

TOWARD A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SABBATH

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In our last issue, we included an article by this author on 'The Importance of Biblical Theology' in which he argued that the Bible tells the ONE story of redemption. A biblical theology then has to do justice to the nature of Scripture as the revelation of the redemptive work of God and must deal adequately both with the unity of the Bible story and the diversity of its parts.

As an example of his approach to biblical theology, Mr Misselbrook, who is Warden of the Aged Pilgrims' Home in Camberwell, London, here turns his attention to the Sabbath, arguing that it is not a static, unchanging institution but a dynamic and redemptive theme. Not all will agree with his argument but it behoves us to grapple biblically with this important subject.

Correspondence will be welcomed on this subject.

THE QUESTION OF the Christian's relationship to the sabbath commandments of the Old Testament is no easy one. Theoretically at least, it would seem that any answer to the question must lie somewhere between two extremes. On the one hand, one could argue that the sabbath legislation of the Old Testament, as part of the law of God, is unchanging. The Christian should therefore obey the Old Testament sabbath laws in every minutest detail. On the other hand, one could argue that Christ does away with all of these Old Testament laws and commandments. The sabbath legislation of the Old Testament therefore makes no demands upon the life of the Christian.

I would hazard a guess that most of us would advocate an interpretation of the sabbath which lies somewhere between these two extremes. Few Christians would argue that the detailed sabbath legislation of the Old Testament is minutely binding upon the Christian. Unlike the Seventh

Day Adventists we would not wish to insist upon seventh day rest and worship. Moreover, few of us would advocate the detailed observance of the laws regarding the land sabbath and the year of jubilee. On the other hand, I suspect that most of us would be just as unhappy with the proposition that the sabbath was simply part of the Old Testament economy, having no application to the life of the New Testament Christian. Was not the sabbath given to man at creation? Is not sabbath observance one of the Ten Commandments?

But immediately we opt for a position somewhere between the two extremes outlined above we are faced with a problem. How can we consistently maintain that certain parts of the sabbath legislation are abrogated, other parts are kept unchanged, and still other parts (such as the day) suffer a transformation? How are we to define biblically and unambiguously the extent to which the Old Testament sabbath legislation is binding upon the Christian? This is the problem which has beset Christian views of the sabbath and which has left them open to the charge of inconsistency and arbitrariness.

It is the conviction of this writer that the problem is entirely one of our own making. We have viewed the sabbath as if it were something entirely static. We have assumed that the sabbath must necessarily be always the same, the creation sabbath identical in every respect with the Israelite weekly sabbath. We have then been faced with the impossible question of whether or not the Christian is to obey this sabbath.

In what follows we shall argue that the sabbath is not a static and unchanging institution but a dynamic and redemptive theme. Creation sabbath is not identical with the Israelite weekly sabbath, and neither is identical with the Christian 'Lord's Day'. Nevertheless, the three are bound together within the dynamic redemptive work of God.

The Creation Sabbath

The creation sabbath recorded for us in Genesis 2.2-3 comes at the climax of the creation narrative of Genesis one. In the first six days of creation we have the record of the progressive creation of the universe, culminating

in the creation of man in the image of God. On the sixth day man is instituted as lord over creation. It was for man that creation was made, and he was made for creation that under his hand all things might glorify the Creator.

With the creation of man on the sixth day God's creative work is complete. "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work." (Gen.2.2) After six days of creative work there follows the seventh in which God enjoys his completed work and creation enjoys its perfection before God. This is God's day of contemplative rest, his sabbath.

But God does not rest for a limited period before resuming his creative activity. Having finished his creation he rests for ever. The seventh day is therefore not simply another day of limited duration within the sequence but rather it encompasses (what promises to be) the everlasting future of the perfect creation. John Murray expresses the point thus:

The seventh day referred to here is unquestionably the seventh day in sequence with the six days of creative activity, the seventh day in the sphere of God's action, not the seventh day in our weekly cycle. In the realm of God's activity in creating the heavens and the earth there were six days of creative action and one day of rest. There is the strongest presumption in favour of the interpretation that the seventh day is not one that terminated at a certain point in history, but that the whole period of time subsequent to the end of the sixth day is the sabbath rest alluded to in Genesis 2.2.

