

JOHN 5:17: NEGATION OR CLARIFICATION OF THE SABBATH?*

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The saying of Christ reported in John 5:17, "My Father is working until now (ἔως ἄρτι) and I am working," is regarded by some exegetes as being "probably the key verse of the entire chapter and also one of the major emphases of the Fourth Gospel."¹ F. L. Godet likens it to "a flash of light breaking forth from the inmost depths of the consciousness of Jesus."² The pronouncement represents Christ's defense against the charge of Sabbath-breaking. That John recognized the significance of the utterance is implied by the fact that he introduces it, not with the usual verbal aorist form ἀπεκρίθη, "answered," which he uses over fifty times, but with the exceptional middle voice ἀπεκρίνατο, "answered," employed only here and in vs. 19, and which indicates a close relationship between the agent and the action.³

What did Christ actually mean when he formally defended himself against the accusation of Sabbath-breaking, saying, "My Father is working until now and I am working"? Did he appeal to the "working until now" of his Father to rescind the obligation of Sabbath-keeping both for himself and for his followers such as the healed man? Or, did Christ use the "working until now" of the Father as a model to clarify the nature of the Sabbath rest? To put

*Adapted from a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, Louisiana, Nov. 21, 1978.

¹George A. Turner and Julius R. Mantey, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1964 [?]), p. 138. See also Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford, 1971), p. 244.

²F. L. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 3d ed. (New York, 1886), 1: 461.

³See, e.g., James H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 3d ed. (Edinburgh, 1908), 1: 153; H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York, 1927), p. 157.

it bluntly: Does Christ's statement represent a negation or a clarification of the Sabbath law? The former is the traditional and still prevailing interpretation, while the latter is the view espoused in this article. The investigation into the meaning of Christ's saying will be conducted by utilizing insights provided by linguistic, contextual, theological, and historical data. First, however, it will be useful to summarize several traditional interpretations of the passage.

1. *Traditional Interpretations*

A brief survey of the various interpretive categories that have been utilized to explain this passage may serve to show a rather consistent tendency to interpret Christ's statement as the overthrow of the Sabbath.⁴

Cura Continua

The most ancient and yet-surviving interpretation may be designated as *cura continua*. According to this view, the "working until now" of God represents his constant care for the maintenance of the universe which admits no interruption on the Sabbath. Consequently, if God is not bound to rest on the Sabbath, the same liberty belongs to his Son and indirectly to the recipients of Christ's revelation. The notion of God's working even on the Sabbath, not as creator but as judge and sustainer, was present in rabbinic teachings. Apparently the distinction between the two was made by rabbis to avoid a crude anthropomorphic understanding of God's rest after the six days of labor of creation. R. Phinehas (ca. A.D. 360) quotes R. Oshaya (ca. A.D. 225) as saying: "Although you read: 'Because that in it He rested from all His work which God created to make,' He rested from the work of [creating] His world, but not from the work of the wicked and the work of the righteous, for He works with the former and with the latter."⁵

The early-church fathers utilized the notion of God's uninterrupted care for his creation and creatures, not for the purpose of

⁴As one example, see Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, 2d rev. ed. (London, 1947), p. 267.

⁵*Genesis Rabbah* 11.10.

qualifying the nature of God's Sabbath rest (as did the rabbis), but rather to invalidate its obligation. Christ's saying provided the basis for their apologetic-polemic arguments. Justin Martyr, for instance, justifies the Christian non-observance of the seventh-day Sabbath by the fact that "God directs the government of the universe on this day equally as on all others."⁶ Origen interprets John 5:17 similarly, saying: "He shows by this that during the present age God does not cease on the Sabbath to order the world or to supply human needs, . . . The true Sabbath in which God will rest from all His works will, therefore, be the world to come."⁷

A sharp polemical use of this interpretation is found in the Syriac *Didascalia*:

If God willed that we should be idle one day for six . . . God Himself also with all His creatures [would have remained idle]. But now all the governance of the world is carried on ever continually; . . . For if He would say: "Thou shalt be idle, and thy son and thy servant, and thy maidservant, and thine ass," how does He (continue to) work, causing to generate, and making the winds to blow, and fostering and nourishing us His creatures? . . . But this (the Sabbath) has been set as a type for the times. . . . But the Lord our Saviour, when He was come, fulfilled the types.⁸

John Calvin's is a later example of the *cura continua* interpretation. Commenting on John 5:17, he writes: "In six days,

⁶Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 29, ANF 1: 209; cf. *Dialogue* 23; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 6.16.

