

CONTINUING EDUCATION



BIBLE DOCTRINES, PART II THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH, ESCHATOLOGY, AND THE SABBATH

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The doctrine of the church is central to Christian theology because church membership is an important aspect of salvation. Besides responding individually to the salvation Christ makes available, becoming a Christian involves becoming part of the community that Christ established.

The most important thing about the church is its mission in the world. The church is more than a group of people

united by common experiences. Its life is its work, and everything about the church must be justified in relation to its fundamental task.

The basic work of the church is to carry on the work of Christ Himself. Indeed, it is through the church that Christ continues to work in the world. The church fulfills its mission in two important ways—by proclamation and by demonstration. It communicates a certain message. It tells who God is, what He is like, and what He has done for human beings. In addition, it illustrates the truth of its message by the corporate life it establishes in the world.

The church's message is this: God

acted in Jesus Christ for the salvation of every human being. There is an exclusivity to this message, for Christians claim that salvation is available only in Jesus Christ. He provides our one and only avenue to God. As Jesus said of Himself, "No one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6; cf. Acts 4:12).¹

It is not enough for God to have acted, however. In order for this activity to achieve its purpose, people must hear about it and respond to it. Only then can there be genuine fellowship between God and human beings. This is why the command to preach receives great emphasis in the New Testament. The gospel commission is the climax of the

HOW IT WORKS

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gospel (Matthew 28:19, 20). Paul says that it is the preaching of Christ that generates faith (Romans 10:17).

The proclamation of the gospel includes a work of education. Jesus told His followers to "make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19, 20). Besides relating the good news, the apostles educated their converts and organized them into congregations. Teaching was a major function of Paul's letters, each of which contains material about how Christians should live, once they have received salvation.

Christian mission encompasses the entire world. From Matthew to Revelation, the New Testament emphasizes the global nature of the church's task:

This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world (Matthew 24:14).

You shall be my witnesses to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people (Revelation 14:6).

The early church took this responsibility seriously. Paul planned to carry the gospel to all the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea (cf. Romans 15:19, 24). In one passage he implies that the first generation of Christians reached the whole world with the gospel (Colossians 1:23).

The scope of Christian mission includes the world close at hand as well as far away. Sometimes we think of distant parts of the earth as the "mission field," but the church faces a challenge wherever there is unbelief. Its mission field includes the secular, sophisticated, and largely decadent culture of the Western world. It embraces the great cities of Europe and America as well as those of developing countries. It may even include our own families.

The challenge of Christian mission today is greater than it ever has been before. There are more people living now who have never heard of Jesus than the entire population of the world when Jesus was alive. Not only that, the proportion of the world's population that believes in Christianity is steadily declining. So the task facing the church becomes more formidable with each passing year.

Christians can never hope to meet this challenge at their present rate of activity. Even if we buy the finest communication equipment, formulate new evangelistic

programs, and urge each church member to engage in active witnessing, the church will never complete its mission through human means or plans alone. Only an infusion of spiritual power, like the one that launched the church, will enable it to do the enormous work before it now.

The Form of Christian Mission

"Contextualization" plays an important role in the church's mission. This means that our proclamation of the gospel should take into account the situation of the people we address. The essential content of the message is always the same, but the manner of presentation, as well as its applications, will vary according to the audience. This is especially important as the church takes the gospel into other cultures. Forms of communication acceptable in one society would be outrageous in another, just as methods of evangelism effective at one time in history may be ineffective in another.

Contextualization also means allowing people to determine for themselves the appropriate life-style for Christians in their culture. Becoming a Christian does not necessarily involve eating with a knife and fork, or wearing white shirts and ties, or building meeting places out of concrete blocks instead of wood and thatch. Unity in Christ does not require uniformity in Christian practice. More likely, it will lead to a certain degree of diversity.

The church's failure to contextualize its mission accounts in part for the bad name that Christian mission sometimes acquires. Mission work has often gone hand in hand with colonialism. In fact, some colonial powers regarded the missionary as a helpful ally in achieving their goals. His work often made it easier to subject people to economic exploitation. It is little wonder that many leaders in developing countries today have little use for Christianity.

The biblical basis for contextualizing the church's message includes incarnation as its most important principle. The Son of God came to human beings in their own form, submitted to the conditions of their existence, and faced the same challenges and difficulties as they do. The mission of the church requires a similar incarnation. The Christian community must assume cultural forms appropriate to the different peoples of the world.

The New Testament contains an interesting example of contextualization. At the first church council, early Christian leaders agreed to ask Gentile converts to refrain from eating meat that had been offered to idols (Acts 15:20). But in writ-

ing to the Christian church at Corinth sometime later, Paul discussed the matter without any reference to the council's decision. He left the decision up to individual conscience (1 Corinthians 8). Paul revised a general church policy in light of local circumstances.