(Principles of Conduct, p.30)

This much may then be granted; in six days God created the heavens and the earth, the seventh day is his everlasting sabbath rest.

In Genesis 2.3 we read, "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." God did not bless and hallow the seventh day for himself; this action is an act of God towards creation - towards man and the rest of the created earth. It is for man's sake that this day is

blessed and made holy. This much may readily be granted, but the crucial question remains, which day is it that God blesses? Does God bless and hallow the recurring seventh day of man's week, or does he bless the eternal seventh day of his own creative work?

John Murray argues back from the sabbath legislation given to Moses that the day which God hallowed was the seventh day of man's weekly cycle: "God blessed and sanctified the seventh day of our week precisely because he sanctified the seventh day in the realm of his own creative activity." (ibid.p.31) We do not think that this is the best interpretation, and that for three reasons.

Firstly, this would require the term 'seventh day' to bear two different meanings in Genesis 2.2-3 where no transition of meaning is demanded by the text. Having entered into his rest on the seventh day (God's seventh day), God hallows the seventh day. He hallows the seventh day because in it (that is, in God's everlasting seventh day) he rests from his creative work. It would be unnatural, without the most compelling of reasons, to interpret these seventh days to be days of totally different kinds. The phrase "because in it" demands that the seventh day which God hallows should be one and the same as the seventh day in which he rests.

Secondly, if Genesis 2.2-3 is interpreted as the institution of man's weekly sabbath cycle then what is the nature of the distinction between the sabbath and the rest of man's week? In Genesis 2 man has not yet fallen into sin and he is thus not yet subject to the curse of arduous and sweated labour. His days are spent in the careless enjoyment of the creation in fellowship with the Creator. What is different about the sabbath? Those who adopt this view can only answer that man's observance of the sabbath consists in his turning aside from all things earthly, things which have to do with everyday created life, in order to devote himself undividedly to the worship of God. But if this is so then the weekly sabbath is essential to man so long as he remains part of the creation: it is essential to him even in his resurrected body in the renewed creation! This view of the sabbath can only be

retained by abandoning the biblical view of salvation in favour of the Greek which sees redemption in terms of a flight from the earthly and the material to the divine.

Thirdly, the rest which God gives to his people is elsewhere spoken of as God's rest (see Ps.95.11;Heb.4.3ff). The connection of these passages with the creation sabbath may not be immediately obvious, but this we hope to demonstrate more fully below. Our point here is simply that the analogy of Scripture welcomes the view that in Genesis 2.2-3 man is called to enter into God's seventh day everlasting rest.

So then, after the six days of creative work God enters upon a seventh and everlasting day of rest. This rest is a contemplative enjoyment of a perfect creation which reflects God's own glory. God hallows and blesses his everlasting seventh day rest, and by this act calls upon man, and with man creation, to enter into the rest of God. Man, as created on the sixth day, is immediately called to share in the eternal rest of God. In his active rule over creation he day by day enjoys God's sabbath rest. It is not in man's separation from worldly pursuits that he enjoys rest and fellowship with God. Rather, in the everyday pursuit of his creatorial office, in the midst of creation, with creation, and at the head of creation man enters into the rest of God.

This then is the primary meaning of the sabbath: it is man's entrance into the rest of God as he enjoys the perfected creation.

This picture of man's entrance into God's rest, his enjoyment before God of the perfect creation, is radically altered by man's sin and God's curse. No longer does man possess rest in the earth. Far from entering into contemplative enjoyment of creation man finds creation to be at war against him as a cursed earth mediates God's wrath. It is into this context that God gives to Israel a new sabbath institution.

The Israelite Sabbath

Exodus 20.8-11 is the first detailed record of the weekly sabbath legislation which God gives to his redeemed people. Deuteronomy 5.12-15 repeats the commandment within

the context of a review of the law.