⁷Origen, *In Numeros Homiliae* 23.4, GCS 30; cf. *Gospel of Philip* 8.

⁸Syriac *Didascalia* 26, in R. Hugh Connolly, ed. and trans., *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford, 1929), pp. 236, 238 (Latin text on pp. 237, 239). Eusebius explains John 5:17 thus: "We say that He works when He consecrates His attention to sensible realities and when He is engaged exercising His providence on the world. . . . But when He devotes Himself to incorporeal and supraterritorial realities . . . we can say that He takes some rest and accomplishes His Sabbath" (*Commentaria in Psalmos 91*, PG 23: 1168). On the basis of this interpretation, Eusebius argues that believers are to celebrate the Sabbath rest not by interrupting their daily work, but by "consecrating themselves completely to God through the study and contemplation of divine and intelligible realities" (*ibid.*). The paradox of this view is obvious: How can one *freely* consecrate himself to the study and contemplation of God without being *free* from the commitments of the daily work?

therefore, the creation of the world was completed, but the administration of it is still continued and God incessantly *worketh* in maintaining and preserving the order of it."⁹ Therefore Christians, according to Calvin, are to follow "the example of God" not by resting "on the seventh day . . . but by abstaining from the troublesome actions of this world and aspiring to the heavenly rest."¹⁰

This interpretation still enjoys supporters today. Barnabas Lindars, for instance, refers to God's "activity in maintaining the universe (which) continues without intermission. . . . Jesus deduces from this fact, . . . that he has himself a right to override the Sabbath."¹¹ Rudolf Bultmann reaches basically the same conclusion by interpreting the "working until now" as "the constancy of the divine activity" upon which rests the freedom from "the law of the Sabbath," first for Christ and then "indirectly" for the followers. As he puts it: "Just as the revelation-event is not bound to any religious law, so too the reception of the revelation transcends all laws and rules. The healed man must also break the Sabbath."¹² The assessment of this interpretation will be made after other views have been presented.

Creatio Continua

An interpretation of John 5:17 that is closely related to, and somewhat overlaps, that of *cura continua*, may be labeled as *creatio continua*. According to this view, the "working until now" of the Father refers to his incessant *creative* activity which knows no Sabbath rest. Christ would have derived from the example of his Father the abrogation of the commandment to rest for both himself and his followers.

⁹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1959), pp. 196-197.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹¹Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London, 1972), p. 218; Cornelius à Lapidè similarly interprets the "working" of the Father as his "governing and preserving the world, and all the things that are in it" (*The Great Commentary*, trans. Thomas W. Mossman, 3d ed. [Edinburgh, 1908], 1:173 [Catholic Standard Library, vol. 5]).

¹²Bultmann, pp. 246-247.

That God is by his very nature continually active is a Greek philosophical concept already found in Aristotle and reflected in the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo who wrote: "God never ceases to act; but as it is the property of fire to warm and of snow to chill, so it is the property of God to make. . . . He causes to rest that which . . . he is apparently making, but He Himself never ceases making."¹³

This notion of ceaseless divine creation is utilized by Clement of Alexandria, one of the most liberal and syncretistic minds of Christian antiquity. "God's resting," he explains, "is not, then, as some conceive, that God ceased from doing. For, being good, if He should ever cease from doing good, then would He cease from being God, which it is sacrilege even to say."¹⁴ Clement reasons that God's creation is not limited by time, "seeing time was born along with things which exist." Thus, he interprets the expression "when they were created" (Gen 2:4) as intimating "an indefinite and timeless production."¹⁵

Faustus the Manichaean, as reported by Augustine, employs the same concept to explain Christ's saying. Christ told the Jews, says Augustine, "that God always works, and that no day is appointed for the intermission of His pure and unwearied energy, and accordingly He [Christ] Himself had to work incessantly even on Sabbath."¹⁶ Augustine himself uses basically the same interpretive category to unravel the meaning of Christ's words. He challenges the Jewish understanding of God's Sabbath rest at the completion of creation, by appealing to the *effortless* nature of God's working. "He who made all things by the Word, could not

¹³Philo, *Legum Allegoriae* 1.5-6; In *De Cherubim* 87, Philo explains that God's "rest" does not mean that he ceases to do good "since that which is the cause of all things is by nature active and never has any respite from doing the best." In *Legum Allegoriae* 1.16, Philo apparently distinguishes between the creation of mortal things which was completed with the divine Sabbath rest, and the creation of divine things which still continues. Later (ca. A.D. 100-130) Rabbis Gamaliel II, Joshua ben Hananiah, Eleazar ben Azariah, and Aqiba declared that God continues on the Sabbath his creative activity (Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar* 2: 461-462; cf. Bertram, "ἔργον," *TDNT* 2: 639-640).

