

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

The Sabbath – a Sign of the Covenant

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Have you ever noticed that all 10 commandments are repeated in some way in the New Testament – with the exception of the fourth? You look in vain in the words of Jesus or of Paul or of Peter for an instruction to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. It's just not there. Does that not mean that the fourth commandment is no longer relevant for the church today??

Another question. *If* this command is still in force today, by whose authority has the day of rest been changed from the commanded last day in the week in the Old Testament to the first in our practice? Again, nowhere in the New Testament do we read any explicit command from either Jesus or Paul or Peter or John that the Sabbath was to be changed from Saturday to Sunday.

A final question. We find ourselves in a society that no longer has respect for the Sunday as the Lord's Day. To get for our children or ourselves a job that involves no Sunday work becomes increasingly difficult. Is it fitting, in such a culture, that we insist on maintaining the Sabbath as a day of rest? Should we not, given the earlier questions, be more flexible on Sunday work – as long as one's work does not interfere with going to church at least once?

In what follows, I seek to show that God's fourth word of the covenant remains as valid for the New Testament church as it was for the Old Testament people of God. In this fourth commandment the Lord impresses upon His people the rich reality of the covenant He made with us in Jesus Christ. I contend that to minimise the Sabbath is in essence to give up that covenant of grace.

The Purpose of the Sabbath.

Why did the Lord tell His people of old to rest on the Sabbath? The two editions of the ten commandments give us two different reasons.

Exodus 20:8-11

At Mt Sinai, God mentions one reason:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

Notice the reason for the Sabbath: "in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it." With this statement the Lord roots the Sabbath in creation.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

At the end of 40 years of wandering through the desert, Moses repeated for Israel once again the 10 commandments. This time, though, the fourth commandment reads differently:

"Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

Notice that the reason for the Sabbath has shifted from God's work in the week of creation to God's free gift of redemption to Israel from the house of bondage. And we understand that the redemption from Egypt was not a simple freeing from slavery to Pharaoh itself; this redemption foreshadowed the deliverance of God's people from slavery to Satan through the coming work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

So there appear to be two distinct reasons why Israel was to keep the Sabbath: the one reason revolved around God's action in creation, the other around Christ's work in redemption.

Exodus 31

Now I need to make the matter just a bit more confusing. For Ex 31 gives another reason for the Sabbath:

"Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you'" (vs 13).

Here, then, is a third reason beside the first two; Israel must keep the Sabbath because it's a "sign" to them from God so that they might "know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you."

It makes it all so confusing. Israel must keep the Sabbath because God rested in the beginning on the seventh day – that's Ex 20. Israel must keep the Sabbath because God delivered Israel from their bondage in Egypt – that's Dt 5. Israel must keep the Sabbath because it's a sign from God to His people that it's He who sanctifies them – that's Ex 31. Yes, it's confusing....

Synthesis

Yet, dear reader, it's not so confusing, nor so difficult. For that passage from Ex 31 about the Sabbath being a sign does not give a *third* reason for the Sabbath; it instead gives us the *common denominator* between the reasons of Ex 20 and Dt 5. In Ex 31 the Lord tells Israel that the Sabbath is given to them as a *sign* – of what? – of the relationship between the Lord Himself on the one hand and His people on the other. What is that relation? This: "that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you." And "sanctify", we know, means to set apart, to make holy. God has taken Israel out of Egypt and set them apart, made them different from the Egyptians and the Canaanites and the Moabites, distinct. What was distinct about Israel; how were they different? This: Israel was *God's special people*, and *He was their God*. And that's to say that *God made His covenant with Israel*. The Sabbath was the sign of that relationship between God and this people; the Sabbath was given *as a sign of the covenant* between the Lord and Israel. That's why the Lord also repeats in Ex 31:16 that Israel shall keep the Sabbath, and then God adds that they shall observe it "as a perpetual covenant." As the Lord also says through Ezekiel: the Sabbath is "a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I the Lord am your God" (20:20). 'I am the Lord your God', 'you are My people':

that is typically covenantal language – and God sets that language within the context of the Sabbath.

Sign of the Covenant

If that's what the Sabbath is – a sign of God's covenant with His people– how can creation and redemption serve as reasons to keep the Sabbath? To start with the redemption motif of Dt 5: Israel was redeemed from Egypt exactly because Israel was God's people. God chose them, delivered them, and promptly brought them to Mt Sinai to make a formal covenant with them. The redemption from Egypt, and so also our redemption through Christ on Calvary, is possible only because of the reality of the covenant. God's gift of redemption demands that the Sabbath be kept as a sign of the covenant between God and His redeemed people.

And how does the reference to creation in Ex 20 fit into the covenant? Covenant means that God is Israel's Father, and Israel is His people, His children. Well now: it is for the children to do as does the father; it's God's command that His people image Him. God makes clear that the people of Israel are indeed His children by commanding them to act as He did; as He worked six days and then rested on the seventh, so also Israel is to work six days and then rest on the seventh. The rest of the Sabbath spells out concretely that this people is specifically *God's people by covenant*; they are to do as He did.

