

ARE CHRISTIANS BOUND TO KEEP THE SABBATH LAW?

OF all the divers laws and ordinances enacted by God through Moses the prophet, the Sabbath Law was one of those the breaking of which carried capital punishment. But the advent of Jesus Christ brought a modification of the law and, subsequently, the understanding that the Sabbath was among those things which were a shadow of things to come.

The sabbath day was the seventh day of the week on which the children of Israel were by law enjoined to refrain from all kinds of work. This was one of the Ten Commandments. God said: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it." – Exodus 20: 8-11.

Stringent Law

It was a requirement of the law that no fire should be kindled on the sabbath day. The law was stringent, and the penalty for breaking it was death. In Exodus 35: 2-3, it is written: "Six days shall work be done but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a sabbath of rest to the LORD: whosoever doeth work therein shall be put to death. Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day."

There was an occasion when the children of Israel were in the wilderness that a certain man who was gathering sticks on the sabbath day was caught. The man was brought before Moses and Aaron, and all the congregation of the people. He was found guilty, and God's sentence was this: "The man shall be surely put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp." Indeed this sentence of the Lord was at once executed. – Numbers 15: 32-36.

After the return of the Jews from Babylonish captivity, the faithful observed the sabbath law with all seriousness. Trading on the sabbath day was prohibited. (Nehemiah 10: 31) It happened at one time that when Nehemiah the prophet took notice that some of the Jews violated the sabbath by making purchases on that day, he strongly objected. And because of the misconduct of the people in this regard, he ordered that the gates of Jerusalem should be shut and should not be opened until the sabbath was over.

Here is his own record:

"In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, what evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that

they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day.” – Nehemiah 13:15-17.

Modification

Long before Jesus Christ was born on the earth, the prophet Moses, moved by the Spirit of God, had told the nation of Israel in a prophecy concerning him (Christ) thus: “The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from among the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken.” – Deuteronomy 18: 15.

As a matter of fact, the advent of Jesus Christ brought about a change from the old to the new covenant. It was because the unbelieving Jews in his days ignored the prophetic instruction about the expected Messiah – the Greater Prophet – that they failed to recognise or acknowledge the pre-eminent position of Jesus Christ. In John 1: 17, it is written: “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.”

By virtue of the authority God gave to Jesus Christ, he modified the Sabbath Law. There was never a time he taught his disciples to keep the sabbath. Rather, he showed – by precept and example – that for doing any good work on the sabbath day no one deserved to be punished.

One of the things that often brought conflict between Jesus Christ and the fanatical Jews was the question of the Sabbath. He did good works on the Sabbath day and even allowed his disciples “to pluck ears of corn, and to eat”, which according to the Pharisees was “not lawful to do upon the Sabbath day” – Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28.

In the synagogue of the Jews into which he went there was a man with a withered hand. And when the Pharisees asked whether it was lawful to heal a man on the sabbath day in order to find fault with him, he answered: “What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much more then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.” – Matthew 12: 9-12. See also Mark 3: 1-5.

There was another occasion when Jesus Christ, on the sabbath day, cured an impotent man at the pool of Bethesda. Instead of the Jews to glorify God and rejoice with the man who was cured, they harassed him saying, “It is the sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed.” But the poor fellow replied, “He that made me whole, the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk.” (John 5: 1-11) And when the hardhearted Jews knew that it was Jesus who cured the man, they persecuted him “and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day”. (verses 15, 16) Notwithstanding, Jesus defended himself and justified his action by saying, “My Father has never yet ceased His work, and I am working too.” – verse 17, New English Bible.

Moreover, none of the apostles of Jesus Christ ever enjoined the Christian believers to observe the sabbath. When the council of the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem sent word to the Gentile converts at Antioch, Syria and Cilicia as to what they should do, they did not ask them to keep the sabbath. – Acts 15: 22-31.

Shadow

That the sabbath law was among those Ordinances blotted out by Jesus Christ, as stated by St Paul, is beyond argument. For this reason the apostle admonished: "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." – Colossians 2: 14-17.

The bottom has been knocked off the argument of those who hold that Christians should keep the sabbath. It is wrong to stick to the demands of the Mosaic law instead of the truth and faith of Jesus Christ. St. Paul showed clearly that the law served as a kind of tutor to lead the Jews to Christ and that since he (Christ) had come "we are no longer under a schoolmaster". (Galatians 3: 23-25) He also said: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ..." – Galatians 2: 16.

Among the churches that claim to be keeping the Sabbath, there is disagreement as to whether Saturday or Sunday is the sabbath day. There should be no dispute over this if men would be true to themselves. The seventh day of the week, according to the Bible (Exodus 20: 10,11), which is Saturday, is the sabbath day. In his Encyclopedia of Religion and Religions, E. Royston Pike, an ecclesiastical scholar, stated: "Among Jews the sabbath is reckoned from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset." (Page 332).

Sunday Observance

The change of the sabbath from Saturday to Sunday was made by Constantine, a Roman emperor. He made a law in 321 A.D. for the observance of Sunday throughout the Roman Empire. About this, Frank Loris Peterson wrote: "Seeking to please both the Christians. Who observed the seventh-day Sabbath, and the pagans, who worshipped the sun on the first day of the week, he (Constantine) 'artfully balanced the hopes and fears of his subjects by publishing in the same year two edicts, the first of which enjoined the solemn observance of Sunday, and the second directed the regular consultation of the Aruspices (a pagan practice).'" (The Hope of the Race, pages 110-111). His quotation was from the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon.

Concerning the Sunday observance, The American Peoples Encyclopedia states: "Historically, Sunday came to be identified with the Sabbath, specifically in regard to its observance. The Emperor Constantine's decree A.D. 321, making Sunday a day of rest from general labor, but providing for exceptions, such as keeping open the market place, is an example of civil laws regulating the day's observance after Christianity had become a legal religion." (Vol. 16, page 845).

The teaching that Christians, as the Explanatory Catechism says, are "commanded to keep the Sunday holy" is a distortion of Bible truth. Many of the wrongs in Christendom sprang from the imposition of Roman paganism upon Christian practices.

People know that those claiming to be keeping the sabbath – Saturday or Sunday – are deceiving themselves. If we are to go by the terms of the sabbath law, we do not think that any of the so-called sabbath – keepers would be living since the penalty for breaking it was death. Do some not go to the offices to work on Sundays or Saturdays? Do they not kindle fire, make purchases or do some other works? If they don't, granted, what about their children, servants, or domestic animals? The law says, "Thou shalt not do ANY work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates." – Exodus 20: 10.

However, the vital point we must emphasise, is that Christians are not bound to keep the sabbath-be it Saturday or Sunday. One is free to rest oneself any day. The law of faith and grace under Christ does not tie anyone to a particular day to rest. The sabbath is not to control us; and Jesus Christ told the Pharisees: "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath." – Mark 2: 27-28.

Real Rest

The word sabbath means rest. The time for the real rest or sabbath that God promised His true worshippers, of which the Mosaic sabbath was a type, has not come. That will be in God's Kingdom fully established, and it is towards that rest we as Christians are labouring. Concerning that antitypical rest, St. Paul wrote: "For if Jesus (that is, Joshua) had given them (the Jews) rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God...Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, least any man fall after the same example of unbelief." – Hebrews 4: 8-11.

Jesus Christ, the Leader and Master of Christians, worked on the sabbath day. If therefore his disciples work on the sabbath day, they do not break God's law since Jesus Christ whom Moses told the Jews to look to and obey, has amended the law. "The sabbath", said he, "was made for man and not man for the sabbath." This is the truth and it is clear.