

THE RELEVANCE OF THE SABBATH

N. Blake Hearson, Ph.D.

*Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, MO 64118*

Abstract

Christians treat the commandment concerning the Sabbath in Exodus 20:8 as somehow less binding than the other nine commandments. This article explores the nature of the commandment to remember the Sabbath and its role in the life of the modern believer.

Introduction

What is the Sabbath? Most Christians associate the word with one of the two things: an archaic Jewish holiday or the Christian Sunday. If it is thought of as particularly Jewish, the Sabbath is relegated to the category of the unimportant. If, on the other hand, the Sabbath is categorized as the Christian Sunday, then it is viewed as a day of leisure or a time to catch up on the ever-pressing work load. Many Christians aren't sure what to do with "Sabbath." They struggle with it and wonder whether or not it is strictly an Old Testament convention. Most of us would not hesitate to affirm that the Decalogue is a normative ethical code for the church today, yet when it comes to the fourth commandment on keeping the Sabbath, we somehow manage to ignore it. Why? This study will attempt to examine the institution of the Sabbath, as well as its nature and the need to practice it today.¹

Analysis

The Sabbath was instituted by God as part of the creation (Genesis 3:2). The first mention of the word Sabbath is found in Exodus 16:23ff. The word means "to be still, to cease", and is representative of what God did

¹ Before we begin, it is important that we outline the scope and method of this project. The size of this project curtails its depth and extent. Attention will be paid to the Scriptures, but with our specific purpose in mind. Likewise, use of secondary sources is made, but with a purpose. For example, it is not the function of this project to do an in-depth study of the difference between the Lord's Day and the Sabbath. As with any study, the subjective opinions of the author enter in to the process and conclusions and it is therefore our hope that the reader will do further reading and come to his/her own conclusions.

in Genesis 3:2. According to *Genesis Rabbah*, a rabbinical commentary on Genesis, God did create on the Sabbath day: He created serenity, peace, and repose.² This was done because the Creator knew that work alone is not sufficient for human fulfillment.³ The Sabbath, then, was designed for mankind, the created being. A. J. Heschel has said, "The love of the Sabbath is the love of man for what he and God have in common."⁴ Observance of the Sabbath, then, is a loving response to God.

The importance of the Sabbath was reconfirmed at Sinai with the giving of the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20:8ff, the Israelites were commanded to "remember" the Sabbath. The fact that they were to remember it indicates that this institution did indeed exist before Moses and that this was not a new "rule" for them.⁵ The word "remember" also points to the exodus, which represented a type of the Sabbath in that it was liberation and freedom from slavery. Thus, the Sabbath came to be tied to both the emancipation from Egypt as well as the creation of all things.⁶ These links meant that the Sabbath also came to be viewed as a symbol of eschatological hope.⁷

Remembering the Sabbath involved "observing" the day (Deuteronomy 5:12ff). This meant ceasing from work (Exodus 34:21). It required stillness before God (Psalm 46:10). It entailed preparing for the day as sacred time. The Sabbath was the seventh day, a specific period of each week, which was to be set aside and kept holy. Solomon Goldman explains: "Keeping the Sabbath, therefore, is in the nature of an act of worship, a sacrament. One sanctifies the Sabbath by *observing it*" (italics mine).⁸ Ultimately, observing the Sabbath is an acknowledgement of God as both the Creator and the Lord of History.⁹

The import of Sabbath observance is further strengthened through several events in Scripture which point to its significance. In Exodus 16:27ff, God declares His displeasure with the fact that the Israelites continue to look for manna on the seventh day of the week. Clearly they miss the point that God would provide! Likewise, in Exodus 31:14ff and Numbers 15:34-36, the death penalty is issued for anyone who breaks the

² *Genesis Rabbah* 10:9

³ Tilden Edwards. *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 16.

⁴ *The Earth is the Lord's and The Sabbath*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 16.

⁵ Charles A. Platt. "Day of Praise, Joy and Freedom." *The Lord's Day*. J.P. Wesberry ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986), p. 40.

⁶ Edwards, T, pp. 12-13.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 14.

⁸ Solomon Goldman. *A Guide to the Sabbath*. (London: Jewish Chronicle Publications, 1961), p.7.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 6.

Sabbath by working on that day. This certainly testifies to the significance of the Sabbath in God's view. Additional warnings to observe the Sabbath are found in Nehemiah 10:31, 13:15 and Jeremiah 17:27. Finally, in Ezekiel 20:13 and 22:8, God declares that the people have despised "my Sabbaths." This affirms that the Sabbath belongs to the Lord and must be treated with reverence.