¹⁴Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 6.16, ANF 2: 513.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 513.

¹⁶Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean* 16.6, NPNF, 1st Series, 4: 221.

be wearied.”¹⁷ Elsewhere Augustine indicates that “God worketh in quiet, and always worketh, and is always in quiet.”¹⁸ Since God’s *modus operandi* (*fiat* creation) presupposes no fatigue or consumption of energy, what is the significance of his Sabbath rest? Says Augustine: “In the Rest of God our rest is signified,” by which he means, not the rest experience of a present Sabbath-keeping, but rather the eschatological rest to be experienced in the seventh and last age.¹⁹ In another discussion, Augustine interprets Christ’s saying as an open declaration “that the sacrament of the Sabbath, even the sign of keeping one day, was given to the Jews for a time, but that the fulfillment of the sacrament had come in Himself.”²⁰ Thus, the fulfillment of the Sabbath rest is for Augustine both eschatological and Christological.²¹

The *creatio continua* interpretation of John 5:17 is defended by several contemporary commentators. J. H. Bernard, for instance, affirms that “the words express the idea (obvious when it is expressed) that God does not keep the Sabbath *ἕως ἄρτι*, that is, *hitherto*. God’s working has not been intermitted since the Creation. . . . The rest of God is for the future.”²² Willy Rordorf similarly argues that “John 5.17 intends to interpret Gen. 2.2f. in the sense that God has never rested from the beginning of creation, that he does not yet rest, but that he will rest at the end.”²³ Therefore, he concludes, “Jesus derives *for himself* the abrogation

¹⁷Augustine, *Sermons on New-Testament Lessons* 75.4, NPNF, 1st Series, 6: 477.

¹⁸Augustine, “Psalm 93,” *On the Psalms* 1, NPNF, 1st Series, 8: 456.

¹⁹Augustine, *Sermons on New-Testament Lessons* 75.4, NPNF, 1st Series, 6: 477.

²⁰Augustine, *On the Gospel According to St. John* 17.5.13, NPNF, 1st Series, 7: 115.

²¹This is clearly enunciated by Augustine in *The City of God* xxii.30, NPNF, 1st Series, 2: 511.

²²J. H. Bernard, *Gospel According to St. John*, ICC 1: 237; similarly J. N. Sanders affirms that “Jesus in effect repudiates any crudely anthropomorphic understanding of God’s rest after His six days labour of creation, the aetiological myth which explained the command to rest from labour on the seventh day” (*A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* [New York, 1968], p. 163).

²³Willy Rordorf, *Sunday. The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 98.

of the commandment to rest on the weekly sabbath from the eschatological interpretation of Gen. 2.2f.”²⁴ Before testing the validity of this interpretation (as well as of the previous one), mention should be made of a third interpretation.

Acta Salutis

Some commentators, ancient as well as modern, have viewed the “working” of the Father and of the Son as *acta salutis*, that is, redemptive activity. Such a concept is not necessarily mutually exclusive with the foregoing ones, however.

One early source outside the pale of orthodox Christianity, the Gnostic tractate known as *The Gospel of Truth*, sets forth the idea as follows:

Even on the Sabbath, he [i.e., Christ] labored for the sheep which he found fallen into the pit. He gave life to the sheep, having brought it up from the pit in order that you might know interiorly—you, the sons of interior knowledge—what is the Sabbath, on which it is not fitting for salvation to be idle, in order that you may speak from the day from above, which has no night. . . .²⁵

The early patristic writer Clement of Alexandria, cited above as an exponent of the *creatio continua* interpretation, alludes also to the redemptive nature of Christ’s “working” when he writes: “For still the Saviour saves, ‘and always works, as He sees the Father.’”²⁶ John Chrysostom (d. A.D. 407) associates the incident of the healing of the blind man recorded in John 9:6, 14, with the divine “working” of John 5:17, regarding both as specific occasions when Christ repeals the Sabbath law “directly.”²⁷

This *acta salutis* interpretation is defended by several modern scholars. H. A. W. Meyer, for instance, sees in Christ’s saying an

²⁴Ibid., p. 100.

