



TRUE AND FALSE BINDING AND LOOSING

BY BOB DEWAAY

Fifteen years ago we published Issue # 1 of CIC on the topic of binding and loosing.¹ That article was written to correct a false use of the term by those teaching spiritual warfare. We argued that the term binding and loosing concerns entrance into the kingdom, and what is or is not binding on Christians after they have been added to the church. We demonstrated that our interpretation is not unique and that every major scholarly exegesis of this passage also supports this meaning. We also showed how the apostles practiced binding and loosing in Acts 15 when they met to determine if the Law of Moses was binding on converted Gentiles (they determined that it was not). Now it is now time to bring out some important implications and applications of the true meaning of binding and loosing.

The Teaching of Christ and His Apostles is Binding

Jesus Christ gave His apostles the authority to bind and loose on earth according to God's mind (literally "having been bound [or loosed]") as it is in heaven. In other words, the apostles were authorized to speak authoritatively for God and in accordance with the mind of Christ. The power to bind and loose given to the Biblical apostles is also expressed in their being called the foundation of the church: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner

stone" (Ephesians 2:19, 20).² Christ and His apostles alone have the authority to give permanently binding revelation to the church. The record of their binding is contained in the New Testament.

Further evidence for such binding is found in Hebrews: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1, 2). God has spoken authoritatively through Christ, the corner stone of the church. Hebrews also mentions the apostles: "how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (Hebrews 2:3, 4). God has preserved the teachings of Christ the corner stone and the apostles and prophets (the writers of the New Testament), and this serves as the once-for-all laid foundation of the church. The church becomes the "pillar and support of the truth" (1Timothy 3:15b), but the church does not continue to be the ongoing giver of new, binding revelation. That function ceases.

This does not imply, however, that the church ceases to practice binding and loosing. Scripture transmits meaning determined by its Holy Spirit-inspired authors. This meaning is fixed and does not change, even over the centuries. But valid implications and applications of Scripture are derived

from scripture, and these are also binding.³ For example, the New Testament teaches the terms of entrance into the kingdom of God. The preacher may declare those terms to be binding upon any particular sinner and may authoritatively declare, "You have failed God, are facing His wrath, and shall certainly be damned if you do not turn to Christ in faith." This is a valid application of the teachings of Christ and His apostles and is therefore validly binding even though it is not a direct citation of Scripture.

Implications and applications are binding on the grounds that they are controlled by the meaning of Scripture. Since it is possible to misuse Scripture we must be careful lest we falsely bind or loose. For example, people wishing to loose themselves or others from the Bible's prohibition of homosexual behavior have engaged in hermeneutical gymnastics when they suggest that the Bible only prohibits "pederasty" (immorality between an adult male and an adolescent male). This is not a valid interpretation of the pertinent passages (such as Romans 1:26, 27). Only correct Biblical interpretation leads to valid binding and loosing.

False Binding – The Roman Catholic Church

The longest standing and most egregious misuse of binding and loosing (I have it under the section of false binding because Rome has not been prone to loosing anyone) is that of the Roman Catholic Church. They claim that the power to bind and loose was given particularly to Peter and that Peter has successors (the papacy) that may exercise that same power to bind and loose throughout church history and beyond Scripture. Here is how the Roman church states this doctrine:

We teach and define that it is a dogma Divinely revealed that the Roman pontiff when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, by the Divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding faith or morals, and that therefore such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves and not from the consent of the Church irreformable.⁴

Roman Catholic theology takes binding and loosing several steps away from the foundation of Christ and His apostles as expressed in the New Testament writings. Besides investing this power in supposed successors of Peter, they teach that since the church gave us the Scriptures, the church has primacy over the Scriptures. Therefore, they declare that scripture and church tradition are foundational, and they reject the Scripture's declaration of the once-for-all laid foundation that Ephesians speaks of. I believe that God gave us the Scriptures through the work of the Holy Spirit and that this Roman Catholic argument is invalid. The reformers rightly taught "Scripture alone" to counter this claim.

