
The Sabbath: Brinsmead's Polemic

reviewed by Desmond Ford

R. D. Brinsmead, "Sabbatarianism Re-examined,"
Verdict, vol. 4, no. 4, June 1981.

Robert Brinsmead has placed the whole Adventist world in his debt by his emphasis on righteousness by faith. Perhaps more than any other figure, he has been responsible for challenging accepted legalistic concepts of salvation in our community. His recent book, *Judged by the Gospel*, though marked by unnecessary asperity, should nonetheless cause gratitude because of its exposure of doctrinal aberrations in traditional Adventism. One does not have to agree with all his conclusions (as this reviewer does) to acknowledge the necessity of his critique.

Now, the issue of *Verdict* containing his book-length article "Sabbatarianism Re-examined" with its rejection of the Seventh-day Sabbath as a Christian obligation. First, we should say that as a people we have been guilty of treating the Sabbath as we have the gospel — we have turned it into an instrument of legalism too often, and this

failing Robert Brinsmead criticizes. When he affirms that we have frequently mistaken the form for the substance, he is correct.

There are other excellent features in the article. It rightly reminds us that the New Testament does not so much issue rules as point to Christ, affirming faith and love in the Savior as the chief motivation for conduct. Furthermore, it correctly asserts that a literalistic reading of the Ten Commandments can be a very poor guide for Christian behavior.

Besides areas of agreement, I must also indicate areas where I disagree with "Sabbatarianism Re-Examined." Because of space limitation, the following will of necessity seem staccato and laconic. The reader may refer to my recently published book, *The Forgotten Day*, for further details.

Robert Brinsmead's polemic against the fourth commandment makes many assumptions not only beyond the evidence but often contrary to it. Following are examples only.

1. *The Epistles, not the Gospels, always have the last theological word.* (p. 6)

This is a half-truth. Some esoteric references in the gospels are subject to clearer explana-

Desmond Ford has taught theology at Avondale College and Pacific Union College. A graduate of Manchester University and author of *Daniel*, he is employed by Good News Unlimited.

tions in the letters, and the great truth of the atonement finds its fullest explanation in the writings of Paul. On the other hand, it should be remembered that for the most part the gospels were written later than the epistles and are just as theological, as every scholar knows. Furthermore, it is *Jesus*, not Paul (and Brinsmead by the epistles really means those of Paul), who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus is the light of the World. The great commission is to teach believers all that Jesus commanded, not Paul. The blood of the covenant at Calvary ratified the teachings of Jesus, not those of Paul (Gal. 3:15).

Paul acknowledged this priority of the words of Jesus (I Cor. 3:11; 7:10). One chapter in eight in the gospels refers to the Sabbath and always positively, and this *after* the circulation of the supposed texts which declare the commandment abolished!

Brinsmead quotes John 16:12, 13 — the Spirit will, Jesus says, teaching more than he has been able to tell — perhaps momentarily forgetting that this promise began to be fulfilled at Pentecost, at least thirty years before the first gospel was written. The gospels are the product of the Spirit of Pentecost. And the one written particularly for the cosmopolitan gentile world (Luke) has the most references to the Sabbath — with never a syllable against it.

2. *Sabbath-keeping in the first century was subsumed under circumcision, and the rejection of circumcision (Acts 15) automatically embraced release from the fourth commandment also (p. 12).*

Abundant historical evidence exists that large numbers of Gentiles in the first century kept the Sabbath but were never circumcised. (See Acts 13:42, 44; 15:21; F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, pp. 216, 301, 64; and the well-known comments to this effect by Philo and Josephus.) Even in Old Testament times Gentiles could keep the Sabbath without circumcision, but not offer sacrifices in the regular way, or keep the Passover, etc. (See Ex. 20:8-11; Isa. 56:1-7, and compare Ex. 12:44, 48.)

3. *Silence in the Epistles on Sabbath-keeping signifies Sabbath was not kept by Gentiles (p. 12).*

Often silence means something is taken for granted and not a subject of dispute. Thus for at least six hundred years after the entrance

into Canaan, we do not have a single reference to the Sabbath, and in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon not even an allusion except as a heading for one psalm — and this despite the frequent lists of sins in both Proverbs and Psalms. Nor do we find anywhere in John's gospel a command to baptize or keep the Lord's supper. Nor any warning against making graven images.

