

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

6-1-1999

Under Fire: A Look at Recent Controversy Over the Sabbath

Samuele Bacchiocchi
Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bacchiocchi, Samuele, "Under Fire: A Look at Recent Controversy Over the Sabbath" (1999). *Faculty Publications*. 3762.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/3762>

This Popular Press is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Under Fire

A look at recent controversy over the Sabbath

BY SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI

FEW BIBLE DOCTRINES HAVE EXPERIENCED the constant cross fire of controversy during Christian history as has the Sabbath. In this century alone more than 1,000 major treatises have been published on the Sabbath/Sunday question, besides a countless number of articles. It might truly be said that *the Sabbath has had no rest*.

In recent times the Sabbath/Sunday controversy has been rekindled by three significant developments: 1. Pope John Paul's pastoral letter *Dies Domini*, released May 31, 1998, in which the Roman pontiff makes a passionate plea for a revival of Sunday observance by appealing to the moral imperative of the Sabbath commandment. 2. Numerous doctoral dissertations and articles written by Catholic and Protestant scholars, arguing for the abrogation of the Sabbath in the New Testament and for the apostolic origin of Sunday. 3. The abandonment of the Sabbath by former Sabbatharians such as the leaders of the Worldwide Church of God and a few former Adventist pastors.

This article focuses specifically on the major arguments used by former Sabbatharians to explain away the continuity and validity of the principle and practice of seventh-day Sabbathkeeping.¹

The Protagonists

Early in 1995 the leaders of the Worldwide Church of God declared the Sabbath to be a Mosaic, old covenant institution given to the Jews, fulfilled by Christ, and consequently no longer binding upon new covenant Christians.

Their abandonment of the Sabbath and other doctrines led to a mass exodus of more than 70,000 members, a near meltdown of the church.

In our own Seventh-day Adventist Church the "New Covenant theology" has been popularized especially by Dale Ratzlaff, a former Adventist who once served as Bible teacher at Monterey Bay Academy and as pastor of two churches in southern California. His 345-page book *Sabbath in Crisis* is the most influential presentation of the "New Covenant" and anti-Sabbatarian theology produced and used by former Sabbatharians.

Ratzlaff actively promotes his anti-Sabbatarian views through radio talk shows and advertisements in local papers (in which he offers his book free). KJSL, a St. Louis radio station, invited me to respond to Ratzlaff's anti-Sabbath arguments during a radio program on June 15, 1998. We had an animated discussion, but the one-hour time limit prevented a thorough discussion of the major issues, and so we agreed to continue the discussion in cyberspace. After I posted 21 essays on the Internet refuting Ratzlaff's major arguments against the continuity and validity of the Sabbath for "New Covenant" Christians, more than 5,000 people signed up for the *Sabbath Discussion list* in just a few weeks. The enormous interest convinced me to expand, edit, and publish these essays in my newly released book *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*.²

The influence of the "New Covenant" theology promoted by Ratzlaff has been felt among Sabbatarian churches, including the Adventist Church. One example is the book *New Covenant Christians*, by Clay Peck, a former Adventist minis-

ter who once pastored the Damascus Seventh-day Adventist Church in Maryland with Richard Fredericks.³ In the introduction to his book, Peck acknowledges his indebtedness to Ratzlaff: “While I have read and researched widely for this study, I have been most challenged and instructed by a book entitled *Sabbath in Crisis*, by Dale Ratzlaff. I have leaned heavily on his research, borrowing a number of concepts and diagrams.”

Another example of “New Covenant” theology is Richard Fredericks, a former pastor of the Damascus Adventist Church, who recently established the (independent) Damascus Road Community Church (DRCC). On February 4, 1999, Fredericks mailed a newsletter to the members of his congregation that charged that “the overall package that is Adventism is fatally flawed, very often cultic and destructive to building a true biblically functioning community.”

At the heart of the debate is Sabbathkeeping, which, for Fredericks, should consist primarily in a daily spiritual experience of salvation rest and not in the physical observance of the seventh day. In his newsletter Fredericks wrote: “At the emotional heart of these discussions for many is the question of the Sabbath. I will attempt to show biblically that our Lord Jesus is the reality of the Sabbath (Col. 2:16, 17), its fulfillment and expansion and the only Source for the true rest of soul that is offered to every genuine Christian (Matt. 11:28-30).”

In view of the fact that the anti-Sabbath arguments presented by Fredericks and Peck are largely drawn from Ratzlaff’s book, I will briefly respond to five major anti-Sabbath arguments as presented by Ratzlaff.