False Binding – The New Apostolic Reformation

Another example of false binding comes to us as the movement known as The New Apostolic Reformation.⁵ The movement's key idea is that God has raised up thousands of end times prophets and apostles who are going to usher in a glorious revival. They claim that the foundation of the church is not the Biblical apostles and prophets, but

the *ministry* of apostles and prophets. The most prominent person in this movement is C. Peter Wagner, formerly of Fuller seminary.

This movement includes a network of many individuals from all over the world. I wrote an article about Rick Joyner (one of the better known prophets of the movement) who claimed to ascend into heaven and talk with various persons there including the apostle Paul.⁶ That article shows that this movement is characterized by mysticism, grandiose claims, false spiritual warfare teachings, and the undermining of Biblical authority.

The latter day apostles and prophets movement is in error concerning binding and loosing in two entirely different ways. First, it teaches the false spiritual warfare version of binding and loosing in which it is supposed that men can "bind territorial spirits" and "loose" whole cities from their influence.⁷ Second, they claim the authority to speak new revelations from God that are binding on the church. An earlier iteration of this movement, the discredited shepherding movement from the 1970's, used a hierarchical process whereby the authority of the movement traced its way down to individual believers who were under a "shepherd" who was under a series of authorities all the way up to the founders of the movement. These authoritative "shepherds" proved abusive as they intruded into every aspect of the private lives of believers, telling them how they must make life choices. The abuses led to the demise of that version of the movement. The present apostles and prophets version claims that they are nothing like the shepherding movement.

However, whenever men claim the authority to speak for God beyond Scripture they are abusive no matter how nice they appear. The apostles and prophets (there are so many thousands of people claiming this status they cannot all be identified) today use tactics other than directly commandeering the lives of individual Christians. They use the fear of "missing God" or "coming under a curse" or some other really bad outcome to keep people submitted to

them. Thus people are "bound" by their decrees, if not by a direct ecclesiastical system of authority, then by the fear of coming under a curse because God is angry at everyone who disregards their claims of authority.⁸ They assume that anyone who disagrees with them on any grounds is thereby in the clutches of Satan. They have stories to reinforce this. Joyner even claims that he met a man in heaven who had died early and was in the lowest ranks of heaven because of resisting the apostles and prophets. By sowing the fear of being cursed, judged, or even killed if one resists the latter day apostles and prophets, they bind Christians to their own decrees.

This false binding is in many ways worse than that of Rome. The Pope speaks *ex cathedra* only rarely and there is only one of him at a time. The latter day apostles are continually multiplying as more people claim apostolic status and no mechanism exists to keep anyone from making such claims. The saints find themselves "bound" by conflicting prophecies. We are warned in scripture not to "fear" false prophets like those who make up this movement and fear is precisely what they dish out.

False Binding – Rick Warren's Oaths

The New Testament teaches against the taking of oaths (Matthew 5:34-46; James 5:12). The taking of special, religious oaths became popular in Roman Catholicism through the monastic system. As we mentioned in the last issue of *CIC*, Martin Luther wrote against such oaths. One reason taking special religious vows is wrong is that the believer who does so is practicing false binding. The person, for example, who takes a vow of obedience to religious superiors, has "bound" himself in an invalid way. We are only bound to the teachings of Christ and His apostles. If we bind ourselves to obedience to the teachings and practices of religious leaders we have departed from the true foundation of the church.

Just as the latter day apostles have

taken it upon themselves to repeat the error of Rome in practicing false binding, so Rick Warren has repeated another Roman Catholic error by bringing back special religious oaths. Rick Warren has created a series of classes (101, 201, 301, and 401) that involve signing a series of covenants (oaths) at completion to go on to the next class and eventually become a fully committed member of Saddleback Church. All members must agree to unity: "At Saddleback Church, every member signs a covenant that includes a promise to protect the unity of our fellowship." This is not an agreement to preserve either the "unity of the Spirit" (Ephesians 4:3) or strive for "the unity of the faith" (Ephesians 4:13), but a signed covenant that includes "following the leaders." Since the terms "covenant" and "oath" are used synonymously in the Bible, Warren is requiring people to take an oath to follow leaders (among other things). He has brought the "oath of obedience" into Protestantism.

