

CONTEMPORARY LORD'S DAY OBSERVANCE

The Committee believes that its remit essentially requires a "big picture" statement of Biblical Sabbath teaching (the fruit of clear and thorough application of Reformed exegetical - hermeneutical principles) in a form that most people can grasp. This would be the foundation for any subsequent practical guidelines. The committee believes it is important for everyone to see:

- The essential principle in the "Sabbath" concept
- The (Biblical-Theological) Sabbath changes arising from Christ's advent
- The legitimate applications for today

In particular there is a need to clarify the distinctions between,
(a) the abiding moral aspects and the temporary Jewish aspects of "Sabbath", and
(b) the "Sabbath Principle" and a "Sabbath Day".

This task is attempted in the main part of the Report, headed "*Sabbath: The Big Picture*". That is followed by some practical guidelines.

Sabbath: The Big Picture

Among Reformed Christians there is a unique nuance to the ongoing disagreement regarding application of the fourth commandment. The debate boils down to Sabbath-breaking by *friends* of the fourth commandment. Similar tensions appear in our Lord's frequent Sabbath collisions with the Pharisees. Jesus was not dealing with people who openly rejected the legitimacy of the commandment. They were strict Sabbatharians. But filled with scruples about the fourth commandment, they were actually the real Sabbath breakers! Their principles of interpretation were flawed. Clearly Jesus, the alleged 'Sabbath breaker,' was right and the Sabbatharians were wrong, a fact that surely warns us to proceed with caution.

It is not good enough to derive our ideas of Sabbath observance from a selected text. One believer, citing Numbers 15, might invoke the death penalty on Sabbath breakers for picking up sticks (or mowing the lawn?). Another believer could approve nearly anything since "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*" (Mk 2:27). All piecemeal approaches must be replaced by the proper 'big picture' view. That will require our understanding of at least two key distinctions.

First, the Sabbath is found in two different Biblical contexts. As part of the *moral* law it has universal application to all people in all history. But it is also found in the temporary Jewish ceremonial laws that became obsolete in Christ. Sometimes the moral and Jewish aspects occur side by side.ⁱ Morally, the fourth commandment obliges us still, but ceremonially it does not and must not oblige anyone. Neglecting this distinction has led to a great deal of friction among believers. The second key is the distinction between the Sabbath *principle* and the Sabbath *day*.

To understand the Sabbath day we must start with the Sabbath principle underlying it.

1. The Sabbath principle

The Sabbath principle means *consummation*. It denotes achievement, climax, and completion. The word "*Sabbath*" means to rest, to bring to completion. God is the primary Sabbath keeper. After six days of creation he *Sabbathed*.ⁱⁱ He observed the completion of work, a consummate rest. It marked the achievement of a goal, the finished creation. This consummation idea is quite explicit in Genesis 2:1-2, "*Thus the heavens and the earth were completed and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done: and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done*". Men are morally bound to follow God's example of keeping Sabbath as the consummation of work (Exodus 20: 11).

The consummation idea in Deuteronomy 5:15 stresses the completed work of God in the Exodus (which in turn typifies the greater Exodusⁱⁱⁱ accomplished by Christ). The Sabbath principle is essentially Christian in character because it highlights the finished work of God in creation and redemption. It announces that life is not aimless, unstructured, and random. There is purpose and order. There is achievement and consummation.^{iv}

The idea of *covenant* is also basic in the Sabbath (Exodus 31:13-17). The Sabbath is a covenant sign reminding us that Jehovah made us, and saved us, and sanctifies us. He makes us his special people, separate from others. We belong to him in a sacred sense. The Sabbath identifies our religious loyalty to the Creator-God of the Bible. Israel's repeated disloyalty drew God's complaint, "*They have polluted My Sabbaths,*" as if true religion consisted mainly in Sabbath keeping.^v Plainly, God means far more than "they will not rest". He means they refuse to honour him as their maker, saviour and sanctifier.^{vi}

This helps us to understand the death penalty for Sabbath breaking. In the Decalogue the fourth commandment is the only one that acts as a covenant sign. In a real sense, the other nine are involved in the fourth. In principle, to break Sabbath is to break covenant. It is to despise the great works of God. It means to care little for God's creation, redemption, and sanctification. In the former age of shadows and 'types' the death penalty was appropriate because it vividly indicated the foolish choice made by a Sabbath breaker (man or nation, see Ezekiel 20:13). By choosing to disown God, they rejected the covenant, and chose the way of eternal death.