²⁵*The Gospel of Truth* 1.32, trans. George W. MacRae, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York, 1977), p. 44.

²⁶Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.1, ANF 2: 302.

²⁷Chrysostom, *The Gospel of St. Matthew*, Homily 39, NPNF, 1st Series, 10: 255: “There are occasions on which He even repeals it [i.e., the Sabbath] directly . . . as when He anoints with the clay the eyes of the blind man; as when He saith, ‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.’”

allusion "to the unresting activity of God for human salvation." For him, Jesus says:

As the *Father* . . . has not ceased from the beginning to work for the world's salvation, but ever works on even to the present moment, so of necessity and right, notwithstanding the law of the Sabbath, does *He* also, *the Son*, who as such . . . cannot in this His activity be subject to the sabbatical law, but is *Lord* of the Sabbath.²⁸

Edwyn Hoskyns similarly maintains that in John 5:17 "the emphasis lies, not on the continuous and unbroken invisible work of God, but on the visible work of the Son of God."²⁹ He concludes that "this work involves, not the violation of the law of the Sabbath, but its complete overthrow and fulfillment."³⁰ Oscar Cullmann discusses extensively and convincingly the Christological nature of the divine "working [ἐργάζεσθαι]." Basing his interpretation on the close nexus between John 5:17 and 9:4, he rightly points out:

. . . it would be contrary to the intention of the Old Testament to wish to interpret the continued work of God in the sense of a *creatio continua*. It is concerned rather with the work of salvation, by which God reveals himself and which continues also after the six days' work and finds its culminating point in the life of Christ on earth.³¹

From this interpretation Cullmann comes to far-reaching (and, as I shall show, unwarranted) conclusions. "Jesus, by his work," he contends, "brings to an end this feast day [i.e., the Sabbath] by

²⁸Heinrich A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Gospel of John* (New York, 1895), p. 178; Godet, p. 462, paraphrases the passage as follows: "Since up to this time the work of salvation has not been consummated, as it will be in the future Sabbath, and consequently my Father works still, I also work."

²⁹Hoskyns, p. 267.

³⁰Ibid. The same view is advocated by Christoph Ernst Luthardt: "All the action of God since the creation, . . . is essentially related only to Christ and his work. Therefore it is of salvation-bringing, a redeeming kind" (*St. John's Gospel* 2 [Edinburgh, 1877]: 101).

³¹Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (London, 1953), pp. 89-90.

fulfilling the ultimate purpose underlying God's institution of this day in the Old Testament."³²

2. *Analysis of Key Expressions in the Passage*

This brief survey of the leading interpretations of John 5:17 has shown the existence of a basic consensus of scholarly opinion on the implication of John 5:17. Though the "working until now" of the Father and Son has been interpreted differently as *cura continua*, *creatio continua*, or *acta salutis*, the exponents of these three views basically agree in regarding this passage as an implicit (if not explicit) annulment of the Sabbath commandment. Does this conclusion reflect the legitimate meaning of the passage or rather subjective assumptions possibly determined by confessional and/or traditional positions? I shall attempt to answer this question and hope to come closer to the significance of Christ's saying and of the implications of John's reporting, by first examining (1) the role of the adverb ἕως ἄρτι, "until now," and (2) the meaning of the verb ἐργάζεται, "is working." Then, in the next section I shall treat the theological implications of the passage.

"Until Now"

Traditionally, as we have seen, the adverb ἕως ἄρτι has been understood as "continually, always." The emphasis has been placed on the *continuous* working of God (whether it be in creation, preservation, or redemption) which allegedly overrides or rescinds the Sabbath law. But does the adverb emphasize the *constancy* or the *culmination* of God's working? In other words, does ἕως ἄρτι suggest that God is *constantly* working without respect to the Sabbath, or does it mean that he is working *until this very hour*—since the first Sabbath and until the conclusion of his work, the final Sabbath? Obviously, the implications of the two renderings are radically different. The former could imply a negation of the

³²Ibid., p. 90; cf. also by the same author "Sabbat und Sonntag nach dem Johannesevangelium." ἕως ἄρτι (Joh. 5, 17)," *In memoriam E. Lohmeyer* (Stuttgart, 1951), p. 131, where he argues that since, according to John 5:17, "the true 'rest' of God is first fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ," the celebration of Sunday in place of the Sabbath does not represent disobedience to the fourth commandment.

