
AN ABIDING SABBATH

Introduction

Fifty years ago most evangelical Christians in Britain would have agreed that Sunday was ‘the Christian Sabbath’. This common belief expressed itself in a measure of uniformity of behaviour: participating in or watching sporting or cultural events – or any form of entertainment – whether ‘live’ or on TV was a breach of the fourth commandment. Although some may have struggled to articulate the theological basis of their belief, the Lord’s Day Observance Society’s publications set out the biblical arguments for this position for those who were prepared to study the matter.

A Changing World

All this has changed. Why? First, the world has changed. The introduction of ‘continental shifts’ into the workplace impaled many Christians on the horns of a cruel dilemma: to have refused to work on the Lord’s Day could have led to Christians losing their jobs, and thereby be unable to honour the commands to work and to provide for one’s family. Alternatively, to obey the command to work and to provide for family and those in need would have involved one in not keeping the Lord’s Day. Many concluded that since industrial plant such as steelworks had to be manned seven days in seven and since utility providers like power stations also needed continuous manning, it would be hypocritical in the extreme to have the benefits of electric power and steel goods, which would necessitate some people having to work on the Lord’s Day, but be unwilling to do the work oneself. The change had begun.

This change in the world has coincided with changes in the church: exposure to a ‘broader evangelicalism’, which does not share what had become a fixed view of the Lord’s Day; a tendency to view the Lord’s Day as ‘the family’s day’ and a time for leisure; and – and in the long haul this is the most important point – a questioning of whether the Bible actually teaches that the Lord’s Day is the Christian Sabbath. Widely differing positions are held on this last point among conservative evangelicals in the UK. Each side can present coherent arguments to

support their respective positions. Two previous Table Talk papers set out differing positions which have implications for the view one takes of the Lord's Day. In this article I have set myself the task of trying to crystallize what are the main points at issue and to seek to shed biblical light upon them. I hope I shall generate more light than heat.

Differences of belief in this area result from different answers to a number of crucial questions.

Question 1

Is the Sabbath a 'creation ordinance'? That is, did God, at creation, lay down the obligation upon men and women to observe one day in seven as a day of rest?

'Sabbatarians' answer, 'Yes'. They appeal to the following: God 'blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creation that he had done' (Genesis 2:3); the fourth commandment commands one to 'remember' the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8), thereby implying that a pre-existing command is now being restated, by keeping it holy, and bases this obligation on the fact that the LORD rested on the seventh day and blessed it and made it holy (Exodus 20:11). Furthermore, Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27) and this suggests that it was not made simply for Israel.

'Non-sabbatarians' answer, 'No'. They appeal to the following: Genesis 2:3 does not use the noun 'Sabbath'; 'remember' in Exodus 20:8 is a reference back to the first giving of the Sabbath command in Exodus 16:5, 22-26; the LORD's seventh day was not followed by an eighth day but is still continuing (see John 5:16-17) and prefigures the eternal rest of salvation which is entered now by faith (Hebrews 4:1-11); the repetition of the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 is based not on creation but on the exodus. Finally, Christ's words in Mark 2:27 are uttered in a Jewish context: therefore, the reference to 'man' should not be extended to all people.

What are we to say to these things? First, although Genesis 2:3 may not use the noun 'Sabbath', Exodus 20:11 (clearly referring to the LORD's seventh day of Genesis 2:3) certainly does. Secondly, while it is legitimate to say that 'remember' in Exodus 20:8 may include a reference to Exodus 16:5, 22-26, it seems forced to confine it thus: v.11 is specific in basing this command on the LORD's rest at creation. Deuteronomy 5:12-15 does not negate the creation ordinance; rather, it adds another reason, one which is not absent from Exodus 20 (see v.2): redemption.

Both sides in this debate are probably trying to make more of our Lord's words in Mark 2:27 than were intended: non-sabbatarian are right to point out that they were spoken in a Jewish context. On the other hand, if other passages teach that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance, then our Lord's words could have a wider application than their immediate context. These points notwithstanding, as Scripture unfolds it is clear that God's rest is the salvation into which we are invited. This means that the Sabbath is more (though not less) than a creation ordinance: marriage is such an ordinance but will not continue in heaven (Matthew 22:30), but the eternal state will be the Sabbath (Hebrews 4:1-11; Revelation 14:13).

Question 2

Are the Ten Commandments special as a summary of God's law for all people?

