

# New Testament Sabbaths

*By Herold Weiss*

**W**hen Martin Luther found himself defending his understanding of the gospel before the ecclesiastical authorities of his day, part of the problem was that the two sides were working with diametrically different views of the nature of the Scriptures.

According to the traditionalists, the Scriptures are by nature opaque, and therefore difficult to read. It is easy for the laity to go astray in its interpretation. It is necessary, therefore, for the church to guide the laity in the reading of the Scriptures in order to prevent the rise of misguided and flatly erroneous interpretations.

Luther, to the contrary, maintained that the Scriptures are diaphanous, and therefore easy to read. Their meaning is not hidden. The Bible is transparent, and any lay person inspired by the Spirit that inspired the authors of the Scriptures may, without any ecclesiastical guidance, attain to the true understanding of the gospel.

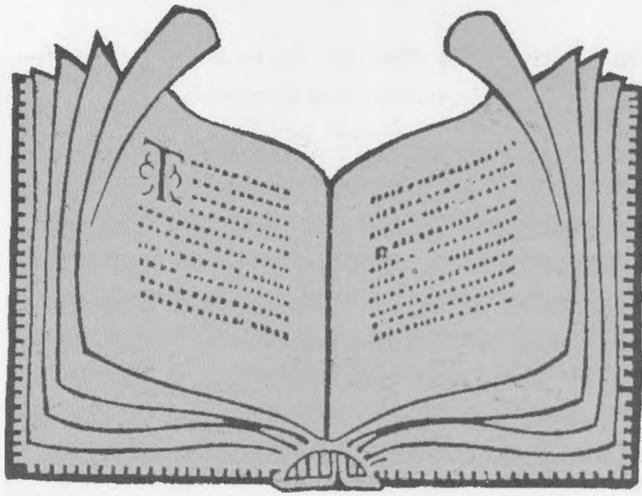
Five hundred years after Luther, some

of us are convinced that declaring the Bible a transparent document from which one may obtain proof texts is more likely to lead to the proliferation of denominations than to a serious wrestling with the meaning of the Scriptures and the message of the gospel. We have come to terms with the indispensable agency of the authors of the Bible.

To pretend that the gospel arrived in a pristine, perfectly sanitized, pure form, untouched by any human agency is to negate the evidence. Each social unit makes sense of its life within the confines of its own symbolic universe. Its cultural artifacts lack transcendence.

It is not irrelevant to debate whether translations of the Bible for the Eskimos





should render "Lamb of God" as "Seal of God." The Eskimos have no word for lamb since the species is not part of their world. The role of lambs in the Near East is played by seals in the Eskimo's world.

What is to be given priority, the need to make the gospel accessible to the Eskimos, or the need to be faithful to the letter of the text? For some, to make seals carry the burden of meaning accorded to sheep in the text is to detract authority from the text and to open the door to relativism, the deadliest of all theological sins.

Well, the fact is that we live in a sinful world and relativity, as Einstein taught us, is in its very structure. Those who claim to escape relativity pretend not to have their feet on planet earth. But, of course, they do. Whether we like it or not, we live in the postmodern world, and its cultural trademark is to have looked relativity in the face.

Some react in panic and fight it, much to their own discomfort. Others of us see in it something that needs to be taken into account. To recognize that the biblical authors wore colored glasses that imprinted particular tonalities to their accounts is not to minimize their authority or to set ourselves as superior to them.

Rather, it is to prevent a short circuit in the hermeneutical circle. It is to recognize the roles played by the writers of Scripture and the symbolic universes within which they lived. To leave them out of the picture is a trick played by those who wish to usurp for themselves the power of the text.

The gospel in its first expression was presented in a distinctive cultural dress. Within the culture in which it was written, a text may very well have been transparent, but it was not pristine. It was delivered by human agents who could only understand the gospel within their own symbolic universe.

Knowledge is possible only within the cultural context of the social group that determines the mean-

ing of the language. Language is a cultural tool. Within a given culture, the symbolic universe integrates the cultural signs into a coherent system of meanings. Therefore, the study of the Scriptures calls for a cross-cultural reading.

