

THE COVENANTS COMPARED ⇒THE SABBATH⇐

In previous chapters we have looked at the contracts God has made with men, tracing the series through from Noah, Abraham, the Tribe of Israel and on to the New Covenant. For us, who are not Jews, the only contract which applies, apart from the New Covenant, is the covenant with Noah, in which God promised that he would never again destroy the whole land through a flood. Jews who became Christians were, however, often confused about the extent to which they should still keep the covenant made with them at the time of Moses. Unfortunately, for us also who are not Jews, a failure to understand the covenants and who each one applies to, has led to confusion.

Amongst the most misunderstood matters is the Sabbath. This was the sign of the covenant with Israel and the penalty for breaking it was death. The sign of the New Covenant is the communion. Is the Sabbath then not part of Christianity? Indeed it is not! The apostle Paul was in no doubt at all. He wrote to the church at Colossae (Colossians 2:26): “Allow no one therefore to take you to task about what you eat or drink, or over observance of festival, new moon, or Sabbath. These are no more than a shadow of what was to come; the solid reality is Christ’s.” In another place (Romans 14:5-6) he wrote: “This man regards one day more highly than another, while that man regards all days alike. On that point everyone should have reached conviction in his own mind. He who respects the day has the Lord in mind in doing so”.

Yet how often have we been told in our churches that we must keep the Sabbath! How many churches have on their walls a list of the Ten Commandments, including the Sabbath law! Even now the leaders of many churches, supported by many clergy, not only wish to impose the keeping of the Sabbath on Christians but on the whole of our society! Are we to turn backwards to Judaism! If so, we should ask parliament to impose the death penalty on those who break the Jewish Sabbath law. And let us remember that the Sabbath was Saturday! More precisely it was sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. And if we are under Judaism our men should be circumcised! Those who teach others to observe the Sabbath should be first in line for the scalpel!

All this may be a shock to many. Habits die hard. Our consciences become engraved by the traditions in which we are brought up and it is difficult to change. To stop doing what we have always believed to be required of us is difficult. It can lead to conflict with our conscience, which some of us may find difficult. Perhaps that is why Paul in Romans allows each person to do what he feels is right for himself. But equally Paul, in his letter to the Colossian church, tells us not to allow others to impose the observance of Sabbaths and festivals on us. Those who are psychologically impaired by false consciences are unlikely to be suitable for a teaching ministry. So, Christian leaders, stop telling us to do what you have no right to tell us to do! And have you forgotten that Sunday, which you tell us is the new Sabbath, is the day when many of you work most!

We are sometimes reminded that the early Christians met for worship on Sunday. This is certainly true, but they didn’t have a holiday! Most were living under the Roman Empire, not under Judaism. Some of them were slaves, and there was certainly no day off for them! We have an example in the New Testament of an evening meeting in Troas, which could have been on a Saturday or Sunday night (Acts 20:7). Paul also mentions Sunday as being the day for the collection for the poor in Corinth, so it was probably their day of meeting (1 Corinthians 16:2). About 112 A.D. the Roman official Pliny wrote to the Emperor Trajan about Christians in Bithynia, and mentioned in passing that they met weekly before daylight. It was only some years after Constantine became emperor in 312 A.D. that Sunday became a public holiday in the Roman Empire.

Others tell us that a day of rest a week is good for us, physically and mentally. Agreed!. Many of us already have two days rest from work each week - which is better still! If we all had three days off work a week, the current misery of unemployment might well be eased. But that is for the whole of our society to decide. There is a great difference between a society deciding to do what it sees as good for itself and the imposition of mistaken religious teaching.