

The General Conference Session, Delegates, and Theology

BY ÁNGEL MANUEL RODRÍGUEZ

As the General Conference Session approaches, it may be important to think for a moment about its contribution to our understanding of the nature of the church and its theological role. In fact, the Session itself is an important ecclesiological expression and, therefore, it needs to be theologically analyzed and interpreted. This is an area of Adventist ecclesiology that needs a little more attention. Any attempt to define the General Conference Session simply as a global *business* meeting misses its very nature in a drastic and even threatening way. Let me share with you some thoughts about the ecclesiological function of the General Conference Session.

1. Expressing the Catholicity of the Church

The word “catholic” comes from the Greek *katholikos*, and it means “general,” “universal.” By “catholicity” I mean the universal nature and multifaceted expression of the church as the body of Christ. During a General Conference Session, the “catholic” nature of the church, understood by Adventists as the end-time remnant gathered from “every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev 14:6), becomes visible in the gathering and activities of the delegates. The inclusive nature of this ecclesiological remnant manifests itself in the cultural and ethnic diversity of the delegates. What the church is in its global dimension is now

embodied in the gathering of its representatives at the Session. They come together not to represent the interest of the local expression of the church, but to stand by what is best for the global church as the body of the Christ. Therefore the catholicity of the church should transcend the geographical and potentially narrow concerns of the delegates without necessarily ignoring them.

2. Expressing the Apostolicity of the Church

By “apostolicity” I mean the nonnegotiable commitment of the church to the totality of the Scripture as the standard of faith and practice. The church is apostolic as long as it takes as its ground of faith what is recorded in the Old Testament, in the teachings of Jesus, and in its apostolic expression in the New Testament. During the General Conference Session the church models and demonstrates through the decisional processes and the pastoral, doctrinal and theological discussions the supremacy of the Scripture in the life of the global community of faith. In other words, the centrality of the Bible in the different local expressions of the church around the world becomes particularly visible during the Session. On such occasions, the Scripture becomes the norm that determines all elements of doctrine and faith, and its principles are used to define and establish policies and to configure global

missiological activities. In order for the centrality of the Scripture to rule, it is necessary for the delegates to be well versed in the Scripture and be open to the illuminating influence and work of the Spirit. Only then can the Spirit formulate a biblically-based consensus among the faithful ones as they deal with difficult and, at times, complex issues.

3. Expressing the Authority of the Church

The authority that Christ gave to His church as a community of believers is diffused
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GC Session Logo: Tanya Holland

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EDITORIAL

Some Problems with “Adventist” Futurism

There is among some Adventists an obsession with prophetic speculation. The present time of relative peace and waiting is disturbing to them, leading them to reinterpret apocalyptic prophecy along



futurist lines. In the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, they find predictions related to some of the contemporary nations of the Middle East and even identify prominent political and religious leaders as specific fulfillments of prophecy. In doing so they commit two errors about which Ellen G. White has alerted us.

1. Misapplication of Prophecy. By misapplying biblical prophecy they reach wrong conclusions. How does this happen? She explains: “Some will take the truth applicable to their time, and place it in the future. Events in the train of prophecy that had their fulfillment away in the past are made future, and thus by these theories the faith of some is undermined.”¹ This statement rejects the introduction of futurism into Adventist prophetic interpretation, through the reapplication of prophecies, and makes two points about those who would try to do so. First, they have forgotten that the adversary is constantly at work upon human minds. Therefore Bible students should be wary of personal interpretations of prophecy. Second, they ignore the Lord’s past leading of His people in the interpretation of prophecy. They detach themselves from the rest of the body of Christ by coming up with their own personal interpretation of biblical prophecies.²

2. Emotional Excitement. A false sense of excitement will damage the image and message of the church. There are some who, when studying not only prophecy but the Bible more generally, “have a burning desire to get out something new and strange to present to the flock of God. The rebuke of God is upon all such teachers.”³ When this becomes known outside the church its reputation is damaged. Ellen G. White wrote, “It is the desire and plan of Satan to bring in among us those who will go to great extremes—people of narrow minds, who are critical and sharp, and very tenacious in holding their own conceptions of what the truth means.... Through the work of a few of this class of persons, the whole body of Sabbath keepers will be designated as bigoted, pharisaical, and fanatical. The work of the truth, because of these workers, will be thought to be unworthy of notice.”⁴ When it comes to eschatology the Scripture provides only an outline of eschatological events; it is dangerous to try to fill in every gap. Our eschatology should be placed within the soteriology of the New Testament, emphasizing hope as its primary content.

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¹Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1, 195.

²Ellen G. White comments: “It is true that there are prophecies yet to be fulfilled. But very erroneous work has been done again and again, and will continue to be done by those who seek to find new light in the prophecies, and who begin by

turning away from the light that God has already given. . . . But the Lord does not lay upon those who have not had an experience in His work the burden of making a new exposition of those prophecies which He has, by His Holy Spirit, moved upon His chosen servants to explain” (*Manuscript Releases*, vol. 17, 15).

³Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1, 61.

⁴Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, 269.