Church Organization

The church is a spiritual reality because it owes its origin to God. The Holy Spirit creates an invisible bond of fellowship among its members. However, the church is a visible community as well—a social and historical reality. For this reason it must have organization, or structure. This is necessary in order for the church to communicate the gospel. Organization helps church members to coordinate their efforts for maximum effectiveness.

The church also needs organization because its members have different gifts, or abilities (1 Corinthians 12). Organization allows every person to contribute his or her gifts, and prevents church members from working at cross purposes from one another. The apostles needed assistance in directing the financial affairs of the church so that they could devote themselves to the ministry of the Word. To facilitate their work, the office of deacon was created (Acts 6:1-6).

The occasional need for church discipline also calls for organization. According to the first Gospel, Jesus prescribed a rather well-defined procedure for dealing with a member who persisted in sin (Matthew 18:15-17). Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to settle disputes among themselves, rather than taking them to court (1 Corinthians 6:1, 2). He also admonished the same congregation to expel a member whose scandalous behavior brought reproach on the church (1 Corinthians 5:1, 2).

The church needs organization for external reasons as well. It exists alongside other institutions in society—economic, political, educational, judicial, and military organizations, to name a few. In order to define its purpose in contrast to those of other institutions, the church needs an identifiable form in the world.

Which Is the True Church?

The most obvious feature of Christianity today is its many forms. There are great divisions among Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism, and further divisions within Protestantism. The Lutheran and Reformed streams diverge on many points, and many Protestant churches have moved farther away from one another doctrinally since the Reformation. In addition, a number of

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religious groups exist outside the traditional denominations. Generally described as "cults," these organizations bear only marginal resemblance to other Christian bodies and typically value their independence very highly.

The diversity of Christian groups raises the perplexing question of which is the true church. Some people take the position that all Christian groups are equally valid as expressions of the true church. According to this view, no denomination completely represents true Christianity, so it doesn't matter to which group you belong, as long as you participate in some Christian community.

Others identify the true church with a specific Christian organization, which they regard as the primary means through which humans may obtain salvation. Those who hold this view, naturally, are very particular about which church to join. They believe that salvation may be theoretically possible for people not connected with the right church, but such individuals cannot receive all the benefits of the Christian life that full-fledged members enjoy.

A further consequence of this view is

the judgment that other Christian groups are "false" churches. If any of their members are saved, it will be in spite of their teachings, not because of them.

In general, these positions represent extremes in the thinking of Christians today. Most believe that all Christian organizations represent the one true church, but only in varying degrees. Some are closer to the ideal than others, while others are aberrations of genuine Christianity. But no one group represents the "true church."

Since rival organizations did not yet exist, the sort of division facing us today was not a problem in the time of the New Testament. Nonetheless, Christian unity was a matter of great concern to the apostles. Paul's writings emphasize two aspects of church unity.

One is the identity that members share by virtue of their common experience of salvation in Christ. This is the dominant theme of Ephesians, where Paul argues that Christ has broken down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14-16). He makes the same point in Galatians, where we find the ringing statement, "There is neither Jew nor

Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

A second aspect of unity is an attitude of fellowship and love toward other members of the church (Ephesians 4:2, 3). In the great hymn of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul presents love as the solution to discord within the church (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:3-7). For Paul the things that unite Christians are much more fundamental than their differences: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope. . . , one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

A familiar response to the problem of Christian division is to invoke the venerable distinction between the visible and the invisible church. The invisible church includes all who are truly dedicated to Christ, as opposed to merely "nominal" members of the church. The visible church is a "sign" of the invisible church, but it is by no means identical to it. And, although affiliation with the visible church is important, membership in the invisible church is what really counts.

This distinction is helpful because it prevents us from exaggerating the significance of any specific organization or structure. But it tends to obscure the importance of such issues as active participation in the fellowship of believers, doctrinal correctness, and the concrete embodiment of authentic Christian community. All are essential components in the life of a Christian. Minimizing their significance detracts from Christian experience.

Many of these considerations play a role in Seventh-day Adventist teaching about the true church. In general, we affirm the distinctiveness of Adventism within Christianity, but do not absolutize it. We believe Seventh-day Adventists have a specific role in the plan of salvation, but this does not exclude non-Adventists from salvation.

Seventh-day Adventists have always described themselves as Protestants. We see Adventism as continuing the work of reform that began 400 years ago in the attempt to recover the essential message of the New Testament. Adventists accept the Reformation principle of the Bible only as the rule of faith and practice, and we share almost all of our beliefs with members of other Christian groups.

Adventists also approve of the missionary activity of other organizations. In the words of one official document, we "recognize every agency that lifts up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for

the evangelization of the world.”² So we see Adventism as part of a larger divine plan for world-wide evangelism.

In spite of these elements of continuity, Adventists have not sought organizational consolidation with other Christians. Our strong sense of uniqueness arises from the belief that we are the “remnant” destined to bear God’s final message to the world before the return of Christ.