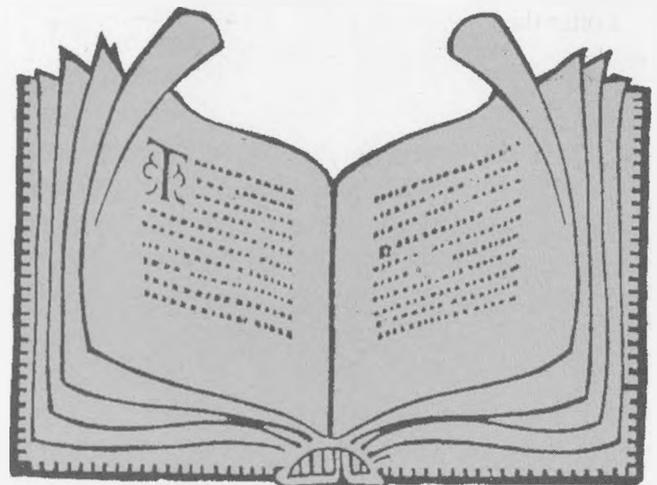
The first Christian disciples who experienced the Risen Christ as a living Lord gave expression to their experience and testified to their faith within their own particular symbolic universe. The New Testament does not witness to the gospel in a homogenized, sterilized, transparent vacuum, but in the language of Christians who lived in different symbolic universes that remain rather opaque to us.

This means that from the very beginning the way in which they began to make sense of the presence of a Living Jesus among them was different, conditioned by the symbolic universe that enabled them to make sense of their daily living. Thus, these days we are again involved in a debate as to whether the Scriptures are transparent or opaque.

At issue now is not the role of the Church in determining the meaning of Scripture, but the role of the culture in which the Scriptures were written.

Early Christian views on the Sabbath illustrate the argument made above. Working with an apocalyptic symbolic universe, some Christians saw in the Sabbath a barometer of piety. Other Christians, working with a Hellenistic symbolic universe, saw the Sabbath as the tangible manifestation of their hope.

When we look at the references to the Sabbath in the Synoptic Gospels we see that they involve controversies about what can lawfully be done on the Sabbath. In them, we find Jesus being accused of having done something that according to the reli-



gious authorities of the day was not permissible.

In these stories everyone agrees that the observance of the Sabbath commandment is essential. Those who wish to observe it, however, still have to decide *how* to observe it. The commandment says, "In it thou shall not do any work." But the Law does not specify what "work" is.

The Jews were at the time actively involved in defining what work is and, therefore, what is not permissible. Many Christians also got caught in the task of defining work in order to observe the Sabbath properly. This way of being concerned with the Sabbath considers it a commandment that forbids work.

If one is an apocalypticist who expects the final judgment to take place any time soon, one would be particularly concerned with being able to stand at the judgment. Within an apocalyptic outlook, the Law plays a prominent role.

Thus, the nearness of the judgment only serves to intensify the demands of the Law. The Synoptic Gospels, which explicitly connect the Parousia to the destruction of the Temple, are very concerned to show that Jesus exemplified Sabbath observance for those who will enjoy life in the Kingdom.

The most important saying of Jesus in these Gospels is the statement found only in Mark 1:27: "The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath." Traditionally, this statement has been interpreted to argue that Jesus is liberalizing Sabbath observance by pointing out that keeping the Sabbath should not be burdensome. The focus is on the welfare of human beings.

Another reading of the text is also probable. The Sabbath is not a peculiar blessing for the Jews, as most Jews at the time claimed. Here Jesus is saying that the Sabbath has been given to all humanity, not just the Jews. All those who wish to stand approved at the Judgment, including Gentiles, must observe the Sabbath.

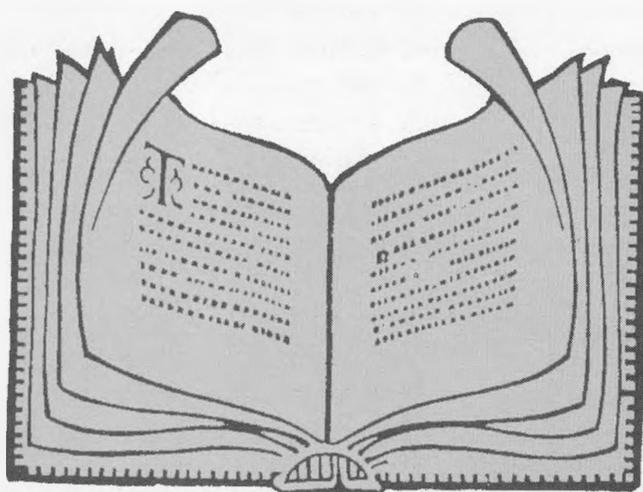
I offer this other reading not as a superior alternative, but as complimentary. Apocalypticism has a universalistic outlook and highlights the necessity of obedience. Thus, in the Synoptic Gospels, which are highly apocalyptic, the proper observance of the Sabbath by all human beings is demonstrated by Jesus' words and example.

It is somewhat disconcerting that in the epistles of the New Testament, the word *Sabbath* appears only in the epistle to the Colossians. Clearly, the reference is polemical. The author of the epistle is engaged in defending Sabbath observance against other Christians who consider it unnecessary.

The passage says, "Therefore, let no one judge

you on account of what you eat or drink, or in reference to festivals, new moons or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to be, but let them judge the body of Christ [on account of what you eat or drink, or in reference to festivals, new moons or Sabbaths]" (2:17). Here the disagreement is not about which activities are permissible on the Sabbath, but whether it should be kept at all.