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The General Conference Session, Delegates, and Theology

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throughout it. In order for that authority to find its fullest expression in the global church, the church entrusts authority to some of its members. When church delegates gather together at a General Conference Session, the Session itself is constituted into the highest authority of the church on earth on the foundation of the Scriptures, under the headship of Christ, and in the power of the Spirit. It is the highest authority in that through the Session the global church speaks with one voice to its local expressions and on their behalf to the world at large. In this task the Session transcends *individualism* and *regionalism* and reaffirms the church as a global *community* of faith. Consequently, it is necessary for the delegates to use the authority of the Session with circumspection, always aiming at the well-being of the universal church



Photo: Richard Dower

Any attempt to define the General Conference Session simply as a global business meeting misses its very nature in a drastic and even threatening way.

in a spirit of love and humility. In the process, regional concerns should be explored and analyzed from the

perspective of the global church. One could even suggest that the Session calls all the delegates to work in humility when seeking to use and implement the authority of the church.

4. Expressing the Oneness of the Church

Our previous comments already point to the fact that the General Conference Session is by definition an expression of the unity and oneness of the church of Christ. The delegates come from all over the world holding a common message, a common mission, and a common hope. These define their identity and the purpose for their existence. This *koinonia* of message, mission, and hope is not created at the Session; they bring it with them from the local communities of faith. At the Session their togetherness reveals in a glorious way that the unity and oneness of the church is indeed a global phenomenon; a miracle of the grace of Christ

through the Spirit. Within the diversity of their cultures and ethnic backgrounds the delegates reveal in a spirit of love and service the profound bond and unity that the church enjoys with the Lord and with one another. This *koinonia*, created by the Spirit and grounded in the Scripture, enables them to work together as the one body of Christ in the election of leaders for the world church, in the discussion of doctrinal and biblical concerns, and in all matters related to the business of the

church. During the Session, this oneness expresses itself and is nurtured through the proclamation of the Word, the moments of prayer, the congregational singing of praises to the Lord, and their constant fellowship with one another. At the end of the Session, when the delegates separate from each other, this unity and oneness lives on in the

common mind and purpose of the church.

It is of value for the church to consider the General Conference Session to be a dynamic expression of aspects or dimensions of a Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiology. This could contribute to strengthen the disposition of the delegates to work together as one body, free from a potentially divisive spirit based on personal concerns or self-interest. The power entrusted to the Session should be handled with loving care. It would be correct to conclude that one of the most significant ecclesiological aspects of the General Conference Session centers on its role as the ultimate expression of the authority of the world church. In order for this authority to contribute to the unity of the church its use has to be based on the Scripture and on the willingness of the body of believers to

acknowledge it and submit to it. This we should all do in all humility and as a response

The General Conference Session transcends individualism and regionalism and reaffirms the church as a global community of faith.

to the Lord who prayed, “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21, NIV).

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THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Is the Sabbath Part of the “New Covenant”?

BY ROY GANE

Traditional Christian distinctions between moral, ceremonial, civil, and health categories of law are interpretive classifications not explicitly stated in the Bible. However, Walter Kaiser has pointed out that within the Pentateuch there are some terminological and conceptual indications of such differences between kinds of laws.¹ These categories can be quite helpful, *provided that* they are defined and applied carefully and accurately.²

The stakes are exceedingly high. Whether or not we believe that we should keep a divine command today depends upon the category in which we place it. For example, if the command to observe the seventh-day Sabbath is isolated from the other commands of the Decalogue as a ceremonial law, as many Christians believe, it is no longer binding. Notice the potential danger of circular reasoning: An assumption regarding whether or not a law is binding can influence the way we classify it, which in turn determines whether or not we believe that it is still applicable. Since we are dealing with divine commands that can vitally affect our daily lives, this is no casual matter. Here is a call for “handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15)!

Categorization of Biblical Law

We can describe and critique each of the four categories of biblical law as follows:

1. Moral law. Identifying certain commands as “moral law” can be helpful if it is qualified to refer to those laws that express universal and eternal principles governing relationships. The Ten Commandments (Exod 20; Deut 5) are an extremely important expression of moral law in that they summarize or exemplify essential broad principles that are basic for the health of divine-human and human-human relationships, including the need to acknowledge God for who he is, respect for parents, respect for life, sexual purity, respect for the property of others, etc. However, the Ten Commandments are not the only expression of moral law in the Bible. For example, another moral law based on love appears in Exod 23:9—“And you shall not oppress a stranger.”³ We should keep in mind that because moral law, based on love (Matt 22:37-40), is as eternal as the loving character of God that it reflects (1 John 4:8), such

law existed long before the Ten Commandments.⁴

2. Ritual/ceremonial law. Laws designated as “ritual/ceremonial” in nature regulated the ancient Israelite ritual system, through which human beings interacted with things that were ordinarily inaccessible to their material domain, such as God (by giving offerings/sacrifices) or ritual impurity (through purification rituals).⁵

3. Civil law. While Christians routinely dismiss Mosaic *civil law* as no longer relevant, many of these supposedly obsolete laws are applications or exemplifications of universal and enduring moral principles based on love. As such, they are applicable to Christians today to the extent that circumstances remain similar to what they were for the Israelites (apart from the elements unique to their theocratic civil government). Consider,

for example, the following civil law: “He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death” (Exod 21:12). This applies the principle of respect for life that is expressed in the sixth of the Ten Commandments, “You shall not murder” (20:13).⁶

4. Health law. Modern people see a category of *health law* because we understand that matters such as diet (e.g. Lev 11; Deut 14) and sanitation (e.g. Deut 23:12-14) affect human bodies, which should be cared for because they are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26) and are therefore holy (Rom 12:1). However, the Pentateuch never assigns a motivation of physical health to a specific law. Reasons given are always in other categories. For example, abstaining from eating meat from which the blood is not properly drained at the time of slaughter is based on the moral principle of respect for life (Gen 9:4-6; Lev 17:10-12). Wholistic health comes from harmony with God by keeping all his laws (Exod 15:26), not simply from a self-help program that targets some areas (e.g. the muscles and cardiovascular system) but neglects others (spiritual wellness, including freedom from guilt that can tear down health).