The remnant is an important biblical concept. It refers to the Israelites who survived national catastrophe, as well as to a group who will receive the promises of God to His people (Jeremiah 23:3; 31:7). Paul applies the term to those who believe in Christ (Romans 11:5). And the book of Revelation describes the remnant of the woman’s seed—that is, the church—as those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (Revelation 12:17).

Seventh-day Adventists believe that we are the remnant referred to in Revelation because of the circumstances of our origin and our distinguishing doctrinal features. The prophecies of the Bible indicate that Adventism came into existence during the final phase of human history. Our church’s concern for the Sabbath displays a special commitment to the commandments of God. And the presence of the spirit of prophecy among us in the form of Ellen White’s ministry is a manifestation of the testimony of Jesus mentioned in Revelation (chap. 12:17; cf. 19:10; 22:8, 9).

Adventists also believe that we have something of utmost importance to communicate to the world, namely, the messages of the three angels recorded in Revelation 14:6-12. Proclamation of these messages includes a call to worship God the Creator in view of the fact that the judgment has begun. It also includes a call to turn from the practices of a corrupt religious system and thereby avoid the punishment of those who oppose God. Adventists believe that this constitutes God’s final warning to a world that has largely rejected His grace. It directly precedes Christ’s return to save His people from the earth.

This special sense of mission characteristically leads Seventh-day Adventists to emphasize our differences from, rather than our similarities to, other Christian organizations, but there have been recent attempts to find more positive ways to express this relationship. One suggestion is to think of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a prophetic minority within the larger Christian community.

The biblical prophets were members

of the community chosen by God to bear a message to His people. Their messages often criticized the community and typically called for drastic changes in its thought and life. But although the prophets played a distinctive role, their call was to service rather than to privilege. The content of their mission, though negative at times, expressed God’s concern for all His people. It indicated that God had not rejected them, but continued to hope for their salvation.

Taking the prophetic minority as a model for the work of the Adventist Church expresses a strong sense of mission, but it also speaks of God’s interest in all His people, indeed, in all the people of the world. So Seventh-day Adventists have no basis for indulging in self-congratulation or excluding themselves from other people. On the contrary, they should cultivate a sense of fellowship with members of other churches.

Moreover, recalling the concerns of the biblical prophets may arouse Adventists to bear a more vigorous witness against the evils of society. By using these principles, Seventh-day Adventists can view their role in history in a way that supports

a distinctive sense of mission, while managing to avoid the unfortunate and unproductive tendency to exclusiveness.

The Doctrine of Last Things

In terms of our denominational roots, the doctrine of last things is the most important aspect of Adventist theology. The church developed out of the great Advent movement that swept across America and other parts of the world in the mid-19th century.

Although well-known for our strong beliefs about the end of history, Adventists are by no means alone in our interest in the future of the human race. In recent years questions about the future of humanity have held a fascination for growing numbers of people. One reason for this interest is the realization that there may not be a future at all, at least as far as human beings are concerned. The world’s great military powers have enough explosives to blow us all up many times over, and they persist in adding to their stockpiles.

If we are spared a nuclear holocaust, we face the equally unattractive prospect of starving to death or poisoning our-

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selves with pollution. World population is rapidly increasing, while natural resources are dwindling. It doesn't take a genius to see that more and more of us will have less and less to share until none of us has anything. Human beings have made great strides in many areas, but getting along with one another is not one of them, and neither is taking care of our environment. Technology has brought us many good things, but it has also pushed us to the brink of disaster.

These depressing facts are worth considering here for two reasons. They show that we need something more than human means to solve our present problems. Unless we get "outside help," nothing can save us from destruction. This fact establishes the lively relevance of Christian eschatology. What Christians have been saying about the end for centuries takes on new meaning as we look around us today. The doctrine of last things doesn't deal with the far-off future; it speaks directly to the present. It is as timely as the morning paper and hourly news bulletins.

In the traditional arrangement of Christian theology, eschatology comes last, after the doctrine of the church. But this doesn't mean it is merely a footnote to the central concerns of Christian faith. Eschatology is no afterthought. It is the climax to which all the rest leads, the ringing conclusion of everything that Christianity has to say.

At the same time, this aspect of Christian faith has generated a wide diversity of theological views. In fact, nowhere in Christian thought do we find a more bewildering variety of biblical interpretations and doctrinal formulations. Controversy surrounds almost every aspect of this doctrine—from the time of Christ's return and the ultimate fate of the wicked, to the identity of the antichrist and the location of Armageddon. The list of eschatological questions is much too long to answer here. So we will limit our inquiry to the most basic elements of the doctrine.

Many people equate eschatology with a description of last-day events. The word sometimes conjures up visions of prophetic charts and diagrams designed to pinpoint our location in the march of time and predict in detail the course of the future.