Perhaps the first thing that we notice about these two passages is that they correspond practically word for word up until the point where they give the reason for the command to keep the sabbath. Exodus makes the creation sabbath of God the basis for weekly sabbath observance among his people. Deuteronomy, on the other hand, roots sabbath observance in the redemption from Egypt. Here we observe something of the complex relationship between the creation sabbath and the Israelite sabbath - a relationship involving both continuity and discontinuity. This new sabbath law once more summons man to enter into the rest of God, the rest which he was to enjoy at creation. But the summons is no longer addressed to man as man, but to man as redeemed man.

To understand the role of the sabbath in Israel we have first to tackle the question, "What is redemption?" It is our contention that redemption is basically re-creation. It is that process by which God restores man to the state which he enjoyed at the first but which was lost through man's sin. It is therefore a process which is to end in sabbath, when redeemed man enters into God's rest in the enjoyment of the newly perfected creation.

In the Old Testament the primary act of redemption is God's deliverance of his people from the Egyptian bondage and his gift to them of the land of Canaan. In this redemptive movement Canaan functions typically as the renewed creation or Eden restored (see Deut.26.5-9). The goal of this redemptive movement is that God's people should enter into his rest as they possess the land at peace from every oppressor (Ps.95.11).

But the movement from Egypt to Canaan was not the final and perfect redemption, neither was Canaan the final inheritance of the people of God. The land proved to be much as any other, it yielded its plenty only with reluctance, and man still ate his bread in the sweat of his brow.

It is into this situation - the situation of a people redeemed and yet still waiting the perfection and consummation of redemption - that God gives the sabbath laws to Israel. For six days man is occupied in arduous labour,

and thus he is caused to remember that he still lives in a fallen world, a world under curse. But on the seventh day redeemed man puts away his labour and eats without sweat on his brow.

The sabbath day is therefore a ceremonial anticipation of the day of redemption's consummation. The cycle of man's week reflect in miniature the redemptive work of God. While God yet works for man's redemption, man must yet live under curse and strive for life within a fallen world. But the six days are followed by the seventh and so redeemed man is reminded that the day of redemption is coming. In celebrating the sabbath he knows his interest in that day.

The seventh year land sabbath and the year of jubilee are extensions of the same principle. For one whole year in seven Israel was to eat the fruit of the land without sweat or labour and thus ceremonially anticipate the complete removal of curse and the perfection of redemption in the renewal of creation. The theme of paradise restored is prominent in the account of these institutions in Leviticus 25. "The jubilee marked a two-year holiday in which covenant man celebrated the foretaste of the great sabbath of the new creation" (Rushdoony, The Institutes of Biblical Law, p.141).

The complex of sabbath laws focusses the attention of the people of God upon a redemption promised. In Canaan this redemption is possessed in earnest, but the sabbath ceremonies prevent faith from degenerating into a complacent satisfaction with the present state of the redeemed; they focus faith upon the future perfection of God's redemptive work. Unlike the ungodly who glory in the work of their own hands, God's people, in celebrating sabbath confess that their work lies under curse and that their hope lies only in God's work of recreation. In their celebration of redemption which is the sabbath, God's people know already something of the joy of the age to come.

The Sabbath and the Work of Christ

With the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ the age to come has broken into our own. Jesus' miracles are signs of the kingdom (Matt.12.28), in which the final doing away of

curse and regeneration of creation have appeared before time.

The theme of sabbath fulfilment found in the ministry of Jesus is focussed especially in his death and resurrection. Through the incarnation the Son of God enters into a fallen world and takes upon himself a fallen humanity. In Jesus' death a world under curse is brought to judgment. In his resurrection Christ is the beginning of the new creation. Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of the resurrection of the Christian for Christ is the firstfruits of the new humanity (1 Cor.15.20). But the regeneration of the Christian is the earnest of a greater and final regeneration (Matt.19.28), it is the firstfruits of creation (Jas.1.18). Therefore, in Christ's death and resurrection this world is brought to judgment and the new creation, though not yet manifest, is brought into being.