When we attempt to categorize a biblical law, it is crucial to recognize that a given law may fit in more than one category. For example, we have found that civil laws can encapsulate moral principles. Also, while abstaining from improperly slaughtered meat is a moral requirement based on respect for life, which explains why Acts 15:20, 29 regards it as enduring and applicable to Gentile Christians, we also understand that there is a health benefit.⁷

Determining whether an Old Testament Law is Applicable Today

If we accept God as the authority behind the whole

The two extremes of bending principles to fit culture and rigid, unthinking, knee-jerk “obedience” that is insensitive to cultural contexts are both wrong.

Bible and that this Word is to guide the Christian life (2 Tim 3:16-17), it stands to reason that the laws promulgated by him in the Old Testament should at least in some way inform our ethical conduct. The question is, how? Some laws, such as the Ten Commandments, health laws, and many of the civil laws can be applied today in a straightforward or fairly straightforward manner, except that church discipline (e.g. disfellowshipping, not dismembering) replaces the civil penalties (including corporal and capital punishments) formerly administered under the ancient Israelite judicial system, which no longer exists.⁸ Many laws are applicable in principle even when the culturally dependent specifics do not apply to us.⁹

It is crucial to keep the role of culture in proper perspective. Culture never overrules enduring principles established by God, but such principles are worked out in various cultural contexts. So the two extremes of bending principles to fit culture and rigid, unthinking, knee-jerk “obedience” that is insensitive to cultural contexts are both wrong. How these principles are to be worked out in concrete situations is not always easy to determine and must be carefully studied on a case by case basis.¹⁰

In other cases, the decision is more straightforward. For example, there are some biblical laws that we cannot keep since (in most places at least) we no longer have the human (and sometimes flawed) social institutions they were designed to regulate, such as levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10), bonded servitude (Exod 21:2-11, 20-21, 26-27), and ancestral land ownership (Lev 25:8-55—Jubilee law). However, we can learn much about God’s approach to society by studying such laws in light of their cultural context. The ritual laws, which were dependent and centered upon the function of the earthly sanctuary/temple as the dwelling place of God, can no longer apply because that institution is gone. Since the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, our worship is focused toward God’s sanctuary in heaven, where Christ has been ministering for us (Heb 8-10). However, we can greatly enrich our comprehension of God’s relationship to human beings through study of the Old Testament ritual laws.¹¹ Christians have some rituals instituted by Christ and the New Testament, such as baptism, communion, and anointing the sick, but these are not dependent upon the function of a sanctuary/temple.

Although circumcision was a ritual law (Gen 17), it pre-dated the sanctuary/temple system and was not dependent on it. So loss of the Temple in the first century A.D. does not remove the possibility that circumcision could be an ongoing requirement.

Cessation of this requirement is based on another factor: Membership in the “new covenant” church no longer requires membership in ethnic Israel, the core of which consisted of Abraham’s physical descendants (Acts 15).¹² However, terminology of circumcision can continue to be relevant for symbolizing a spiritual reality (e.g., Deut 10:16—circumcision of the heart; see also n. 36).

The net effect of the above discussion is that we should be paying a lot more attention to biblical law than we do. Won’t this lead to legalism? Not if the place of God’s law is kept in its true perspective. First, God’s law is a standard of acting and thinking in harmony with his character. It is not, cannot be, and never was intended to be a means to salvation. Second, God’s law is a gift that protects human beings. It is and always was supposed to be for their good (Deut 10:13). As such, “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Rom 7:12).

Determining the Modern Applicability of Various Sabbath Laws

It is crucial to recognize the generally overlooked fact that a given biblical law can fit into more than one of the postbiblical categories of law we’ve talked about (moral, health, civil, and ceremonial). Thus, for example, there are Sabbath laws relating to all of the four categories:

Moral. In Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15 God commands Sabbath rest, i.e., ceasing from work on the seventh day, within the context of his paramount Ten Commandments. Since the other nine commandments are clearly moral in nature and Sabbath observance (fourth commandment) is as basic to maintenance of the divine-human relationship as abstaining from polytheism, idolatry, and taking God’s name in vain (the first three commandments), there is no compelling reason to exclude Sabbath rest on the seventh day from eternal moral law.¹³ Notice that the biblical “Sabbath” is by definition rest *on the seventh day*, which celebrates an unchangeable historical event on that day as the birthday of the entire world (Exod 20:11). So rest on any other day is not Sabbath rest—and this cannot be changed, just as the Independence Day of the United States can never be on any day other than the fourth of July. To talk about keeping the Sabbath on Sunday is as illogical as it would be to claim that because of some important event after 1776, America’s Independence

Day should now be celebrated on the fifth of July. Anyone who claims the power to change the religious day of rest thereby blasphemously claims to take the place of the Creator who performed the historical act that the Sabbath

The seventh-day part of the Fourth Commandment is part of the principle and cannot be separated from the matter of resting on that day.

day was established to commemorate and celebrate. It is no wonder that Rev 14:7, responding to such a power described in chapter 13 (the same power in Dan 7:25 which presumes to change God's times and law), reminds everyone that it is God alone who is the Creator.

