February 20, 2015

Dear Friends,

What do we do when an eloquent and influential person writes something we believe contradicts the Bible? Feel intimidated? Shrug our shoulders and walk away? Get angry and rude? Or do we respectfully engage?

That was the question that faced Australian Adventists recently when the Australian Bible Society ran a piece in its influential newspaper questioning Sabbath observance. Rather than let it slide by, I submitted a response that was published this month.

How well does the Seventh-day Adventist perspective stack up against thoughtful and insightful critiques?

Why not read the two pieces for yourself and decide?


May God bless you,

James
I read Michael Jensen’s beautifully written piece on the Sabbath with interest. He refers to the Sabbath as a foreshadowing of Christ. In this he is only half right. The Jews had two different kinds of Sabbaths: Weekly Sabbaths and annual Sabbaths. The failure to make the distinction is the basis of much confusion.

The weekly Sabbath was instituted by God at creation (Genesis 2:2 & 3). It was then confirmed in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8). Jesus clarified how to keep the Sabbath (Mark 3:4) and early Christians followed His example of Sabbath celebrations (Acts 16:13). The weekly Sabbath does not foreshadow Christ’s coming, but rather was instituted explicitly to commemorate God’s creative power. Listen to the words of the Fourth Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy…” Why? “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exodus 20:8-11). The weekly Sabbath harkens back to creation, not forward.

So how is Michael partly right? Because there were also annual Sabbaths that were part of the Jewish ceremonial cycle, some of which pointed forward to Christ’s coming (see, e.g., Leviticus 23:7 & 8).

The reason Christians like Eric Liddell, whose courage was captured in Chariots of Fire, refused to work on Sabbath was that they correctly viewed the weekly Sabbath command as relevant to Christians today, just as the other commands found in the Ten Commandments are (e.g. the command to honour parents, refrain from stealing, lying or killing, etc.). They did not believe they were saved by keeping those commandments, but believed keeping those commandments is a natural reaction of receiving Christ’s grace (see Roman 6:1&2).

The passages Michael quotes about confusion over which days to keep, refers to the annual Sabbaths, not the weekly Sabbath (Romans 14:5-6). How can we know that with confidence? Context. For Jews to abandon weekly Sabbath keeping would have created an enormous controversy in the early church. It would have dwarfed the well-documented controversy over circumcision – a controversy that is referred to extensively in Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians. And yet there are only a couple of ambiguous passages that are pointed to as evidence of the abandonment of the Sabbath – one of the Ten Commandments. The cited evidence doesn’t hold water.

Not only is there a compelling lack of evidence that the Sabbath was abandoned in the New Testament, there is a compelling body of
evidence that the Sabbath was retained. The book of Acts, which tells the story of the Christian church after Christ’s return to Heaven, mentions the Sabbath explicitly nine times. In every single instance, it is clear that it is referring to the same weekly Sabbath as followers of God kept from creation. And these Christian Sabbath celebrations were not limited to synagogues. For example, early Christians met together on a river bank one Sabbath (Acts 16:13).

Why does this all matter?

First, Michael correctly laments our collective loss of a weekly rest. As Christians have turned away from Eric Liddell-style Sabbath observance, they have lost something very precious: time to connect with God, with families and with our community. In the rush towards a 24/7 world, we are “rich and have need of nothing” but have lost our families, our mental health, and our faith in the process. While celebrating Sabbath on any given day of the week may sound good, how are families and church communities meant to connect if everyone is off on a different day? God knew human beings need a coordinated break when we can fellowship together. That may be one of the reasons He gave us the Sabbath.

But it isn’t just what the Sabbath gives us; it is what it says about our hearts. “If you love me,” said Jesus, “keep my commandments.” (John 14:15). The question of the Sabbath is all about love.

The Sabbath isn’t a burden for me or my family: it is far and away the best day of the week. We don’t keep the Sabbath to earn God’s grace; we keep it because we have God’s grace. And it is a fabulous blessing. Why not give it a try? Turn off the TV Friday night, drop your work and study, your bill paying or home improvement projects. And just spend 24 hours in communion with God, your family, your church community, God’s creation and your friends. By sunset on Saturday, you’ll feel like a new person. And, I suspect, you’ll understand why Jesus said the Sabbath was made for us (Mark 2:27). Why not accept His gift?