

## *The Sabbath Binding on All Men?*

Sabbatarians argue that God appointed the sabbath for all mankind, binding its observance upon them as long as time shall last. He did this, so they claim, at creation (Gen. 2:2-3), repeating the same in what they call ‘the moral law’ at Sinai (Ex. 20:8-11).<sup>1</sup> And, of course, we have Christ’s statement: ‘The sabbath was made for man’ (Mark 2:27). From this text sabbatarians argue that the sabbath is binding on all men. All men must keep the sabbath!

But was Christ saying that all men, in all ages, are required to keep the sabbath? Far from it! Rather, Christ was telling the Pharisees that man is more important than the sabbath. After all, man was created before the sabbath. Sabbatarians are, in effect, arguing that man was made for the sabbath!

As we have seen, sabbath-observance by men was unknown in Genesis. It is only as we get to Exodus 16 and 20 – when God gave the sabbath to his newly-constituted people Israel on their deliverance from Egypt – that sabbath-observance by men came into existence. And even then it was – and always has been – confined to Israel, God giving the sabbath to Israel as a special marker, separating them from all other people. And this, as an integral part of the old covenant, became obsolete when Christ fulfilled it and established the reality in himself in the new covenant.

That much we have seen already. I now want to explore some of the consequences of universal sabbath-obligation.

***If sabbath-observance is a perpetual obligation for all the human race, why does the New Testament not say so?***

We have, for example, a clear explanation of civil government, and the necessity of obedience to it (Rom. 13:1-7; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:11-17). The apostles instructed believers in this matter to

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<sup>1</sup> The threefold division of the law is quite wrong. See my *Christ* pp100-104,392-400. See the chapter: ‘Change of Day and Sleight of Hand’.

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put a stop to any foolish talk among them to the effect that, since they were now converted and liberated, they were free of the universal obligation to submit to rulers. ‘The fact that you are believers’, say the apostles, ‘does not release you from the universal requirement to be submissive to civil authority’. So why do we not get the same for the sabbath? And, don’t forget, bearing in mind that by ‘the Lord’s day’ sabbatarians mean ‘the sabbath’, which scripture tells us that unbelievers have a responsibility to keep the Lord’s day? And which passages show us the apostles preaching to Gentiles – unconverted Gentiles – and declaring the necessity of sabbath observance? Why, they never even preached such thing to converted or unconverted Jews!

***If sabbath-observance is a perpetual obligation for all the human race, why does the apostle declare that the observance of a sacred day is a thing indifferent? And, moreover, why is it that Paul, when writing so firmly against observance of days, including sabbaths, does not, on account of the seriousness of breaking the sabbath, make it clear that, in delivering his dogmatic statements, he exempts the sabbath?***

We know that he did tell some believers that the observance of certain days is a thing indifferent (Rom. 14:5-12), that he rebuked others for ‘observing special days’ (Gal. 4:10), and forbade yet others to let anyone judge them ‘with regard to... a sabbath day’, teaching (reminding) them that it was ‘a shadow’ of Christ (Col. 2:16-17). Well? What of it? Notice what Paul did not do. He said nothing about the sabbath being an exception! But it is unthinkable that Paul would have failed to include an exception clause for the sabbath – if believers are to keep it, that is. Include an exception? He should have been explicit. He should have put the exception up in pulsating lights. He would have done.<sup>2</sup> Sabbatarians do. They devote entire books to promoting the permanency of the sabbath and the necessity of its universal observance. So why – if he was

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<sup>2</sup> Do not forget Paul’s background. As a Jew, he would not have missed the importance of the sabbath – if he had still been a sabbatarian.

still a sabbatarian in the time of the new covenant, a sabbatarian *par excellence* – did Paul omit this obvious requirement? Are we to understand that sabbath-observance is optional for believers but compulsory for unbelievers? If so, that takes us back to the previous point.