Sabbath, while the latter could provide a clarification of the nature of the divine Sabbath rest. It is therefore imperative to determine which is the more accurate meaning of the adverb.

“Ἐως ἄρτι means nothing more nor less than *usque adhuc*, “until now.”³³ This, in fact, is the rendering given by several translators.³⁴ Some rightly use the emphatic form “even until now,”³⁵ since according to the order of words the emphasis is on the adverb and not on the verb. The fact that the emphasis is on the adverb rather than on the verb³⁶ suggests that the *constancy* implied by the verb ἐργάζεται must be subordinated to the *culmination* implied by the adverb ἕως ἄρτι.

If Christ had intended to appeal to the *constancy* of God’s working on the Sabbath to justify its violation, then, as aptly noted by Godet, “He would not have said: until this very hour (ἕως ἄρτι), but *always, continually* (ἀεί).”³⁷ Moreover, as Godet further points out, “In the second member of the sentence, Jesus could not have refrained from either repeating the adverb or substituting for it the word ὁμοίως, *in the same way*.”³⁸ Finally, if the adverb were intended to stress the constancy of God’s working which overrides the Sabbath, this would create an unwarranted ethical dichotomy between the position of God and that of man, since God would disregard the very precept he enjoined upon his creatures.³⁹

³³Parallel usage of this adverbial phrase with the same meaning is found in John 2:10; 16:24; 1 John 2:9.

³⁴See, e.g., Godet, William Temple (*The Interpreter’s Bible*), Calvin, Albert Barnes, Lagrange, W. Robertson Nicoll, Sanders, Luthardt, Barclay, and others *in loco*.

³⁵See, e.g., Turner and Mantey, Cullmann, and Hoskyns *in loco*.

³⁶Godet, p. 461, notes the emphatic position of the adverb, remarking that “according to the position of the words, this adverb of time, and not the verb, has the emphasis.”

³⁷*Ibid.* Meyer, p. 178, defends Godet on this point. See also Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 89, who points out that “the reference to a time when the work ceases ought to be underlined.” Bultmann, though he stresses the *constancy* rather than the *culmination* of God’s working, suggests in a footnote (p. 245, n. 5) that “ἕως ἄρτι . . . in the first place indicates the terminus ad quem.”

³⁸Godet, p. 461.

³⁹This point is well brought out by Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, pp. 89-90.

The adverbial phrase "until now" must then be taken as a reference to the *culmination* of God's activity—the time when God will no longer work, at least not in the same way. This time is envisaged in another pronouncement uttered by Christ on a Sabbath and reported in John 9:4: "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work." In this statement the *culmination* (*terminus ad quem*) of the divine and human "working" is explicitly designated as $\nu\acute{\omicron}\xi$, the "night." By virtue of the conceptual similarity between John 5:17 and 9:4 it seems legitimate to conclude that the "night" is the *terminus ad quem* also for the "until now" of John 5:17.

The conclusion of God's working presupposed by "until now" is apparently viewed as the final and perfect Sabbath rest of which the initial creation Sabbath (*terminus a quo*) was the prototype. A study of the meaning of the divine working clarifies and supports this interpretation.

"Is Working"

We have seen that two historical interpretations of God's working are the *cura continua* and the *creatio continua*. The former apparently reflects the rabbinic concept of God's uninterrupted care for his creatures even on the Sabbath, while the latter is akin to the Philonic understanding of God's continuous creation which knows no interruption on the Sabbath. But do these interpretive categories accurately reflect the Johannine concept of the divine working?