It is true that eschatology includes an understanding of how history will end. However, Christian faith views all of history in the light of God's saving activity, and sees the end of time only in relation to what goes before. As a result, the final events mean nothing by themselves. They

must be related to the process that precedes them. Consequently, it is more important to understand the *meaning* of history's final events than to know the precise nature or sequence of their occurrence.

The Biblical View of History

The roots of Christian eschatology reach deep into the soil of Hebrew thought, so we must begin our analysis with the Old Testament. Central to Hebrew religion was the belief that God acted in history for the salvation of His people. The events recorded in the book of Exodus form the center of Hebrew faith. These were the call of the fathers, the deliverance from slavery, the covenant at Sinai, and the conquest of Canaan (cf. Deuteronomy 26:5-10).

Convinced that God had been active in their past, the Israelites believed that He would continue to act in their behalf in the future, and that He would bring the work of salvation He had begun to its final consummation.

Accordingly, their attitude toward the future was based on a confidence in God established by His previous activity. Their concept of the future was essentially an extension of God's actions in their past (cf. Isaiah 48:20, 21; 51:10, 11). For the Old Testament, therefore, the "eschaton" is that part of salvation history still to come, which presses for its realization. The future is not like a distant destination toward which we are slowly moving. It is threatening to break in upon us.

The most important event described in the Old Testament was the coming of God to His people. This event involved both salvation and judgment. It spelled disaster for the enemies of God, but it brought restoration and deliverance to the faithful remnant. Old Testament authors did not view judgment and salvation as contrasting divine activities, but as aspects of a single unit (cf. Exodus 20:5, 6).

Hebrew writers often referred to God's coming as "the day of the Lord." They were careful to describe both the negative and the positive elements of this event. Amos portrayed the day of the Lord as a day of darkness and of gloom (5:20). Zephaniah described it as a day of wrath, a day of distress and of anguish, a day of ruin and of devastation (1:15). In the day of the Lord, the enemies of God will finally be dealt with, and the faithful remnant will be delivered, to enjoy the personal presence of their Saviour.

Apocalyptic literature—the kind of prophetic writing we find in Daniel—also

describes the end of history. This type of literature typically arose during periods of persecution. It reaffirms God's promises to His people as they face difficult circumstances. It portrays the end as a sudden, dramatic conflict when God defeats the evil powers that dominate the present era. In its distinctive way, then, apocalyptic literature expresses the essential theme of Old Testament eschatology. History will reach its climax with the completion of God's saving activity. At last, His people will enjoy His presence, untroubled by any disruptive influence.

Jesus and the End of History

The New Testament writings about Jesus make sense only in the light of this Hebrew concept of history. Its central claim is that God was acting for the salvation of all human beings in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:22-24, 31, 32; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3-5). In the context of Old Testament eschatology, this means that the climax of history arrived with Jesus. He fulfills the meaning of history. In other words, the end has arrived. We are now living in the last days.

Alongside this "even now" of present realization, we also find in the New Testament the "not yet" of anticipation. Numerous texts point to the return of Christ in the very near future. Indeed, the entire New Testament, from Matthew to Revelation, breathes the spirit of fervent expectancy:

For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand (Romans 13:11, 12).

The Lord is at hand (Philippians 4:5).

We who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up . . . to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

The coming of the Lord is at hand (James 5:8).

The end of all things is at hand (1 Peter 4:7).

Children, it is the last hour (1 John 2:18).

I am coming soon (Revelation 22:6, 12, 20).

Although they had a strong sense that Christ's return was near, early Christians also recognized that it had not occurred as soon as they had expected. Several texts indicate that a series of events would have to take place before the Lord could return (Acts 20:29; 2 Thessalonians 2:3; 2 Timothy 4:3ff). And at least one notable passage deals explicitly with the delay as a problem facing the Christian community. Peter attributes the apparent delay to God's forbearance—His unwillingness that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9).

So, early Christians believed that the decisive act of salvation had already taken place—with Jesus, the end of history had arrived—but the full realization of salvation was yet to come. They looked for Jesus to return and complete the process. They found themselves living “between the times.” The climax of history was past, but its conclusion was still to come.

Prophecy and History

As the years passed, it became evident that considerable time would elapse between the earthly ministry of Jesus and His glorious return. As a result, Christians have been forced to examine the significance of the historical period between these two climactic events.

For many Christians, the prophecies of the Bible provide an answer to this question. They believe that prophecy enables us to see the religious significance of different developments in the course of history. A 12th-century churchman, Joachim of Floris, did much to stimulate thought along these lines. He believed that the various symbols of prophecy corresponded to actual historical persons and events. By interpreting these symbols, we can plot the course of history through its various stages, and determine where we fit in the overall progression of events.