The *covenant* aspect of Sabbath leads to the *cosmic* aspect. The Sabbath has significance for the whole cosmos, since it includes the Promised Land, which is ultimately "*the new heavens and new earth*". The consummate event for God's people is to enter "His rest," the endless Sabbath day (see Hebrews 3 & 4). There God's redeemed creation will enjoy the fruits of the Sabbath principle (consummation, covenant, and sanctification) in fullest measure. This glorious final (Sabbath) form of Christ's everlasting kingdom is the ultimate proof that "the Sabbath is made for man." The Sabbath is a servant made for our benefit.

Since it embraces both *anthropos* and *cosmos*, it is not surprising to see Sabbath rest commanded for the land and animals in the Old Testament. Every 7th year the land in Israel was to be left rested (Lev. 25:2). The land has a Sabbath because the land is involved in the final, consummate, covenant purposes of God. The whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth until now but it will be set free from its slavery to corruption (just as men are in Christ) to enter into "*the freedom of the glory of the children of God*" (Rom 8:18-23).^{vii}

This is the 'big picture' of the Sabbath Principle. Now we need to see the 'big picture' for Sabbath observance.

2. The Sabbath day

The advent of Christ brought an end to all the *ceremonial* and *temporary* details of the (post fall) Old Testament economy, including Sabbath observance. They obliged only Theocratic Israel as a 'body politic' and are now obsolete.^{viii} Unless that fact is conceded, all discussion of Christian Sabbath keeping is pointless. The detailed rationale is provided especially in the book of Hebrews.

By 'typical details' we mean those many Mosaic institutions serving as gospel paradigms. They were mere shadows of actual realities in the ministry of Christ. A good example is the whole priestly system with the temple, the sacrifices, and the mercy seat. These were typical of Christ and his work, so they are now things of the past. The implications for Christians are massive. "*Therefore, let no-one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day- things which are a mere shadow of what is to come: but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no-one keep defrauding you of your prize*" (Col. 2: 16-18).

If we continue clinging to the shadows we are unfaithful to the reality (Christ). The '*Sabbaths*' referred to here are the festivals such as Passover, Jubilee, and Tabernacles. Paul could not possibly be talking about the 4th commandment as a moral principle because it is not merely typical of the gospel. As we've seen, it is grounded in creation and redemption. It signifies the covenant of grace. Far from being a mere temporary shadow, the Sabbath shouts permanence. It denotes the eschatological climax of all history, Paradise restored!

Likewise, we are safe to conclude that the land Sabbath was typical, intended only for ancient Israel. It never applied to Gentiles. God gave Israel temporary rest in Canaan but he always had something far greater in mind (see Hebrews 4:1-11 and 12:18-29). Christians are not obliged to rest their gardens or farms every seventh year.

As with adultery, the death penalty for Sabbath breaking was also typical. They are both obsolete in the church age. Though still inherently wicked, literal adultery is no longer a religious picture ('type') of spiritual adultery. The moral aspect of adultery still applies (chastity) but not the ceremonial (death). Likewise the moral principle of the Sabbath day remains binding on all men, but its many typical applications are not.