'Yes,' replies the sabbatarian. First, God spoke these words directly to Moses and wrote them Himself (Exodus 20:1, 18-19; Deuteronomy 5:22); they were called 'the Testimony' and were placed within the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:21); they are quoted by Christ as setting forth the way of life if perfectly obeyed (Matthew 19:18); they are quoted by Paul as pinpointing sin (Romans 7:7-12) and as expressing the Lord's will for His people (Ephesians 6:1-3). Combining Romans 7:7-12 with Romans 2:14-15, it is reasonable to infer that the requirements of the law being written on the hearts of the Gentiles is what the Ten Commandments say. Finally, it is reasonable to infer that the putting of God's laws in the hearts and minds of His people (Hebrews 8:10) is a deliberate contrast with the writing of the law on the stone tablets (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:3) and must, therefore, refer to the Ten Commandments.

The non-sabbatarian replies that things are not that simple. First, what Jesus called the greatest and the second greatest commandments are not found in the Ten Commandments (Matthew 22:34-40). Second, though there were many laws within the Mosaic system (note the plural in Hebrews 8:10) and although Jesus did not regard them as equally important (Matthew 23:23), the fact remains that Paul never refers to 'the laws' but to 'the law'. The Mosaic law was a whole and the New Testament does not distinguish neatly and clearly between its moral, civil, and ceremonial aspects. Thus, Jesus not only affirmed the fifth commandment but also quoted, in the same breath, the Mosaic death penalty for its breach (Matthew 15:3-4). Thirdly, Jesus took seemingly 'civil' requirements applicable to the nation of Israel and related them to the way His church must deal with sin in its midst (Matthew 18:16). Paul does something similar in 1 Corinthians 5:13 and 9:9-11.

Furthermore, the Sabbath commandment itself is expressed in such wide terms that it can be properly obeyed only in a society like Old Testament Israel: a theocracy. How else can one apply the Sabbath command to 'the alien within your gates'? Finally, the preamble in Exodus 20:2 and the change in the command in

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 indicate that this command was never intended to be a timeless piece of legislation. One determines which Old Testament commands still apply by ascertaining which ones are repeated after Pentecost.

Here indeed is a tangled skein to unravel! Sabbatarians are right to appeal to the uniqueness of the Ten Commandments. Non-sabbatarians are right in saying that 'the law' is a whole and that one does not determine what is permanent and what is passing simply by identifying moral law with the Ten Commandments and saying that nothing else applies. On the other hand, the view that commands are only applicable if reaffirmed after Pentecost leads to bizarre conclusions. Nowhere in the New Testament is the specific prohibition of sexual intercourse with animals explicitly reaffirmed (Lev. 18:23). Is it seriously suggested that this no longer applies? God forbid!

The position is surely this. God's timeless requirements of us predated the giving of the law by Moses. They bound all people before Sinai, continued to do so throughout the Old Testament era, and still do so today. The Mosaic law contained these timeless requirements as part of God's special revelation but also included other material but bound it all together as a package. The package was fulfilled in and by Jesus Christ and no longer applies as a 'package deal' (Matthew 5:17-18 [note: the fact that some matters have 'disappeared' or 'passed' from the Law, as is clear from the letter to the Hebrews, must mean that 'everything is accomplished']; John 19:30; Galatians 3:23-4:11; Hebrews 7:12). But God's timeless moral law still binds all and, therefore, those elements in the 'Mosaic package' which express these timeless requirements still bind all people. The words 'before this faith came' (Gal. 3:23) are historical, not experiential. Just as the coming of the 'age of faith' does not mean that there was no faith in exercise prior to the age of faith, so the fact that the age of the supervision of law has come to an end (Gal. 3:19, 25) does not mean that there is no longer any law. Some elements within the Mosaic Law, while not necessarily being part of God's timeless moral law, are 'taken over' and 'transposed' by the New Testament into another key and are applicable to God's covenant people the church. Thus civil execution under the Mosaic law (as distinct from the death penalty laid down in the Noachian covenant) is transposed into church excommunication: Matthew 18:16 and 1 Corinthians 5:13. This is a point which needs to be stressed over against those who hold to the position broadly classified as theonomy.