The person who takes such an oath is bound in an invalid way. The New Testament does not require us to obey religious leaders under pain of being covenant breakers if we do not obey them. We are only bound to follow anyone's teaching if it validly brings forth implications and applications of Scripture.

The second covenant Warren's church members sign (from class 201) includes tithing.⁹ He has them sign a card they will carry: "The signed covenant cards are collected, I sign them as a witness, we laminate them, and then they are returned so people can carry them in their wallets."¹⁰ There is a picture of one of these in his book.¹¹ One side of the card includes: "My 1992 Growth Covenant," "A weekly tithe to God," and "Giving the first 10% of my income." But tithing is not binding under the New Covenant. By requiring people to enter into a binding covenant to tithe to the church, Rick Warren is practicing false binding and has made himself a lawgiver. Furthermore, by requiring such oaths Warren is practicing false "loosing."

Jesus bound us to His teaching not to make an oath and Warren has loosed the flock from Jesus' teaching.

On April 17, 2005, Rick Warren had 30,000 people stand at Saddleback Church's 25th anniversary celebration and make a covenant to express a "radical commitment to this global spiritual revolution."¹² The revolution is a planned "new spiritual reformation."¹³ Warren further used the occasion to rally the troops to engage in his P.E.A.C.E. plan to wipe out world problems like poverty and disease.¹⁴ He bound his followers by oath to engage in a mission that was not given by Christ and His apostles. This also is false binding. It is interesting that both the new apostolic movement and Rick Warren's P.E.A.C.E. plan are billed as "reformations." The real Reformation delivered the church from the false binding of Rome to the truly binding teachings of the Bible. "Reformations" that attack the true Reformation on this point of binding and loosing are false; we should avoid them.

False Binding –Judaizers

In the book of Galatians, Paul dealt with a heresy that claimed that new covenant believers were bound to the Law of Moses and were required to submit to circumcision and other old covenant laws in order to be saved. Paul anathematized this teaching. Sadly, Judaizers still exist and are going about practicing the same false binding that characterized those of the first century.

To find the teachings of modern day Judaizers one only has to type in "Torah only Christians" in Google. Here is one result that pops up:

The "million dollar question" that has successfully split the Messianic movement today is: Are Gentiles required to keep Torah? And the answer is a resounding, "YES!" God gave the Torah to His people Israel to tell them how to live their lives and how to relate to Him. Yeshua was Torah observant and neither He nor His disciples ever negated

Torah in any way. Therefore, **anyone** who chooses to believe in Yeshua is obligated to follow Torah to the best of his abilities. It doesn't matter whether you are a Jew or Gentile; in order to please God, you **must** be Torah-observant.¹⁵

The modern day Judaizers shamelessly bind Christians to food laws, Sabbath observance, circumcision and other matters that Christ and His apostles loosed us from. Their error is quite obvious, but that does not keep them from deceiving many people with their false binding.

False Loosing – The Emergent Church

Outside of traditional, theological liberalism, the Emergent Church is the most prominent Christian movement today that is characterized by loosing Christians from the authority of Christ and His apostles as expressed in Scripture. Their leaders do this in various ways, most of which arise from questioning the possibility of knowing the meaning of Scripture in a non-relativistic way (i.e., other than having a private meaning as in "what it means to me"). Here's what I mean: They hide under the guise of postmodern theology, a thought process that questions whether we can ever know anything in a valid, binding way. Then, it stands to reason that if we cannot know the meaning of the Spirit-inspired Biblical authors, we cannot bind anyone to it. They also question the clarity of Scripture using arguments that suggest that words written hundreds of years ago cannot transmit the author's meaning to people today. When the meaning remains unknown, valid implications and applications cannot be made; thus the contemporary reader of the Bible is "loosed" from everything it says.