In a word: both of those reasons for keeping the Sabbath –both creation and redemption– draw the attention of Israel to that unique relationship between themselves and the Lord God. Because of that *covenant* is Israel to keep the Sabbath so carefully.

Covenant Wrath

This explains too why God reacted so fiercely against anyone in Israel who profaned the Sabbath. Ex 31:14: "everyone who profanes [the Sabbath] shall surely be put to death." No wonder, for by profaning the Sabbath one undermines, denies the covenant relationship God has established between Himself and His people. And God will not tolerate that His people break or disregard His covenant of grace.

Covenant Blessing

Israel, then, had to keep the Sabbath. That is: on that one day in seven they were to do no work. Please remember: in the land of Egypt the people of Israel –slaves as they were– were used to labouring for their hard task master seven days a week; their master in Egypt knew no respite, no mercy. But now they receive a new Master, the Maker of heaven and earth, their God by covenant. And see: this Master is not hard; He gives a day off in seven! And where, then, shall one's food come from if one doesn't work on the seventh day? This gentle Master promised to *supply*, freely. Their daily needs: He would provide it abundantly – witness the manna laying on the ground morning by morning. So God tells His people by covenant not to work on the Sabbath; they were instead to *trust* that their heavenly Father would give them their daily bread. By telling His people not to work on the Sabbath, God impressed upon them that *He* would supply their needs – He *was* a faithful covenant God. And the people for their part, by not working on the Sabbath, demonstrated that they indeed *trusted* their covenant God for all their needs; by keeping the Sabbath, they showed their appreciation to God for the covenant He graciously made with them.

Celebrate

This purpose of the Sabbath –a symbol of the fact that the Almighty had made Israel His own and now cared for His people day by day– also determined for Israel the *character* that this day had to have; the Sabbath was to be a day of *rejoicing*. Here was a day free from work, free from worries about work, a day set apart to delight in the redemption implied in the fact that

the LORD was Israel's God. The Sabbath wasn't for long faces, it wasn't for rigid laws of do's and don'ts; it was instead for celebrating the return of Paradise. Here's a day to remember specifically that 'God is not angry with us, God does not punish us for our sins, but rather forgives; the Lord is our Father who graciously supplies for all that we ever need each day anew.' So it was too that when God gave His legislation about the feasts that He wanted Israel to *celebrate*, the first feast mentioned is that of the Sabbath; the Sabbath was to be a feast day in Israel, a day for rejoicing (cf Lev 23:2f). In fact, on the Sabbath twice as many burnt offerings had to be offered to the Lord in the tabernacle as on any other day of the week (Num 29:9f). And a burnt offering was nothing else than a way of saying to God: 'Lord, I'm so thankful for the abundance we have in You.' *Rejoicing*: that's what the Sabbath in Israel was to be all about. This day was a *gift* from a God of great grace to a people mercifully redeemed.

And *where else* could one rejoice in God's redemption better than in God's own presence, in God's tabernacle, God's house??! Hence the instruction to Israel that on the Sabbath they had to meet together in the place where the Lord God had put His name, there to rejoice in the wonders of His covenant of grace (cf Lev 23:3).

Jesus' Fulfillment

By the time Jesus Christ lived on the earth, the Sabbath was no longer appreciated as a day to rejoice in the covenant bond between God and His people. For the Pharisees had made the Sabbath into a day of do's and don'ts; by carefully watching one's conduct on the Sabbath one could work one's way into God's good books. With that theology-of-works they stifled the day, choked out all happiness. For they decreed that God would not be pleased if one would light a candle or a fire on the Sabbath, or if one would travel more than so far on the Sabbath, or if one would carry more than so many pounds, etc. The disciples of Jesus picked some grain and husked it, and the Pharisees accused them of working on the Sabbath; they harvested and threshed the grain crop, and God didn't want that. Jesus healed a man with a withered arm and earned the anger of the Pharisees because He transgressed their stipulations for the Sabbath. It all boils down to this: all the friction between Jesus and the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath was the result of the fact that the Pharisees enslaved man to the Sabbath instead of seeing the Sabbath as God's gift to man (cf Mk 2:27).

Jesus was emphatic: it was not God's wish that the Sabbath be a day of restrictions of not this and not that and not that. Rather, the Sabbath was a day free to rejoice in the fact that one may be God's child. So Jesus healed on the Sabbath. He gave the wretched cripple deeper reason to rejoice in God his Saviour, and that was in keeping with the purpose of the Sabbath. Had Jesus not come to save from bondage to Satan, to pay for sin? More, had He not come to free from the consequences of sin? And the consequences of sin include sickness, it includes grief. All of that He took upon Himself; "He has borne our sicknesses and carried our pains" (Is 53:4). He went to the cross, and the reason for His going was to obtain complete redemption; He came to set His people free, free from sin, free from Satan, free even from the consequences of sin, free so that they can serve God again.

