

Sabbath and Sunday: A Brief Biblical-Theological Consideration

by Tim Gallant, June 2009

I belong to the broader tradition of the Christian Church known as Reformed. One of the issues that frequently comes up in this tradition is the matter of “Sabbatarianism.” (I put that in quotation marks, because what is really meant is treating Sunday as a day analogous to the Sabbath, rather than resting on the seventh day itself.) The position and practice of what we’ll call “Sunday Sabbatarianism” is particularly prevalent among the Reformed, despite the fact that among the first generation or two of Reformers (including John Calvin himself), such a position was not widely held.

To state my position up front: I do not believe Sunday Sabbatarianism can stand up to sound biblical interpretation. Here’s a quick look at why not....

Days and months and seasons and years....

In Galatians 4.10, Paul charges the Gentiles with observing “days and months and seasons and years,” a practice which he identifies with “turning back to the elements [Gr *stoicheia*] of the world” (Gal 4.9).

This charge has to do with the fact that converted Gentiles were now starting to practice the calendar given to Israel (the “days and months and seasons and years” correspond to sabbaths, new moons, appointed feasts, and to the sabbatical and Jubilee years). There are those who suggest that Paul’s objection is because these were *old covenant* days, but that he is not arguing against an observance of Sunday as a “new covenant Sabbath.”

Now, I am the first to grant that Paul was not arguing against an observance of Sunday as a “new covenant Sabbath,” for the simple reason that it hadn’t entered anyone’s head that Sunday was a “new covenant Sabbath.” But the real question has to do with whether Paul’s treatment of the old covenant Sabbath rules out the making of Sunday into a “new covenant Sabbath.”

And I suggest that Paul’s line of argument does indeed rule that out.

In the context, Paul has been arguing that Torah (the Mosaic law) was a *paidagogos* (a slave who served as a child custodian) who served until the coming of Christ (Gal 3.24), and that with the coming of Christ, believers are no longer under a *paidagogos* (3.25). In what follows (3.26-4.7), Paul argues that because believers have been clothed with Christ, the mature Son, in baptism, they are therefore themselves the one mature son who is qualified to inherit the promises. They are no longer treated as children who are under custodians and managers - a situation which Paul identifies as being enslaved to the elements (*stoicheia*) of the *kosmos* (the term by which Paul frequently refers to the first/old creation). The coming of the Son redeems (liberates from slavery) those who were under Torah; Paul concludes the section by saying, “So you are no longer a slave, but a son [note well: not merely *child*, but *son*], and if a son, then an heir through God” (4.7).

But then, what is perhaps surprising is that Paul immediately reminds his hearers that they themselves were not Israelites, but Gentiles who “were enslaved to those that by nature are not

gods” (4.8). And when he charges them with their observance of the old covenant calendar, he says they are *turning back again* to the weak and worthless elements of the world, to which they would be enslaved once more (4.9).

What does this mean? How could previously-pagan Gentiles be *turning back* to something Israel practiced, but which they themselves had not?

It means that, while the old covenant administration provided a calendar that was *good and beneficial* for Israel during the period prior to Christ, nonetheless it belonged, along with the pagan cultic practices of the Gentiles, to the old creation. And in context, it is particularly the calendar, including the Sabbath, which is in view. The old covenant calendar, although ordained by God, was part of an old world that has passed away for those in Christ. This is why Paul uses the term “elements” - a term used classically by the philosophers to refer to the things of which the world is composed: earth, wind, air, fire. Paul is saying that Torah was one of the constituent elements of the old *kosmos*.

Thus it is not quite accurate to say that Paul’s argument impinges *only* upon the old covenant Sabbath and the related calendar. For the purpose in view (contrasting old creation and new), Paul’s argument assumes a basic coherence between Israel’s “Mosaic” calendar and the calendars and cultic practices of the pagans. Obviously, the analogy is not because both were founded upon falsehood, as God Himself was the One who had given Israel her calendar. The analogy lies rather in the overall cultic form of the religion.

And this is why I cannot concede that Paul leaves room for a “Christianization” of the Sabbath. That would suggest that it is okay to adopt one of the elements specifically constituent of the old creation. Sunday Sabbatarianism borrows the cultic form of the *stoicheia*, and therefore would fall into the same category as the practice which gave Paul such dismay in Galatians 4.