There is usually far too much angst in discussions over which day is the Sabbath. Is one particular day morally obligatory? ^{ix} The Jewish calendar is not morally sacrosanct, and the traditional use of Sunday by Christians does not depend on such a thing. "*The Lord's Day*" follows the habit of the early churches assembling on the first day of the week, to honour Christ's resurrection. ^x The theological paradigm (implied reasoning) is that Christ died at the onset of a Jewish 7th day Sabbath, entering into the rest of his resurrection life on the 1st day of the week, leaving the old Jewish Sabbath lying in between, disposed of and buried in the tomb. Christ has brought in a far better "rest" and consummation by his work. He achieved resurrection rest, eternal rest. So Sunday is an appropriate Christian Sabbath, but the following questions are in order.

Is the precise calendar day critical? When does a preacher observe Sabbath? Sunday is not a rest day but one of intense labour for most. If Monday is set aside for his (Sabbath) rest then what is he to do? How is his time spent? Presumably not by labouring in word and doctrine, which he does 6 days a week!

The 4th commandment does not specify "*the 7th day of the week.*" It commands rest on the day that follows six days of work. The precise moral issue is not related to which calendar day you start counting from! Rather, the moral issue is that one seventh of our time is to be observed as a Sabbath rest on a regular cyclical basis. Clearly a man who worked 600 consecutive days and then rested for 100 days is not a Sabbath keeper. Nor is a pagan who spends every Sunday in bed.

Does Christian Sabbath keeping depend on our present cultural privilege of a Saturday - Sunday 'weekend'? If a law changed our weekend to Wednesday - Thursday, wouldn't wisdom suggest making one of those days our Christian Sabbath? Unless we distinguish principle from custom we are in danger of legalism.

How should the Sabbath be observed in our age? The three aspects of the Sabbath Principle provide logical answers.

(a) Consummation Behaviour.

The moral obligation to keep Sabbath begins with doing honest work. A seventh day of rest is meaningless apart from six days of work. Sabbath keeping is morally right even before sin existed. ^{xi} The man who regards the Sabbath as any other day, on which he does the same things as on the other six days, without any distinction of ceasing or resting, is out of line with the Sabbath principle. Neglect of the moral context of the Sabbath has led to erroneous conclusions, such as: "*This means that the Christian's task is no longer to keep the Sabbath (Jesus has done that already) but to believe in him.*" ^{xii} Christ has kept the entire law, but Christians are still obliged not to steal, murder, tell lies, or dishonour parents.

Our model is God's rest, his delighting in and enjoyment of his finished creation. On six days of the week our rest is mainly physical. We unwind physically, mentally, and emotionally, getting a good night's sleep for the labour ahead of us. But on one day of the week our rest takes on a different flavour. While there is the blessing of physical relief, the main idea is the spiritual satisfaction of contemplating the success and completion of God's works. It is not so much a holiday as a *holy-day*. This has some practical implications.

We cannot keep Sabbath if the end of the previous six days leaves us in such an exhausted state that we need a day in bed. We rob God of his Sabbath rights unless we are physically prepared for it. Wisdom suggests that at church on Sunday it should look like we have finished our work, not like our work has finished us. We should not have to force ourselves up in the pew or fight off drowsiness in public worship. Each man is responsible before God for 'his own life, and it is unwise

to impose our 'rules' upon others. Any spiritual blessings that come from corporate worship on Sunday require effort. Any sermon worth hearing requires mental effort.

There is nothing wrong with a picnic or a bush walk or some other activity that enjoys the work of God's hands. If it is proper to look at a beautiful river and think of God who made it for man's benefit, how is it sinful to swim in that river on a hot day? Will we sit and enjoy a cool breeze God has made, but condemn those who enjoy the cool sea? A lot depends on circumstance and the attitude of the heart.

(b) Covenantal Behaviour.