All who regard prophecy as a forecast of historical events are indebted to Joachim's ideas, even if their interpretations differ from his. In a sense, he was the pioneer of the three major schools of prophetic interpretation—preterist, historicist, and futurist. Preterism sees the historical events of which prophecy speaks as having occurred in the past. Futurism regards these events as yet to come. And historicism applies the prophecies to successive phases of world history up to and including the present, and extending to the end of time. However, all of them relate prophecy to world history in a manner similar to Joachim.

To summarize, Christians believe that history is meaningful because God is working in historical events for human salvation. The climax of His saving action was the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This work will conclude with the return of Christ and the establishment of God's reign over human beings. The basic posture of Christians in the world is therefore one of confidence in the past and eager anticipation for the future. Because of what God has already done, they look forward to what He has yet to do.

In addition, many Christians believe that biblical prophecy describes the relation between human history and the

work of salvation. If we interpret the prophetic symbols accurately, we can see the spiritual significance of different historical developments, along with our own role in the scheme of things. Seventh-day Adventists are among those who hold this view of prophecy.

Adventism and the Advent Movement

Adventists trace their roots to the great Advent movement that radiated from the northeastern United States in the middle of the 19th century. William Miller, the central figure in this movement, was born in Massachusetts and raised in upstate New York. He was an avid reader as a child and joined a literary society in the Vermont town where he settled with his wife. With a number of his friends he espoused deism, the view that God does not take an active interest in human affairs. His experiences as an officer in the War of 1812 left him disillusioned with human behavior, and he suffered periods of deep despondency.

In 1816 Miller accepted Christ and began to study the Bible in depth to learn more of his Saviour. After two years of intensive Bible study he reached the conclusion that the personal return of Christ to earth lay in the near future, only 25 years away. The most important text in his calculations was Daniel 8:14: “Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed” (KJV).

Miller believed that days of prophetic time corresponded to literal years (cf. Numbers 14:34; Ezekiel 4:6), and that the 2300 days of Daniel 8 began simultaneously with the 70 weeks (representing years) described in Daniel 9, that is, with Artaxerxes' decree in 457 B.C. Miller believed that the “cleansing of the sanctuary” referred to the purification of the earth that would accompany the return of Christ.

After restudying his position for several years, Miller presented his views to small groups around New England during the 1830s. His work became a full-fledged movement in 1840, largely due to the promotional efforts of Joshua V. Himes, a pastor in Boston.

Although all who belonged to the movement believed that Christ's return was near, few had a specific date in mind. This changed in the summer of 1844. At that time, certain Millerites began to teach that the cleansing of the sanctuary mentioned in Daniel 8:14 would fulfill the Hebrew day of atonement service described in Leviticus 16. They further believed that this antitypical cleansing

would occur on the day when the typical day of atonement was scheduled, that is, on the tenth day of the seventh month in the current Jewish year. This fell on October 22.

Not all of Miller's followers accepted the view that Christ would return on this date. Miller and Himes did not take this position themselves until early in the month. But on the morning of October 22 thousands met in groups here and there throughout much of the United States, confident they would meet their Lord before the day was over. Their later reference to the experience as the “Great Disappointment” reflects the emotional blow that fell when their hopes were not fulfilled. Those who experienced it said their grief defied description.

The impact of the Great Disappointment fragmented the Millerite movement. The two most important reactions held contrary interpretations of Daniel 8:14. Most Millerites, including Miller himself, continued to believe that the text pointed to the return of Christ and felt that something was wrong with their calculation of the time. The 2300 days did not, as they had thought, end on October 22, 1844.

Others were convinced that their interpretation of the time period was correct. They believed that the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14 did come to an end on October 22, 1844, but that their understanding of the event it pointed to, the “cleansing of the sanctuary,” had been mistaken. This group included many of those who became the principal figures in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Over the next few years these early Adventists came to believe that the sanctuary of Daniel 8:14 was in heaven, not on earth, and that on October 22, 1844, Christ entered the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary to complete His high priestly ministry. The cleansing of which Daniel 8:14 speaks is a blotting out of the sins recorded against God's people in the books of heaven. It requires a work of judgment, or investigation, to determine which sins should be expunged.

The “cleansing of the sanctuary,” then, refers to the results of an investigative judgment that takes place in heaven just before Christ returns to earth.

An Adventist View of Final Events

The concept of the investigative judgment is often described as Adventism's most original theological concept. But other things distinguish the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of last things from other Christian eschatologies. Adventists

are “pre-millennialists,” since they believe that Christ will return before the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20. But unlike many pre-millennialists, they are not “pre-tribulationists.” They do not believe that the church will be delivered, or raptured, from the earth before the time of suffering that precedes Christ’s coming.

As pre-millennialists, Seventh-day Adventists regard Christ’s return as an interruption in the period of human history that precedes it. They do not believe that conditions here on earth will gradually improve until they eventually merge into the kingdom of God. Instead, the quality of religious, moral, and social life will progressively decline, and human life will finally reach an all-time low (1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 4:3, 4).