Now, this is not to say that worship on Sunday is improper; nor is it to say that we no longer need to rest. Both of those principles, in fact, are not only permissible, but quite necessary. The former is mandated quite openly by the New Testament itself; it is clear that the early Church met as such on the first day of the week (Acts 20.7; 1 Cor 16.2). It seems clear that this was not simply an accident of history, but based on the fact that Christ’s resurrection occurred on the first day of the week (Mt 28.1ff), as did His primary subsequent meetings with large groups of the disciples prior to His ascension (Jn 20.19; cf 20.26). It is thus not surprising that the first day of the week gained the term “the Lord’s Day” (Rev 1.10).

In that respect, there is analogy to the Sabbath: there is a “holy convocation” (assembly) - a formal service of worship on the first day of the week, as there was on the seventh under the law (cf Lev 23.3).

Yet even here, the first day of the week does not become analogous to the Sabbath in fundamental respects. Sunday is never termed a “sabbath” anywhere. There is no command to rest. Masters are never commanded to give their slaves the day off, which certainly was imperative for Israelite masters to do on the Sabbath.

The fundamental idea of the Sabbath was rest; hence, observing the Sabbath meant abstaining from everyday work - to the degree that even gathering manna (or attempting to do so, as God didn’t supply it on the seventh day of the week) was forbidden. When Paul expresses dismay that

Gentiles observe the Sabbath (Gal 4.10) and teaches that believers should not allow others to bind their consciences in regard to a Sabbath or a feast day or a new moon (Col 2.16), he doesn't add (here or elsewhere) that the *proper* day of mandated rest is Sunday. No such moral imperative is supplied in the New Testament, for the simple reason that imposing such a requirement would be imposing the shadow at the time of the substance (cf Col 2.17); it would mean reintroducing the elements of the old *kosmos*.

We need to take careful note of Paul's argument in Galatians 3-4. It is about how minors (children) are bound in a form of necessary slavery, and how, by being united to Christ, the mature Son, all God's new covenant people (yes, including children) are now delivered to a new form of service.

It may be that when we were small children, most of us had mothers who had a specified nap time for us. Let's say it was at 2:30 p.m. It was a moral imperative for us to rest then and try to sleep. And that was for our own good. Nap time was a good thing, although we didn't necessarily appreciate it. Moreover, rest is still a good and necessary thing.

And yet, who would be so absurd as to claim that as an adult, it is a moral imperative for you to observe a 2:30 p.m. nap time? Or even, given the fact that you have grown up and your circumstances have changed, that you observe a *changed* nap time - say, 5:30 p.m.? Well, why not? After all, rest is good, naps are a great way to get rest, and your mother taught you to have a set nap time!

But the answer is that you're grown up now, and although your specified nap time was good, it was good for a *child*. You still must rest. And very likely, you can and will take a nap when you need one. Good for you. But neither a 2:30 nor a 5:30 nap time are moral imperatives for you.

And so it is with the Sabbath. God specified a particular period of rest for His old creation children, and it was *good*. And we still need rest. But we are no longer old creation people, and the Sabbath is not a moral imperative for the sons of God.

Objections... or further support?

Sabbath as "creation ordinance"

It is true that Sunday Sabbatarians appeal to the Sabbath as a "creation ordinance." God created the world for six days, then rested; and it is to this precedent that He appeals in Exodus 20 when He commands Israel to observe the Sabbath. The argument is then that one day in seven rest is built into the very order of creation.

The problem is that this argument proves both too little, and too much.

Too little, because the precise contrast that Paul is drawing in Galatians 3-4 is between the (old) *kosmos* and the "new creation" (see also Gal 6.14-15). Even if we were to grant that the Sabbath is constitutive of the order of creation, the question still remains what its relationship is to the *new* creation.

The argument also proves too little, because the Sabbath commandment is not simply about resting one day in every seven, but specifically about resting *the seventh* day. The New Testament never once says the Sabbath commandment has *changed*, such that essentially the

same commandment remains, albeit moved to a different day and provided with a new “theological” basis.