Is the notion of a *creatio continua* present in John's Gospel? Hardly so. John explicitly affirms that God's works of creation "were made" through the "Word" at a time designated as "the beginning" (1:1-3). Both the phrases $\acute{\epsilon}\nu \acute{\alpha}\rho\chi\eta\acute{\iota}$, "in the beginning," and the aorist form of the verb $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\tau\omicron$, "made" or "came into being," indicate with sufficient clarity that the works of creation are viewed as concluded at an indefinite distant past known as "the beginning." Moreover, the fact that in John 5:17 (and throughout the Gospel) the works of the Father are identified with those performed by Christ on earth, suggests that these could not possibly be creative works, since Christ at that moment was not engaged in works of creation. To distinguish between the works of the Father and those of the Son would mean to destroy the absolute unity

between the two, a unity which is emphatically taught in John's Gospel.⁴⁰

What, then, is the "working until now" of the Father? Could it refer to God's *cura continua* for the maintenance of the universe which knows no interruption on the Sabbath? The orthodoxy of such a notion can hardly be disputed, but is this the Johannine understanding of the divine working? In the Gospel of John, the working and works of God are repeatedly and explicitly identified with the saving mission of Christ. John 4:34 says, e.g., that Christ's mission is "to do" and "to complete his [i.e., God's] work." In 6:29 the purpose of "the work of God" is spelled out as being "that you *believe* in him whom he has sent." Again, in 10:37-38 Christ not only claims to be "doing the works of [his] Father" but also urges his listeners to "*believe* the works" (cf. 14:11; 15:24).

The redemptive nature and purpose of the "working until now" of the Father and Son is possibly suggested also by the setting for the healing of the paralytic, namely the pool of Bethesda, which means "Place of Mercy."⁴¹ Any lingering doubt is removed by the strikingly similar episode of the healing of the blind man. Not only is the Father described here as the One "who sent" the Son to do his work, thus implying the missionary character of Christ's activity, but the very healing of the blind man is described as the manifestation of "the works of God" (John 9:3). These indications force the conclusion that the "working until now" of the Father in John 5:17 refers not to a *creatio* or *cura continua*, but rather to *acta salutis*—the works of salvation accomplished by the Father through the Son. "Speaking with qualification," as well expressed by Donatien Mollat, "there is but one 'work of God': that is, the mission of the Son in the world."⁴²

⁴⁰An informative analysis of the existing unity between the works of the Father and of the Son is provided by Mario Veloso, *El Compromiso Cristiano* (Buenos Aires, 1975), pp. 119-120.

⁴¹Joachim Jeremias presents significant archaeological evidence indicating that the reading Βηθεσδά is to be preferred to Βηθζαθά (*Die Wiederentdeckung von Bethesda* [Göttingen, 1949]).

⁴²Donatien Mollat, *Introduction à l'étude de la Christologie de Saint Jean*, mimeographed ed. (Rome, 1970), p. 116. Godet, p. 463, remarks that "the rest in Genesis refers to the work of God in the sphere of nature, while the question here is of the divine work for the salvation of the human race." Luthardt, p. 101, also

3. *Theological Implications of the Passage*

What are the theological implications of the redemptive nature of the Sabbath-working of the Father and of the Son? Does Christ's defense of his Sabbath healing, on the ground of God's works of salvation which continue after the creation Sabbath, imply that, as Paul Jewett suggests, "by his redemptive *work*, Jesus sets aside the Sabbath"?⁴³ Did Christ through his saving ministry, as argued by Cullmann, bring "to an end this feast day [i.e., the Sabbath] by fulfilling the ultimate purpose underlying God's institution of this day in the Old Testament"?⁴⁴ Does the saying "My Father is working until now" imply a movement in redemptive history "from promise to fulfillment," that is to say, from the promise of the OT Sabbath rest to the fulfillment found in the day of the resurrection?⁴⁵ In other words, did the fourth evangelist report Christ's saying, as claimed by Cullmann, to justify on the one hand "the superseding of the Jewish Sabbath by the new conception of the divine rest," and to defend on the other hand the observance of "the *Lord's Day* [i.e., Sunday] of the Christian community"?⁴⁶

To assume that through his Sabbath deed and pronouncement, Christ was announcing (though in a veiled fashion) the end of Sabbath observance which was soon to be replaced by Sunday observance, is to hold the same position as those Jews who accused Christ of Sabbath-breaking (John 5:16, 18; 9:16). But this is the very charge that Christ consistently refused to admit. It must be emphasized that Jesus, in this as well as in all his other Sabbath deeds, never conceded any transgression of the Sabbath, but rather defended the legality of his actions by a theological norm admitted by his opponents. A defense implies not an admission, but a refutation, of the accusation.

perceives the redemptive meaning of God's "working until now" which is to continue until the final Sabbath. "For this work," Luthardt says, "there is no Sabbath either for him or for the Son."