Doug Pagitt in his book on preaching warns against what he calls "speaching" (authoritative preaching from God's word). Pagitt sees bad motives behind preachers who would bind anyone to the teachings of scripture:

At the heart of the resistance to progressional dialogue [a process where everyone gets a say about their impressions of a passage] as a legitimate method of preaching is the question of control. The speaking act allows for the preacher not only to control the content, but also to apply the sermon to people's lives. . . . Is it possible that this kind of phrase [a ball hog in basketball] could also apply to pastors who do all the studying, all the talking, and even have the gall to think they can apply the messages they create to the lives of other people?¹⁶

Pagitt mischaracterizes what it means to apply the teachings of the Bible, binding people to them. In fact, according to the Biblical model, the preacher doesn't control the meaning of the text; the Biblical authors do. The preacher's words are binding only if they express valid implications and applications of Scripture based on the one meaning of the passage which was determined by the Spirit-inspired authors. Pagitt finds meaning in the process of discussion which is not based on applying a hermeneutic that validly determines the author's meaning, but in the process of dialogue itself. So for him, the readers, not the author, determine the meaning.

Saying that one who applies the teachings of Christ and His apostles in a binding way to Christians is a "ball hog" with "gall" is equivalent to loosing the church from the implications and applications that derive from the meaning of scripture. Furthermore, the claim that preachers (Pagitt uses a long section from Martin Lloyd-Jones to illustrate the approach to preaching Pagitt rejects¹⁷) who bind their hearers to the authoritative teachings of the Bible have suspect motives is an invalid *ad hominem* argument. I reject his position.

In fact, some preachers actually take Paul's teachings as binding on their own ministries and therefore obey passages like this:

preach the word; be ready in season

and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (2Timothy 4:2-4)

So we are commanded to authoritative-ly apply the Bible to people's lives; but Pagitt effectively is counseling us to be loosed from Paul's authoritative teachings.

Furthermore, Pagitt's view of the Bible reveals an approach far different from the one evangelicals have held in the past:

The contemporary church makes two mistakes regarding the function and relationship of the Bible. One is to think of her [Pagitt calls the Bible "she" and "her"] as a stagnant telling of all the desires of God. The other is to think of her as something from which we extract truth, whether in the form of moral teaching or propositional statements.¹⁸

This statement reveals a neo-orthodox view of Scripture which in the end is a fancy way of saying the reader determines the meaning of the Bible. When the reader determines the meaning, then readers are all loosed from any binding teaching from the Biblical authors. Learning the Biblical author's one true meaning is no longer considered a worthy goal of Biblical interpretation.

False Loosing – Theological Liberalism

Though I consider the Emergent Church to be an expression of theological liberalism,¹⁹ traditional liberalism deserves to be considered as a separate category. Based on various theories about the nature of Scripture, liberals doubted that one could expect to find

true propositions about God, man and salvation and apply them to people today. The reasons for these doubts varied. Some wanted to "de-mythologize" the Bible on the grounds that modern people could not be expected to believe in demons, angels, and talking serpents. Liberalism has also been known for an anti-supernatural bias that lead to doubting even central Christian doctrines such as the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Historical liberalism often turned to the teaching of Jesus to find a Christian ethic in the absence of any doctrine of the atonement, justification, a literal heaven and hell and other such Christian teachings. The Bible could be mined to find ethical gems that could be used to construct a Christian ethic (leading to the idea that the Bible contains the word of God and the liberal scholars would determine which teachings should be taken as God's word). The reality of the history of liberalism is more complex than this but the result is always the same: people are loosed from the teachings of Christ and His apostles. In their system, most of the teachings of the Bible could be safely ignored. In recent years, liberalism has taken a more radical turn and even the moral teachings of the Bible are rejected. This results in the promotion of gay marriage and other such evils.

False Loosing – Hyper-Dispensationalism

There is a teaching that has been around for over 50 years that claims that Paul had a different gospel than Peter and that most of the teachings found in the gospels and early in Acts are not for the Gentile church, but just the Jews. The Jews were offered a kingdom in which those teachings would be binding, but when they rejected the kingdom offer, it was withdrawn and Paul was raised up with his unique "gospel of grace." The reason I call this false loosing, is that this teaching actually looses the church from the teachings of Jesus, including the Great Commission.