And again, the argument proves altogether *too much*, because by the same standard, not only the seventh day Sabbath, but the seasonal appointed times of Israel are also part of the old creation - not simply by Paul’s judgment, or even by the institution of the Mosaic law, but by the witness of Genesis itself. Genesis 1.14 tells us that when God created the heavenly bodies, they were to be “for signs and appointed times [לְמוֹעֲדִים], and for days and years.” The term for “sign” (אֵימָת) is repeatedly used to refer to the Sabbath, while the term here rendered “appointed times” (often translated as “seasons”; cf most versions’ rendering of Gal 4.10) is later used extensively to refer to the appointed times in the Israelite calendar (examples could be multiplied, but e.g. Lev 23.2’s “appointed feasts” is the same Hebrew word as in Gen 1.14). In truth, the actual keeping of the Sabbath by human beings is not mentioned until after the keeping of one of the festivals (Passover) - Passover appears in Exodus 12; the Sabbath, not until Exodus 16.

Given all of this, we must say that if the Sabbath is a “creation ordinance,” so *the whole system of “days and months and seasons and years”* (cf Gal 4.10!) *is a creation ordinance*. In fact, *Paul’s language is much more an echo of Genesis 1.14 than it is an echo of anything in the law itself*.

It is thus no surprise that when the Old Testament talks about the Sabbath, it usually also talks about the other appointed times, such as the festivals. A case in point are the new covenant prophecies of Ezekiel, where the Sabbaths are tied together with the new moons and festivals (see e.g. Ezek 44.24; 45.17; 46.3ff). Likewise, the new covenant prophecy of Isaiah 66.23 speaks not only of the perpetuity of the Sabbaths, but also of the new moons. (Cf also Hos 2.11 etc.) This is why Paul so readily places Sabbaths in the same context as the other appointed times in both Galatians and Colossians.

The point is simply that unless we are to believe that the new covenant and new creation maintain the entire Israelite calendar, there is no reason to believe that seeing the Sabbath as a “creation ordinance” makes it a binding ordinance in perpetuity. The prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah speak of the new covenant in old covenant terms (elsewhere, circumcision is also referred to as an “everlasting covenant,” Gen 7.13). But when the new covenant comes, the elements of the old creation, while not simply obliterated - God doesn’t start over from scratch, after all - are transfigured into something very different, not only in explicit theological meaning, but also in form.

“Lord of the Sabbath”

A further common objection to what I will call the new creation position is that Jesus says that the Sabbath was made for man, and that He is the Lord of the Sabbath.

What is interesting about this objection is that a straight-line reading of the text in this fashion results in a *non sequitur*. “The Sabbath was made for [generic] man, not man for the Sabbath; *therefore* [or, *so that*], the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Mk 2.27-28). The Sunday Sabbatarians generally make no attempt to show how verse 28 follows from verse 27. What is the “therefore” there for? How does the fact that the Sabbath was given for man’s good demonstrate that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (whatever that might exactly mean)?

Notwithstanding the frequent misreading, however, Jesus is not making a generic claim regarding the Sabbath and men in general in Mark 2; nor, in context, would it even make sense for Him to do so.

The occasion for the dispute here is that the disciples were plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath day and eating them. As inoffensive as that may seem to us, it was *not* allowable under the terms of the Mosaic law, which is why the Pharisees say the disciples are “doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath” (Mk 2.24) - *a point Jesus Himself concedes* (despite the fact that elsewhere Jesus readily corrects the Pharisees when they misread the law).

This concession was entirely necessary, in view of Exodus 16: If simply picking up manna off the ground was a violation of the Sabbath, so was plucking heads of grain. *Gathering food on the Sabbath was not lawful.* (Nor can one appeal to the traditional notion of “works of necessity.” The Sabbath required *prior preparation*. If you weren’t going to have ready access to food on the seventh day, you were to gather on the sixth, which is precisely what happened with the manna, when God commanded Israel to gather double on the sixth day.)

Rather than arguing that what the disciples did really *was* lawful, Jesus instead points to a historical example when the law was superceded by a larger concern (or, more accurately, a larger person; Jesus quite shockingly implies that David, at least on the occasion in view, was more important than the law regarding the proper recipients of the Bread of the Presence).

Whatever Jesus is doing, He is not saying that the Sabbath law allowed for what the disciples were doing. Rather, He was giving a reason why, at least on this occasion, the Sabbath law could be violated with impunity.

It is then that Jesus continues on into Mark 2.27-28. And no, He does *not* give a generic statement regarding how the Sabbath is good for men in general. Rather, He says this:

“The Sabbath occurred [became] on account of the man, and not the man on account of the Sabbath.”

