

# The Sabbath in the New Testament— COMMANDED or

# CONDEMNED?

Last month in an article entitled “What Was the Apostolic Sabbath?” we examined all the scriptures where the Sabbath was mentioned after Christ was resurrected. We found that there were 10 such texts in the book of Acts and in the epistles.

Then we checked all the places that mentioned the “first day of the week.” When we read them carefully, we found no hint of any change from Sabbath to Sunday.

There was no text that indicated Sunday was a day of rest and religious worship for the apostles and converts, whether Jew or gentile.

We found that the Sabbath of the apostles was what we commonly call Saturday, the seventh day of the week, the same day as commanded in the Old Testament.

8 For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day.  
9 There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.  
10 For he that is entered into this rest, he also hath ceased from his works, as God did from his.

*Must we keep one specific day, or may we “let our conscience be our guide”? This article dares to show what the Scriptures really say.*

By L. Leroy Neff

But some may still believe that there is no New Testament command to keep the Sabbath. Some may also believe that the Sabbath is condemned in the New Testament. Obviously, the Sabbath was an Old Testament institution, but some believe it is not a New Testament institution.

Part of the problem is the belief that since we are a New Testament Church, the Old Testament has been done away with. Others who profess to believe in both the Old and the New Testaments use only those parts of the Old of which they “approve,” or that they believe the New Testa-

ment supports. So that there is no doubt, we will address our questions to the New Testament alone!

## Three New Testament proofs

To begin, let us investigate the common belief that there is no command or clear statement showing that we should keep the Sabbath. We are now going to see three separate proofs that this is not true.

The first is based on a text in Hebrews.

In chapters 3 and 4 we find a discussion of the rest that is promised to God’s people. Because of unbelief and hardness of heart, ancient Israel never did enter into the promised rest (Heb. 3:11).

We are warned not to make the mistakes they made, lest we, too, fail to receive that rest (Heb. 4:1). That rest, by implication, is immortality as spirit beings in God’s Kingdom. The Sabbath day is a physical type of that rest (verse 4).

Verse 8 is improperly trans-

lated in some versions and should read "Joshua," not "Jesus." Actually, the two names are the same; they are just from different languages. The reference obviously applies to Joshua, the son of Nun, not Jesus of Nazareth.

In these two chapters the word *rest* usually is translated from the Greek word *katapausis* (Heb. 3:11, 18, 4:1, 3, 5, 10-11). The Greek word is defined as "a resting, rest."

But in Hebrews 4:9 a totally different and unrelated word is used: *sabbatismos*. This word literally means "a keeping sabbath" or "a sabbath rest."

The Authorized or King James Version reads, "There remaineth therefore a *rest* to the people of God." The marginal reading in the Cambridge and other Bibles is "keeping of a sabbath," rather than "rest."

Now read the text that way: "There remaineth therefore a *keeping of a Sabbath* to the people of God."

A word-for-word transliteration from the Greek text to English is, "Therefore remains a keeping of a Sabbath for the people of God." The Lamsa translation reads, "It is therefore the duty of the people of God to keep the Sabbath."

Note that this Sabbath remains! It was not done away. It was not nailed to the cross. It was not abrogated. It still remains — it still exists!

The next verse reinforces this point: "For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His" (Heb. 4:10, Revised Authorized Version).

After we are baptized and receive God's Holy Spirit, but before we enter into the final rest of God, we enter into a preliminary rest or foretaste of the final rest. This is possible since we have been forgiven of past sins and are no longer under the bondage that sin brings, and we are at peace with God.

If we have entered into that rest, having been forgiven of sin and received God's Holy Spirit, then we, too, will follow God's

example and cease from our work or labor as God did.

This obviously is not talking about retiring or no longer working, as God still works (John 5:17). It refers to resting on the Sabbath just as God did (Gen. 2:2-3, Heb. 4:4).

### **Why should we follow Christ and Paul?**

The second main proof is based on I Corinthians 11:1: "Imitate me," wrote Paul, "just as I also imitate Christ."

This is the same principle we saw last month in I Peter 2:21, I John 2:6 and John 13:15. Jesus Christ set us a perfect example of obedience to God. He did not sin (Heb. 4:15). Sin is the transgression of the law (I John 3:4). Jesus Christ did not live a perfect life in our stead so that we can live any way we want. Instead, these scriptures show we are to follow His example.

The true Christian will, then, also follow those who follow Christ. Christ kept the Sabbath (Luke 4:16) and so did Paul (Acts 17:2).

It should now be obvious that we ought to keep the Sabbath, too. If we don't we are not following the example of Paul or Christ or the early Christians as recorded in the New Testament.

### **Are the Ten Commandments done away?**

The third main proof relates to God's commandments.

God literally spoke the Ten Commandments to ancient Israel (Ex. 20:1) and later wrote them with His own finger on two tables of stone (Ex. 31:18). These Ten Commandments are commonly referred to throughout the Bible as "the commandments."

