

## *Note to the Reader*

A reader of my *Sabbath Questions: An open letter to Iain Murray* (being my response to a book by Iain Murray) asked me to re-publish my work, leaving out references to Iain's book, John Calvin and the Reformed, explaining that he thought that this would benefit many who know little of such men and their works. This new book, confined to the essential scriptural principles concerning the sabbath, and published in a slightly larger typeface, 'would be', he thought, 'of great value to the Christian public at large... I for one would look forward to its publication'. Well, Mr W.M.Kilby of Frinton-on-Sea, I was moved to respond and here is the result. Thank you for the suggestion. I am sure you will join me in praying that God will bless this booklet to the profit of many. For those who wish to see more of the argument behind what I say here, the fuller, original version is, of course, still available.



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God gave the sabbath to Israel as a special marker to distinguish them as his people from all other nations.<sup>1</sup> Having given his people the sabbath when they were in the Wilderness of Sin, just after their redemption from the slavery of Egypt in the exodus, God reinforced its observance a few weeks later when he gave them his law through Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 16; 20:8-11; 31:12-17; Neh. 9:14; Ezek. 20:12). Centuries later, at his appointed time, God sent his Son into the world, made under the law, in order to fulfil it and thus render all its shadows obsolete, Christ himself being their reality in the new covenant (Matt. 5:17-20; Rom. 10:4; Gal. 4:4; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 8:13; 10:18). These shadows included the priesthood, the sacrifices, the feasts and the temple. In the new covenant, therefore, Christ is the believer's priest, sacrifice, feast and temple. The sabbath, of course, is no exception to all this. The real sabbath is Christ, the believer's sabbath (Matt. 11:28-30; Heb. 4:9-10). Hence the main thinking behind my chosen title: *The Essential Sabbath*. In the days of the new covenant, talk of sabbath-observance misses the point. Sabbath-observance was, from first to last, entirely Jewish, an essential shadow of the old covenant, which covenant was fulfilled, terminated, accomplished and brought to its God-ordained end by Christ, thus rendering it obsolete when he established the new covenant.<sup>2</sup>

Many confuse these two contrasting covenants and try to put new wine into old skins (Luke 5:36-38), sabbatarianism being the most obvious sign of this.<sup>3</sup> Sabbatarianism is, of course, a

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<sup>1</sup> This distinction of Israel was a vital principle with God. His presence (Ex. 33:16), the law (Ps. 147:19-20) and the sabbath all served to separate Israel from all the nations.

<sup>2</sup> I have set out my arguments on all this elsewhere; in particular, in my *Christ*.

<sup>3</sup> When the charge of 'antinomianism' is levelled against new-covenant theologians, the sort of thing I have just said about the

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spectrum embracing many shades of opinion. The sabbatarianism I am speaking about is the Puritan invention;<sup>4</sup> namely, the change of the scriptural sabbath – a day of rest in the days of the old covenant for the Jews, lasting from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset – into a day of rest and worship binding on all men (believers in particular), lasting for 24 hours from Sunday midnight, and calling it ‘the Christian sabbath’ or ‘the Lord’s day’. Ever since the Puritans, whether or not they realise it, the overwhelming majority of evangelicals have been sabbatarians approximating to this.

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sabbath is often cited as though it were sufficient proof of the accusation.

<sup>4</sup> As Kenneth L.Parker explained: ‘In the first three centuries of Christianity, theologians like Irenaeus, Justin, and Tertullian... [rightly (DG) interpreted] the sabbath precept as a spiritual rest from sin. But during the fourth century, this allegorical interpretation gave way to an analogical explanation, with theologians applying the sabbath laws... to the Christian Sunday... The application of Jewish sabbath laws remained an important part of medieval justifications for strict Sunday observance... However... 13th century scholastic theologians introduced a new explanation... The scholastics discarded the allegorical and analogical interpretations... defining instead the moral and ceremonial parts of this law. Thomas Aquinas... explained that... by [the sabbath] men were firmly established in genuine religion... Aquinas’ position was to be crucial for all subsequent development of sabbatarianism... He... explained that the day had been shifted from the Jewish sabbath to the Christian Sunday... This Thomistic distinction between the moral and ceremonial parts of the sabbath precept was accepted by nearly all subsequent sabbatarian writers’ (Kenneth L.Parker: *The English Sabbath...*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp17-20. For finer tuning, consider P.Gerard Damsteegt’s review of John H.Primus: *Holy Time: Moderate Puritanism and the Sabbath*, Mercer University Press, Macon, 1989. Damsteegt: Primus ‘highlights certain emphases which Parker tends to overlook... By the end of the sixteenth century “sabbatarianism had become the linchpin in the Puritan programme for more complete reform in England”, with one of its distinguishing characteristics being “the divine appointment of Sunday as the new day of rest” (andrews.edu)).

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Sabbath-observance is not a thing indifferent. It was God's requirement for Israel under the old covenant, being the fourth commandment of the ten, and as such was a vital part of the inflexible and inviolable law of God to all who were under it. And God decreed the most serious punishments for sabbath-breakers (Ex. 31:14-15; Num. 15:32-36). Sabbatarians, who claim that believers – indeed, all men – are under this sabbath law, need to be very sure that they really are secure in their attempted justification of the changes they make to it. Not only that. They need to be confident that God really will excuse them for any falling short of the command, and that their system really does justify their evasions of sabbath law.

All this forms the background to what follows.

I do not publish this booklet to engage in mere academic debate. As some sabbatarians recognise – and all ought to admit – this is a life-and-death matter, and the death in question can be eternal. Yes, it is that serious! As I have already hinted, this is why I chose the title: *The Essential Sabbath*. Sabbatarianism, alas, obscures the real sabbath of the new covenant; namely rest for the believer in Christ. I am wrestling, therefore, for the well-being of men, women and children. In the ultimate, I am wrestling for their eternal welfare. I hope that this booklet will point any unbelieving readers to the real sabbath – Christ – and encourage them to trust him for salvation. In addition, I want to do what I can to help believers enjoy the liberty they have in Christ, and not be 'burdened again by a yoke of slavery' under that killing law which the Jews found they could never keep (Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1). Sabbatarianism, alas, is a step in that direction.

Finally, let me explain how I set the work out. I do so in three sections: The Sabbath in the Old Covenant, The Sabbatarian Sabbath and The Sabbath in the New Covenant. In the first section, I show, contrary to what most sabbatarians think, that sabbath-observance among men (which is what we are

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concerned with here) was unknown in Genesis;<sup>5</sup> it started with the giving of the manna to Israel in the Wilderness of Sin, recorded in Exodus 16. That is where I begin, therefore. I follow this with a look at the sabbath in the law given to Israel at Sinai, recorded in Exodus 20, further showing that the sabbath was given to Israel as a special distinguishing marker, God thus separating his people from all others. To conclude this section, I look at the sabbath (or lack of its observance by men) in Genesis. All that comprises the first section of my booklet. In the second section, I face the sabbatarian claim that the sabbath is binding on all men. Then I look at the changes sabbatarians make to sabbath law, exposing the wrongness of this. In the third and final section, I set out the doctrine of the sabbath in the new covenant. I bring the booklet to a close, naturally enough, with a short conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> I acknowledge that God spoke of the sabbath in the context of creation (Ex. 20:11), but the seventh day of creation was God's sabbath, God's ceasing day.