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This is a review of the article called “The Christian Sabbath,” which was published in the reformed theological review: May-August, 1983, written by a scholar named G.N. Davies.

In this article, the Christian Sabbath, G.N. Davies looks at two scholarly views on the nature of the biblical Sabbath and suggests a third alternative to show why he believes that Christians are not obligated to keep the seventh-day Sabbath as a worship day. In this review, we will look at the three positions. In other words, we will summarize the essential of this article, briefly analyzing the three alternatives on the nature of the biblical Sabbath. Then, we will draw our own conclusion and provide some application pertaining to the perennity of the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship.

G. N. Davies succinctly talked about a well-documented survey of the historical and biblical data surrounding both Sabbath and Sunday observance, a work published by a group of scholars, among them the well-known: Dr. D.A Carson. In this document, as G.N. Davies points out, the scholars argue and conclude that the fourth commandment has been annulled by the work of Christ. The emergence of the Lord’s day testifies of that abrogation. The redemptive work of Christ has created room for a new day, where Christians now can worship on the risen Lord’s day, Sunday instead of Saturday. G.N. Davies does not believe the day should be centered on worship more than it should be on rest from labours, since that day become the Christian Sabbath.

Then, G. N. Davies mentions the second view, which comes from the hand of R. T. Beckwith and W. Scott. This view stipulates that seventh-day Sabbath has been transferred to the first day of the week and should be kept by all Christians as a day of rest and worship. This understanding of the Lord’s Day, argues Davies, has gained Creedal authority in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643) and in that way, has been convincing in England, Scotland, as well as the USA. Dr. Davies is not convinced nor agreed with these two views and thereby proposes a third alternative.

Dr. Davies contends that the first two views have a common ground. They both believe and propel a new day of worship under the new covenant dispensation. He proposes a third alternative: In the new age of the Spirit, Christians are not called to keep a day of worship, but a day of rest. And that that day, he argues, could be any day. Christians can still gather to worship, and the day of rest could be so designed for worship. But such gatherings, he affirms, are not necessarily application of the fourth commandment.

Dr. Davies has faith that the sacral aspect of the Sabbath in terms of what he calls “cultic acts of worship” has been fulfilled in Christ. He advances that the primary aspect of the Sabbath rest, in anticipation of the eschatological rest to come, is still to be kept on a weekly basis. To support his premise, he looks at Sabbath as Creation Ordinance and redemption ordinance.

Based on Genesis 2:1,2, Dr. Davies sees the institution of the Sabbath as creation ordinance, although, he says, there is no specific command to observe a weekly rest. He believes that the day was given for rest not for worship. God, knowing that Adam would need to rest from labours, he thinks, gives the day to help human family from exhaustion. So, Dr. Davies mentions the two states that Adam would have to go through: the Psychical state and the Pneumatic state. The psychical state is the physical state. When Adam sins, says Dr. Davies, he lost his original righteousness, his ability not to sin, and there by all hope of gaining the pneumatic, which is the spirit state, apart from redemption. Therefore, he concludes the Sabbath rest remains, but not as a day of worship. In addition, he reasons that we must recognize the absence of any cultic act of worship on the Sabbath as originally given. In other words, God did not specify the day as a day of worship in Genesis. He puts it this way, “We must not read back into the Creation Sabbath a day of worship, as it was later to become under the Mosaic economy. The sanctification of the seventh day for Adam was unto rest. It was a holy day, in that it was to be set apart from the other six days of the week. The contrast was clearly between labour and rest, and not between labour and worhip.”

Dr. Davies also looks at the Sabbath as redemption ordinance. Based on Deuteronomy 5:12-15, he acknowledges the fact that the day has to be kept not only because of the rest that God had in store for His people before the fall, but also because God has intervened to saved His people. However, he points out that aspect of rest is still the dominant feature of the fourth commandment. He concludes by saying, “the concept of the seventh day being set apart for worship does not occur at all in either record of the Decalogue. It cannot be argued that because the seventh-day is designated a holy day, that it was to be seen as a day of worship. For the holiness of the day pertained to its separation from the other six days of labour. On the seventh-day, labour was to cease.”