Conclusion

This work of Jesus Christ is part and parcel of the covenant that God made with His own. And that covenant abides forever; it is as valid for the New Testament dispensation as it was for the Old Testament dispensation. In that covenant, the Sabbath *remains as sign*. No where do the Scriptures give indication that the covenant is no longer valid; on the contrary. Equally, the Scriptures no where give indication that the Sabbath's function as sign of the covenant is Old Testamentic only. It is here the same as with infant baptism: the New Testament church understands that children belong to God's covenant because God's Old Testament revelation says so, and there is no indication in the New Testament to the contrary. So too with the Sabbath: the New Testament church is to keep the Sabbath because God's it remains a sign of God's covenant with His own; it is He Who sanctifies us, sets us apart from those around us

who do not know God.

That is also why the New Testament does not supply a specific command to keep the Sabbath; this command, like infant baptism, is *understood*. More, it's *implicit* in those passages of Scripture where we're told not to "neglect to meet together" (Heb 10:25); that's the Sabbath, when God's people take distance from daily work—for they're sure that *God* provides daily bread—and congregate together around the preaching of the gospel of God's covenant in Jesus Christ.

The Date of the Sabbath

With the above, we've uncovered also the reason why the day of rest has been changed in the New Testament from the last day in the week to the first. For that Old Testament Sabbath revolved around Jesus Christ. Without Christ that covenant was not possible. Without Christ, redemption from Egypt meant nothing, and imaging God's six days work and seventh day rest also meant nothing. But here was Christ now, and He went to the cross, there to obtain for His people a complete redemption from all the power of the devil. So the Sabbath of the Old Testament – it pointed forward to the coming Christ— is fulfilled.

What remains now of the Sabbath? This: now there remains the message that *Christ has been successful*. So the covenant in the New Testament is richer in content than it was the Old Testament, for we live in the dispensation of the triumphant Christ. And what is the assurance that He has been triumphant? This: that on the third day *He arose from the dead*. So the sign of the covenant –it *remains* a sign— was moved from the last day of the week to the first. As children of God redeemed by this Christ, it no longer will do for us to rejoice in God's redemption –Sabbath— on the day when Christ lay in the grave; we may now rejoice on the day when Christ demonstrated His victory over sin and Satan.

It is true: there is no express *command* in the New Testament that the day of rest should from now on be the first day of the week. But the meaning of the Old Testament Sabbath does dictate that conclusion. Because the Old Testament Sabbath revolved around Jesus Christ must the New Testament Sabbath do the same – in even clearer expression.

So it was that the early church of the New Testament observed on the first day of the week the Sabbath God had commanded for the Old Testament. On the very day that He rose from the dead – it was the first day of the week— Jesus appeared to ten of His disciples (Jn 20:19ff). These ten received the Holy Spirit and believed that Jesus was indeed risen from the dead. Eight days later – and that's again, by Jewish counting, on Sunday— the disciples were together, this time all eleven (Jn 20:26). Though by Old Testament regulations this would be the first work day of the week, and therefore not the day of rest, the disciples are not working; they are together. And that's the day which Jesus chooses to appear to them again.

Fifty days after the resurrection, on the day of Pentecost –and that's again, by Jewish counting, on Sunday— the disciples are again "all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). That became the habit: they gathered together not on the last day of the week, but on the first. And that's the day the Lord was pleased to pour His Spirit of rejoicing out over His people. So when Paul instructed the Corinthians to set aside money so that the poor might be able to rejoice as well, they were to do so "on the first day of the week" (I Cor 16:2). This was the day of regular getting together. Similarly, John, when exiled on the island Patmos, "was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day" (Rev 1:9), and that's understood to be on the first day of the week; then it was that the Lord Jesus appeared to him with His revelation.

Conclusion

Taking the practice of the early church together with the purpose for the Sabbath as such, it follows that the fourth commandment does indeed count also in the New Testament

dispensation. It's true that this command is not repeated in the New Testament in so many words. But now we know: that's not decisive. For the heart of the New Testament is that God's covenant of grace remains because of Christ's redeeming work, and that gives every reason to rejoice.

This, then, is also why today's society has no regard for the Sunday as the Lord's Day any more. For society has this century moved away from God and His covenant; western society as a whole breaks that covenant. Since society does not *trust* that God will provide for the needs for His people, society cannot afford to cease economic activity for the day. That's equally why society sees no need to devote the day to God and His worship. For our society does not delight in God's saving work in Jesus Christ. So the Sunday, as sign of the covenant, perishes.

Here, then, is the challenge for us. *If we fail to treasure the covenant of grace God established with us in Jesus Christ*, we will invariably lose the sign of that covenant – the Sunday.

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