Consistent with the Sabbath as a covenant sign, we must escape from individualism. A covenant member is part of the body of Christ, the covenant community. It is no surprise that the final Sabbath is described as one great covenant assembly, with all God's people assembled in the new heavens and new earth. This will give the fullest expression to God's will: "*Gather my godly ones to me, those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice*" (Psalm 50:5). Wilful and deliberate neglect of corporate Christian worship is a neglect of the covenant principle enshrined in the fourth commandment.^{xiii}

Consistent with Exodus 31:13, we should concentrate on the things that sanctify us. Jesus said "*Sanctify them in the truth: Your word is truth*" (Jn 17:17). Sabbath behaviour means progress in knowledge of the sanctifying word of God. We should give special attention to valid Bible instruction, preaching, teaching, reading good books, and fellowship around the Bible with others.

(c) Cosmic Behaviour.

Sabbath keeping does not deserve the name if it is an unpleasant burden. Our attitude to the Sabbath should reflect our attitude to heaven (of which it is a miniature). If we think "Oh no, it's Sunday again, I've got to get ready for worship", it is analogous to thinking (when Christ returns), "Oh no, it's the great Sabbath already, I've got to get ready for eternal blessings!" Isaiah's exhortation to turn away from doing our own pleasure on the Sabbath does not mean privation and misery are marks of a devout soul,^{xiv} though some Christians might give that impression.

Fun and joy should be part of a child's Sabbath. They will learn to distinguish it as a special day by its emphasis on consummation and covenant activities, but they should not regard it as a miserable day. Why can't they play games, run off some energy, have a swim, and enjoy interaction with Christian friends?

Conclusion

The 'big picture' framework presented here should keep us away from the dangerous extremes of antinomianism and legalism.^{xv} The former is seen in Martin Luther's radical distinction between law and gospel. Blind to the moral component of the Sabbath, Lutherans have abolished any obligations of a Sabbath day for Christians.^{xvi}

But legalism raises its head when general phrases in the Westminster Confession are treated as virtual 'Sabbath formulae.' To turn "*necessity and mercy*" (WCF 21:8) into the 'rule' for every potential Sabbath activity is fraught with danger. Casuistry is the inevitable consequence of an endless string of semantic definitions of "necessity" and "mercy" (see the recent Sabbath quandary for the Jewish astronaut encircling the earth every ninety minutes).^{xvii} "*Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels*" (2 Tim 2:23).

Guidelines

For the glory of God and the welfare of the church it would be good for each Christian:

1. To recognise the need for a 'big picture' view of the Bible's Sabbath teaching as provided in the report.
2. To recognise the distinctions between the *moral* and *ceremonial* aspects of the Sabbath as illustrated in the report.
3. To recognise the Sabbath significance of *consummation*, *covenant*, and *cosmos* and to order one's personal Sabbath behaviour so that it is consistent with these perspectives, as explained in the report.
4. To recognise the importance of committed participation in the corporate worship of the church and the fact that wilful forsaking of it is sin.
5. To refrain from judging one another by wielding personal opinions about "*necessity and mercy*" (WCF 21:8) as if they were Sabbath formulae.