In saying this, I am not arguing my case from silence, but just observing that if the apostle was still a sabbatarian after his conversion, then he was being extremely cavalier in the way he wrote. After all, the churches of Rome, Galatia and Colosse were made up of Jewish and Gentile converts. Not only that. We know that the teaching of the Judaisers – with their insistence that (Gentile) believers had to come under the law of Moses (Acts 15:1,5; Gal. 2:4; 5:12) – was rampant throughout the early churches.<sup>3</sup> In light of this, Paul committed a blunder of massive proportions by not demanding sabbath-observance by believers. If he was a sabbatarian, that is!

***If sabbath-observance is a perpetual obligation for all the human race, then pagans will be – and must be – punished for sabbath-breaking.***

If sabbath-observance really is a creation ordinance for all men, then all men are obliged to keep the sabbath. Not only that. All the human race must be exposed to all the punishments for sabbath-breaking. And not only exposed to them. Those punishments must be meted out on all who break the sabbath. There is no getting round this. This is what sabbath-keeping means. Sabbath-breaking is attended with awesome curses. Sabbath-breaking is a most heinous offence; those who break the sabbath (and who does not?) merit the death penalty (Ex.

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<sup>3</sup> If not, why did Paul devote so much time and space to the law, especially seeing he was writing, in the main, to Gentile believers? See Rom. 2:12-29; 4:13-17; 6:14 – 8:4; 9:30 – 10:5; 2 Cor. 3:1 – 4:6; Galatians; Eph. 2:8-18; Phil. 3:2-11; Col. 2:13-23; and so on. In addition, we have the letter to the Hebrews. By the way, the fact that the Judaisers were demanding Gentile submission to the law of Moses, now that the gospel had reached beyond Judaism, proves that the Gentiles never were under the law. Acts 15:21 clearly refers to Jewish practice within the synagogue.

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31:14-15; Num. 15:32-36). It is no use saying that these passages applied to the Jews in the old covenant. So they did. But so did Exodus 20:8-10. So, on the sabbatarian argument it can only mean that when pagans do not keep the sabbath as commanded in Scripture – and who does? – they must be executed. As I have said, I know that sabbatarians feel they can assure believers that they avoid this because Christ has borne the curse for them,<sup>4</sup> but pagans have no such get-out clause, do they? They are not in Christ, they do not have Christ as their curse-bearer, do they? So sabbatarians must be advocating the death penalty for sabbath-breakers, at least for non-Christian sabbath-breakers. If so, who will carry out the inspection, what are the ground rules for that inspection, what measuring-stick will they use, and who will pronounce and carry out the sentence? Will pagans inflict it on fellow-pagans, even on themselves? Or will it fall to believers to do it? And how will believers respond to the exponents of Sharia law when they, in their turn, advocate the execution of those who transgress the Koran?

***If sabbath-observance is a perpetual obligation for all the human race, then all men must be fully conscious of all sabbath regulations and punishments.***

Are pagans obliged to keep the sabbath? Are we really to believe that pagans who lived *before* the time of Christ knew they must rest from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset? and those who have lived *after* the time of Christ have known that they must keep it from Saturday midnight to Sunday midnight? Can anybody tell us of any pagan people who keep the sabbath? or feel guilty for not keeping it? By the way, who told the pagans of the change of day and its hours? Is this knowledge innate? or what?

Since sabbath-observance is such an important matter in Scripture, and the breaking of the sabbath is attended with

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<sup>4</sup> They will say that Christ has removed the curse for believers, leaving the obligation intact, but it will not wash. I refer to my full argument as set out in my *Christ* pp107-108,404-408 in particular – but see the entire volume.

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devastating curses and judgements, we surely need – the pagans, themselves, surely need – the clearest scriptural proof that sabbath-observance is a universal and perpetual demand of God for all the human race without exception. Indeed, this should have been written in the hearts of all men from the word ‘go’ (Rom. 2:14-15). Was it? Is it today?

We know that the Gentiles never were under the law of Moses. The basic ground upon which Scripture condemns pagans is not their breaking the law of Moses – which they were never given – but, rather, that they suppress, warp, ignore and deny the light of nature and conscience, the light that God has placed in every man:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened... Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done... Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them...