1. That the Sabbath Is Not a Creation Ordinance

Ratzlaff attempts to prove that the Sabbath is not a Creation ordinance for humanity, but a Mosaic institution given to the Jews. His major argument to support this thesis is the absence of an explicit command to observe the seventh day in Genesis 2:2, 3. “There

is no command for mankind to rest in the Genesis account.”⁴ “Nothing is expressly mentioned regarding man in the seventh-day-creation rest.”⁵

This argument ignores five important considerations.

First, Genesis is not a book of commands but of origins. None of the Ten Commandments are ever mentioned in Genesis, yet we know that their principles were known. The book records God saying, for example, “Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws” (Gen. 26:5).^{*} Thus it is evident that Abraham knew God’s commandments and laws, though no reference is made to them in the book of Genesis.

Second, the absence of a command to keep the Sabbath in Genesis may be because of the cosmological function of the seventh day in the Creation story. The divine act of resting on the seventh day is designed to tell us how God felt about His creation. It was “very good.” And to dramatize this fact, twice we are told that He “rested” (Gen. 2:2, 3)—literally, He “stopped.” Why? Simply because there was no need of finishing touches to improve His perfect creation.

Third, the establishment of the Sabbath by a divine example rather than by a divine commandment could well reflect what God wanted the Sabbath to be in a sinless world, namely, a free response to a gracious Creator. By freely choosing to make themselves available for their Creator on the Sabbath, human beings were to experience physical, mental, and spiritual renewal and enrichment. These needs have not been eliminated but heightened by the Fall. Accordingly the moral, universal, and perpetual functions of the Sabbath precept were repeated later in the form of a commandment.

Fourth, the argument that the Sabbath originated at Sinai makes Moses guilty of distorting truth or at least pits him as the victim of gross misunderstanding, since he clearly traced the Sabbath back to Creation. Such a charge, if true, casts serious doubts on the integrity and/or reliabil-

ity of anything else Moses or anyone else wrote in the Bible.

Fifth, the clinching proof of the Creation origin of the Sabbath is the testimony of Jesus Himself. In refuting the charge of Sabbathbreaking leveled against His disciples, Jesus referred to the original purpose of the Sabbath: “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Christ’s choice of words is significant. The verb “made” (*ginomai*) alludes to the original “making” of the Sabbath, and the word “man” (*anthropos*) suggests its human function. Thus to establish the human and universal value of the Sabbath, Christ reverts to its very origin right after the creation of humanity. Why? Because for the Lord, the law of the beginning stands supreme (see Matt. 19:8).

The consistent witness of the Scriptures is that the Sabbath is a Creation ordinance for the benefit of humanity. We have our roots in the Sabbath from Creation to eternity.

2. That Sabbath Terminated at the Cross

The second major anti-Sabbath argument is taken from the aging munition dump of dispensational literature. The stock weapon of their antiquated arsenal is the allegation that the Sabbath is an Old Covenant institution given to the Jews and terminated at the cross. Their strategy is to make the cross the line of demarcation between the Old and New Covenants, law and grace, the Sabbath and Sunday.

To a large extent Ratzlaff repropose this theological construct by arguing that there is a radical distinction between the Old Covenant, which was based on a package of laws, and the New Covenant, which is based on principles of love. He argues that the distinction between “law” and “love” is reflected in the covenant signs. “The entrance sign to the Old Covenant was circumcision, and the continuing, repeatable sign Israel was to ‘remember’ was the Sabbath. . . . The entrance sign of the New Covenant is baptism [and] the remembrance sign [is] the Lord’s Supper.”⁶

The attempt to reduce the Old and New Covenants to two different sets of laws with their own distinctive signs—the latter being simpler and better than the former—is designed to support the contention that the Ten Commandments in general, and the Sabbath in particular, were the essence of the Old Covenant that terminated at the cross.

The problem with this imaginative interpretation is that it is devoid of biblical support, besides incriminating the moral consistency of God's government. Why would Christ need to alter the moral demands that He has revealed in His law? Paul declares that "the [Old Testament] law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12). He took the validity of God's moral law for granted when he stated unequivocally: "We know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8). Christ came not to change the moral requirements of God's Law, but to atone for our transgression against those moral requirements (Rom. 4:25; 5:8, 9; 8:1-3).

It is evident that by being sacrificed as the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7), Christ fulfilled all the sacrificial services and laws that served in Old Testament times to strengthen the faith and nourish the hope of the Messianic redemption to come. But the New Testament makes a clear distinction between the sacrificial laws that Christ by His coming "set aside" (Heb. 7:18), made "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13), "abolishes" (Heb. 10:9), and Sabbathkeeping, which "remains . . . for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9).