Footnotes

- i. Andrew Shead fails to make this distinction: "*This commandment is not a mandate for Sabbath observance by all humanity, for the lesson of creation is applied narrowly to the Israelite Sabbath*" (see the entry on "Sabbath" in the New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner, Eds., IVP, 2000, page 746). The same sort of argument would remove the universal mandate against coveting since the tenth commandment also expresses its applications in cultural terms (servants, oxen, and donkeys). The entire Decalogue is moral law for all humanity.
- ii. It misses the point for Andrew Shead to say: "*There is no mention of the Sabbath here, nor of rest*" (New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, op cit page 745). The text literally says "and he (Elohim) Sabbatheth" [tBov.Ylw:]. The fourth commandment specifically draws attention to that fact (Ex 20:11).
- iii. At his transfiguration, Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah about "*his exodus*" about to be accomplished at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).
- iv. By implication there is also a principle of cadence or rhythm. There is cyclical beauty of rest and pause that is part of the created fabric of the universe and of our humanity.
- v. See Ezekiel 20:21 and 22:8.
- vi. The Sabbath implies faith in God as our provider and sustainer. As was evident in collecting the manna, the Sabbath regularly requires us to believe that God will provide for us, and that we don't need to work seven days a week to make ends meet or to get things done. This is the faith that knows life is not about abundant possessions or frenetic human activity. It is trust in Jehovah Jireh.
- vii. It was no trivial thing to neglect this wider cosmic dimension of the Sabbath principle. Between Moses and Jeremiah it was neglected 70 times (i.e. more than 50% of the time), thus God chose 70 years of captivity, so that the land received its full Sabbath rest (2 Chron. 36:21).
- viii. See Hebrews 8:13 as expanded in 9:1 - 10:39
- ix. Adventists insist on 7th day worship (Saturday) and they link Sunday worship with the mark of the Beast! See Professor A.A. Hoekema's "Seventh Day Adventist Teaching on the Sabbath Day" on pages 161-169 in his standard text, "The Four Major Cults" (Eerdmans, 1963).
- x. See Revelation 1:10, Acts 20:7, and 1 Cor. 16:2.
- xi. This is probably the weakest aspect of Calvin's treatment of the 4th Commandment. Though he acknowledges the pre-fall Sabbath at the end of the creation week, it plays no significant part in Calvin's treatment of the Sabbath. He constantly envisages the post-fall situation in all that he says about it. For more details see "Calvin and The Sabbath" by Richard Gaffin (Christian Focus Publications, 1998). This was originally his MTh Thesis at Westminster Theological Seminary.
- xii. Andrew Shead, New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, op cit. page 749.
- xiii. See Hebrews 10:23-27
- xiv. See Isaiah 58:13-14

- xv. For another useful essay on this topic (notwithstanding a weakness in the doctrine of the church), see "The Sabbath Rest" by Joshua Ng (The Briefing, Issue 293, February 2003, pages 15-19).
- xvi. In the Large Catechism (1529 AD.) Luther claims that the Sabbath: "is altogether an external matter, like other ordinances of the Old Testament, which were attached to particular customs, persons, and places, and now have been made free through Christ."
- xvii. "As if weightlessness, cramped conditions and the enormity of the galaxy were not worrying enough, a crew member of the next space shuttle mission is facing an additional problem: How do you observe the Sabbath while in orbit?"

Col. Ilan Ramon, who will become the first Israeli to leave Earth's atmosphere as part of the NASA crew on the shuttle Columbia in July, has caused consternation among rabbis by asking how - or more precisely, when - to mark Judaism's day of rest.

The problem stems from the fact that Jews are required to observe the Sabbath "every seventh day," starting at sunset on Friday evening and ending the following day "when three stars are seen." Aboard the space shuttle, however, Col. Ramon will orbit the earth every 90 minutes, with each orbit counting technically as a "day" because from his perspective the sun has risen and set. The stars will be visible to him at all times.

To settle the question of Sabbath observance, however, Col. Ramon has asked his local minister in Florida, Rabbi Zvi Konikov, for guidance. Rabbi Konikov has in turn consulted rabbinical scholars across the world. "We are told to observe Shabbat every seventh day, but if you are orbiting the Earth every 90 minutes, do you do it every seventh orbit?"

One of the scholars consulted, Rabbi Levy Yitzhak Halperin, has already ruled that the colonel should be relieved of his obligations because he will not be experiencing Earth time. A British rabbi who has researched the subject disagrees. Rabbi Jonathan Romain, who heads the Maidenhead synagogue, said: "Some rabbis say that because he will be in space, Earth rules don't apply. But my view is that, as you can't exist in space without re-creating Earth like conditions using oxygen, for example - you should observe the same routine as you would on Earth."

Rabbi Romain did, however, offer a different way out of Col. Ramon's difficulty. "His fellow crew members are unlikely to appreciate him taking time off during what is likely to be a very intense mission, especially as it might endanger their lives... There is a Jewish principle which says that saving life takes precedent (sic) over all religious rituals, so on those grounds he could be relieved of his obligations." (Jonathan Petre, London Sunday Telegraph, May 27th 2002).