God does not show favouritism. All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them). This will take place on

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the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares (Rom. 1:18-21,28,32; 2:11-16).<sup>5</sup>

Of course, more light brings increased responsibility and greater condemnation. But, as the above extracts prove, all men have enough light in nature and conscience to hold them accountable to God. The Jews, of course, having been given the law of Moses, were blameworthy for their disobedience to it, more guilty than Gentiles (Rom. 2:1,17-27). But God will never condemn non-Jews for not obeying a law they have not been given; namely, the Mosaic law. Consequently, since they knew that the Gentiles did not have the law, no biblical preachers ever used the law when addressing pagans.

Indeed, the ultimate sin is the sinner's refusal of the gospel offer and not to trust Christ. As Christ complained:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Matt. 23:37).

You refuse to come to me that you may have life (John 5:40).<sup>6</sup>

And it is not only the Jews. As he explained:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 2:14-15 offers no support for thinking that the Gentiles are under the law as well as Jews. Just to read the verse in its context makes it clear as noonday that while Gentiles have a rudimentary knowledge of right and wrong in the conscience, they certainly do *not* have the law. See my *Christ* pp38-48,342-347.

<sup>6</sup> See also Luke 14:16-24; John 12:31-38.

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because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed (John 3:14-20).

The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day (John 12:48).

In light of this, it is not surprising to find Christ declaring that the source of conviction of sin is not the law but the unbeliever's refusal to submit to him as Saviour and Lord:

When [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin... because they do not believe in me (John 16:8-9).

And the writer to the Hebrews made the position as clear as noonday:

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God... See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven (Heb. 12:15,25).<sup>7</sup>

'Refusing him'? As the apostle made clear, God says:

All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people (Rom. 10:21).

Clearly, from the context of Romans 10, what is said to Israel (Rom. 10:21) the apostle applies to all. God offers Christ to sinners and complains that sinners refuse him, refuse Christ, and this is the condemning sin, the damning sin; this is what the Spirit convinces men of. Never once are we told that the Spirit will convince men of their refusal to obey the Mosaic law, the sabbath in particular.

'Even so', often comes the reply, 'but we know that all men are sinners, and sin is defined as breaking God's law. Take 1

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<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge that these words were written to believers, but: 'It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And: "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"' (1 Pet. 4:17-18).

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John 3:4 (AV): “Sin is the transgression of the law”. And the sabbath, the fourth commandment, is a part of this’. Let me reply. This is a poor, misleading translation. The Greek is: ‘Sin is lawlessness’, and this is how several versions rightly render it (NKJV, NIV, ESV, NASB, for instance). In fact, the AV is almost unique in its gloss. Sadly, it has caused many to go astray, and think that John was referring to the ten commandments.<sup>8</sup> He was not. The truth is, when a man sins, he breaks some command or other (Rom. 4:15). John was setting out a general principle: to sin is to live in an unprincipled way, to transgress, to break, to disobey a law.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, for Israel in the old covenant, the ‘law’ in question would have been the Mosaic law, yes. And we know that he who ‘stumbles in one point... has become guilty of all’ (Jas. 2:10). If a Jew broke any of the ten commands, he broke the other nine as well. Indeed, if he broke any of the 613 commands of the law, he broke the lot, and incurred the appropriate penalty. The law was the law, in its entirety.<sup>10</sup> But, alas, sabbatarians want to impose this law on believers, yet confine it to ten of the commands and, at the same time, broaden it to include the Gentiles, who never had the Mosaic law, yet try to mitigate its punishments. All these desires are sadly misplaced and without scriptural warrant.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In his letters, John never once cites the Mosaic law.

<sup>9</sup> For more on 1 John 3:4, see my *Believers*.

<sup>10</sup> Take the Passover. Those who broke Passover regulations suffered dire penalties akin to those for breaking the sabbath (Num. 9:2-3, 11-14), yet the Passover was not part of the ten commandments.