He adds that even though there is no reference to the day of the Sabbath as a day of worship in the Decalogue, the Mosaic economy, based on Leviticus 23, does make provision for such a day. But that day was in association or intimately associated with the sacrifices of the tabernacle and later the temple. Consequently, he specifies that the newness of the Sabbath observance under Mosaic economy was not rest, but worship. For, he says, Israel, prior to Mt. Sinai and the construction of the tabernacle were instructed not leave their tents on the Sabbath. And if the worship on the Sabbath is intimately associated with the sacrificial system, the redemptive aspect of the Sabbat, therefore, has been fulfilled in Christ. But the creation aspect with its eschatological promise is still to be fulfilled. Thus, the day should be kept, he argues, as a day of rest not as day of worship, until we enter God’s ultimate rest. And that could be any day.

In the three views on the biblical Sabbath, we see clearly an attack on the commandments of God, there by an attack of the character of God. The first view shows that the 4th commandment has been abrogated by the work of Christ. If it is abrogated, there is no need to replace it by another day and calls it the 4th commandment. Men will never be able to bless a day that God never blesses. God has blessed only one day among the Seventh and that is the Seventh-day. And Christ has not nullified nor changed that day to another day. What God has blessed it is bless for eternity ( 1Chronicles 17:27). And what God has blessed man cannot cursed.

Contrarily to the first view that says the 4th commandment has been abrogated by the work of Christ and now the Lord day has emerged as the day of worship, the second view says the seventh-day Sabbath has been transferred to the 1st day as a day of rest and worship for all Christians. In other words, Christians are required to rest 24 hours on the first day of the week and held worship service on that day. This view does not say that day has been revoked, but for Christians, indeed, it has. So, both the first and the second views are in the same package. They both reject the 4th commandment that demands the observance of the 7th day as day or rest and worship.

And the alternative offered by G.N. Davies highlights the need of a continuing day of rest for all Christians, not a day of worship, which could be on any day. Therefore, all three views reject the 4th commandment and attacks God’s character.

The argument of Davies to show that the day is a day of rest only is flawed. Davies thinks that because of Adam psychical state, as well as for us, we need rest. So, God has provided a day of rest. This hypothesis is faulty. Davies needs to remember that the first day of Adam and Eve was a day of rest. In other words, they rested before they worked. The human family, therefore, begins life on this earth with rest with God and celebrating what God has done. We rest before we work. This is significant. By this we know the profound spiritual significance of the Sabbath. Sabbath is not rest from physical exhaustion, as claimed Davies, but it is rest from an inward spirit. It is rest from the heart. In other words, when we rest on that, we are worshiping God. We are rejoicing in God’s finished work. We are saying the reason why we have all that we have and we are all that we are, it is not because we have a Job but because we have a God.

When the commandment stipulates “In it you shall not do any work” (Ex 20:10), Davies should understand this as a prohibition against independence, against self-trust, not just labour.

The day has never been changed and will never be (Isaiah 66:33). We are called as Christian to keep that day holy knowing that God never changes and will not change what comes out his mouth. God has shown the perennity of this Sabbath command when He places at the heart of the ten commandments. If you remove one, you break all. And if you change one you break all.

One needs to understand that observing the Sabbath day as prescribed by God is an act of faith. When we put aside our work, including our unfinished work on the Sabbath, we show that we depend on Him. We show that He is not only the creator of the world, but is our redeemer and our great provider. When we worship Him on the day he has set aside, we demonstrate that our faith is not in our talents, or our ingenuity, or our work, or our ability. We say that our faith is God, the maker of heaven and earth. But when we choose another day, we simply don’t accept salvation by faith. When we choose another day, we are trying to sanctify a day God did not sanctify and did not bless. Basically, you are saying to God: I don’t want what you have provided. I’m giving you another one. There by, we come with our own law, our regulation, our own rule. This is salvation by works.

We must not make the same mistake as the Pharisees. They were trying to keep the law without Jesus and we are trying to have Jesus without keeping His commandments. Both will lead to destruction. For, one cannot worship God without submitting to Him. Worship without obedience is idolatry.

The Sabbath is the memorial of Creation as well as redemption. The Sabbath is the unique sign of God’s identity on earth as creator of heaven and earth and as redeemer of humanity. When we observe the Sabbath day as prescribed by God, we show that we accept salvation by faith in Jesus alone. The Sabbath rest is more than physical rest. Its deeper meaning is the complete reliance on God’s finished work that the beings He created revel in on that day, and the gratitude they express to God for being always faithful and steadfast in supplying every need.1

Endnotes

Nixon, John. Redemption In Genesis (Kindle Locations 442-443). Pacific Press Publishing Association. Kindle Edition.