The New Covenant consists not in the replacement of the Ten Commandments with simpler and better laws, but in the internalization of God's law. "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God" (Jer. 31:33).

The Decalogue is not merely a list of 10 laws, but primarily 10 principles of love. There is no dichotomy

between law and love, because one cannot exist without the other.

3. That Christ Fulfilled the Sabbath by Becoming Our Salvation "Rest"

Ratzlaff and his supporters contend that Christians no longer need to observe the Sabbath literally by resting physically on the seventh day because the Saviour, to whom the Sabbath rest pointed, has fulfilled its typological function, and offers believers every day the salvation rest typified by the Sabbath. "Thus the new covenant believer is to rejoice in God's rest continually. He does not have to wait until the end of the week."⁷

To defend this thesis, Ratzlaff devotes four chapters (6 to 9) to the Sabbath material of the Gospels. His conclusion is that Christ's provocative method of Sabbathkeeping was designed to show "how Old Covenant law, including Sabbath law, points to *Him*," and not to clarify "appropriate Sabbath behavior or a correct interpretation of Old Covenant Sabbath law."⁸ "Jesus broke the Sinaitic Sabbath, but in doing so He brought in the 'true rest.'⁹

There are four major problems with this popular view defended by Ratzlaff.

First, it misinterprets the meaning of the Sabbath in the Gospels. An objective reading of Christ's provocative manner of Sabbathkeeping reveals that His intent was *not to nullify* but *to clarify* the meaning of the fourth commandment. Repeatedly in the Gospels Christ acts as the supreme interpreter of the law by attacking external obedience and human traditions that often obscured the spirit and intent of God's commandments (see Matt. 5:21, 22, 27, 28; 9:13; 12:7; 23:1-39).

It is noteworthy that in all instances in which Christ or His disciples were accused of Sabbathbreaking, He defended their conduct, often by appealing to the Scriptures ("Have you not read . . ." [Matt. 12:3, 5])—thus showing that their actions were in harmony with the divine intent of the Sabbath. Christ declares the Sabbath to be a day "to do good" (Matt. 12:12), "to save life" (Mark 3:4), to show "mercy" rather than religiosity (Matt.

12:7), and to loose men and women from physical and spiritual bonds (Luke 13:16). Clearly His intent was to clarify and not to nullify the Sabbath.

Second, to contend that the weekly experience of the Sabbath rest and liberation from work was intended only for the Jews to aid them in commemorating Creation and in experiencing the future Messianic redemption to come makes us blind to the fact that Christians need such an aid just as much as the Jews. The difference between the two is simply that while for the Jews the Sabbath rest pointed forward to the redemption rest of the Messiah to come, for the Christians the Sabbath rest points backward to the redemption rest of the Saviour who has come and forward to the final restoration rest that still awaits for the people of God (Heb. 4:9).

Third, to maintain that "New Covenant" Christians observe the Sabbath spiritually as a daily experience of salvation-rest, and not literally as the observance of the seventh day, is to fail to recognize that the spiritual salvation-rest does not negate, but rather presupposes, the physical Sabbath rest. God invites us to cease from our physical work on the Sabbath so that we may enter more fully and freely into His spiritual rest (verse 10). Physical elements, such as the water in baptism, the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, and the physical rest on the Sabbath, are not superfluous. They are designed to help us conceptualize and internalize the spiritual realities they represent.

Fourth, Fredericks' contention (in his newsletter) that literal seventh-day Sabbathkeeping reflects "a cultic, sectarian," and legalistic mentality that "distorts the gospel of Christ and the authority of Scripture" ignores the fact that a correct biblical understanding and experience of the Sabbath can be a most powerful antidote against legalism and sectarianism. Why? Because the Sabbath teaches us *not to work* for our salvation (legalism), but to *cease* from all our works, in order, as Calvin so well expresses it, "to allow God to work in us."¹⁰

To rest on the Sabbath is to give priority to God in our thinking and living. We allow the omnipotent grace of God to work more fully and freely in our lives. Indeed, properly understood and observed, the Sabbath epitomizes the gospel, the good news of God's invitation to cease from our works in order to enter into His rest (verse 10).

In the light of the cross, the Sabbath memorializes not only God's creative accomplishments but also His redemptive accomplishments for humankind. And through the physical act of resting on the Sabbath we conceptualize, internalize, and appropriate the reality of salvation rest. We celebrate God's creative and redemptive love.