Christ kept these very same Ten Commandments (John 15:10). That includes the Sabbath command, which is the Fourth Commandment (Ex. 20:8-11).

From I Corinthians 10, especially verses 4 and 9, it is obvious that the God of the Old Testament was the same one who became, through human birth,

the Jesus Christ of the New Testament. Many other scriptures, such as John 1:1-18, also make this clear.

Jesus Christ, the Word (John 1:1-2, 14), had received the Ten Commandments from the Father and then spoke them to Israel at Mt. Sinai. We should expect, then, that the One who spoke the Ten Commandments to Israel (Ex. 20:1) would later, as Jesus Christ, keep these same commandments!

If we ever expect to receive eternal life, we will need to keep the commandments, which include the one about the Sabbath: "So He said to him, 'Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments'" (Matt. 19:17).

If we really know Jesus Christ, we, too, will keep His commandments, including the one about the Sabbath: "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (I John 2:3-4).

These commandments are not some new commandments of "love," but the same commandments of love to God and love to neighbor that were given in the beginning (verse 7). Compare Mark 12:29-31 with Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18.

If we want to express the real Christian love of the Bible instead of a false, pseudoreligious love, John says that we will keep God's commandments. That includes Sabbath observance. John says that these commandments are not grievous or burdensome, contrary to what many claim (I John 5:3).

John also said that the remnant, or those in the last Church era of this age, would keep the commandments, which include the Fourth: "And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring [the Church], who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17). The end-

time true saints of God will still keep the commandments, which includes keeping the Sabbath holy: "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12).

Those in Judea are to pray that

they will not need to flee for safety on the Sabbath during the beginning of the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:20). The Sabbath command will still be in effect!

From all these scriptures, it should be crystal clear that the commandments, including the

proper day of rest and worship, are commanded in the New Testament, just as they were commanded in the Old Testament.

Some may still believe, though, that this proof is nullified by texts that condemn the Sabbath.

There are three texts that some

# Why Do Most Observe

Not because they can prove that they should from the Bible!

"You may read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and you will not find a single line authorizing the sanctification of Sunday. The Scriptures enforce the religious observance of Saturday."

What is the source of that quote? A publication of the Worldwide Church of God? No, it came from Catholic James Cardinal Gibbons in *The Faith of Our Fathers* (1917 ed.).

A Catholic study course states: "If we followed the Bible only, we would keep holy the Saturday . . . Well, did Christ change the day? . . . We have no record that He did . . . The Church . . . transferred the obligation from Saturday to Sunday" (*Father Smith Instructs Jackson*).

The Catholic church makes no secret that it is responsible for replacing Sabbath keeping with Sunday observance.

And the Protestants? At the time of the Reformation they protested against many teachings of the Catholic church. But few protested against Sunday observance. One of those who did was named Carlstadt. So striking were his writings on the subject that Martin Luther admitted in his book *Against the Celestial Prophets*: "Indeed, if Carlstadt were to write further about the Sabbath, Sunday would have to give way, and the Sabbath — that is to say, Saturday — must be kept holy."

But Luther did not want to go to that extent in rocking the ecclesiastical boat of his time. His reasoning, as found in his *Larger Catechism*, was that "to avoid the unnecessary disturbance which an innovation would occasion, it [the day of worship] should continue to be Sunday" (*Shaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, article "Sunday").

Martin Luther did not take issue with Sunday observance. The Protestant reformers as a whole accepted the Catholic position on Sunday. This is the real reason Protestants observe Sunday today!

## When was Sunday substituted?

It did not happen all at once. It was gradual. "For some time it [Sunday] was observed conjointly with the Sabbath, verbal and ritual relics of such observance still remaining in our liturgical books and customs. But as Jewish habits [an admission that the early true Church kept some of the same customs as the Jews] became disused [On whose authority? God's? No, man's!] by the gentile [pagan-influenced] churches, this practice [Sabbath keeping] was generally, though slowly, discontinued" (*Blunt's Dictionary of Doctrinal and Historical Theology*, article "Sunday").

Even while the original apostles were alive it was necessary to warn of "certain men . . . crept in unnoticed" (Jude 4) who were trying to introduce pagan ideas into the Church. Worshiping on the day of the sun was but one of those ideas. Multitudes in the world were being deceived by an expanding counterfeit "Christianity" based on the ancient Babylonian mystery religion.

In the early years of the Church many fraudulent epistles were circulated, masquerading as apostolic letters. Notice how a letter written to gentiles shortly after the turn of the century and attributed to one Ignatius reveals that they, gentiles, were keeping the Sabbath:

"Let us therefore no longer keep the Sabbath after the Jewish manner . . . But let every one of you keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner, rejoicing in meditation on the law, not in relaxation of the body [a deliberate attempt to water down God's

Sabbath law] . . . And after the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day [Sunday] as a festival . . . the queen and chief of all the days of the week."