For example, C. R. Stam claims the

Great Commission does not apply to the church: "This so-called 'great commission' is generally supposed to embody our Lord's 'marching orders' to His church today."²⁰ The hyper-dispenstational²¹ teaching claims that none of the various commissions of Jesus are binding on the church today. Stam writes, "What a mistake to call this '*the great commission*' and '*our marching orders*.'! How pathetic to see sincere believers vainly trying to carry out this commission and these orders!"²² Stam and others who follow this theology teach that water baptism is not for the Christian church. When Jesus said, "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you," that would be "legalism" if we tried to apply it to the church.²³ So, according to this theology, the teachings of Jesus, the head of the church, are not binding on the church. This is a clear example of false loosing.

If we consider the implications of this theology further, we see it leads to some very questionable conclusions. For example, when Jesus taught us to love our enemies (**Matthew 5:44**) we can supposedly safely ignore Him because that passage is not binding on the church. But when Paul taught the same thing in **Romans 12:18-21** his teaching is binding. So rather than having the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ the cornerstone as the foundation of the church, one is left with Paul as the foundation because the other apostles supposedly only had a message for Jews about a kingdom that was never instituted. This claim is disproved by the following passage that says the "mystery" (that God was going to save Gentiles through the gospel) was revealed not just to Paul, but the other apostles:

*And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to **His holy apostles and prophets** in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through*

*the gospel, (**Ephesians 3:4-6**)*

These "apostles and prophets" who with Christ as the cornerstone are the foundation of the church, are the same ones mentioned in **Ephesians 2:20**. If Christ's teachings and those of other apostles besides Paul were not binding on the church, Paul was obviously unaware of it.

According to hyper-dispensationalism, only part of the New Testament is binding on Christians and that part is determined using a contrived system of interpretation that results in Jesus' teachings being null and void until some later date. But Jesus said this: "*Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven*" (**Matthew 5:19**). He warned us not to do the very thing hyper-dispensationalists do.

The Importance of Hermeneutics

The most important principle in hermeneutics is that the author determines the meaning. Ignoring that principle makes valid binding and loosing impossible. Let me give an example. The hyper-dispensationalists reject the Great Commission no matter what gospel it is found in. In the case of Luke, repentance is stressed: "*and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem*" (**Luke 24:47**). Luke/Acts is a two volume work and the theme of repentance is found throughout. Early in Luke, John the Baptist says to Jews: "*Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham*" (**Luke 3:8**). To show the continuity of Luke's theme, at the end of Acts Paul describes his own message to the Gentiles in terms reminiscent of those of John the Baptist: "*but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout*

all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (**Acts 26:20**). So we see thematic unity in Luke/Acts.

Furthermore, after repentance is emphasized in the Great Commission as found in Luke, Peter preaches repentance (**Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19; Acts 5:31**) and Paul preaches repentance (**Acts 17:30; Acts 20:21; Acts 26:20**). In Luke, besides John the Baptist, Jesus preached repentance (**Luke 5:32; Luke 13:3, 5; Luke 15:7**). The most important people in Luke/Acts, upon whom the Holy Spirit fell, preached repentance. This was preached to both Jews and Gentiles. God also "granted" repentance to the God fearing Gentiles (**Acts 11:18**). So if the principle of authorial intent means anything, Luke (inspired by the Holy Spirit) intends his readers to know that repentance for forgiveness of sins is to be preached. Therefore those who "loose" the church from **Luke 24:47** by claiming that it no longer applies, do so by ignoring Luke's intended meaning. Bad theology begins with a hermeneutic that fails to be concerned with the meaning of the Biblical authors.

We need to use whatever tools are available to make sure we understand the Biblical authors' meaning when we study the text.²⁴ Because knowing that meaning is the only way we can practice valid binding and loosing. Believers need to be equipped so that they can understand and apply the Bible. Lacking that ability will make them vulnerable to false binding and loosing like we have described here.