Health. Exodus 23:12 commands: "Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor in order that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female slave, as well as your stranger, may refresh themselves." Here Sabbath rest benefits animals, so it must provide physical benefit. Even people who do not necessarily understand the religious implications of the Sabbath, such as the "stranger" (resident alien), gain refreshment from its rest and there is no reason why a modern person would not receive the same benefit. Of course, there is a physical health benefit from resting on any day, but Sabbath rest carries a special divine blessing.

Civil. In Numbers 15:32-36, a man who flagrantly violated the Sabbath by gathering firewood on this day was stoned to death by the community at God's command. While this biblical record preserves God's estimation of the crucial importance of Sabbath observance among his people, such a penalty can no longer be administered under theocratic civil law because this system of judicial administration no longer exists. However, our lack of such accountability to a human court in no way removes our direct accountability to God.

Ceremonial. In a calendar of periodic sacrifices, Numbers 28:9-10 calls for two burnt offerings, with their grain and drink accompaniments, to be performed every Sabbath in addition to the regular burnt offering. In Leviticus 24:8, the ritual for renewing the "bread of the Presence" on the golden table inside the tabernacle was to take place every Sabbath. These ceremonial laws that involve the Sabbath no longer apply because the earthly ritual system has been superseded by Christ's royal priestly ministry in God's temple in heaven (Heb 7-10). However, this does not mean that the day itself is no longer holy or that we no longer need to participate in its holiness through cessation of work. The civil penalties and ceremonial performances are not enduring, but the moral and health aspects of Sabbath (= seventh-day) rest remain.

So, on the basis of the Old Testament evidence considered up to this point, ceasing from work on the seventh-day Sabbath *should continue to be practiced by new covenant believers in Christ*. We will test this provisional conclusion by considering some potential objections.

Objection 1: Literal seventh-day Sabbath observance was commanded only for literal Israelites.

While the objection is logical at first glance, it is fraught with flaws. To begin with, who says that a divine-

ly mandated duty does not exist unless God commands it in the form of a law? If this were true, why would God hold Cain accountable for murdering his brother (Gen 4) centuries before he said to Noah and his family, "... from every man, from every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man" (9:5-6). Obviously the principle of respect for human life, which Cain violated, was inherent in the order that God set up at Creation, when he made human beings in his own image (1:26-27). Similarly, the fact that rest on the seventh-day Sabbath does not appear as a divine command before Exodus 16 does not automatically mean that it was not an obligation before that time.¹⁴ God instituted cessation from work for the benefit of all human beings by example rather than command (Gen 2:2-3). The fact that God ceased from His work and was "refreshed" (Exod 31:17) even though He did not need to rest from fatigue indicates that the purpose of the seventh day was to show people how *they* would gain relief from fatigue (23:12) by following His example.¹⁵ Jesus succinctly validated this interpretation when he affirmed that the Sabbath was made for humankind (*anthropos*)¹⁶ and not humankind for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Jesus' view that God did not simply intend to benefit himself when he rested on the seventh day of Creation is supported by several contextual factors in Genesis:¹⁷

1. On the seventh day of Creation, God did more than rest: He blessed the seventh day and endowed it with holiness (Gen 2:3). Elsewhere in the Creation story, God's blessings were outgoing, for the benefit of his creatures (1:22, 28). So could we imagine that on the seventh day God rested and admired his handiwork while Adam and Eve toiled in the garden (2:15)?¹⁸ Sabbath as the apex of Creation on the seventh day of the first week showed that human beings, created on the sixth day, need their relationship with God in order to be complete.¹⁹

2. God made human beings in his image (Gen 1:26-27) and commissioned them to continue the work of creation by being fruitful and multiplying (v. 28). He also gave them the role of dominion/responsibility over the earth (vv. 26-28; 2:15). If human beings are made in God's image and are to emulate God by working on their level as God worked on His (cf. Lev 19:2), it would stand to reason that they should also emulate God by resting from their work as God rested from His.²⁰

3. On each of the first six days of Creation, God did something that had ongoing results for our world. So also when God blessed and hallowed the seventh day, it had ongoing applicability to each subsequent seventh day.²¹ The Creation account makes clear that God instituted the Sabbath, marriage, and work for human beings, institutions which embody principles of love later expressed in the Ten Commandments (Exod

20:3-17).²² According to Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve showed disrespect for God's lordship by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree (v. 6), their marriage and work suffered as a result of the curse of sin (vv. 16-19). But unlike the other two Creation institutions, the Sabbath is never mentioned as subject to the curses (or consequences) resulting from sin (Gen 3:14-19) and thus remains a little piece of Paradise.²³ As such, its value is enhanced by the deterioration around it. Now that work is exhausting, ceasing from labor on the Sabbath provides needed rest. More importantly, now that human beings are cut off from direct access to God, they need a reminder of His lordship even more than they did before the Fall.

Objection 2: Literal seventh-day Sabbath observance is no longer relevant because it was a temporary type/symbol of greater spiritual "rest" that Christians now enjoy.