<sup>11</sup> Sabbatarian use of the law is radically different to Paul’s occasional use of it (Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 5:6-8; 9:7-14; Gal. 5:13-15; Eph. 6:1-3). He occasionally treats it as a paradigm (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14-15; Eph. 6:1-4), and he also refers to parts of it outside the ten commandments by way of illustration (1 Cor. 5:6-8; 9:7-14, and so on). Even so, he is willing to use anything to make his point, including the history of Israel (1 Cor. 10:1-11; see also Rom. 4:23-24; 15:4), nature, common sense or Greek poets (Acts 17:28-29; 1 Cor. 11:14; Tit. 1:12-13). Never did any apostle tell believers that they are under the law of Moses. Indeed, they frequently declared that believers have died to that law. The fact is, the believer has been translated out of the



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Take 1 John 2:4: ‘The one who says: “I have come to know him”, and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him’. While I do not concede that 1 John 2:4 refers to the ten commandments – it clearly refers to Christ’s commandments, the law of Christ – nor do I concede that these verses establish that the ten commandments are perpetually binding on all men, let me accept the sabbatarian point for the sake of argument. Since, on sabbatarian terms, all men *ought* to know that the sabbath is binding upon them – indeed, all men *must* know that the sabbath is binding upon them – and we know that to break the commandments is a sin of a very high order, where is the clear and unequivocal evidence that all men do have this working knowledge, both in their conscience and specifically given to them in Scripture?

So as to leave no room for misunderstanding, speaking for myself simply as a man (not, at this point, speaking as a believer), I need proof that I, as a man, must keep the sabbath, and that if I fail to keep it, I face the death sentence. And I need proof that I know this by nature. In putting it this way, I am speaking for Mr Everyman. Will sabbatarians give us that proof?

These are not idle questions. If sabbatarianism is confined within the covers of a book, it is relatively easy to make sweeping claims for it, but what of the practicalities of the proposed jurisprudence in the real world? As Scripture teaches us, God appointed the death penalty for sabbath desecration. In light of all this, we surely need to have clear answers as to the ground rules I mentioned earlier. Bearing in mind the fearful plight in which all mankind find themselves, surely it would be

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realm of law – letter – and into the realm of the Spirit, having died to the law. This is the glorious teaching of Rom. 6:14 – 8:4. The sabbatarian conception of all this misses the apostle’s point by a long chalk. By reading Rom. 7:4-6 and 2 Cor. 3 aloud – Paul’s setting out of the believer’s glorious condition under the ministry of the Spirit – it will become obvious that the believer has died in Christ to the killing, condemning law (Rom. 7:4-6; 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:6-9; Gal. 2:19; 5:18). This, of course, does not mean that believers live independently of the word of God. See my *Christ pp255-256; Believers*.

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unthinkable that God, the God of infinite love and mercy, would have left men – all men – without the clearest testimony that universal sabbath-observance is essential, and that the breaking of it is attended with the most severe condemnation. Moreover, we should expect to have this testimony found clearly written, not only in Scripture, but in our consciences by the light of nature, should we not? But is it? Does Joe Bloggs or John Doe know that he must keep the sabbath, and if he fails he faces execution? Has God ever told him that? Does his conscience, the light of nature, tell him?

True, all men are accountable since they know there is a God and that he must be worshipped. In this regard, all men are answerable to God. But this is a far cry from knowing that they have an obligation to keep the sabbath. How could any man know *by nature* that God required a weekly sabbath, and that sabbath had to take place sunset to sunset on the last day of each week? How could the Gentiles know that God required them to do no work on that day?<sup>12</sup> Why, the Jews themselves didn't know it until the giving of the manna in Exodus 16! And, of course, in the sabbatarian system, all men today must know *by nature* that, under the new covenant, the day in question, and its hours, have changed. Hmm!