The letter makes clear, however, that all the participants in the debate are concerned with perfection. It is, therefore, surprising to find no references to the Law. This tells us that we are in a different symbolic universe. The author of the letter carefully points out



that the Sabbath is not a law from the past but a prophetic anticipation of the future. The Sabbath proclaims the reality of something that is not being experienced.

While using the traditional calendric string "festivals, new moons and Sabbaths," the author of Colossians is giving to the observance of the Jewish festal calendar a new Christian point of reference. These festal days are shadows of things to be. Of course, the whole letter to the Colossians is permeated with references to the future manifestation of the saints in glory, and the core of the gospel is defined as "Christ in you the hope of glory" (1:27).

The author is preserving the traditional piety of Judaism by giving it a new point of reference. The Sabbath is a foretaste of future glory. The symbolic universe of the letter to the Colossians, it must be noted, is one that also universalizes salvation, but sees



the Risen Christ as the bodily fullness of divinity. As the "first born of the dead," he has brought peace to the universe and integrated all things into a whole.

At the cross, the cosmic body of Christ was made perfect, just as circumcision perfects the body of human males. In his body, creation has been reconstituted. There is a new world order where peace and love reign, and where in the future the saints will live in glory. The Sabbath is the present shadow visible on this earth of the cosmic reality that will be manifested soon. The author says: "your life is now hid with

which Christ is to be understood, and the Law plays no role in this debate. Rather than seeing the significance of Christ in the words and example he gave while on earth, at Colossae Christ is recognized as the One whose risen body integrates the whole universe bringing peace.

In other words, the cosmic conflict between good and evil is over. The principalities, powers, thrones, and dominions of the air have been reconciled in him (1:20). He is already the head of all rule and authority (2:10).

The dualistic cosmos of apocalypticism does not belong here. Those living on this earth should not be

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Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (3:3b-4).

Here the Sabbath is seen within a symbolic universe where the cross of Christ has already achieved peace. All the principalities, powers, lords, and dominions of the cosmos have been integrated into the body of the Crucified and Risen Christ. He is the Head of the cosmic Pleroma and, at the same time, the totality of all things in the universe.

In anticipation of the appearance of this Divine Head, the Firstborn of the Dead, Christians keep the Sabbath as an affirmation that their salvation has been accomplished. Their perfection does not take place by means of law observance, but by their participation in the perfected body of the crucified.

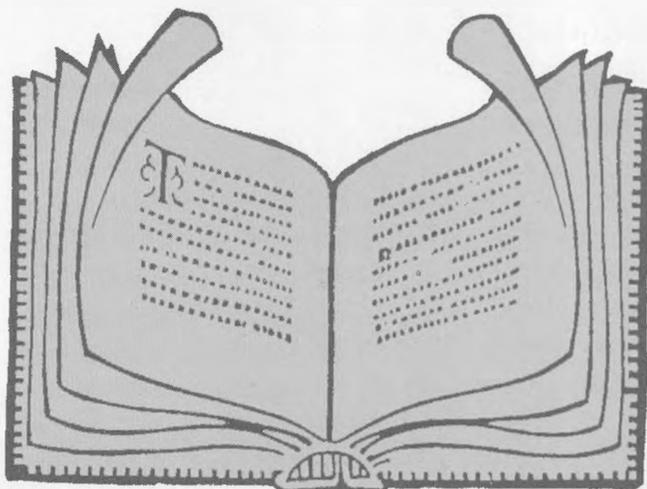
The arguments for and against Sabbath observance among the Christians at Colossae resonate within a symbolic universe primarily concerned with the way in

spending their energies in ascetic practices. Rather, they must make sure they are mystically integrated into the cosmic body of the crucified and risen Christ. Observance of the Sabbath anticipates the glory of the life to come just as a shadow anticipates the arrival of the body that projects it (2:17).

By means of these two rather sketchy outlines of understandings of the Sabbath among the early Christians I wish to make two points. One is that early Christianity was not a unified movement where everyone agreed on how to understand the significance of "the things that had been accomplished among them," to paraphrase the author of Luke-Acts.

The other point is that the Bible is not transparent. It is essential to identify the cultural matrix in which the different books were written if one is to make sense. Early Christianity was not made of one piece of cloth woven in heaven. The New Testament witnesses to significant variations in the way early Christians made sense of the Christ event.

These variations testify to the power and the limits of cultural artifacts, and argue for the legitimacy of our own efforts to find ways to foster cross-cultural dialogues with the Gospel. We may learn from the witnesses in the New Testament that there is more than one way to significantly observe the Sabbath within our own culturally conditioned symbolic universes.



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