Some have seen support for this approach in Hebrews 4, where Sabbath rest symbolizes a life of faith or trust in God,²⁴ as well as in Colossians 2:16-17 which describes "festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths" as a "shadow" (*skia*)—taken to mean "temporary type." But because God instituted the seventh-day Sabbath for human beings before the Fall into sin (Gen 2:2-3) it cannot be one of the types of salvation from sin.²⁵ Still, while Exodus 20:11 points back to the Sabbath's primary significance as the memorial of Creation, the commandment's restatement in Deuteronomy 5:15 shows that the Sabbath has an added significance in pointing back to the salvation of Israel from Egyptian bondage (an event which is itself a type pointing forward to the saving work of Christ). Thus, in Hebrews 4, Sabbath rest symbolizes the Christian life of peace and rest from dependence on human work, resulting from faith in God and in his care and redemptive work for his people (cf. Matt 6:25-34; 11:28-30). The seventh-day Sabbath is not a temporary, *historical/horizontal* kind of type that prefigures something in the future, i.e., its antitype. When an antitype commences, its type becomes obsolete. Thus, for example, the levitical priesthood was superseded by the greater Melchizedek priesthood of Jesus Christ (Heb 7-10). Another example is the ritual of Passover, which Christ fulfilled and therefore superseded when he died on the cross (see John 19:14). The type and antitype do not function at the same time. But in Hebrews 4, God's "rest" has not suddenly become available for Christians; it was available all along, though it was not fully appropriated in Old Testament times because of unbelief (Ps 95:7-11).²⁶ Therefore, the weekly Sabbath cannot be a

historical type of the life of rest;²⁷ rather, it is an eternal memorial of Creation and of Redemption.²⁸

Now we are in a better position to understand

Colossians 2:16-17.²⁹ At issue in this difficult passage is the problem that, in spite of Christ's victory and removal of condemnation against sinners through the cross (cf. vv. 13-15), some early Christians were mistakenly prone to judge/despise others (cf. Rom 14:3) for not engaging in certain practices that involved matters of diet and observance of holy times, in accordance

with their philosophy. But the misuse of certain Sabbath regulations and festival observances by Colossian heretics (and perhaps their adding to them) does not place these practices in the same category in terms of their ongoing applicability. The fact that the seventh-day Sabbath was *not* a temporary historical type, and therefore should continue to be observed, does not mean that Christians are also obliged to keep the annual Jewish festivals. To begin with, Leviticus 23 acknowledges a difference by separating the weekly Sabbath from the festivals by means of a second introduction to the calendar of sacred times (v. 4). Furthermore, the festivals were limited to the Sinaitic/Israelite phase of God's covenant by several factors, none of which apply to basic Sabbath rest:³⁰

1. The *essence* of festival observance involved rituals functioning as temporary historical types.
2. For their full observance, the festivals were dependent upon continuation of the Israelite ritual system.
3. The festivals were rooted in the particular national religious experience of the Israelite people.³¹

Objection 3: Although the principle of Sabbath rest can be kept by Christians today, the seventh day is like circumcision (compare Acts 15) in that the New Testament has removed the reason for its existence.

This objection misses the point that Sabbath = seventh-day rest. The seventh-day part of the Fourth Commandment is part of the principle and cannot be separated from the matter of resting on that day. The eternal and universal Sabbath principle of rest on the seventh day is not mentioned as abolished or altered in Acts 15 or anywhere else in the New Testament.³² Quite the opposite: the true significance of the Sabbath is restored under the "new covenant." When God reaffirmed the Sabbath for Israel, it was more than a commandment; according to Exodus 31:13, 17 (cf. Ezek 20:12), it functioned as an ongoing sign of the covenant relationship by which he sanctified his people.³³ They would emulate their holy Creator and acknowledge their ongoing connection with

Him. Because they would belong to God, who is intrinsically holy, they would gain holiness from Him. Is such holiness important for “new covenant” believers? Peter wrote: “but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15-16; reiterating Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26).³⁴ According to Paul, Christ has eclipsed the Mosaic Torah in the sense that He is a vastly more glorious, effective, complete and therefore adequate revelation of God’s character (2 Cor 3). As a Torah-keeping Jew, Christ magnified the laws given within the framework of the Sinaitic covenant, showing their ongoing applicability, not nullifying them (Matt 5:17-48).³⁵ Enlightened and empowered by Him, His followers, who “serve in newness of the Spirit” (Rom 7:6), can and must have genuine righteousness that exceeds that of legalists (Matt 5:20). By restoring the spiritual liberation of internalized holiness and obedience through God’s Holy Spirit (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:25-28),³⁶ the “new covenant” reveals and underscores the true significance of the Sabbath (cf. Deut 5:15—celebrating redemption). People who are allowing God to sanctify them keep the sanctified day. Internalization is in harmony with the external summation of the law, rather than invalidating it.

During His ministry, Jesus showed Christians how to live under the “new covenant.”³⁷ Participating in communal worship on Sabbath was His usual practice (Luke 4:16). More significantly, the fact that Jesus went to so much trouble not merely to keep the Sabbath, but to reveal its rightful place within the “new covenant,” shows that its proper observance was of great importance for Him and therefore should be important for Christians. Jesus risked controversy and danger by healing people on the Sabbath (e.g. Mark 3:1-6; John 5:2-18; 9:1-41), thereby stripping away hypocritical human tradition and restoring the created intention of the Sabbath (Gen 2:2-3): “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Consequently, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28). Why would He restore something that He was about to do away with? That would make as much sense as remodeling a house before demolishing it! Furthermore, why would He wipe out the seventh-day Sabbath when His covenant lordship over it was part of His divine messianic claim?