But what is the nature and purpose of the Sabbath? It is perhaps best described by the prophet Isaiah. In 56:2, we find that keeping the Sabbath is synonymous with maintaining justice and keeping one's hand from evil. Then in 58:13-14, there is the restriction on selfish desire and the encouragement to delight in and to honor the "Lord's holy day." In keeping with this theme, A. J. Heschel indicates that the Sabbath day "is a day of praise, not a day of petitions."¹⁰ It entails peace with all things and a focus on the Creator. This day is a necessary part of the rhythm of life.

Since it is only a part of life and not the whole of it, the Sabbath does not deny the validity of work. Again A. J. Heschel is insightful: "Labor is not only the destiny of man; it is endowed with divine dignity."¹¹ The Sabbath is meant to be different from the other six days in that work is not done on it. In the Jewish understanding, the Sabbath was to be welcomed as a bride would be by a groom. No one would expect a groom to work on his wedding day!¹² This means that the Sabbath represents freedom from the things that bind us during the other six days of the week. It is with this understanding that Jesus made his declaration in Mark 2:27: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Ultimately, the intent and focus of the Sabbath is a rest that reflects the image and love of God.

The nature of the Sabbath rest is debated. Is the promise of rest fulfilled when the Israelites settled the land of Canaan (Judges 1:6-8) or is there a more permanent rest to come? Leon Morris feels that Israel failed to enter into the rest of God which is typified by the Sabbath.¹³ Hebrews 3:17-4:13 is helpful at this point in making two things clear. First, the rest which is in question, whether Sabbath rest or a more general form, is the sole property of God. In 3:18, the author attributes the idea of rest to God and in 4:3 God is quoted as speaking of "my rest."¹⁴ Second, the passage tells us that faith and rest are integrally tied together. Thus, the sons of Israel did obtain the rest that came from

¹⁰ A. J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1979), p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 27.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 55.

¹³ Leon Morris. *Hebrews*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 43.

¹⁴ This is undoubtedly tied to the fact that the Sabbath also belonged to God. See Ezekiel 20:13 and 22:8

having physical security and a place to call home, but they failed to maintain consistent faith in the One to whom rest belonged. The point of the author of Hebrews is that the offer of Sabbath rest and permanent rest is still open to those who believe in Christ. Jesus confirmed this with His claim to be able to give rest in Matthew 11:28-30.¹⁵

Since this rest is still open to those who believe, does that imply that the command to remember the Sabbath is normative for Christians? Some would say so. A. A. Hodge feels that the Sabbath deserves perpetual, universal observances because it was instated at creation.¹⁶ Similarly, G. Holder views the Sabbath as binding upon *all* men because of its presence from the very beginning.¹⁷ John Calvin also believed that the Sabbath was still in effect, but that recreation on the Sabbath was permissible.¹⁸ Additionally, it has been noted that the Sabbath is one of the ethical laws because of its presence in the Decalogue. This places the obligation to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” in the same category as not committing murder.¹⁹

On the other hand, others would say that the Sabbath is not binding on the Christian. P. Cotton, for example, states that the Pauline view is that the Sabbath is not binding upon the Gentile.²⁰ In fact, he feels that this was the very reason that the church celebrated worship on Sunday instead of Saturday: in order to sweep away the burdensome restrictions of the Sabbath laws and to celebrate only those things which were good about the Sabbath.²¹ Likewise, J. S. Porter held that “it is quite manifest that the Fourth Commandment, as it stands in the Law of Moses, cannot bind us because we are Gentiles...Neither Jesus nor the apostles imposed the Sabbath on us.”²² Historically, the Ante-Nicene church father Tertullian held that the legal observance of Sabbath was not required.²³

¹⁵ Rest is tied intricately to the concept of peace via a faith and assurance in Christ. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this aspect of rest but see the helpful article, “The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest.” *Bibliotheca Sacra*. (April, 1973) p. 139ff.

¹⁶ *The Day Changed and the Sabbath Preserved*. (Philadelphia: Committee on Christian Education), p. 2.

¹⁷ George Holder. *The Christian Sabbath*. (London: C.&J. Rivington, 1825), p. 31.

¹⁸ Edwards, p. 20.

¹⁹ Paul K. Jewett. *The Lord's Day*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 28, 29.

²⁰ *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Study in Early Christianity*. (Bethlehem, PA: Times Publishing Co., 1933), p. 35.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 160.

²² J. S. Porter, *Christ's Dominion over the Sabbath Asserted: A Discourse on Mark 2:27-28*. (Belfast: Henry Greer, 1856), pp. 7, 19. This seems based on the hermeneutical idea that in order for an Old Testament instruction to be viable for Christians, it must be explicitly endorsed within the New Testament.

