson, D. A. (ed.), *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), p. 361. (This book contains a mass of information about Sabbath and Sunday.)

³ Bacchiocchi, S., *Divine rest for human restlessness: a theological study of the good news of the Sabbath for today* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1980), p. 32f. Bacchiocchi's other book, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, has been most influential but as an historical study is really outside the scope of this article.

⁴ Bauckham, R. J., in Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

⁵ E.g. Beckwith, R. T., and Stott, W., *This is the Day: the Biblical Doctrine of the Christian Sunday in its Jewish and early Christian setting* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1978), p. 45.

⁶ Davies, G. N., 'The Christian Sabbath', *Reformed Theological Review* 42 (2), 1983, pp. 33-41.

⁷ The first observation of the Sabbath (Ex. 16, the manna) was in fact prior to the ten commandments. It would however have been illogical for God to supply on a seven-day basis knowing what would shortly be commanded. The reaction of the people in Ex. 16 would indicate that the whole idea of a seven-day cycle was foreign to them.

⁸ Jewett, P. K., *The Lord's Day: a Theological Guide to the Christian day of worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 16.

⁹ In Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹⁰ Bauckham in Carson, *op. cit.*, pp. 266-267.

¹¹ Cf. Carson in Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹² Cf. Dressler, H. H. P., in Carson, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 23.

¹³ Jewett, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ In Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

¹⁵ In Carson, *op. cit.*, pp. 266, 274.

¹⁶ Rushdoony, R. N., *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), p. 141.

¹⁷ Bacchiocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

¹⁸ Lincoln in Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

¹⁹ F. Macnutt, *The Power to Heal* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria, 1977).

²⁰ Rushdoony, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

²¹ Barth, K., *Christian Dogmatics 3(1) The doctrine of creation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 215.

²² E.g. Rushdoony, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

²³ Wolterstorff, N., *Until Justice and Peace embrace: the Kuyper lectures for 1981 delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 153.

²⁴ Carson in Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 87 n.30.

²⁵ Islam also observes a special day. Whether their current economic boom is in any way due to this rather than the presence of oil is questionable; in any case the Friday is not so much a day of rest as of worship, so that economic activity could continue.

²⁶ See Lincoln in Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 250f.

²⁷ Jewett, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

²⁸ Bacchiocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

²⁹ Cf. Davies, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Bauckham in Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 314 *etc.*

³¹ Cited in Carson (*op. cit.*), p. 14.

³² Bacchiocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

³³ Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

³⁴ Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

³⁵ Jewett, *op. cit.*, pp. 74, 105.

³⁶ Dressler, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

³⁷ Cf. Bacchiocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³⁸ Bauckham in Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

³⁹ Bacchiocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 158. He, however, advocates the Saturday.

⁴⁰ When I was in the ministry I observed Saturday for practical reasons, as it could be a family day, whereas Sunday, on which we had services, was very much a work day. As a Sabbath of rest and a Sunday of worship, was this in fact religiously correct? Most ministers I know took Monday off, and it got filled with fraternal and other business which I could only really identify as work, meaning they never actually had a full day off — and suffered accordingly!