
Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Sabbath—According to the Gospel of John

by James J. C. Cox

Some Adventists, over the past decade, have given up on the Adventist doctrine and practice of the Sabbath. As we listen to them defend their decisions, we hear them propound, in one form or another, the following arguments:

“We believe, with most Adventists, that the central elements of the faith and practice of the New Testament church remain normative for the continuing church, including the 20th century church. Among those central elements, we include the early church's views of God and man, sin and salvation, second advent and mission, its practice of Baptism and its celebration of the Lord's Supper. We do not, however, include the Adventist doctrine and practice of the Sabbath.”

“Why?”

“Well, we believe, like most Adventists, that Paul's letters represent the most mature thinking of the New Testament church on Christian faith and practice.” However, unlike most Adventists, we believe that those letters reflect and propose a view of the law, ‘sabbaths,’ and ‘days’ that disallows the Adventist doctrine and practice of the Sabbath.”¹

In this essay, we support their claim that the central elements of the faith and practice of the

New Testament church remain normative for the Christian community, including the 20th century church. But we challenge two of their basic arguments. First, the argument that Paul's letters contain the most mature thinking of the New Testament church on Christian faith and practice. Second, the argument that the Pauline point of view disallows the Adventist doctrine and practice of the Sabbath.

We could challenge those arguments from the perspectives of the faith and practice of the early church as reflected in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (often called the Synoptic Gospels), and the Acts of the Apostles.² However, in this essay, we will do so from the perspective of the faith and practice of the first-century church as mirrored in the Gospel of John.

We will argue that the Christian communities of Syria, Asia Minor, and Europe, at the end of the first century, C.E.,³ were regularly practicing the central Christian sacraments—participating in Baptism, sharing in the Lord's Supper, and observing the Sabbath. They apparently had no questions about whether Christians should or should not practice those rites. They did, however, have some questions about their meaning, significance, and *Christian* practice. That is as true of the Sabbath as it is of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

It is not clear what Paul meant by his reflections on the law *vis-a-vis* the Sabbath and his remarks

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about “days” and “sabbaths” in his letters to the Christian communities scattered from Syria to Europe. What is clear is that those same congregations, some 35 to 40 years later, did not understand Paul to mean that the Sabbath had been discontinued as a Christian rite. Nearly a half-century after Paul wrote and published his letters, those very congregations were still observing the Sabbath, as well as Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as central sacramental elements in their Christian faith, practice, worship, and mission.

Consequently, we conclude if ex-Adventists and Adventists are right in their contention that that which was central and normative for the faith and practice of the first-century church remains central and normative for the continuing church, then Adventists are right in concluding that the practice of the Sabbath, as well as the practice of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, remain central and normative for *Christian* faith and practice in the 20th century church.

Relevant Characteristics of John’s Gospel

Before examining specific texts and passages, we need to mention three relevant characteristics of John’s Gospel.

First, the Gospel of John both mirrors and augments a later and more mature stage in the early church’s thinking about its faith and practice than do the letters of Paul.⁴

The letters of Paul reflect the faith, practices and concerns of Christian communities scattered along the northern rim of the Mediterranean, from Antioch to Rome, during the *central third* of the first century, C.E. The writings of John, on the other hand, mirror the faith, practice, and concerns of Christian congregations settled along the same westward-oriented missionary trails during the *last third* of that century.⁵

Consequently, when we ask historical questions, as we do in this essay, the literatures of the early Christian communities on which we plan to

draw for our answers must be consciously arranged according to the historical periods they actually represent—first, the Pauline letters, written in and representing the *central third*, and then, the Johannine documents, written in and representing the *last third* of the first century, C.E.

The stories, drawn from the life of Jesus, and told by John, are intentionally shaped so as to lead the reader to the conclusion that he who spoke such wise words was the Messiah.