### ***But what about 'the sojourners'? They are included in the sabbath command.***

So they are! But it will not do to cite Exodus 20:10 to try to justify the sabbatarian claim that all men are perpetually obliged to observe the day. The 'sojourner' speaks of proselytes (or the equivalent at that time) – the word 'proselyte' being an anglicisation of the Septuagint use of the word. Proselytes, the God-fearers, the 'worshippers of God' (Acts 13:43; 16:14; 17:4,17; 18:7), kept the sabbath (and underwent circumcision, and complied with the dietary laws, and so on) as part of their acceptance of Judaism, not because they were obliged to observe such things as creation ordinances binding on all men. Incidentally, why, if all men are obliged to keep the sabbath, did God issue a tautology when giving the command to Israel? Did

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<sup>12</sup> And this was precisely the sin in Neh. 13:15-22.

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he need to include the aliens, specifically? Weren't they included already – being part of 'all men'? The fact is, what is involved in being a 'sojourner', a 'stranger', dwelling among the Israelites, is surely set out for us in the regulations for the Passover:

No foreigner is to eat of it. Any slave you have bought may eat of it after you have circumcised him, but a temporary resident and a hired worker may not eat of it... The whole community of Israel must celebrate it. An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you (Ex. 12:43-49).

In other words, these texts have nothing to say about pagans and the sabbath. They are to do with Jewish adherents, would-be Jews, Jewish converts. Such men and women were, of course, obliged to keep the law of Moses. Sabbatarians certainly cannot deduce from such passages that *pagans* are obliged to keep the sabbath.

### ***But what about the sabbath in Nehemiah?***

It will not do to call on the book of Nehemiah to try to establish the obligation of all men to keep the sabbath. Indeed, that book shows us that pagans are *not* obliged to keep the sabbath. Let me explain. Nehemiah saw some Jews breaking the sabbath, and he also saw pagans bringing 'all kinds of goods' into Jerusalem and selling them to the Jews on the sabbath. He reacted strongly to both: he rebuked the Jews for profaning the sabbath, and at the same time he took steps to prevent the pagans from entering the city on that day (Neh. 13:15-22). The episode is highly instructive. Notice how Nehemiah treated the Jews very differently to the pagans. The Jews were breaking God's law which the LORD had given them, whereas Nehemiah merely stopped the pagans from entering the city with their goods. The Jews had to keep the sabbath – God gave it to *them* – but the pagans had to be prevented from interfering with the Jews in *their* observance of the sabbath. What the

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pagans did with the day *outside* the city was their affair, not Nehemiah's. He was concerned with sabbath-observance by the Jews, and only by the Jews. He drove the pagans away when they camped outside the walls – but not for *their* sake. He did it for the sake of the Jews; he wanted the most conducive circumstances possible for *them* to keep the sabbath. The distinction Nehemiah drew between Jews and pagans over sabbath-observance could hardly be more clear. Nehemiah was concerned to guard the gates to keep the pagans out. Why? Because he knew the sabbath applied to the Jews and 'the stranger who is within your gates' (Ex. 20:10).<sup>13</sup> As long as they were outside the gates, the pagans were outside his jurisdiction and outside sabbath-observance. He was concerned with God's 'wrath on *Israel* by [their] profaning the sabbath' (Neh. 13:18).<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, God could complain that Israel did not keep his laws – which he gave them – but 'have done according to the customs of the Gentiles which are all around you' (Ezek. 11:12); they had 'conformed to the standards of the nations around' them. This makes sense only if God's (and Israel's) laws were different to the laws, principles and standards of the pagans.

Before the sabbath episode under Nehemiah, on hearing the law, 'the book of Moses', when it was read to them, the Jews reformed themselves, and separated from the pagans, stopping them from coming into the congregation (Neh. 9:2; 13:1-3). The pagans were not allowed to share in the worship of God or partake of his ordinances, since they had no part in them (cf.

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to be taken literally but metaphorically. It stands for those pagans who converted to Judaism and therefore became virtual Jews, under the authority of Judaism. See my earlier remarks on Ex. 12:43-49.