Conclusion

I believe that Jesus will indeed return and set up His millennial reign on the earth. When He does He shall rule directly. Until that time, the kingdom of God gains citizens as people are converted through the gospel. During the entire period from Pentecost until the return of Christ, the acceptable conduct of the citizens of the kingdom is determined through binding and loosing based on the authoritative teachings of

Christ and His apostles. Anything that adds or subtracts from this is false binding and loosing. Christians should only submit to what is validly binding, not the teachings of man.

End Notes

1. Which can be found at www.cicministry.org or there is an updated, rewritten version here: http://www.christianworldviewnetwork.com/article.php/1898/Bob_DeWaay
2. I defend and explain my interpretation of this passage as referring to the authoritative, Biblical apostles and prophets here: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue66.htm> (CIC Issue 66)
3. I explain and defend this view here: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue95.htm> (CIC Issue 95)
4. www.newadvent.org/cathen/05677a.htm (the New Advent Catholic encyclopedia).
5. For an explanation of this movement: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue66b.htm> (CIC Issue 66b by Orrel Steinkamp)
6. <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue71.htm> (CIC Issue 71)
7. See <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue48.htm> (CIC Issue 48) that exposes the error of these teachings.
8. All that I am saying here I know by my own experiences with the movement and the eyewitness accounts of many others who have been in it.
9. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 331-382.
10. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 167; and Warren *The Purpose Driven Church* 321.
11. Warren, *Church* 321.
12. Warren, *Church*, 349.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. 350.
15. <http://www.pastors.com/RWMT/default.asp?id=203&artid=8205&expand=1>
16. <http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/AboutUs/SaddlebackAnniversary.htm>
17. <http://www.assistnews.net/stories/s05040087.htm>
18. http://www.therefinersfire.org/should_genes_keep_torah.htm
19. Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined – The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith*; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 123.
20. Ibid. 114 – 117.
21. Ibid. 44.
22. I defend that view here: www.christianworldviewnetwork.com/article.php/2096/Bob_DeWaay
23. C. R. Stam, *Things That Differ*; (Germantown, WI: The Berean Bible Society, 1996; originally from 1959) 169.
24. This term is used of them by critics such as myself; they call themselves “mid-Acts” dispensationalists. Les Feldick has popularized this theological system by teaching it on radio and TV.
25. Stam, 182.
26. Ibid. 183.
27. We have a hermeneutics class on our Web site that will help one learn these principles: www.twincityfellowship.com/hermeneutics.php

Entering True Sabbath Rest -- *Understanding the Christian's Relationship to the Sabbath* by Ryan Habbena

A few years ago an area pastor took out advertisements in one of our local Christian periodicals. These ads issued both a proclamation and a challenge: “Christians are required to observe the Sabbath on Saturdays, and I invite anyone to debate me on this subject.” The challenge was eventually accepted, and I proceeded to attend the public debate. At the time of this debate I was engaged in expository work on both Galatians and Hebrews. As I listened to these two men debate the issues, I compared their views to what I was learning through my studies. What struck me was this: the theological issues that the first century church struggled against are just as pressing 2,000 years later.

Perhaps you have read the commands to observe the Sabbath in the Old Testament and asked yourself “How does this command apply to me?” The history of biblical interpretation has produced

several answers to this question. Many teach that Christians are called to keep the Sabbath, in the sense that the Old Covenant commands (i.e., no work on the seventh day of the week [Saturday]). These teachers are quick to point out that Sabbath keeping is one of the “Ten Commandments.” They argue “Since we believe that the commands against murder, stealing, and adultery are still binding, why should we think the command of Sabbath keeping has been abolished?”¹

In this article I will demonstrate that the New Testament teaches that true “Sabbath rest” is not found through obeying an Old Covenant ordinance, but rather through trusting in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ. Since the teaching of the New Testament is primary, let us now explore the teaching of Christ and His commissioned apostles regarding the place of the Sabbath in the Christian life.

Entering True Sabbath Rest

The first text we will interact with is in the book of Hebrews. The entire thrust of the book of Hebrews is to exhort Christians to remain in the perfect, completed work of Jesus Christ and not return to the elements of the Mosaic Covenant. In fact, the Messiah and his work are described as being greater than all that was held dear under the Old Covenant: Moses, the priesthood, angels, sacrifices, and *the Sabbath*. In chapter four of this epistle we are granted keen insight into the New Covenant view of “Sabbath.”