If we wish to know and understand the faith, practice, mission, and concerns of the church in the *last third* of the first century, we must turn to the literature of that period. For the purposes of this essay, that means the writings of John, in particular, the Gospel of John. The literature of the previous period, the *central third*, the letters of Paul, may only be used legitimately to contribute perspective—not to control, in any way, either the historical questions or their answers.⁶

It follows that we may not take the Pauline letters as the last word on the thinking of the New Testament church about its faith, practice and mission. What Paul proposed, in his letters, about the meaning and significance of faith and practice he set forth in dialogue with the congregations to whom and for whom he wrote. It both reflected and instructed their faith, their practice, their mission, and their concerns. We may not, however, legitimately use his letters to assess the faith, practice, mission, and concerns of those and other congregations of a later time. To do that, we must turn to the writings of that later period, in this instance, the writings of John, in particular, the Gospel of John.

Second, the Gospel of John, like the Synoptic Gospels and the letters of the New Testament, was written in dialogue with the communities to which it was first addressed. It, like them, both reflects and contributes to the thinking and the practice of those communities.

From the answers given in the gospels, as in the letters, it is possible to identify the questions of the communities to which they were first addressed and, thereby, to identify the thinking and concerns of those communities.

We are therefore able, from the answers John provides, to recover the questions his congregations were asking about Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Sabbath. By identifying those questions, we can also identify both their thinking and their concerns about those rites.

Third, the stories, drawn from the life of Jesus, and told by John are intentionally shaped so as to lead the reader steadily to the conclusion that he who spoke such wise "words" and wrought such remarkable "works" was the promised Messiah.⁷

John tells those stories with the intention of developing the more profound aspects of his doctrine of Christ in relation to the more consequential dimensions of Christian faith and practice; particularly those that pertain to the heart of Christian worship—the practice of participating in Baptism, sharing in the Lord's Supper and observing the Sabbath.⁸

Baptism: John 3

Many scholars agree that although John does not record any command to baptize converts, as does Matthew,⁹ he does have a profound interest in Baptism and its significance. In passages such as the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, they would argue, John treats both the inner meaning and the more profound implications of Baptism.¹⁰

Furthermore, this and other passages in the gospel reflect the continuing practice of Baptism in the communities to which John addressed his Gospel. The intention of the passage is to authenticate that practice and to emphasize its Christian significance by drawing on the words and attitudes of Jesus.¹¹

Most scholars would see this brought to focus in the words, "Let me assure you, unless one is

born again, one cannot even comprehend God's kingdom," and "Let me assure you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, one cannot become a citizen of God's kingdom."¹²

When we seek the purpose of John's thumbnail sketch of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, some obvious questions come immediately to mind. Why does John choose this particular portion of what must have originally been a much longer and more complex dialogue? What is he trying to say to his intended readers by this specific focus? What questions, posed by the Christians of his time, is he attempting to answer?

It is obvious that John wants his readers to focus on the central expression of the dialogue—"to be born again"—and, especially, on Jesus' explanation of its deeper meaning—"to be born of water and the Spirit." That explanation would remind them at once of the sacrament of Baptism.

John's contemporary readers were not asking, "Shall we, or shall we not, practice Baptism?" Rather, they were asking, "Given that we practice Baptism, what is its importance? Other religious groups practice initiatory ablutions. What is so important about our practice? What is its real significance—its *Christian* significance?"

John uses the words of Jesus to convey his answers. Baptism is a significant act. "Unless one is born again, one cannot even comprehend God's kingdom, let alone become its citizen." It is not only a symbolic act—an initiation by water. It is also a sacramental act—an incorporation by the Spirit. "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, one cannot become a citizen of God's kingdom." And it is backed by the authority of the Messiah. "Let me assure you, . . . You must be born again."

The Lord's Supper: John 6

Similarly, many scholars agree that although John does not record the story of the institution of the Lord's Supper, as do the other three Gospel writers,¹³ he is intensely interested in its practice, meaning, and significance. In passages such as the sermon based on

the account of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 on the eastern shore of the sea of Galilee, John treats both the unique intentions and deeper ramifications of the Lord's Supper.¹⁴

Furthermore, this and other passages reflect the regular practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper among the congregations for whom the gospel was written. One of the purposes of the passage was to authenticate that practice and to highlight its Christian significance by drawing on the words and intentions of Jesus.¹⁵

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 leads directly to the long sacramental discourse on the "bread of life." There Jesus claims to be the "Bread of Life," an appellation he equates with the messianic title, "Son of Man." And Jesus also claims to be the "Bread of the Lord's Supper," a notion he equates with the sacramental expression, "flesh and blood."