At the same time, the work of salvation reaches its final stages. The investigative judgment takes place in heaven. Concurrently, the church fulfills its mission by carrying the gospel to all the world (Matthew 24:14). Seventh-day Adventists have a special role to play in this task. They announce the arrival of the judgment and warn people to escape the punishment that the enemies of God will soon receive (Revelation 14:6-12).

As the moral state of human beings deteriorates, the difference between those who accept God’s sovereignty and those who reject it becomes increasingly vivid. Oppressive political and social conditions will force everyone to make a decision for or against God. And when every human being has decided, the polarization of the righteous and the wicked is complete.

When that takes place, to use Adventist terminology, “probation” closes. There is no further opportunity to repent. Christ ceases His high priestly ministry, and the status of every human being is fixed forever (cf. Revelation 22:11).

This is an ominous prospect, to be sure, but it is not an arbitrary act on God’s part. The close of probation is not like a door slamming shut, regardless of who is on the outside. Instead, it is God’s recognition of the fate that human beings have chosen for themselves.

The sobering aspect of the close of probation is not the possibility that someone will decide to accept God’s offer of salvation five or ten minutes too late. It is the recognition that we are fixing our eternal destiny every day of our lives. By our actions and attitudes we decide whether or not God has our ultimate loyalty. The decision need not be a clear-cut, sharply focused experience. But we make it nevertheless. The close of

probation simply acknowledges that these choices are irreversible. We choose our own eternal destiny.

After the close of probation, just before the return of Christ, the earth experiences a tremendous upheaval when its inhabitants suffer enormously. This is the “time of trouble” or the “tribulation” of which the Bible speaks (cf. Daniel 12:1). The seven last plagues fall, inflicting widespread destruction (Revelation 16).

The Bible describes these plagues as a manifestation of the wrath of God (Revelation 16:1). This makes us wonder about their purpose. Why are these plagues necessary? Since probation has closed, they do not lead anyone to repentance. It seems unlike God to impose purely vindictive or retributive punishment. The Bible tells us that getting even doesn’t interest God (Ezekiel 18:32). Revenge never explains His actions.

The nature of God’s government provides an answer to this question. As the Bible describes the end of history, human beings in general will reject God’s sovereignty just before Christ returns, and God will withdraw His influence from human affairs. Consequently, the destruction prior to Christ’s return demonstrates what happens when God is no longer sovereign. Human beings are at the mercy of the elements. The earth becomes uninhabitable. The forces of darkness have free rein to torment and destroy.

During this time God’s people suffer intensely. God cares for their physical needs (Isaiah 33:16), but the cause of their anguish is primarily spiritual. Their experience is like Jacob’s on the night before he met his estranged brother Esau (Jeremiah 30:7; Genesis 32:22-30). They know that they must face God very soon, and they wonder if they are ready. They search their lives to see if they have surrendered completely to Him.

These dark scenes come to an end when Christ returns to earth. According to the New Testament, His return is glorious and universally visible (1 Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 1:7; Matthew 24:27). It brings great rejoicing to those who are waiting for Him (Isaiah 25:9), but causes the wicked to mourn (Matthew 24:30). They seek to escape from Christ’s presence (Revelation 6:15-17), but the brightness of His coming destroys them (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

Reunion is the dominant note of Christ’s return. It brings together at last all those who have accepted the gift of salvation. When Christ returns, the resurrection of the righteous dead will take place. Coming to life with bodies that are immortal, they rise to meet Christ in the

air (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53). Then the living righteous are caught up to meet Christ with them. Their bodies are instantly transformed into immortal, imperishable forms (1 Thessalonians 4:17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53). From this moment on through eternity, the righteous will never again be separated from Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

It is no wonder that Christ’s return is the great hope of the church. It fulfills the promise Jesus gave His disciples centuries ago: “I will come again. . . that where I am you may be also” (John 14:3). According to Paul, Christ’s return is the “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13), and those who belong to Him “love his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). God’s objective from the beginning of sin was to restore human beings to fellowship with Him, and now that goal is finally realized.

Although the plan of salvation reaches its culmination with the return of Christ, it is not complete. God must remove the consequences of sin from the universe and make a final reckoning with those who have rejected Him. According to Seventh-day Adventist eschatology, these events take us through the millennium to the final destruction of the wicked and the restoration of the earth.

With many other conservative Christians, Adventists believe that the thousand-year reign of Christ begins with His return to earth (Revelation 20:4), but we are unique in locating this reign, not on earth, but in heaven. After rescuing His people from the earth, Christ takes them to heaven, where they enter the glorious places He has prepared for them (John 14:1-3).