<sup>14</sup> See the chapter: 'The Sabbath the Old-Covenant Sign for Israel', where I dealt with the fact that the sabbath was a sign of God's covenant with the Jews. The fact that it was such a sign *proves* it must have been a special day for them, for them alone, and not a day for all men. How could it be a sign, a special marker, for Israel, if it belongs to all mankind?

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Ezra 4:1-3). The law's remit ran as far as the purity of Israel, and no further. Furthermore, Nehemiah put a stop to the misuse of the temple involving a pagan (Neh. 13:4-9). After this, he dealt with the failure to provide for the Levites (Neh. 13:10-14). Then came the issue of the breakdown of the sabbath (Neh. 13:15-22). Once this was sorted out, Nehemiah immediately went on to deal with those Jews who had married pagans (Neh. 13:23-31). But in all this, he rebuked no pagan for being a pagan and acting like a pagan. True, he did address pagans (Neh. 13:21), but as I have pointed out, only to stop them interfering with the Jews on the sabbath. He dealt with Jews, he 'commanded *them*' (Neh. 13:9), he 'warned *them*' (Neh. 13:15), he 'contended with the rulers' of the *Jews*, 'the nobles of the *Jews*, and said to *them*' (Neh. 13:11,17), speaking of '*your* fathers... and... *our* God' (Neh. 13:18). As he said: 'Thus I cleansed *them* [*the Jews*] of everything pagan' (Neh. 13:30). He cleansed the Jews from paganism, and got them back to Jewish (biblical) separation, priesthood support, sabbath and marriage. What was true for the sabbath was equally true for Jewish purity, worship and marriage. The pagans only figured in Nehemiah's reforms because it was their practices and presence which had tainted the Jews and their obedience to God.

Years before, Jeremiah had been a precursor of Nehemiah. He had been told to address 'the kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem'. The burden of his message was: 'Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the sabbath day... but hallow the sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers' (Jer. 17:19-22). But the Jews refused, even though God promised them that if they kept the sabbath, then Jerusalem and its surrounding cities, the kings, princes and men of Judah would be blessed in their sacrifices to the LORD, and, on the other hand, warned them that if they continued to refuse, and profaned the sabbath, then Jerusalem would be destroyed (Jer. 17:23-27).

Isaiah said much the same thing, putting it in the positive:

If you turn away your foot from the sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honourable, and shall honour him, not

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doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isa. 58:13-14).

The point is clear. The sabbath was Jewish. If the Jews kept the day, their economy and religion would flourish; if they profaned the day, their system would be blighted. Where did God ever say such things to Gentiles?

So how can sabbatarians allege that all men are obliged to keep the sabbath? Nehemiah did not tell the pagans as much. If it had been the duty of the Gentiles to keep the sabbath, not only would Nehemiah have reminded them of it, but, as we have seen, God himself must have commanded them to keep it – indeed, sabbatarians think he commanded all men so at creation – and he must have told them precisely how they should keep it. Otherwise, it could not have been their duty to observe the day. They could not be blamed for not doing what they had never been told to do. How could they be accountable if they had received no law on the subject? No law? No sin! For ‘sin is not imputed when there is no law’ (Rom. 5:13). I ask again: When did God command the Gentiles to keep the sabbath, and tell them how to keep it? When did God give precise instructions to the Gentiles regarding the sabbath?

The answer is, of course, never. Nehemiah did not rebuke the pagans for breaking sabbath laws. The reason is obvious: the sabbath did not apply to them. And this is not an isolated case. In all the countless passages where the prophets condemned the nations (in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and so on), there is never a hint that God through the prophets ever complained that pagans broke the sabbath. Never a hint! Are we to deduce they all kept it? Or that it did not apply to them? Which is it? God rebuked the Jews when they broke the sabbath. Take Amos who, when he condemned Judah in the name of the LORD, told them why God had punished them; it was ‘because they have despised the law of the LORD, and have not kept his commandments’ (Amos 2:4); and as for Israel, he specifically referred to sabbath offences (Amos 8:2,5). In

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contrast, when addressing any other nation, Amos did not mention God's law.