4. That Paul Teaches the Abrogation of the Law

Ratzlaff and Sundaykeeping Christians in general allege that Paul teaches the abrogation of the Old Testament law in general and of the Sabbath in particular. Throughout his book *Sabbath in Crisis* Ratzlaff repeatedly makes categorical affirmations regarding Paul's alleged abrogation of the law.

These categorical statements reflect the prevailing gross misunderstanding of Paul's teachings regarding the place of the law in the Christian life. Fortunately, an increasing number of scholars are recognizing this problem and addressing it. For example, in his article "St. Paul and the Law," published in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, C.E.B. Cranfield writes as follows: "The need exists today for a thorough re-examination of the place and significance of Law in the Bible."¹¹ He goes on to note that "recent writings reflect a serious degree of muddled thinking and unexamined assumptions with regard to the attitudes of Jesus and St. Paul to the Law."¹²

I share Cranfield's conviction that shoddy biblical scholarship has contributed to the prevailing misconception that Christians are released from the observance of the law. This prevailing misconception is negated by a great number of Pauline passages that uphold the law as a standard for Christian con-

duct. When the apostle Paul poses the question "Do we then overthrow the law?" (Rom. 3:31), his answer is unequivocal: "By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (verse 31). This and similar statements should warn us that, as Walter C. Kaiser, a respected evangelical scholar, puts it, "any solution that quickly runs the law out of town certainly cannot look to the Scripture for any kind of comfort or support."¹³

The function of Christ's redemptive mission was not to abrogate the law, as many Christians mistakenly believe,

The argument that the Sabbath originated at Sinai makes Moses guilty of distorting truth.

but to enable believers to live out the principles of God's law in their lives. Paul affirms that in Christ, God has done what the law by itself could not do, namely, He empowers believers to live according to the "just requirements of the law" (Rom. 8:3, 4).

An understanding of the different circumstances that occasioned Paul's discussion of the law is essential for resolving the apparent contradiction between the positive and negative statements he makes about the law. For example, in Ephesians 2:15 Paul speaks of the law as having been abolished by Christ, while in Romans 3:31 he explains that justification by faith in Jesus Christ does not overthrow the law, but establishes it. In Romans 7:6 he states that "now we are discharged from the law," while a few verses later he writes that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (verse 12). In Romans 3:28 he maintains that "a man is justified by

faith apart from works of law," yet in 1 Corinthians 7:19 he states that "neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God."

How can Paul view the law as both abolished (Eph. 2:15) and established (Rom. 3:31), unnecessary (Rom. 3:28) and necessary (1 Cor. 7:19; Eph. 6:2, 3; 1 Tim. 1:8-10)? The resolution to this apparent contradiction is to be found in the different contexts in which Paul speaks of the law. When he speaks of the law in the context of salvation (justification, right standing before God), especially in his polemic with Judaizers, he clearly affirms that law-keeping is of no avail (Rom. 3:20). On the other hand, when Paul speaks of the law in the context of Christian conduct (sanctification, right living before God), especially in dealing with antinomians, then he upholds the value and validity of God's law (Rom. 7:12; 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 7:19).

In summation, Paul does not criticize the moral value of the law—that is, the law as a guide to Christian conduct. But he does criticize the soteriological understanding of the law—that is, the law as an instrument of salvation. Failure to make this distinction has led many to conclude fallaciously that Paul rejects the value and validity of the law as a whole.

5. That Paul Teaches the Abrogation of the Sabbath

The fifth and most popular weapon used to attack the Sabbath is the following three Pauline texts: Colossians 2:14-17, Galatians 4:8-11, and Romans 14:4, 5. On the basis of these texts Ratzlaff and many other Christians conclude that Paul regarded the Sabbath as part of the Old Covenant that was nailed to the cross. Ratzlaff goes so far as to say that, according to Paul, "the observance of the Sabbath by Christians seriously undermines the finished work of Christ."¹⁴ "In every instance in the epistles [of Paul] where there is teaching about the Sabbath, that teaching suggests that the Sabbath either undermines the

Christian's standing in Christ, or is nonessential." ¹⁵ Ratzlaff holds that "the continued observance of the Sabbath by Christians runs from unimportant—probably for the believing Jew—to a dangerous undermining of one's standing in Christ—for the believing Gentile." ¹⁶