Meanwhile, the scene on earth is one of utter desolation, reminiscent of its chaotic state at the beginning of Creation (Jeremiah 4:23-26). In this condition the earth is the “bottomless pit” where Satan is bound (Revelation 20:2, 3). For a thousand years, with no one to tempt or torment, he is left to contemplate the bleak consequences of his rebellion against God.

We know little of the activity of the saved during the millennium, but the Bible contains a suggestion of what they might be doing. At one place in his letters, Paul tells Christian believers that they will judge the world, indeed, that they will judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:2, 3). It is possible that the redeemed will examine God’s dealings with those who are lost. They will have an opportunity to find answers to any questions about the fairness of God’s decisions.

At the end of the millennium, the New Jerusalem, with the redeemed, descends

to earth (Revelation 21:2), and the wicked are resurrected. Jesus stated that all the dead would come to life again (John 5:28, 29). The book of Revelation indicates that there will be two resurrections a thousand years apart—the first resurrection, of the righteous, at Christ's coming; the second, the resurrection of the wicked, at the end of the millennium (Revelation 20:5).

At the same time, Satan is loosed from "the bottomless pit" (Revelation 20:3). Surrounded by those who have rejected God, he makes one last, desperate attempt to overthrow God's sovereignty, leading a massive assault on the New Jerusalem (Revelation 20:7-9).

Satan's attack on the city is interrupted, however, when God appears on a great white throne and calls the assembled multitudes to judgment (Revelation 20:11-13). He reviews the record of each life, and condemns the wicked to eternal death. The fire that purifies the earth destroys those who have rejected God's authority (Revelation 20:9, 10, 14, 15; 2 Peter 3:10). They are consumed along with Satan and his angels (Matthew 25:41).

The final scene in biblical eschatology is the restoration of the earth. After destroying the wicked, God recreates the earth in its primeval splendor (Revelation 21:1; 2 Peter 3:13; cf. Isaiah 35). All traces of sin are removed from the environment, and the new earth becomes the home of the redeemed throughout eternity.

Although the new earth is inconceivably beautiful, its most outstanding feature is the personal presence of God (Revelation 21:22). This is what brings the work of salvation to its fulfillment. Human beings are restored to intimate fellowship with their Creator. The obstacles that sin imposes are completely removed. The consequences of sin are reversed, and God's plans for human life are finally realized.

The Fate of the Wicked

The biblical portrayal of the destruction of the wicked raises a number of questions. It leads us to ask about the time, the length, the nature, and the purpose of their suffering.

Many people believe that the wicked enter "hell" as soon as they die and suffer there through all eternity. However, the Bible offers abundant evidence that the punishment of the wicked does not begin until the final judgment.

Throughout Scripture, the dead are described as unconscious and therefore incapable of suffering. They are brought

back to life to meet the judgment, as we have seen. Christ brings His reward with Him when He comes (Revelation 22:12). So the punishment of the wicked does not occur before the end of the world.

What about the length of their punishment? The Bible indicates that the actual suffering of the wicked is temporary. According to one text, the wicked will be burned up, reduced to ashes (Malachi 4:1-3). In other words, they are utterly annihilated.

Texts that speak of the wicked as burning with "eternal fire," or burning "forever" need to be carefully interpreted. They do not indicate a fire that never stops (cf. 2 Peter 2:6 and Jude 7), but one with permanent consequences. *Forever* does not necessarily suggest time without end. It often means as long as something exists (cf. 1 Samuel 1:22, 28).

Theological factors also exclude the concept of unending torment. The idea is certainly incompatible with the perfect happiness of the saved. How could anyone be happy with the knowledge that others are suffering unspeakable torment? Even in a scheme of retributive

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justice, the idea is unfair. Eventually, it seems, everyone would have suffered in proportion to his or her sins, and further punishment would be excessive.

What causes the wicked to suffer? Their suffering certainly includes the physical, but this pain is not the central cause of their anguish. The essence of their suffering is spiritual, or mental, rather than physical. It is the natural consequence of the course they have chosen for themselves.

To reject God is to turn away from life, because life comes only from Him. Annihilation, or extinction, then, is not something God adds to sin, to somehow compensate for it in the scheme of things. It is the inevitable consequence of sin. Those who reject God choose death (Proverbs 8:36).

But why does God bring the wicked back to life to look these consequences full in the face? Since they are already dead, why not leave them that way? What is the point of the second resurrection and the final judgment?

Once again, we must exclude the idea that God enjoys seeing people suffer,

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even if they get what they deserve. He finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked. So we can rule out the notion that God is gratified to see the wicked "get theirs" at last.

Instead, we can view the final judgment as showing that God respects and values His creatures, even the ones who have rejected Him. He gives even His enemies the opportunity to see that His dealings with them have been fair. In the final analysis, the strange act of punishment, apparently so out of character for God, is a manifestation of His love. It shows that God loves His creatures enough to allow them to decide for themselves whether to accept Him or not. When that choice is made, God respects it. He will not force a change in loyalty.