To what is Jesus referring? I suggest, not to the later Sabbath commandment, but to the underlying event: God’s Sabbath rest in Genesis 2. (Jesus does something similar when dealing with divorce - instead of arguing with the Pharisees regarding the Mosaic provisions, He appeals to Genesis 1-2.) The seventh day was preceded by the sixth, on which God created the Man, Adam, the original lord of creation. God did not create the Sabbath, and then create the Man in order for him to keep it; rather, God created the Man, and then God rested in celebration and pleasure *on account of* the Man. (Again, this fits with the broader evidence: there is no biblical witness that Adam or anyone else observed the Sabbath until the giving of the manna in Exodus 16.)

Verse 28 follows entirely logically from this: Just as the Man was not made in order to observe the Sabbath, the Son of Man - the New Adam is also lord of the Sabbath. Even as the Bread of the Presence was rightfully at David’s disposal to do with as he saw fit, the New Adam is master of the Sabbath, to dispose of as He sees fit. And He sees fit to allow the disciples to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath, contrary to the Sabbath law itself.

Therefore, the Mark 2 passage coheres, not with a Sunday Sabbatarian position, but with a new creation position.

Nine commandments?

One complaint is that if we do not recognize a literal Sabbath day, we are left with nine commandments rather than ten.

There are two proper answers to this, which complement one another.

First, Sunday Sabbatarians must face the fact that they do not, and cannot, treat the fourth commandment in the same fashion they treat the others. The fourth commandment explicitly states that the day of rest is to fall on the *seventh* day. Even if Sunday Sabbatarians keep all the other stipulations of the fourth commandment, they have still made a fundamental change to the commandment which they would never hazard to make to any of the other commandments. This shows that, whatever they may say, they themselves recognize there is some sort of very basic difference between the fourth commandment and the other nine.

Second, the Decalogue was Israel's particular charter. That specific form of God's will for men was inscribed on stone tablets and both copies were placed in the ark of the *covenant*. This very fact shows that it was the center of God's covenant with Israel.

Now, this does not mean that we ignore the Decalogue. The God of Israel remains God, and it should not surprise us that the general outline of His will for men bears a very strong continuity, even between old creation and new creation. Thus it is not at all shocking that the other nine commandments get explicitly repeated in the New Testament (although in some cases the manner of observation undergoes relatively minor alterations).

But neither is it at all shocking that the fourth commandment not only does not get *repeated* in the New Testament - it gets *repudiated*. (I'll qualify that in a moment.)

This is because the Sabbath was a *sign* for Israel over against the *goyim* (the nations or Gentiles), as God makes explicitly clear repeatedly (Exodus 31.13, 17; Ezek 20.12, 20; cf again Gen 1.14). This is closely parallel to circumcision, which was likewise such a sign of the covenant (Gen 17.11). (Although technically, in the case of circumcision the covenant in view was Abrahamic, while the Sabbath was a sign of the Mosaic, nonetheless it should be recognized that from the time of Moses until Christ, the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants were so thoroughly bound up with one another, it would be impossible to distinguish them in any practical sense.) The fourth commandment was an administrative sign of a particular covenant, and therefore it bears a different character from the other nine commandments of the Decalogue.

And yet, we must add that, while the New Testament repudiates the Sabbath as a commandment we keep in any way analogous to Israel, we must also deny that it simply falls to the ground. This is no more true of the Sabbath than it is true of the whole host of intricately woven details of the Mosaic law. We do not literally offer sin offerings, peace offerings, ascension offerings, and so on - but that does not mean the laws regulating them are meaningless to us, or that they belong to a section of the Bible we can call "God's Word, *emeritus*." But as with these other things, the Sabbath changes form very fundamentally in the movement from old creation to new. All commandments are transfigured and glorified in Christ, but alteration is more obvious with some than with others.

The New Testament does speak of a Sabbath rest which remains for the people of God (Heb 4.9). This text, however, is not speaking of Sunday; it is comparing the place of rest in Canaan

(inheritance of which many fell short due to unbelief, Heb 3.7-19) to the place of rest which our High Priest has entered by passing through the heavens (4.14).

While the Sabbath rest thus refers, not to Sunday, but to a resting place, there is nonetheless a Sunday relevance - more on that in a moment.