In the following passage, he develops these claims:

I am the Bread of Life. Your fathers ate manna in the desert, yet they died. This is the Bread that has come down from heaven. One may eat of it and not die. I am the living Bread that has come down from heaven. If one eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. . . . Let me assure you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have [eternal] life in you. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of him, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the Bread that has come down from heaven. Our forefathers ate [manna] and died, but he who eats this Bread will live forever.¹⁶

When we ask about the function of this particular portion of the speech, several questions call for attention. What is its specific purpose? What questions, posed by his readers, is John attempting to answer by it? What role do the words of Jesus play?

It is obvious that John wants his readers to give special attention to the central expression, "flesh and blood," a phrase that would immediately remind them of the elements ("bread and wine")

of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

When we enquire into the interests and concerns of John's readers, it becomes transparent that their implied question is certainly not, "Shall we, or shall we not, continue to celebrate the Lord's Supper?" It is rather, "Given that we regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper, what is its special value? Other religious groups have their communal meals. What is so special about ours? What is its real significance—its *Christian* significance?"

The words of Jesus once again become the means by which John communicates his response. The Lord's Supper is a necessary rite. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have [eternal] life." It is not only a communal meal—a participation in, and celebration of, the life of the community. It is also a sacramental meal—a participation in, and celebration of, the life of the Messiah. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him." And it is backed by the authority of the Messiah. "Let me assure you, . . . He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."

Even more explicitly and extensively than with Baptism and the Lord's Supper, John shows a profound interest in the meaning of the Sabbath and its significance. In passages such as the story of the healing of the Bethesda cripple (John 5), the dialogue about circumcision and healing (John 7), and the account of the healing of the man born blind (John 9), he treats both the inner meaning and deeper implications of the Sabbath.

The Healing of the Bethesda Cripple on the Sabbath: John 5

The story of the healing of the man crippled for 38 years leads directly to the charge of the "Jews"¹⁷ that Jesus, in healing this man *on the Sabbath*, was breaking the Sabbath.¹⁸

Jesus' response ("My Father continues his work—right up to this very moment. And I work

alongside him”) was tantamount to his saying, “If God the Father, doesn’t break the Sabbath by carrying on his compassionate and redemptive work on the Sabbath, as you allow in your interpretations of the Torah, then surely I, his Son, by the same logic, am not guilty of breaking the Sabbath by carrying on the same work as his rep-

The teachings and practices of Jesus suggest that compassionate service is an essential part of *Christian Sabbath* observance. Indeed, it *distinguishes* the *Christian Sabbath*.

resentative. I may have transgressed some of your many halakic regulations designed to protect the Sabbath, but I have not broken the Sabbath command, nor have I desecrated the Sabbath.”¹⁹

When we ask about the purpose of John’s telling this story, several questions present themselves. What is the focus of the story? What is John trying to say through it? What questions, raised by his potential readers, is he addressing?

There can be little doubt that John wants to say something about the Sabbath that will be an encouragement to the congregations he addresses. He goes out of his way to tell us that this healing occurred on a Sabbath, and to inform us that that very fact became the catalyst that caused the Jews to “persecute” Jesus.

The Jewish opponents of the Christian church were attacking the congregations to which John was addressing his Gospel. They were charging those congregations with desecrating the Sabbath by their compassionate deeds for the downtrodden and poverty-ridden, the incapacitated, and the incarcerated. Those were all deeds, they were insisting, that could wait until the Sabbath had passed.

The members of those congregations were asking, “Is that so? Are we, in fact, breaking the Sabbath by such acts of mercy? Or, is the Christian keeping of the Sabbath different?”