Under the “new covenant” phase of the divine covenant, God restores the world and human beings to the sinless ideal he had for them in the beginning (Rev 21-22). Since the Sabbath was part of the “covenant of Creation,” before human sin arose, it is appropriate that it continue into the sinless “new earth” (compare Isa 66:22-23).³⁸

Conclusion

We have sorted out the applicability of biblical laws

within modern analytical categories—moral, ceremonial, civil, and health. Moral and health principles are enduring. Ceremonial laws (including those regarding festivals) that served a prophetic function in pointing forward to Christ’s saving activity are superseded by His ministry and can no longer be kept because the sanctuary/temple is gone. While the ceremony of circumcision did not depend on the sanctuary, the change of God’s community from an ethnic nation to a church removed the meaning and therefore the application of this ritual. The ancient Israelite judicial system is also gone, and culturally-dependent specifics may no longer apply, but Christians should preserve the enduring principles encapsulated in Israel’s civil laws.

To summarize in a handy one-sentence rule of thumb: *A Christian should keep a given Old Testament law to the extent that its enduring principle can be applied within his/her life context (including culture).*³⁹ Of course, identification of enduring principles in laws must be done on a case-by-case basis.⁴⁰ The divine command to rest from work on the seventh day of the week embodies a universal, eternal principle that protects the divine-human relationship, as shown by its inclusion in the Ten Commandments. At the same time, Sabbath rest provides an ongoing health benefit. However, the Israelite civil penalty for Sabbath-breaking and the rituals performed on the Sabbath can no longer apply because they were dependent on civil and religious institutions that no longer exist. That modern Christians should continue to observe rest on the seventh-day Sabbath as part of the “new covenant” experience that they enjoy in Christ is supported by three major factors, which I have identified in response to objections:

1. The Sabbath is universal, rather than limited to Israel because it originated before the Israelites existed as a people.
2. The Sabbath has never served as a temporary historical or vertical type/symbol of later and greater realities because God instituted it before the need for such types was brought about by the Fall into sin.
3. Rather than doing away with seventh-day Sabbath rest, the “new covenant” restores the heart of true Sabbath observance, which is given for the benefit of human beings and celebrates the way God makes them holy by making them like Himself, whose character is love.

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¹Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1983), 44-48; against Roy L. Aldrich, “Has the Mosaic Law Been Abolished?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116 (1959): 325.

²On modern applicability of biblical laws, see Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 305-310.

³See also Lev 20:13, prohibiting the practice of homosexuality, which is not covered under the literal formulation of Exod 20:14 (“You shall not commit adultery”).

⁴Aldrich, 325, 332, 335.

⁵Roy Gane, *Altar Call* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Diadem, 1999), 52-56; idem, *Ritual Dynamic Structure* (Gorgias Dissertations 14, Religion 2; Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2004), 54-64; idem, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 60-62; idem, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 14-18.

⁶The meaning of *rtsh* is “homicide” = “murder.” According to *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1283, “the verb, with the exception of Nu 35₃₀, denotes illegal behaviour against the community which is always directed against an individual....” In Num 35 this can include accidental homicide (= second degree murder/manslaughter), and exceptionally in v. 30 it has the technical sense of executing a first degree murderer. Commandments do not prohibit accidents or divinely-mandated punishments (as in Num 35:30).

⁷See also the laws regarding sexual intercourse during menstruation which come both under timeless moral law and temporary ceremonial law (Lev 15:24, on which see Jacob Milgrom *Leviticus 1-16* [Anchor Bible 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991], 940-41). In Lev 18 and 20 this is categorically prohibited in a series of moral violations and Ezek 18:6 refers to the prohibition along with moral laws.

⁸It appears that offenses for which the OT prescribes capital punishment require disfellowshipping under NT church policy (see e.g. 1 Cor 5; cf. Lev 18, 20).

⁹Cf. J. H. Gerstner, “Law in the NT,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 3:88.

¹⁰For examples of how to do this, see Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, passim.

¹¹See Gane, *Altar Call*.

¹²Notice that NT removal of the requirement of circumcision was implicitly pre-validated by Old Testament prophecy (Acts 15:16-18, quoting Amos 9:11-12).

¹³Cf. Wilmore Eva, “Why the Seventh Day?” *Ministry* (July, 1999), 6-7.

¹⁴Cf. Eva, “Why the Seventh Day?” 5-6. Against Charles L. Feinberg, “The Sabbath and the Lord’s Day,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 95 (1938): 180-81.

¹⁵Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 245, 404; John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 309.

¹⁶Here *anthropos*, “man” = generic “humankind” as the NRSV translates it.

¹⁷Cf. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 391-93.

¹⁸Contrast the Old Babylonian epic *Atra-Hasis*, according to which the gods created man to impose their work on him (W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, repr. 1999], 54-9, especially tablet I, lines 191, 195-7, 240-41).

¹⁹Jiří Moskala, “The Sabbath in the First Creation Account,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 13 (2002): 55-66.

²⁰Cf. Sailhamer, 96-7.

²¹The seventh-day Sabbath provides a credible explanation for the origin of the week, which is not based on the movement of heavenly bodies (cf. Cassuto, 244; Nahum Sarna, *Exodus* [JPS

Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991], 111).

²²For details, see the larger version of this study online: <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/Gane%20Gods%20moral%20law.pdf>.

²³At the same time, the fact that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20) suggests that grace can transform work and marriage to be a blessing and even something paradisiacal now.

²⁴See e.g. A. T. Lincoln, “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 209-17.

²⁵Cf. Wilmore Eva, 5; Frank B. Holbrook, “Did the Apostle Paul Abolish the Sabbath?: Colossians 2:14-17 Revisited,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 13 (2002): 64-65.

²⁶Cf. Herold Weiss, “*Sabbatismos* in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (1996): 683.

²⁷For detailed discussion, see Roy Gane, “Sabbath and the New Covenant,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10 (1999): 318-21.