⁴³Paul K. Jewett, *The Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1972), p. 86.

⁴⁴Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 90.

⁴⁵This concept of Cullmann is repropounded and defended by Jewett, p. 86.

⁴⁶Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 91.

To understand the force of Christ's defense in John, one needs to remember that the Sabbath is linked both to the cosmos through Creation (Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:8-11) and to redemption through the Exodus (Deut 5:15). By interrupting all secular activities the Israelite was remembering the Creator-God, and by acting mercifully toward fellow-beings he was imitating the Redeemer-God. This was true not only in the lives of the people who on the Sabbath were to be compassionate toward the lower orders of the society, but particularly in the service of the temple. There on the Sabbath the priests performed many common works which were forbidden for the Israelites. For instance, while on the Sabbath no baking was to be done in the home (Exod 16:23), yet in the temple, bread was baked on that day for the cereal offering of the high priest and apparently also to replace the week-old bread of the presence (1 Sam 21:3-6; Lev 24:8; 1 Chr 9:32).⁴⁷ Moreover, on the Sabbath the sacrificial offerings were augmented by doubling them (Num 28:9,10). According to Matthew, Christ utilized the latter argument to defend the legality of his Sabbath acts as well as those of his disciples, when he said: "Have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless?" (Matt 12:5). Why were the priests "guiltless" though working more intensely on the Sabbath? The answer lies in the redemptive nature of their work which was not proscribed but contemplated by the Torah.⁴⁸ Christ claimed this same prerogative for himself since he is "greater than the temple" (Matt 12:6). As the *True High Priest* Jesus also has the right to intensify on the Sabbath his ministry of salvation on behalf of needy sinners; and what *he* does, his followers, the new priesthood, must do likewise (John 9:4).⁴⁹

⁴⁷For a concise treatment of the various types of work permitted in the temple, see Nathan A. Barack, *A History of the Sabbath* (New York, 1965), pp. 66-69. On the Sabbath baking of the cereal offering cakes of the high priest, see *Sifra, Tzau* (Lev 6:14), *Menahot* 96a, 49a; though 1 Sam 21:6 suggests that the bread of the presence was baked on the Sabbath (since the text says that it was "replaced by hot bread on that day"), the rabbis disagreed on whether such baking overrode the Sabbath (see *Menahot* 11, 9).

⁴⁸The passage is examined in Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome, 1977), pp. 48-55.

⁴⁹Christ finds in the temple and its services a valid frame of reference to explain his Sabbath theology, apparently because their redemptive function best exemplified

On the basis of this theology of the Sabbath admitted by the Jews, Christ defended the legality of his Sabbath saving acts, saying, "My Father is working until now, and I am working" (John 5:17). That is to say, I am engaged on the Sabbath in the same saving activity of the Father, which is perfectly lawful to perform. To avoid misunderstanding, Christ explained the nature of the works of the Father which "the Son does likewise" (5:19). These consist in raising the dead, thus giving life (5:21), and in conducting a saving judgment (5:22-23). For the Jews who were unwilling to accept the Messianic claim of Christ, this justification of performing on the Sabbath the works of salvation of the Father made him guilty on two counts: "He not only broke the Sabbath but also . . . [made] himself equal with God" (5:18).

To silence the echo of the controversy and to further establish the legality of his actions, Christ wisely used the example of circumcision:

You circumcise a man upon the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment (John 7:22-24).⁵⁰

Why was it legitimate to circumcise a child on the Sabbath when the eighth day after his birth (Lev 12:3) fell on that day? No explanation is given, since the practice was well understood. Circumcision was regarded as a redemptive act which mediated the salvation of the covenant.⁵¹ It was lawful, therefore, on the Sabbath to mutilate one of the 248 parts of the human body (that was the

both his Messianic mission and the divinely intended purpose for the Sabbath. On the redemptive meaning and function of the Sabbath, see my treatment in *ibid.*, pp. 17-73.

⁵⁰Most commentators recognize that this passage is related to chap. 5. See, e.g., William Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (Edinburgh, 1955), 1: 252: "Remember this passage is really part of chapter 5 and not chapter 7."

⁵¹On the redemptive meaning of circumcision, see Rudolf Meyer, "περιτέμνω," *TDNT* 6: 75-76.