In response, John tells this story to inform his

readers that such deeds are both permissible and essential on the Sabbath—the Christian Sabbath. Let me tell you, John is saying, for Jesus and for us contemporary Christians, compassionate service is an essential element of *Christian Sabbath* observance.

It is important to note that the passage intimates that John’s readers were observing the Sabbath and that their implied questions did not even hint at whether Christians should or should not keep the Sabbath. Rather, their implicit questions suggested that they were anxious to know, given the charges of the Jews, what was proper *Christian* service on the Sabbath.

John’s response, like that of the authors of the Synoptic gospels,²⁰ was that the teachings and practices of Jesus suggest that compassionate service is an essential part of *Christian Sabbath* observance. Indeed, it is compassionate service that distinguishes the *Christian Sabbath*.

Circumcision, and Healing on the Sabbath: John 7

Most scholars agree that the dialogue about circumcision and healing in chapter seven continues the issue raised by the story of the healing of the Bethesda cripple in chapter five. Jesus’ remark, “I wrought one miracle, and you are all astonished,” is an immediate reference to it.²¹

If so—and we agree with them—then we have an additional defense of compassionate service on the Sabbath and thus supplementary evidence of the attitudes of both the Jews and John’s readers towards the Sabbath.

Once again, note that this is in response to implied questions about proper *Christian* observance of the Sabbath—not to questions about whether the Sabbath should or should not be observed by Christians.

John calls attention to Jesus’ use of a typical Rabbinic argument—a *qal wahomer* (or a *minori ad maius*, from the lesser to the greater) argu-

ment—to make his point. It proposes that that which is true (or legitimate) in a lesser case must be even more so (or more legitimate) in a greater case. “Thus,” so Jesus argues, “if you don’t break the Sabbath command when you care for the hygiene and health of a *baby boy* by circumcising him on the Sabbath (which your halakic regulations allow),²² then surely I don’t break the Sabbath command when I care for the hygiene and health of a *grown man* by healing him on the Sabbath.”

John claims, indirectly, that the essence of observing the *Christian Sabbath* is compassionate service. That has behind it both the authority and the example of the Messiah.

For John, Jesus’ concluding remark is as appropriate for the Jews who are condemning his readers for their works of compassion on the Sabbath as it was for the Jews who laid their charges against Jesus: “Stop making superficial judgments.”²³

The Healing of the Man Born Blind on the Sabbath: John 9

Comparable to the story of the healing of the Bethesda cripple is the story of the healing of the man born blind. Once more John goes out of his way to remind us that this compassionate act occurred on a Sabbath.²⁴

The story proceeds from the healing itself to the charge, laid by the Jews, that Jesus had desecrated the Sabbath by healing the blind man on the Sabbath.²⁵ That was surely a work that could have waited 24 hours!

Jesus’ implied answer is, “I may have transgressed several of your halakic regulations for the proper use of the Sabbath, but I have not trans-

gressed the Sabbath commandment, nor have I desecrated the Sabbath.”

And again, for the Christian communities to which he was ministering and for the Jews who were condemning them, John claims, indirectly, that the essence of observing the *Christian Sabbath* is compassionate service. That has behind it both the authority and the example of the Messiah.

If our presuppositions, methods, and logic are sound, several conclusions follow.

First, the Christian communities of Syria, Asia Minor, and Europe, at the end of the first century, C.E., were regularly practicing the central Christian sacraments—participating in Baptism, sharing in the Lord’s Supper, and observing the Sabbath.²⁶ They apparently had no questions about whether they should or should not practice those rites. They were, however, exploring their meaning, significance, and Christian practice. That is as true of the Sabbath as it is of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Second, whatever Paul meant by his discussion of faith and works in his letters to the churches in Galatia and Italy,²⁷ by his reference to “sabbaths” in his letter to the community at Colosse,²⁸ and by his remarks about “days” in his epistle to the Christian groups in Rome,²⁹ the Christian congregations scattered throughout Syria, Asia Minor, and Europe did not understand him to mean thereby that the Sabbath had been discontinued as a Christian rite. Some 35 to 40 years after Paul wrote and published his letters, those very congregations were still observing the Sabbath, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, as central elements in their *Christian* faith, practice, worship, and mission.