²⁸See Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 393-95.

²⁹On this passage I am grateful for dialogue with and suggestions from Richard Davidson and from Ronald du Preez, who is working on a Ph.D. dissertation titled “A Critical Analysis of *Sabbatōn* in Colossians 2:16.”

³⁰For a more detailed discussion, see Ross Cole, “The Sacred Times Prescribed in the Pentateuch: Old Testament Indicators of the Extent of their Applicability” (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1996); Gane, “Sabbath and the New Covenant,” 322-25.

³¹On Christians and the festivals, see Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 757-59.

³²On the Sabbath in the New Testament, see Walter Specht, “The Sabbath in the New Testament,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (ed. Kenneth A. Strand; Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), 92-113; also the following articles in the same volume: Raoul Dederen, “On Esteeming One Day as Better Than Another—Romans 14:5, 6,” 333-37; Kenneth Wood, “The ‘Sabbath Days’ of Colossians 2:16, 17,” 338-42; Roy Graham, “A Note on Hebrews 4:4-9,” 343-45; also Kenneth Strand, “The ‘Lord’s Day,’ in the Second Century,” 346-51, showing that the “Lord’s Day” as a Christian Sunday celebration developed in the patristic period and should not be read into the NT (Rev 1:10).

³³Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Crisis* (rev. ed.; Glendale, Ariz.: Life Assurance Ministries, 1995), 180-82 argues that just as the “entrance sign” to the old covenant was circumcision, which is replaced by new covenant baptism, Sabbath was the “continuing, repeatable sign” of the old covenant replaced by the Lord’s Supper under the new covenant. However, baptism, which developed from OT ablutions to remedy ritual impurity (see e.g. Lev 15), did not simply replace circumcision: The Jerusalem council (Acts 15) established a transition from *circumcision + baptism* → *baptism*, not *circumcision* → *baptism*. The Lord’s Supper was a transformation of Passover (Matt 26:17-19), not a replacement of the Seventh-day Sabbath.

³⁴Thus the sanctification significance inherent in the Sabbath remains, so its meaning as a covenant “sign” is not eliminated by addition of the Lord’s supper (Matt 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20) as a Christian sign of remembrance (against *ibid.*).

³⁵Fredrick Holmgren, *The Old Testament and the Significance of Jesus: Embracing Change—Maintaining Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 60-64; cf. Gerstner, 85-86—“Christ was not calling to a new way of obedience, but to

the old way...keeping the law and keeping Christ's commandments are synonymous."

³⁶Deut 10:16; 30:6 and Jer 4:4 already spoke of an internalized covenant relationship with God in terms of circumcision of the heart, an expression picked up by Paul (Rom 2:29).

³⁷See Specht, 105.

³⁸On this passage, see Gane, "Sabbath and the New Covenant,"

330-31. In context (cf. vv. 18-21), Isaiah envisioned future events through the lens of God's plan to use the nation of Israel to gather all people to Himself at Jerusalem.

⁴⁹Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 310.

⁴⁰For examples regarding some challenging cases, see *ibid.*, 324-32, 337-42.

SCRIPTURE APPLIED

The Sabbath: God's Anti-Stress Program

Stress is a serious matter. Although some stress may be healthy, too much is dangerous and, in some cases, even fatal. Stress is caused by an overdose of stimulation, a hectic life, traffic in large cities, noise, overload at home, at work, in school or in the personal sphere, etc. It includes the anxiety to fail and the fear not to be able to cope with what confronts us. Consequences include nervous mental blockages, aggression, depression, a weakened immune system, cardiac, circulatory, liver, and gall problems, etc. We need to protect ourselves against too much stress. Therefore physicians recommend that we relax and rest, exercise, and avoid the intake of alcohol, tobacco, and coffee.

However, long before the medical profession talked about the benefits of rest and relaxation, God recommended it. He has not only told us *that* we should rest but also *how* we should rest. Our Creator has given us tips that can help us—when we observe them—to function at our best. In addition to daily devotional time when we focus on God, He has given us one entire day per week for reflection, regeneration, and communion with Him. In Scripture this day is called "Sabbath." God's special blessing rests on this day.

The Sabbath in the Old Testament

Gen 2:1-3	The Sabbath was installed when God created this world including plants, animals, and humans. Creation was completed with the Sabbath, and the Sabbath existed before sin came into our world. Adam and Eve, the representatives of humankind, celebrated the Sabbath.
Exod 20:8-11	The Sabbath (modern Saturday) is part of the unique law called the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, complete

in their comprehensiveness, constitute God's unchangeable law. The term "remember" in the Sabbath commandment points back to the creation account.

Exod 16:4, 19-29	The Sabbath was known even before the law was written on tables of stone (see also Gen 26:5).
Isa 56:2	God wants all human beings to keep the Sabbath.
Isa 66:22-23	The Sabbath is associated with the new earth.

The Sabbath in the Time of Jesus

Luke 4:16	Christians follow Jesus, their example. It was Jesus' custom to keep the Sabbath.
Luke 23:56	Jesus' followers observed the Sabbath.
Matt 12:8-12	Jesus corrected a false understanding of the Sabbath and rejected human traditions.
Matt 5:17-19	Jesus did not abolish the Ten Commandments.
Matt 24:20	In the context of Jesus' prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, which happened in AD 70, Christians were urged to pray that their flight might not be on a Sabbath. Jesus wanted his disciples to keep the Sabbath even after his death on the cross.