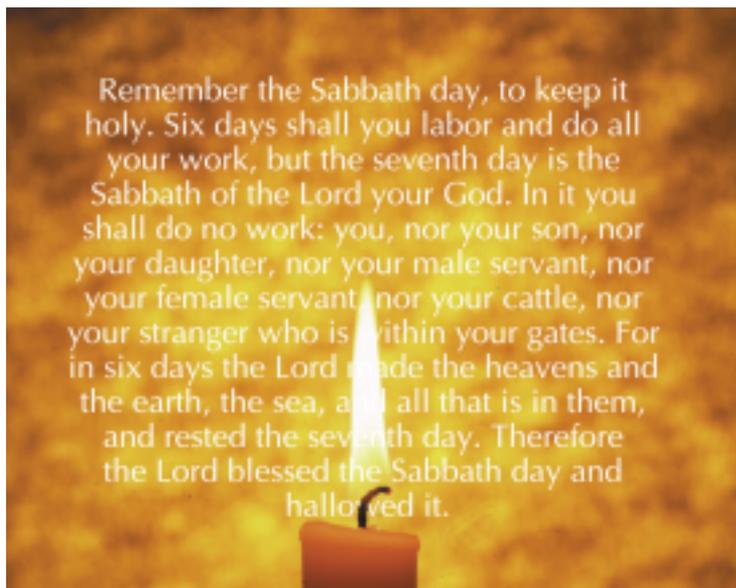
Did Paul really find Sabbathkeeping so dangerous? One wonders in what way the act of stopping our work on the Sabbath to allow our Saviour to work in our

lives more fully and freely could "seriously undermine the finished work of Christ." There are three fundamental problems with Ratzlaff's interpretation of these three texts (Col. 2:14-16; Rom. 14:5; Gal. 4:10).

First, his failure to recognize that none of these passages deal with the validity or invalidity of the Sabbath commandment per se. Instead they deal with ascetic and cultic practices that undermined (especially in Colossians and Galatians) the vital principle of justification by faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, in the crucial passage of Colossians 2:16, Paul is warning the Colossians against those who judged them on "questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath." This warning is not a condemnation of the five mentioned practices as such, but of the authority of false teachers to legislate on the manner of their observance.

Third, Paul's tolerance with respect to diet and days (Rom. 14:3-6) indicates that he would not have promoted the abandonment of the Sabbath and the adoption of Sunday observance instead. Had he done so, he would have encountered endless disputes with some of the Jerusalem leaders, as he had with regard to circumcision. The absence of any echo of such controversy is perhaps the most telling evidence of Paul's respect for



Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you 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.

the institution of the Sabbath.

In the final analysis, Paul's attitude toward the Sabbath must be determined not on the basis of his denunciation of heretical and superstitious observances that may have influenced Sabbathkeeping, but rather on the basis of his overall attitude toward the law.

Conclusion

The Sabbath has been under the constant cross fire of controversy throughout Christian history, undoubtedly because it summons people to offer to God not just lip service, but the service of their total being by consecrating the 24 hours of the seventh day to God. It's not surprising that the Sabbath has come under renewed attacks today, when most people want holidays to seek for pleasure and profit, but not a holy day to seek for the presence of the peace of God in their lives.

The renewed attacks against the Sabbath coming from different quarters, including former Sabbatarians, are victimizing not the day itself, but people for whom the day was made. The Sabbath is not in crisis, because it is a divine institution, and God is never in crisis. What is in crisis is our tension-filled, restless society, which needs more than ever before the physical, mental, and spiritual renewal the Sabbath is designed to provide.

The Sabbath provides the basis for a faith that embraces and unites creation,

redemption, and final restoration; the past, the present, and the future; humanity, nature, and God; this world and the world to come. It is a faith that recognizes God's dominion over the whole creation and human life by consecrating to Him the seventh day; a faith that fulfills the believer's true destiny in time and eternity; a faith that allows the Saviour to enrich our lives with a larger measure of His presence, peace, and rest. ■

* Unless noted otherwise, Bible texts are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.

¹ An in-depth analysis of these arguments is found in my newly released book: *The Sabbath Under Crossfire: A Biblical Analysis of Recent Sabbath/Sunday Developments*. (Book published by the author.—Editors.)

² See note 1.

³ Currently Peck serves as senior pastor of the newly established (non-Seventh-day Adventist) Grace Place Congregation in Berthoud, Colorado.

⁴ Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Crisis. Transfer/Modification? Reformation/Continuation? Fulfillment/Transformation?* (Applegate, Calif.: 1990), p. 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 182, 183, 185.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: 1972), Vol. II, p. 339.

¹¹ C.E.B. Cranfield, "St. Paul and the Law," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (March 1964): 43, 44.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹³ Walter C. Kaiser, "The Law as God's Gracious Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness," in *Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian* (Grand Rapids: 1993), p. 178.

¹⁴ Ratzlaff, p. 174.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 173, 174.

Samuele Bacchiocchi is a professor of theology at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