4. *We have a fairly accurate account as to why Christians were persecuted in the Roman world (p. 13). Sabbath-keeping is not among them.*

This is just not true. We have practically nothing from the first century as to the reasons involved. Cannibalism is the one fantastic charge that has come down to us.

5. *Slaves would not have been able to keep the Sabbath (p. 13).*

In my book *The Forgotten Day* I have pointed out that while slaves of unbelievers did become Christians, there are no grounds for thinking that this was a large group. Many slaves worshipped as did their masters, and many had Christian masters. Other slaves were granted freedom of religion, particularly if in a position of trust.

6. *The "days" mentioned in Gal. 4:10 really mean the Sabbath Day (p. 18ff).*

The word "sabbath" was a common one. Why did Paul not use it here if he intended it? The context speaks of observances reminiscent of previous pagan bondage to superstitions. Nowhere does Scripture refer to true Sabbath-observances in this way. A recent commentator, John Bligh, says the reason the Sabbath is not here mentioned is that Paul had no wish to condemn a current practice in this regard. It is quite wrong to parallel this list of times with the Jewish yearly, monthly, weekly holy times. The text is referring to various days, months (not just the new moon day), seasons and years — all in the plural. There is no evidence that the sabbatical or jubilee years were kept in the first century in Galatia. Undoubtedly a perverted Judaism was a large part of the trouble in Galatia, but to conclude that this alone can be the basis for an exegesis of Galatians 4:9-10 is to err.

7. *Romans 14:5, 6, says that all days are of equal value (p. 30ff).*

The commandments of God are certainly not in view in this passage. It is the *adiaphora*

(matters indifferent) which Paul discusses. Verses 1-6, 21 indicate that some were abstaining from certain types of food and drink on specific days. But Judaism used the Sabbath as a feast day, not a time of fasting. Nothing in the Pentateuch prohibited the use of wine. The expression "every day" in Exodus 16:4 is used for the week days with the Sabbath excluded.

8. *Colossians 2:14-15 obviously excludes all necessity for keeping the Sabbath (p. 25ff).*

Observe that this book never uses the word for "law," though it appears over 70 times in Romans. Neither does it use "commandment," with reference to anything from Sinai. What it does speak about is "philosophy," "angel-worship," and "ordinances" made by cultic heretics forbidding the use of food and drink on holy days (see verses 8, 14,

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18, 21, 22). The heretics claimed all these precepts of theirs about food and drink on holy days were "shadows" of a great reality, but Paul refuses to grant their right to judge men by such superstitious human inventions. Contrary to Brinsmead's view, the "eating and drinking" of Colossians 2:16 has nothing to do with the Jewish offerings linked with holy times in Ezekiel 45:17. The Greek form prohibits any such interpretation as does the context. And as certainly as Paul's dictum does not rule out all eating and drinking, neither does it rule out all Sabbathkeeping. (See the commentaries by Lohse, H. C. G. Moule, Francis, R. Martin and all recent discussions on the incipient Gnosticism at Colosse). As this is the only negative Sabbath text out of approximately 150 references in the entire Bible, one should remember that "in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established."

9. *Because the Jewish Torah no longer is the guardian of believers, the commandments are not binding (p. 19).*

Barth, Bultman, Conzelmann, Ridderbos, Ladd, Schrenk, etc., all agree that the New Testament regards the Decalogue as still binding. This has been the position of the evangelical Christian church in all ages. (See Carl Henry's *Christian Personal Ethics*, pp. 269, 272ff, 315, 336ff.)

10. *The historical elements in the Decalogue show it was never intended for Christians (p. 40f).*

The same principle would wipe out the Sermon on the Mount (there are no pagan Roman soldiers around for whom we should go the second mile), the epistles (written to ancient local communities), and indeed the whole New Testament, including its Great Commission which was given to a group of Jews. But see Ephesians 6:1-3, and also observe how Jesus could apply to Himself what was said to the people of the Exodus one-and-a-half millennia ago (see Matt. 4:4). The Jews were only "stewards" of God's revelation (Rom. 9:3, 3:2).

11. *The fact that the Sabbath points to rest of spirit through faith in Christ means the ordinance is not necessary (p. 57).*

One might as well say that if one is feeding on the merits of Christ's broken body and spilled blood, there is no necessity to keep the Lord's supper, or that if by faith in the death and resurrection of Christ the believer has become one with Christ, there is no need to be baptized. The fourth commandment shows that man is to follow the example of Christ who worked and then rested. Work and rest are both implicit in the commandment, and it is nonsense to say that they are no longer necessary. Hebrews 4:9 says the fulfillment of the Sabbath awaits the world to come.