Third, if ex-Adventists and Adventists are right in their contention that that which was central and normative for the faith and practice of the first century church remains central and normative for the continuing church, then Adventists are right in concluding that the practice of observing the Sabbath, as well as participating in Baptism and sharing in the Lord’s Supper, remains central and normative for Christian faith and practice in the 20th century church.

 NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. We have tried to state fairly the position of our ex-Adventist friends. If we have failed, please forgive and inform us.

2. See the previous essay by our respected colleague, Herold Weiss.

3. C.E. is an abbreviation for Common Era. It is equivalent to A.D. (Anno Domini, "in the year of the Lord"). We use C.E., along with many scholars, out of respect for our readers whose commitment is to a religion other than Christianity.

4. Most New Testament scholars date the Pauline letters between the very late forties and the very early sixties of the first century, C.E. We concur. And most date the Johannine writings in the nineties. So do we. We are aware that some would date the Gospel of John in the seventies. We are not yet persuaded by their arguments. However, even if we were to concede their earlier dating, our basic conclusions would not change.

5. See our remarks on the dating of these literatures in footnote 4 above.

6. To ask historical questions of the first-century church and then naively set out the literature of that church, from which the answers will be sought, in the sequence, first, the writings of John, then, the letters of Paul, is to stand history on its head. That seems to be so obvious, it hardly needs stating. However, the many essays which naively assume that the Fourth Gospel only reflects the thinking of Jesus and his immediate disciples in the *first third* of the first century, and that the more developed thought of the early church is to be found mirrored in the letters of Paul, penned in the *central third* of that century, demand that we state it.

For a recent example of standing history on its head, as described here, see D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Investigation*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1982).

7. John 20:30, 31. All quotations from the New Testament are translated directly from the Greek by the author.

8. This is particularly the case in the passages treated in this essay: John 3:1-15; 5:1-18; 6:48-58; 7:21-24; 9:1-34. Each story becomes the ground for the reporting of the relevant sayings and speeches of Jesus which lead the reader into a more refined understanding of the doctrine of

Christ—who Jesus was and is—and, logically, into a more penetrating understanding of his authority with respect to the central elements of Christian belief and worship, practice, and mission.

9. Matthew 28:18-20

10. John 3:1-15. See R. E. Brown, "The Eucharist and Baptism" in *Catholic College Teachers of Religion Annual*, 8 (1962), pp. 14-33.

11. Ibid.

12. John 3:3, 5. The clause we have translated, "let me assure you," is a solemn formula used, particularly in the Gospel of John, to give special emphasis and authority to the saying which it introduces. All quotations from the New Testament are translated directly from the Greek text by the present author.

13. See Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:15-20.

14. John 6:48-58. See R. E. Brown.

15. See R. E. Brown.

16. John 6:48-58.

17. In the Gospel of John, the "Jews" are those Jews who oppose and persecute Jesus and his followers. They are, at the same time, counterparts of the diaspora Jews who oppose and persecute John's readers.

18. John 5:1-18.

19. John 5:17.

20. Compare, for example, Matthew 12:1-8; 9-14.

21. John 7:21-24.

22. See Mishnah, Nedarim, 3:11: "R. Jose says, 'Great is circumcision since it overrides the stringent Sabbath.' "

23. See John 7:24.

24. John 9:14. Cf. John 5:9.

25. See John 9:16.

26. On the Sabbath as a sacrament and on the profound relationship within this trinity of sacraments, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Sabbath, see R. Branson, "Festival of Fellowship," Roy Branson, ed., *Festival of the Sabbath*, (Takoma Park, MD: Association of Adventist Forums, 1985), pp. 75-77.

27. See his letters to the Galatians and to the Romans.

28. See Colossians 2:16,17.

29. See Romans 14:5-8.