Is the Sabbath command, then, a 'timeless' requirement or 'transposed element', or has it simply passed? The fact that there are good reasons for believing it to be a creation ordinance would indicate that it is a timeless requirement. However, certain other data must also be considered. Marriage is also a creation ordinance but not everyone is under obligation to marry. Furthermore, we have seen that while the Sabbath is a creation ordinance, it is not only such an ordinance. Since the New Testament speaks about the Sabbath and the Lord's Day, we must

ascertain what it says about these days. To put the matter slightly differently, we need to assess whether there are elements both of continuity and of discontinuity. This leads us to the final question.

Question 3

Does the New Testament teach that we should observe a weekly Sabbath?

‘Yes,’ say sabbatarians. Although Jesus broke Sabbath traditions, He did not break the Sabbath command itself (Matthew 5:17, 12:1-14; Mark 1:21, 2:23-3:6; etc). On the first day of the week He rose from the dead; He appeared to His disciples on this day (John 20:19, 26); the church at Troas evidently regarded this day as special (Acts 20:6-13), and 1 Corinthians 16:1-3 suggests that the Corinthian church met on this day. Revelation 1:10 refers to the Lord’s Day: this must be a reference to the first day of the week and this is the Christian Sabbath.

Non-sabbatarians disagree. Jesus lived in what can be called a ‘trans-covenantal period’ (the ending of the Old Covenant period and the dawning of the New). Therefore His Sabbath practice is no guide for us. Secondly, all New Testament references to keeping special days are either negative and say such things have passed (Galatians 4:8-11; Colossians 2:16-17), or teach that they belong to things indifferent and matters of conscience (Romans 14:5-8). Thirdly, the only specific references to the Sabbath in the New Testament letters either say that the Sabbath belongs to the shadow things that are passed by having been fulfilled in Christ (Colossians 2:16) or refer it to God’s rest of salvation into which He invites us (Hebrews 4:1-11). There is no reason to believe that the first day of the week is ‘the Christian Sabbath’.

How shall we assess all this? First, non-sabbatarians are right to point out the ‘trans-covenantal’ nature of Jesus’ ministry. He was circumcised (Luke 2:21) but we do not need to be; He went into the Temple but taught that He would replace it (John 2:19-22). And so we could go on. Furthermore, the Gospels link the rest given by Jesus in salvation with the Sabbath. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus offers rest to all who take His yoke and His burden. The word ‘yoke’ is used in Scripture of the whole Mosaic Law (Acts 15:10). Jesus is evidently speaking, therefore, of His authority in the lives of those who trust Him. Immediately after this, Matthew tells us of Christ’s involvement in Sabbath controversy. Is this part of a ‘replacement’ or ‘fulfilment’ theme? In Mark 2:28 He who submitted Himself to the law nevertheless says that He is Lord of the Sabbath.

The references in the letters to special days are either negative or in the context of matters of conscience. It may be replied that these special days were special days in the Jewish calendar, not the weekly Sabbath. But what, then, shall we make of Colossians 2:16? A standard answer is that in Greek the word is plural and it must, therefore, refer to ‘special’ Sabbaths, not to the weekly Sabbath. But the

difficulty with this is that the plural is used elsewhere when it refers to the weekly Sabbath (e.g. Matthew 28:1a). Any standard Greek lexicon indicates that the plural for this word is sometimes used with a singular meaning. Colossians 2:17 does not say that the Lord's Day has replaced the Sabbath but that the Lord Himself has done so. The verse surely has connections back to Matthew 5:17; 11:28-12:12 and Mark 2:28, and forward to Hebrews 4:1-11. Furthermore, Jews of this period regarded circumcision, the food laws, and the Sabbath day as part of the 'show case' of Judaism. It surely is no coincidence that Romans, Galatians, and Colossians all deal with these issues (Rom. 2:25-29, 4:9-12, 14:1-23; Gal. 2:1-16, 4:8-11; Col. 2:9-17). It seems difficult to believe that Paul's original readers understood his negative words on special days to be excluding the Sabbath.

This most certainly does not mean, however, that the first day of the week is just like any other day or that it is just a day upon which the early church chose to meet. Just as Christ is the fulfilment of the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7) and, as such, instituted a non-sacrificial meal, 'the Lord's Supper' (Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Corinthians 11:20-33, especially v.20), so the Lord is our Sabbath rest and, as the Lord of the Sabbath, He instituted a day when His people are to meet together in His name. His resurrection from the dead, thereby demonstrating Himself to be Lord, on the first day; the strong first-century evidence that the phrase 'Lord's Day' was applied to the first day and that Christians met to praise their Lord, in contradistinction to those who met on the monthly 'emperor's days' to praise the emperor; the New Testament evidence that the church met on the first day of the week and that there was a recognisable 'Lord's Day'; and the fact that Christians at home were to lay aside money for the collection for the saints at Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:2): all this points to the fact that Jesus appointed this day as a special day. It makes no difference that we do not read of Him calling it by this name, for neither do we read of Him calling the Lord's Supper by that name, though Paul does.