These themes are brought together by Paul at the close of his Epistle to the Galatians. Writing against those who glory in circumcision Paul says, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation." (Gal.6.14-15). The Christian is one who is in Christ, he has died with him and has been raised with him; he is already a creature of the age to come (2 Cor.5.17).

But what has all this to do with the vexed question of the relationship between Old Testament sabbath and Christian Lord's Day?

Christians have worshipped on the first day of the week from the earliest days of the Christian church. The risen Christ met with his disciples on that day (Matt.28.9; Luke 24.15-31,36; John 20.19,29). The first day of the week thus became the primary day of Christian worship (Acts 20.7; 1 Cor.16.2), on which Christians commemorated and celebrated the resurrection of their Lord. The vital question is therefore not whether we can justify the change in the day of worship from the seventh to the first day of the week, but whether the Christian Lord's Day (Rev.1.10) has any connection with the Old Testament sabbath.

We believe that there is a very strong link between Old Testament sabbath and Christian Lord's Day, but the link is not one of identity but of continuity within the progress of redemption. On the sabbath Israel remembered the past redemptive work of God and anticipated the future perfection of God's redemption when creation would be freed from curse. The focus was on a future perfect work, and this was reflected in the structure of the week in which the sabbath comes at the end. The Christian also looks back to a past redemptive work of God as he commemorates and celebrates the death and resurrection of Christ. But this past work was not provisional and typical but was a perfect work in which the new creation has already come into being. This also is reflected in the structure of the Christian week, in which the Lord's Day comes at the beginning - the week is lived in the light of the already existent new creation. But, like the Old Testament saint, the Christian also looks for the consummation of redemption. In this way the Lord's Day, like the Old Testament sabbath, is a day of anticipation. It is a day in which (as far as is practically possible) we live the life of the age to come. We should be found in the company of God's people, the community of the age to come. We lay aside our labour so that on this day, like the Old Testament saint on his sabbath, we eat without sweat and enjoy creation without curse, all in communion with our God.

The Everlasting Sabbath

To complete our picture of the biblical doctrine of the sabbath we must say something about the eternal (or more accurately everlasting) sabbath which is the future hope of the people of God. Most of what need be said has been said in passing above, but now we draw these threads together.

In the consummation of redemption God will not only put away the sin of man but will also redeem creation from curse (Rom.8.18-23). After the destruction of this sin-torn world in fire there will be a new creation, new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3.3-13). The resurrection body therefore finds its home in the new creation (note the connection in Romans 8), and it is here that God's dwelling

is with men (Rev.21.1-3). Then redeemed man will enter into the eternal sabbath rest of God (Heb.4), as he dwells before him in the perfected creation.

This then is what we understand to be the structure of the biblical teaching on the sabbath. At creation, God called upon man to enter into his everlasting sabbath rest. This, man would have done as he enjoyed the perfect creation before God. But with man's sin, creation is placed under curse and man knows no rest with God. Redemption shall be perfected when redeemed man enters at last into God's sabbath rest in the new creation. The sabbath laws of the Old Testament were ceremonial anticipations of that final sabbath rest. The Lord's Day for Christians focusses the sabbath rest in the redemptive work of Christ, and declares that the new creation has already sprung into life in him. But, standing beside the Old Testament saint, we also anticipate the consummation of redemption in our observance of sabbath; this we do in our weekly celebration of redemption on the day which has been set apart by Christ's resurrection.

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JEHOVAH-JESUS: TOUCHED WITH THE FEELING OF OUR INFIRMITIES

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Misunderstandings of Calvinism are legion; the interplay of divine sovereignty with our human condition

is complex and liable to defective interpretations. The revelation of God in his involvement with the reality of human suffering should, however, be given careful treatment; it is the source of inexpressible comfort in the midst of sorrow, gloom, and despair. Yet, the doctrine

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