The Sabbath in the Time of the Apostles

Acts 13:42, 44;	Paul's practice was to preach to Jews and Gentiles on Sabbath.
17:2; 18:4, 11	Nowhere in Scripture is the Sabbath done away with. Nowhere is another day recommended which was to replace the Sabbath.

The Meaning of the Sabbath

- **The Sabbath reminds us of creation and the Creator (Exod 31:17).**

- **The Sabbath reminds us of salvation and the Savior (Deut 5:12-15).**
- **The Sabbath is a sign of our sanctification and relationship with God (Exod 31:13, 17).**
- **The Sabbath is a sign of the covenant between God and His people (Exod 31:16).**
- **The Sabbath has a future dimension (Exod 31:16-17; Isa 66:22-23).**

The Sabbath is a wonderful gift of God through which we can experience rest, time for reflection, fellowship with others and especially with God, as well as joy and regeneration. This day cannot be replaced by another day because God's special blessing rests on it. We can make the decision to accept God's anti-stress program and enjoy intimate communion with the Lord.

Ekkehardt Mueller, BRI

WORLDWIDE HIGHLIGHTS

BRI in Japan

Scholars from the Biblical Research Institute, as well as from Andrews and Loma Linda universities, participated in a union-wide Bible conference, January 25-28 in Tokyo, Japan, which focused on issues connected with hermeneutics, prophecy, and church mission.



The opening presentation by Jairyong Lee set the tone for the conference and Miguel Luna on the subsequent days dealt with "Mission and Contextualization." Presentations on the book of Revelation were made by Ekkehardt Mueller and Jon Paulien. The concepts of revelation, inspiration, the authority

of Scripture, and church mission were presented by Kwabena Donkor and Clinton Wahlen, while Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, Gerhard Pfandl, and Merlin Burt explored the prophetic role and authority of Ellen White. In addition, the work of pioneer missionaries in Japan was recognized and information shared about the work of Japan Adventist College. Following the conference, the team from BRI made presentations for lay leaders in various locales throughout Japan, including Okinawa.

Inter-American Division Bible Conference

About 200 administrators, teachers, evangelists, and lay leaders followed the footsteps of Moses and Jesus through Egypt, Jordan, and Israel in the first Inter-American Division (IAD) Bible Conference. Organized by the IAD together with the Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary and in consultation with the Biblical Research Institute, the objective of the conference was to give participants an overview of the geographical and archaeological background of the Biblical accounts and to empower



them to be more effective in the pulpit and in the classroom. The papers read were developed in harmony with the Methods of Bible Study guide

guidelines voted in Rio de Janeiro in 1986 and covered primarily topics in the areas of protology and eschatology, but also soteriology and hermeneutics. In addition, an important series of lectures was given in the areas of stewardship and applied theology, including church growth, evangelism, worship, anointing the sick, spiritual formation, and ministerial ethics. Each presentation was followed by time for questions and discussion, enabling a valuable dialogue among the English-, Spanish-, and French-speaking participants.

Elie Henry, IAD Vice President, said that “the program was a big opportunity for our theology professors to get a better understanding of the Bible’s settings, of the challenges on protology and eschatology. Also it was a golden opportunity to share ideas, papers and concerns in formal group discussions and informal conversations. They are very appreciative for this unforgettable experience.” The official report voted by the attendees, described the history and purpose of the conference, a summary of activities, and the following statement of consensus and commitment:

Statement of Consensus

After coming together to search the Scriptures, to understand more clearly and deeply its message for God’s end-time people, and to pray for divine guidance in humility of heart, we were moved by the Spirit of God to reaffirm that:

1. The Bible is the inspired Word of God and is its own best interpreter. Therefore, the hermeneutical principles for biblical interpretation should be found in the Scriptures themselves.
2. Through the power of the three divine persons of the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, everything that is came into existence and they will likewise manifest their power in the re-creation of the world.
3. Genesis 1-11 provide a reliable historical account of the creation of the world, the entrance of sin, the degradation of the human race, and the destructive effects of a worldwide flood.
4. God created this world in six consecutive 24-hour days and rested on the seventh day, establishing by His example the rhythm of human life of work and rest.
5. God sent His Son Jesus to redeem the world and the human race through His life on earth, His death on the cross, and His ministry in heaven so that human beings may fulfill the original purpose of their creation.
6. Through Ellen White the Lord provided for the remnant church guidance in the areas of protology, soteriology, hermeneutics and eschatology.
7. God restored us through Jesus as stewards of His riches, which include nature, our body, time, resources, abilities, and most importantly the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ and that we are accountable before Him. Therefore, we should be responsible and efficient in administering them to His glory.
8. God provided in Scripture a reliable account of end-time events, but did not give us information to establish a date for the Second Coming.
9. We as a church should work unitedly, fervently and intelligently under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the fulfillment of the mission of the church, strengthening the spiritual experience within our ranks, and meeting successfully the challenges of a deceitful enemy.

Commitment

In view of the above reaffirmations, we commit ourselves to a more dedicated and deeper study of the Word of God, to apply its teachings to our personal lives and to our educational, evangelistic and administrative responsibilities, as well as to a more faithful stewardship of our health and the gifts God has provided in order to prepare ourselves and others for His glorious coming.

Pastor Israel Leito, in summing up the success of the conference, promised that it would not be the last and announced that, for the first time in IAD history, accessions to the church for the current quinquennium have surpassed 1,000,000. Praise was given to God for enabling such growth, which is a fitting testimony to the potential that exists when commitment to a close study of the Scriptures and to the message and mission of the church are combined.