There is both continuity and discontinuity between the Lord's Day and the Sabbath. Indeed, given James Bannerman's observation that the Sabbath can only truly be kept where the church is 'by law established', it should be fairly clear that there must be an element of discontinuity. Similarly, given the creational significance of the Sabbath, it is clear that there must be continuity.

Historical material

We gain perspective by realising that there has not been total uniformity of belief or behaviour on this matter, even amongst those of 'Reformed' convictions. A comparison of the answer to question 103 of The Heidelberg Catechism with the answers to questions 57 to 62 of The Shorter Catechism (the relevant extracts are shown in the Appendix) will demonstrate this. Space will not allow a review of the different views held by great Christians. Suffice it to say that in the realm of belief Joseph Hart, author of great hymns such as *Come ye sinners* and *How good is the*

God we adore, wrote in terms which suggest that he regarded the Sabbath as purely a matter of conscience. In the realm of behaviour the great Puritan John Owen commented that the duties of the Lord's Day laid down by one fellow Puritan were so great that it would require the other six days to fulfil them!

Conclusions

The position I have outlined seeks to give due weight to valid insights of sabbatarians and non-sabbatarians but, contrary to the position of non-sabbatarians, to propose a 'high' view of the Lord's Day. But it does so in such a way as to take account of the historical development of revelation and of the exigencies of the New Testament world and of the modern world: slaves in the New Testament world could function in this context as can Christians in the utility industries!

But this is very different from justifying the giving up of the day to sporting or cultural activities. I appreciate the difficulties of gifted young people where training is on the Lord's Day. But is it really sacrifice to miss this to meet with the Lord's people? It can hardly be compared with that of those many Christian university professors in Communist days who were willing to renounce professorial chairs to sweep the roads simply because they were Christians.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was no legalist or Pharisee but he rose at 6:00 a.m. and retired at midnight on the Lord's Day because he loved it so much. He did so because he loved the Lord so much. The Puritans called it 'the market day of the soul'. There is something terribly wrong with a Christian in this high-pressured modern world who, having spent an hour and a half in the morning with God's people, gives the rest of the day to 'leisure'. What a missed opportunity! Use the Lord's Day for prayer, fellowship, meditation, praise, evangelism, good works and good words and you may find your spiritual appetite whetted in such a way that with M'Cheyne you will say, 'I love the Lord's Day'.

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Appendix

From the Heidelberg Catechism

Question 103

What does God require in the fourth commandment?

Answer: First, that the ministry of the gospel and Christian education be maintained and that I diligently attend church, especially on the Lord's day, to hear the Word of God, to participate in the holy sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian service to those in need. Second, that I cease from my evil works all the days of my life, allow the Lord to work in me through his Spirit, and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

From the Westminster Shorter Catechism

Question 57

Which is the fourth commandment?

Answer: The fourth commandment is, Remember the Sabbath-day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath-day, and hallowed it.

Question 58

What is required in the fourth commandment?

Answer: The fourth commandment requireth the keeping holy to God such set times as he hath appointed in his Word; expressly one whole day in seven, to be a holy sabbath to himself.

Question 59

Which day of the seven hath God appointed to be the weekly sabbath?

Answer: From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, God appointed the seventh day of the week to be the weekly Sabbath; and the first day of the week ever since, to continue to the end of the world, which is the Christian sabbath.

Question 60

How is the sabbath to be sanctified?

Answer: The Sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God's worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy.

Question 61

What is forbidden in the fourth commandment?

Answer: The fourth commandment forbiddeth the omission or careless performance of the duties required, and the profaning the day by idleness, or doing that which is in itself sinful, or by unnecessary thoughts, words, or works, about our worldly employments or recreations.

Question 62

What are the reasons annexed to the fourth commandment?

Answer: The reasons annexed to the fourth commandment are, God's allowing us six days of the week for our own employments, his challenging a special propriety in the seventh, his own example, and his blessing the Sabbath-day.

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