²³ Kenneth A. Strand. *The Early Christian Sabbath: Selected Essays and a Source Collection*. (Worthington, OH: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1979), p. 25.

Even Martin Luther believed that the New Testament had abrogated the Sabbath and that there was no one day that was better than another.²⁴

Given the differing Christian interpretations, can we reach a conclusion? It is helpful to look at how Jesus treated the Sabbath. It is often believed, based on Jesus' conflict with, and defiance of the pharisaical Sabbath regulations, that He nullified Sabbath observance. This is not the case. Jesus was rejecting what the Pharisees had done to the Sabbath, and not the Sabbath itself. C.B. Haynes describes the situation well: "They [the Jews] built around the Sabbath hundreds of man-made laws in the hope of so protecting it from desecration that it would become impossible for the nation ever to be taken into captivity again."²⁵ Jesus was reacting to their failure to internalize the spirit of the Law. Tractate Shabbat of the Babylonian Talmud testifies to this failure. It even has instructions about not placing an egg too close to the stove for fear of cooking it and thereby being guilty of having done work on the Sabbath.²⁶ The Sabbath had gone from a divine provision for the people to an institution protected by the people.²⁷ The result was Jesus' reaction in Mark 2:27. Jesus consistently taught that the needs of man should be preeminent.²⁸ It was for this reason that he taught and healed on the Sabbath (Mark 6:2, Matthew 12:12, John 7:23, 9:14, Luke 13:10-17). Paul followed this example (Acts 17:2, 18:4).

Christ did not nullify the Sabbath but rather fulfilled it by living it out in spirit. However, Jesus is the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Luke 6:5, Matthew 12:1-8) and it belongs to him. Therefore, is His relationship to the Sabbath different from ours? Paul addresses the question more directly. In Colossians 2:16ff he describes the Sabbath outlined in the Old Testament as a shadow of things to come. It has found its "reality" in Christ (verse 17). Again, this indicates fulfillment. The end result is that the Sabbath is, in some sense, still operational through Christ. It is the ethical and moral aspect of the Sabbath that still stand as normative. Rest is still available and it still comes from dependence upon God. The legal minutia has been fulfilled once and for all by Jesus.

²⁴ Edwards, p. 20.

²⁵ *The Christian Sabbath: Is it Saturday or Sunday?* (Nashville: Southern Publishers Assc.), 1949. p. 27.

²⁶ *The Babylonian Talmud. Sabbath* 38b.

²⁷ G. Weldon Gaddy. "Sabbath Rest." *The Way of Faith: Words of Admonition and Encouragement for the Journey Based on the Letter to the Hebrews*. J.M. Pitts ed. (Wake Forest, NC: Chanticleer Publishing Co., 1983), p. 50.

²⁸ Cotton, p. 30.

Application

If then the Sabbath is ethically normative, how and why should the Christian apply it to contemporary life? After all, everyone has more than enough work to fill eight days a week! Ironically, our society is such that it has eroded the very thing it needs—Sabbath rest! Edwards gives four contributing factors to this erosion: American pluralism, individualism, changing views of time, and devaluation of the contemplative.²⁹ Out of these four, individualism is the most significant in that it incorporates aspects of the others. Individualism by its very nature includes a non-historical sense of time as well as a lack of commonality with others. For example, the author can remember a call to reform the “blue laws” in the state of Massachusetts. This reform allowed all stores to be open seven days a week. This measure, and those similar to it across the United States, meant that there is now virtually no difference among the days of the week for many people in our society. Time increasingly becomes a blur and our contact with each other becomes minimal.

This change demonstrates a clear need for the counter-cultural Sabbath. As W.G. Plaut has pointed out, we need the Sabbath as a rest from the unrest that pervades our society.³⁰ Keeping a repetitive, consistent Sabbath also encourages rest more than an isolated vacation. Plaut goes so far as to call the Sabbath a protest against the endless goalless competition inherent in our society.³¹ Ceasing from our work on a regular basis shows our mastery over it and forces us to acknowledge our dependence on our Creator for our needs. It is a break in the humdrum which allows us to disentangle ourselves from our culture and reorient on our identity as servants of Christ. As A. J. Heschel writes, “The Sabbath is the day on which we learn the art of surpassing civilization.”³²

This is not to imply that the freedom that comes with Sabbath does so passively. On the contrary, welcoming Sabbath involves activity. For example, in the Jewish tradition, the Sabbath is welcomed as a bride, a symbol of the special quality of the day.³³ This activity is participation in Sabbath rest as worship, which incorporates our whole being. This worship involves community. Sabbath reminds us that we are a part of the creation and the body of Christ. Sabbath is worship of God with our

²⁹ Edwards, p. 26.