12. *Love, not law, should guide the Christian (p. 64).*

This erroneous assumption is hoary with age but not venerable. Even when man was made with love inscribed on his heart, he needed the guidance of the specific commandments found in Genesis 1 and 2. Law tests so-called love, for the latter offers motivation rather than content for action. The New Testament invokes particular precepts to guide believers (see Rom. 12 and 13). The vast majority of Christian scholars in all centuries have summarily rejected this false thesis. (See C. Hen-

ry's *Christian Personal Ethics*.)

13. *The Decalogue is not distinguished from the rest of the Mosaic code, but moral and ceremonial laws are ever intertwined (p. 42f).*

This another half-truth. In places the eternal and the temporary are joined, but not in their original revelation or in the teachings of Jesus or Paul. The old covenant was ratified over the moral law. *Then* came the directions for building the tabernacle and the sacrificial system was given. Jesus foretold the fall of the Temple and the passing away of the significance of holy places (Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, John 4:21). Since sacrifice could only be offered at the Temple, His words foretell the abolition of the whole system. But the same Christ spoke of "the commandment of God" with the utmost reverence in every reference thereto. (See Mark 7:8, 9; Matt. 19:9, 17-19; Matt. 5:17-45; Matt. 12:12; and compare 1 Cor. 7:19; Rom. 13:9; James 2:10-12; 1 John 5:2, 3.)

The Commandments only name the obvious violation of the principle at stake in each, but include all lesser violations as made clear in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus also taught that every negative implies a positive and vice versa (see Luke 6:9). The first commandment of the Decalogue includes all the rest, and it will guide the Christian in giving God His true place in all matters.

Having listed the chief assumptions of the book which to some are unacceptable, may I offer a few final comments?

1. The case fails to deal adequately with the main sections of the New Testament which discuss the Sabbath. (See Matt. 12:1-12; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; 23:56; John 5:1-19.) Christ worked seven miracles on the Sabbath in His attempt to reform the burdensome observance of the Pharisees. Moreover, His polemic on behalf of the Sabbath embraces more phases of argument from more sources than He ever invoked in any other area. Not one syllable He uttered downgraded the fourth commandment or suggested its coming demise. He affirms the Sabbath to have been made at the beginning as God's gift to mankind, and claims to be its interpreter and protector (see

Mark 2:27, 28).

In a more recent statement Brinsmead has attempted to deal with this neglected area, but his case is no better than his original one. He completely misses the point that the summation of our Lord's case is that both He and His disciples were "guiltless" about the Sabbath, and that as the holy institution was intended for man's benefit, all acts of mercy, necessity, or piety are in harmony with the fourth commandment (see Matt. 12:7, 12). Neither has Brinsmead considered the fact that the massive Sabbath content of the four gospels implies that towards the end of the first century the apostles considered such instruction vital for Christians. They wrote it up in such a way as to show that Christ's Sabbath reformation was partly responsible for His crucifixion (see Mark 3:6).

2. The evidence of Scripture is that the fourth commandment has been used by God as a test of His professed people from the very beginning. Note that the first use of the term "Sabbath" is linked with God's use of the day as a test. (See Ex. 16:4, 23, 28 and cf. Jer. 17:23-27, Eze. 20:12, 13, 16, 20, 21, 24; Isa. 56:1-7; 58:13, 14; Neh. 13:15-22 and the references from the gospels named above which depict the Sabbath issue as a chief precipitant of the cross.)

3. Church history shows that the church dies proportionately to its neglect of the fourth commandment. This is the verdict of Calvin, Ryle, Schaff, Fairbairn and others.

4. Despite whatever arguments casuistry may invent from the New Testament against the fourth commandment, literally scores of historical statements from the first five centuries testify to the widespread observance of the Sabbath (as well as Sunday from the second century) for many generations. The church knew nothing about its abolition.

5. All mystical statements about Christ's fulfilling the Sabbath for us, thereby making observance of the day unnecessary, are as fulsome as the thought that His refraining from adultery makes our abstinence outmoded. Christ worked, rested, and worshipped in harmony with the sabbatical cycle. Should we also do so? So long as these are necessities, the seventh-day Sabbath is obligatory.