Further considerations

The significance of the first day of the week

In the Old Testament, there were indeed a few occasions on which work on the first day of the week was forbidden. But this was generally in association with weeklong festivals which also had a mandated rest on the seventh day of the week (see e.g. the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Lev 23.6-8).

Ordinarily, however, the first day of the week (along with “the eighth day,” in various contexts) was characterized, not by rest, but specifically by creative work. The first day of creation was the one in which the Lord created all the matter of heaven and earth; likewise, circumcision occurred on the eighth day. One reason why the Sabbath cannot simply be moved from the seventh day to the first is the simple fact that the significance of the first day is not rest, but primary creative work. The great work of the new creation is resurrection; and God through the Spirit raised Jesus (who is the firstfruits of the whole new creation) on the first day of the week - the very event upon which the Lord’s Day is founded. The Lord’s Day is thus not founded upon rest, but upon creative work.

The significance of the terminology of “the Lord’s Day”

Why is the day of worship labelled as “the Lord’s Day”? A good hint about this label is that it occurs in Revelation (1.10) - the New Testament book which most heavily draws upon the Old Testament prophetic revelation. The Old Testament prophets frequently spoke in anticipation of a coming “Day of Yahweh” (“day of the Lord” in the Greek version of the Old Testament; see e.g. Is 2.12; Jer 46.10; Joel 1.15; 2.1, 11, 31; 3.14; Am 5.18, 20; Obad 15; cf Is 61.2; Ezek 7.19). The Day of the Lord is when God would judge His enemies and vindicate His faithful people (whether ultimately at the consummation of all things, or with reference to divine interventions nearer at hand, such as in Is 13.6, 9); and this is a dominant theme in the book of Revelation. As you might guess, I’m saying that “the Lord’s Day” is just another way of saying “the Day of the Lord.”

The Day of the Lord was not specifically envisioned as a 24 hour period. It was a term (frequently eschatological) referring to the time in which God would come in judgment (with both the positive and negative connotations biblical judgment includes). The anticipated event(s) could take place quickly or they could transpire over the course of a considerable period of destruction and deliverance. Thus the use of the term “the Lord’s Day” is not another way of saying “the Lord’s 24 hours.” The accent is upon the nature of the occasion, rather than its length.

I mentioned above that the Sabbath rest of Hebrews 4 does have a connection to Sunday. This is not because Sunday is a new Sabbath. And the connection is not tied to a 24 hour period. The

connection is *via* worship. Hebrews 4 speaks of how our high priest has passed through the heavens; it also speaks of how we draw near to the heavenly throne by that very means (Heb 4.14-16). The book of Revelation speaks in great detail of that heavenly throne, and the interface between heaven and earth occurs primarily through worship. Much of Revelation could rightly be described as a worship service, and what God does in response to the prayers and worship of His people. The Lamb brings both blessing and judgment upon the earth in connection with the corporate prayers and praises of His saints. Worship is the primary means by which the saints rule the world.

This is the significance of the Lord's Day. The eschatological Day of the Lord finds its place in our lives and in history on this day, when we are gathered in corporate worship.

This is the one legitimate tie we can make between Hebrews 4 and the Lord's Day. There is a special connection between us and the ascended Christ when we worship corporately on the Lord's Day. And according to Hebrews 4, where He has ascended to is His place of rest. (To be sure, the activity depicted in Revelation doesn't look all that restful! But nonetheless, the Son does sit at the Father's right hand. His rule is rest, even as He brings His judgment and His peace to the earth.)

Conclusion

There is no direct analogy between Sabbath and Lord's Day. The form of the fourth commandment is part of what Paul identifies as the elements of the *kosmos* - the things which made up the old creation as such.

The concerns of the fourth commandment, of course, are not dead. Believers are not resurrected; they still require rest for their bodies and minds. It is still the responsibility of employers to give rest to their employees; indeed, it is the responsibility of all to provide rest to others. We look forward to the resting place of the fully-come new heavens and new earth, just as our Lord has already entered His rest at His ascension. And of course, we are provided with an occasion for corporate worship.

But in terms of redemptive history, we are no longer children. We are not given a moral imperative of a 2:30 p.m. nap time, if you will. Just as the Sabbath itself was a sign for Israel, the movement from Sabbath to Sunday is much more than the exchange of one day for another; it is a sign of a great transition in God's history with His people. He now deals with us, not as small children, but as sons.