Both days were being kept, but observance of Sunday was being emphasized by Ignatius.

Not all early Catholics, however, favored Sunday observance. Around 230, Catholic Origen wrote to fellow Catholics of the gentile churches in Egypt:

"But what is the feast of the Sabbath except that of which the apostle speaks, 'There remaineth therefore a Sabbatism' [Hebrews 4:9], that is, the observance of the Sabbath by the people of God? [Notice how this man understood his native Greek tongue!] Leaving the Jewish observances of the Sabbath, let us see how the Sabbath ought to be observed by a Christian. On the Sabbath day all worldly labors ought to be abstained from. If, therefore, you cease from all secular works, and execute nothing worldly, but give yourselves up to spiritual exercises, repairing to church, attending to sacred reading and instruction . . . this is the observance of the Christian Sabbath" (*Origen's Opera*, Book 2, p. 358).

## Council of Laodicea prohibited Sabbath keeping

In 321 the Roman government issued an edict making Sunday a civil day of rest. The paganized, counterfeit "Christian" religion, which was becoming the empire's dominant religion, supported the edict.

Sabbath keepers were forced to flee the confines of the western Roman Empire. Only in the east did Sabbath keepers remain. Eventually, however, Sabbath keeping was to be stamped out of the eastern Roman Empire as well.

About 365 the Council of Laodicea

people believe do just that. We now need to examine them, in context, to see if they really say what some believe they say.

### What are days, months, times and years?

The first commonly misunder-

stood text is Galatians 4:10, AV: "Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years."

Is Paul here condemning the Galatians for observing the Sabbath? Almost everyone thinks so, but we had better make sure what Paul was writing about.

If Paul had in mind the Sabbath and Holy Days commanded in the law, which *months* were commanded? Which *times* were commanded? The fact is that God's law commands no *months* or *times* to be observed!

But the law does have some-

Gregory, Bishop of Nyassa, a representative of the eastern churches, about 10 years after the Council at Laodicea, dared to tell the world: "With what eyes can you behold the Lord's day, when you despise the Sabbath? Do you not perceive that they are sisters, and that in slighting the one, you affront the other?"

### Sunday finally made a rest day

Observance of Sunday as a day of total rest was not strictly enforced for almost two centuries more. We even find Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible, working after the Sunday services sev-

It was the Roman church that sanctioned the Roman Sunday as a rest day, and not merely a secular holiday. It was that church that transferred the law of the Sabbath to Sunday.

Another 600 years passed before the last recorded semblance of public worship on the Sabbath was completely extirpated from the eastern churches.

Meanwhile Pope Gregory of Rome, who reigned from 590 to 604, anathematized "those who taught that it was not lawful to do work on

was called to settle, among other matters, the Sabbath question! One of its most famous canons was the 29th: "Christians must not Judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honoring the Lord's Day, resting then as Christians. But if any shall be found Judaizing, let them be anathema from Christ" (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. XIV, p. 148).



Men, not God or the Bible, sanctioned Sunday observance. Far left, the Council of Nicaea (325), at which the outlines of Catholicism were formulated. Augustine (left) admitted that the Roman church transferred the law of the Sabbath to Sunday.

The force of the Roman state had already been utilized in 325, after the Council of Nicaea, to confiscate the property and to destroy the lives of any who obeyed God's command to keep the Passover. So the heavy hand of the state fell upon any who would be faithful in resting on the Sabbath and worshiping God as commanded in the Bible.

Why give such a command if there were no true Christians observing the Sabbath at that time?

Although Sabbath keeping was absolutely prohibited by this council, yet the whole Greek world still continued to attend church services on the Sabbath and work the remainder of the day! Saturday then was observed much as Sunday is observed now!

Public worship on the Sabbath was far from expelled in the churches of the east even four centuries after Christ.



Pope Gregory (far left) anathematized those who opposed Sabbath work, while Protestant reformer Martin Luther (left) did not take issue with Sunday keeping. Luther stated that Sunday should be observed "to avoid . . . unnecessary disturbance."

eral years following the enactments at Laodicea.

But Augustine, around 400, declared: "The holy doctors of the church [not the Bible, but men] have decreed that all the glory of the Jewish Sabbath is transferred to it [Sunday]. Let us therefore keep the Lord's day as the ancients were commanded to do the Sabbath" (*Sabbath Laws*, p. 284).

the day of the Sabbath" (*History of the Popes*, vol. II, p. 378).

That stamped the Sabbath out of the churches of the British Isles and the Continent where, according to Webster's *Rest Days*, "The Celts kept Saturday as a day of rest, with special religious services on Sunday" (A. Bellesheim, *History of the Catholic Church in Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1887-1890, i, 86).

That's the record of history! — By the Good News staff □