Jewish reckoning⁵²), in order to save the whole person.⁵³ On the basis of this premise Christ argued that there was no reason to be “angry” with him for restoring on that day the “whole body” (John 7:23).

This argument suggests that for Christ the Sabbath was a day to work for the redemption of the *whole* person. This is borne out also by the fact that on the same day Christ looked for the healed men and having found them, he ministered to their spiritual needs (John 5:14; 9:35-38). His opponents could not perceive the redemptive nature of Christ’s Sabbath ministry because they judged “by appearances” (John 7:24). They regarded the pallet which the paralytic carried on the Sabbath as more important than the physical restoration and social reunification which the object symbolized (John 5:10). They viewed the mixing of clay on the Sabbath of greater import than the restoration of sight to the blind man (John 9:14, 15, 26).

Christ’s intentional infringement of rabbinical regulations was therefore designed not to invalidate the Sabbath precept, but, as stated by M.-J. Lagrange, “to distinguish between that which was contrary and that which was in harmony with the spirit of the Sabbath law.”⁵⁴ Healing a paralyzed man and returning him to his dwelling carrying his bed did not fall under the prohibition of the Mosaic law, rightly understood.⁵⁵ An important theme of the Sabbath is humanitarian consideration for the underprivileged as a response to God’s redemptive activity—his liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage (Deut 5:15).⁵⁶ God ended on the Sabbath his *act*

⁵²Yoma 85b.

⁵³This view was defended by rabbi. Barack, p. 73, writes: “Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah reasoned that since it is permissible to desecrate the Sabbath to perform a circumcision, where only one organ is involved, it should surely be permitted to desecrate the Sabbath for the sake of the entire body (that is, to save a life).”

⁵⁴M.-J. Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Jean*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1925), p. 141.

⁵⁵It is noteworthy that while the Pentateuch bans work on the Sabbath (Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14; Lev 23:3), only in a few instances does it define what constitutes work (Exod 16:29; 34:21; 35:3; Num 15:32-36).

⁵⁶Hans Walter Wolff, “The Day of Rest in the Old Testament,” *CTM* 43 (1972): 502, notes (as he comments on Exod 23:12): “It is indeed moving that the cattle too are cared for. But it is more touching that, of the dependent laborers, the son of the female slave and the alien are especially singled out. For when such persons are

of creation, but not his *action* in general. Because of sin, he "is working until now" to accomplish the salvation of the human race. Christ's act of healing represents a link in the great chain of God's saving acts accomplished here on earth, and consequently it does not contradict but fulfills the spirit of the Sabbath. By linking his healing act to the saving Sabbath activity of the Father, Christ was actually saying to his adversaries: In accusing me, you are really reproaching the Legislator himself, since I only act in harmony with his precepts and example.

Furthermore, if, as proposed by Cullmann, "John reveals a tendency in accounts of all the events of Christ's life to trace the line from the Jesus of history to the Christ of the community and . . . his chief interest is in the connexion with early Christian worship,"⁵⁷ then it appears legitimate to ask whether John does not report the sabbatical saying about God's working in 5:17 (as well as in 9:4) to justify the understanding and practice of the Sabbath-rest of the community as a day to experience God's redemptive working by ministering to the needs of others. Support for this understanding of Sabbath-keeping is provided by several similar sayings of Christ reported by the Synoptics, where the Sabbath is presented as a time "to do good" (Matt 12:12), "to save" (Mark 3:4), "to loose" human beings from physical and spiritual bonds (Luke 13:16-17), and to show "mercy" rather than religiosity (Matt 12:7).⁵⁸

ordered to work, they have no recourse or protection." Cf. Niels-Erik Andreasen, "Festival and Freedom," *Int* 28 (1974): 289.

⁵⁷Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 91; cf. also p. 58.

⁵⁸It seems to me that possible further support would come from the prophet-like-Moses motif noted by a number of recent writers, such as Cullmann, Teeple, Glasson, Bowman, Scobie, Bernard, Brown, Sanders, Michaels, Meeks, and Borgen. A significant paper on this motif was presented by F. Lamar Cribbs, entitled "The 'Prophet-Like-Moses' Import of the Johannine 'Ego Eimi' Sayings" (presented at the annual meeting of the SBL, New Orleans, Louisiana, Nov. 21, 1978).