³⁰ “The Sabbath as Protest: Thoughts on Work and Leisure in the Automated Society.” *Tradition and Change in Jewish Experience*. A.L. Jamison ed. (New York: Syracuse University, 1978), p. 177.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 175ff.

³² Heschel, p. 27.

³³ Samuel H. Dresner. *The Sabbath*. (New York: The Burning Bush Press, 1970), p. 17ff.

whole being in unity with all of creation. This worship should include the study of God's word. Furthermore, we must cease from our anxiety (Psalms 46:10). The Sabbath teaches us to depend on God in all things and therein lays freedom and peace. It frees us from the endless pressure of trying to produce and from being measured by our accomplishments.³⁴ Ultimately, it is not the absence of activity but what is done that makes the day holy.

It should be remembered that like Israel, we were not picked for our accomplishments. The Sabbath reminds us to share the love of God with others, to see them for who they are and not for what they have accomplished.³⁵ Sabbath is, after all, a reflection of our faith in and love for God. A lack of these elements in our lives could very well bar us from entering into the rest of God which has been prepared from the foundation of the world.

Ultimately, one should recognize that the Sabbath does belong to Almighty God and that, in itself, makes it worthy of observance. However, as Jesus stated, the Day was made for man as part of the creation. Karl Barth asked the question, "How are things in your heart?"³⁶ To enter into Sabbath rest is to be still in your heart and know that the Lord is God and to love and depend on Him. Sabbath observance is an intentional act of faith in God's past actions that manifests in our current behavior. It demonstrates a desire and hope for a time when God's true rest will become normative for all time.

Bibliography

The Babylonian Talmud. vol. I, tract Sabbath. Trans. Michael L. Rodkinson. New York: New Amsterdam Book Co., 1896

Cotton, Paul. *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Study in Early Christianity.* Bethlehem, PA: Times Publishing Co., 1933.

Dawn, Marva J. *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.

Dresner, Samuel H. *The Sabbath.* New York: The Burning Bush Press, 1970.

³⁴ Marva J. Dawn. *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly.* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 17-18.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 20.

³⁶ Frances R. McCormick. "Sabbath Rest: A Theological Imperative According to Karl Barth." *Journal of American Academy of Religion.* Vol. LXII. No. 2. p. 539.

- Edwards, Tilden. *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1982.
- Gaddy, G. Weldon. "Sabbath Rest." *The Way of Faith: Words of Admonition and Encouragement for the Journey Based on the Letter of the Hebrews*. J.M. Pitts, ed. Wake Forest, N.C.: Chanticleer Publishing Co., 1985.
- Goldman, Solomon. *A Guide to the Sabbath*. London: Jewish Chronicle Publications, 1961.
- Haynes, Carlyle B. *The Christian Sabbath: Is It Saturday or Sunday?* Nashville: Southern Publishers assc., 1949.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Earth is the Lord's* New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962.
- _____. *The Sabbath*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1951, 1979.
- Hodge, Archibald A. *The Day Changed and the Sabbath Preserved*. Philadelphia: Committee on Christian Education.
- Holden, George. *The Christian Sabbath*. London: C. & J. Rivington, 1825.
- Jewett, Paul K. *The Lord's Day*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971.
- Kaiser, Walter C. "The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest." *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 130, 1973. pp. 135-150.
- Lockyer, Herbert. *Everything Jesus Taught*, Volume 3. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.
- McCormick, Francis Rice. "Sabbath Rest: A Theological Imperative According to Karl Barth." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. vol. LXII No. 2, pp. 539-552.
- Morris, Leon. *Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983.

- Pitts, James M. *The Way of Faith*. Wake Forest, North Carolina: Chanticleer Publishing Company, Inc. 1985.
- Platt, C.A. "Day of Praise, Joy and Freedom." *The Lord's Day*. J.P. Wesbury, ed. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986.
- Plaut, W. Gunther. "The Sabbath as Protest: Thoughts on Work and Leisure in an Automated Society." *Tradition and Change in Jewish Experience*. A.L. Jamison, ed. New York: Syracuse University, 1978.
- Porter, J. Scott. *Christ's Dominion Over the Sabbath Asserted: A Discourse on Mark 2:27-28*. Belfast: Henry Greer, 1856.
- Rodkinson, Michael L., translator. *The Babylonian Talmud*. vol. I, tract Sabbath. New York: New Amsterdam Book Co., 1896
- Strand, Kenneth A. *The Early Christian Sabbath: Selected Essays and a Source Collection*. Worthington, OH: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1979.
- Wilson, R. McL. *The New Century Bible Commentary: Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987.