The precept of “the Sabbath” is related by the Spirit-led author to the promise of entering God’s eternal, enduring rest. He declares that those who refuse to listen to God’s word of salvation *will never enter* (see 3:11, 19) and those who listen and believe the message brought by His Son *have already entered*.

He writes:

Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. For we who have believed enter that rest. (Hebrews 4:1-3a)

Consider that the *means* of entering God's "Sabbath rest" is *belief*. The faithful are at rest, not through the works of the Law, but rather through faith in Jesus. The author of Hebrews continues to note "the Sabbath" rest that we find in the New Covenant: "So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His" (Hebrews 4:9-10). The Sabbath day observance, like the Old Covenant sacrifices and the priesthood, pointed towards the day when God's people would find rest for their weary souls through the power of the cross. Jesus fulfilled the Law and we who believe have entered true Sabbath rest.

In light of these precepts we must always remember Paul's exhortation to the Colossian church, who were being troubled by those who advocated a return to the elements of the Old Covenant:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)

These are powerfully instructive words. The elements of the Old Covenant were *shadows* of the Savior. Since the substance, Jesus, has come and fulfilled the Law, we dare not return to the shadows.

In a related text, Paul, in writing to the Galatians, was so distressed by those who were returning to elements of the Old Covenant rather than remaining in the simplicity of faith in Christ, that he severely admonished them, stating:

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. (Galatians 4:9-11)²

We are warned not to return to the shadows of the Old Covenant, or fear those who would judge us for not observing them. Instead, our fear should be directed elsewhere. The author of Hebrews continues: "Let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it" (Hebrews 4:1).

When we consider the intent of the book of Hebrews and its implications, we encounter a subtle irony. We, as readers, are warned not to return to the elements of the Old Covenant because of the great salvation that has arrived, superseding the Mosaic Law (see Hebrews 1:1-3, 3:1-6, 8:6). If one adheres to observing the Sabbath as a *necessary means* of being at peace with God, they are falling short of entering His rest.³ They have become "Sabbath-breakers" because they have not entered true rest through belief in the terms of the New Covenant established by Christ and His apostles. On the other hand, those who believe in Christ and His work alone as the way to peace with God have entered the eternal rest brought about by His blood. By His grace, these are the true "Sabbath-keepers." That is irony.

Saturday, Sunday, Any Day?

Given the centuries of Jewish tradition preceding the coming of Christ, it is not surprising that this teaching of the New Testament caused great controversy in the Jewish culture of the time. As the controversy crept its way into the church, questions arose: When should we worship? How should we view those who set aside a specific day for worship? How should we view those who see all days alike? These questions have continued to be asked throughout the age of the church and have received a wide

range of answers.

In Romans 14, the Apostle Paul answered these inquiries in this way:

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. (Romans 14:4-5)⁴

If Paul wanted to command mandatory Sabbath keeping for New Covenant Christians, this was the perfect place to do so. One of the issues he addressed in this text was "regarding one day above another" referring to days of worship. Yet rather than command a specific, binding day of worship, the Apostle, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, established something different: *Freedom* in worship under the New Covenant.

Some time ago in a debate about mandatory Sabbath keeping, I challenged my opponent with this passage and its implications. He replied: "Peter tells us that Paul often writes things that are hard to understand. This passage is one of them."⁵ While his comment was cleverly elusive, his response spoke volumes: He had no good answer to this text.

Sunday "Sabbath?"