### ***Further thoughts from the New Testament.***

When we come to the New Testament and read the list of Gentile sins in Romans 1:18-32, sabbath-breaking is conspicuous by its absence. Once again, does this signify that the Gentiles of the time were not sabbath-breakers? If so, it can only mean either they exceeded the Jews in keeping the sabbath – and of this there is no evidence whatsoever; in fact, the notion is risible – or else they never were given, nor were expected to keep, the sabbath. Which is it? And what of Galatians 5:19? 'The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God'. Once again there is no mention of sabbath-breaking. How can sabbatarians account for this? If the sabbath is a perpetual and universal requirement – that is, a duty for all men in all ages – and since the punishment for disobedience is so severe, why is sabbath-breaking missing in this list of 'the acts of the flesh'?

### ***The use of the magistrate – Parliament – to enforce sabbath-observance.***

Some sabbatarians want to bring in Parliament and the magistrate to make and enforce laws to secure sabbath-keeping, and look back with longing to some supposed halcyon day when the UK was 'a Christian country'. But it is all a pipe dream! There is no New Testament warrant for such a role for Parliament or the magistrate; the concept of 'a Christian country' is nothing but unadulterated Christendom – one of the biggest curses Satan ever inflicted on the *ekklēsia* of Christ. Christendom has been responsible for some of the most dreadful curses ever inflicted upon the church (and the world). One of these is to turn the church into a kind of fishing lake in which to gather unbelievers so that they can be evangelised. This notion is utterly foreign to the new covenant. It has also

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produced a horde of nominal but unregenerate Christendom-Christians, men and women who are eternally deceived.

Enforced (or virtually so) sabbatarianism in Britain may have produced ‘quiet Sundays’, which believers of ‘a certain age’ look back upon with nostalgia, but I wonder how many pagans in those days became bitter towards the gospel because the State enforced the wishes of believers (the minority) upon their unwilling fellows. Enforced sabbatarianism certainly might have funnelled Victorian unbelievers into church – many had nowhere else to go which was free, dry and warm when everything else had been shut up by law – and it might have led to the conversion of some, but how many were deluded into thinking they were believers, when they were not, and others effectually hardened against believers, and hence against Christ and his gospel?<sup>15</sup>

Let me bring this up to date. I have been preaching for nearly 60 years, almost entirely in separatist churches (which are supposed to demand a regenerate membership). Even so, most of the churches where I have preached have been plagued by attenders (some for decades, even life-long) who are unregenerate, and utterly hardened to the gospel. I suggest that if an enforced sabbatarianism (enforced by whatever means thought necessary) were to be coupled with the growing emphasis on friendship evangelism and inclusivism – which we see all too evidently about us – we will have brewed a toxic mixture which will lead to the delusion and damnation of countless men and women.

We need to take full cognisance of Paul’s words:

Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish

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<sup>15</sup> I recall, trying to witness to two wallers (men mending a stone wall) in the Dales, I opened the conversation by drawing attention to the large Congregational chapel on the hill in the local village, and speaking of the large numbers that once attended. ‘Yes’, said one of the men. ‘But they had too, didn’t they – if they wanted a job!’ He was referring to the fact that the local employer was a prominent member of the church in those days.



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strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

The world, not least the Moslem world, might well use politics and the sword to advance Islam or whatever, but in order to advance the gospel, believers reject every weapon that is forged in any foundry outside the new covenant. In particular, believers should not adopt the jurisprudence of enforced sabbatarianism, drawn, as it is, entirely from the Mosaic law and the old covenant, bolstered by 1700 years of Constantinian-Christendom teaching and practice.

In short, the idea of an enforced sabbatarianism is not only unbiblical; it is unworkable. Moreover, it is a sharp double-edged weapon, one which is liable to cut the one who uses it, to say nothing of the spiritual damage it might inflict on millions of miserable pagans who suffer under it. That damage might well be eternal.