Beyond teaching that there is no mandatory Saturday Sabbath observance under the New Covenant, this text also implies there is no mandatory *Sunday* "Sabbath." Some have answered the Sabbath question by asserting that the Sabbath has been moved from Saturday to Sunday in light of Jesus' resurrection. An example of this is the so-called "Puritan Sabbath." M. James Sawyer explains some of its dynamics:

The Puritans established a Christian Sabbath (Sunday) during which Christians must "not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the whole time,

in the public and private exercises of [God's] worship and the duties of necessity and mercy." The Puritans saw this Sabbath as binding and honored it with the utmost seriousness. In fact, they believed so strongly in Sabbath adherence that they thought natural disasters resulted from a lack of obedience.⁶

To address this teaching, it is significant to note that there is no text in the New Testament where the authors equate the first day of the week (Sunday or "the Lord's day") with the Sabbath. When this is considered along with Paul's teaching regarding days of worship in Romans 14, it is well established that there is no binding command to New Covenant believers to worship on a specific day. Instead, Christians are given freedom in the Gospel to gather and worship according to their conscience. Yet, do not misunderstand, it is essential that we worship and gather, "not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:25) Yet, under the New Covenant, we are free as to when we engage in worship, and are called to not impose our personal conscience upon others. If a community desires to gather, rest, and worship on Saturday, they are free to do so. The same applies to Sunday. The perilous practice we need to avoid is mandating that all Christians *must* observe a specific day.

Resting in Jesus' Perfect Work

Many hearts become troubled by those who advocate the need for a Christian to observe the Old Covenant Sabbath. Misguided teachings such as the following do such:

The overwhelming evidence of the Bible and history proves that the Seventh day Sabbath—Saturday today—is the true day of rest and worship of God. God puts His presence into that day. He fellowships with His people on that day, as well as, the annual holy days which, He has com-

manded to be observed in worship of Him. Now that you have this knowledge and God holds you responsible for it, what will you do? Jesus Christ commands, "Repent and believe the Gospel." Will you repent sins [sic] and turn to God, or will you continue in your sins? Your eternal life, or eternal death is at stake.⁷

On the contrary, we must *never* allow such distorted views of salvation to eclipse our view of Jesus' perfect, finished work.

Whenever I have debated the "Sabbath" issue with those who believe we are required to observe it to be pleasing to God, I am grieved by their focus: Jesus and his perfect work are minimized and in its stead is a misplaced zeal for the Law of Moses. We well remember that:

What the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3-4)

Since our King has come and fulfilled the Law, we need to continue to rely on Him for salvation, sanctification, and security. When we meet people who condemn us as not pleasing to God because we do not obey the Old Covenant Sabbath observance, we should announce to them the Gospel of grace and keep our eyes fixed on the all sufficient Savior. We will then know what it means to heed Jesus' invitation:

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28-29)

End Notes

1. The short, proper answer to this objection is that the *whole* Law is fulfilled in Christ and His work. We who believe then proceed to

live our lives according to His word through the teaching of the New Covenant.

2. De Lacey rightly concludes regarding this passage: "The situation seems to have been that Paul viewed any attempt to impose Sabbath keeping (or indeed the keeping of any regular festivals of the Jewish or astrological calendars) upon Gentiles as wrong, and any tendency on the part of converts to submit to this coercion as a retrograde step." D.C. Delacy, "The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus" in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D.A. Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999) 181.
3. In the book of Galatians, Paul makes a parallel point. Those who are preaching (and receiving) a different gospel than "Paul's Gospel," are anathematized because they have insisted on the necessity of receiving circumcision for justification (Galatians 1:6-9, 5:1-4). As noted above, the Sabbath is implicated in Galatians as well.
4. "The balance of probability, then, is in favor of the Sabbath being included in the days of Romans 14:5. Paul allows that the keeping of such days is purely a matter of individual conscience." De Lacey, 182.
5. The passage he was alluding to was 2 Peter 3:16.
6. M. James Sawyer, *The Survivor's Guide to Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 323. It is notable that the much of Puritan thought had the view that they were the "New Israel" with this producing "replacement theology" in portions of their doctrine and practice. Thus, "Sunday Sabbath" replacing "Saturday Sabbath" is part of this paradigm.
7. http://www.cbcbg.org/true_sabbath_4.htm accessed October 1, 2007.

Critical Issues Commentary

copyright © 2007

Twin City Fellowship
P.O. Box 26127
St. Louis Park, MN 55426
952-935-3100
www.twincityfellowship.com
www.cicministry.org

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by Permission