The Doctrine of the Sabbath

Seventh-day Adventists are probably best known for the religious significance they attach to the seventh day of the week. They are not the only Christians to do this, nor were they the first, but Adventists are the largest Christian

denomination to observe the seventh day.

The doctrine of the Sabbath has an interesting history in the Adventist Church. Early Adventists accepted the Sabbath under the influence of Seventh Day Baptists, and they more or less adopted the Baptists' approach to the doctrine. They regarded Sabbath observance as the appropriate response to a divine command that has never been changed.

The Sabbath acquired additional significance for Seventh-day Adventists in light of their unique eschatology. Returning to the Sabbath, they believed, was the final phase in the long recovery of biblical Christianity.

Furthermore, its observance is the identifying mark of God's people at the end of time. Early Adventists believed that the Sabbath established their identity as the remnant church, which keeps the commandments of God—all of them (Revelation 12:17). Indeed, they held that the Sabbath represents the "seal of God" mentioned in the book of Revelation (7:2, 3). It indicates complete loyalty to

God and acceptance by Him. Consequently, the contrasting religious practice, Sunday observance, signifies a rejection of God's authority.

During the past few years, Adventist scholars and theologians have begun to take a new look at the Sabbath. Instead of concentrating on the origin and identity of the biblical Sabbath or on its dramatic eschatological significance, however, Adventists are now exploring its larger meaning. They are seeking to relate the Sabbath to some of the major themes of the Christian faith, and to explore the potential value of the Sabbath experience for human life in general. We could say that Seventh-day Adventists are in the process of moving from a doctrine of the Sabbath to a more comprehensive theology of the Sabbath.

In order to give this aspect of Adventist belief the treatment it deserves, we need to do several things. First we will review the biblical evidence for Sabbath observance. Then we will explore the meaning of the Sabbath in the context of Christian faith as a whole. We will try to show how it relates to the major doctrines of God, human existence, salvation, church, and last things. Finally, we will consider appropriate Sabbath observance.

If our efforts are successful, the Sabbath will emerge as something more than one among several beliefs that Seventh-day Adventists happen to hold, and much more than a peculiar religious practice. We will appreciate it as one of the most important theological and experiential resources that Adventists have. For, properly understood, the Sabbath is the capstone of Adventist theology and potentially its most valuable contribution to the larger Christian world.

The Sabbath in the Bible

The Bible first mentions the seventh day in the story of Creation. After making the world in six days, the Lord rested on the seventh day, which He blessed and hallowed (Genesis 2:1-3). The Sabbath also appears in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11).

Human beings are directed to keep the Sabbath in honor of God's activity. In Exodus 20, the Sabbath commandment refers to God's creative activity. Our Sabbath rest commemorates His original rest at the conclusion of Creation (Exodus 20:11). But Deuteronomy 5 gives as its rationale for Sabbath observance God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage (Deuteronomy 5:15). This suggests that the Sabbath commemorates salvation as well as Creation.

The Old Testament contains many

other references to the Sabbath. A number of them describe the Sabbath as a reminder of the special relationship that exists between God and His chosen people. According to Exodus 31:12-21, for example, the Sabbath is a sign of sanctification. Furthermore, it is meant to be kept forever. In Isaiah 58:14, we read that God intends for the Sabbath to be a delight to His people.

Exodus 16 recounts the miraculous way God fed the Israelites in the wilderness. Each morning the ground was covered with a mysterious substance they could eat. But there was no manna on the Sabbath, and the manna from the previous day remained fresh—the only time in the week this happened. This story is significant because it refers to Sabbath observance prior to the dramatic proclamation of the law from Mount Sinai. This refutes the idea that the Sabbath was not kept before the giving of the Ten Commandments.

The New Testament also contains many references to the Sabbath. We do not find a direct command to keep the day holy, but its sacred significance is clearly assumed. In the most famous New Testament passage on the subject, Jesus defended His disciples against the charge of Sabbathbreaking because they happened to pluck and eat a few grains of wheat. He insisted that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27-28).

Jesus' point was that the Sabbath was meant to be a blessing to human beings, rather than a burden. The positive purpose of the Sabbath also emerges from the numerous accounts of Jesus' Sabbath miracles.

According to the Gospels, Jesus healed people on the Sabbath no fewer than seven times during His ministry, so the relation between the Sabbath and healing is more than coincidental. Jesus' actions portray the Sabbath as a day of healing, or salvation. Its purpose is to restore people to the fullness of life that God intends for all of us.

People sometimes interpret Paul's polemic against legalism as a rejection of the Sabbath. But the apostle's specific concern was the misuse of the law as a means of gaining salvation. He never taught people to ignore its basic precepts. Colossians 2:16 contains Paul's most controversial reference to the Sabbath: "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath."

Many believe that this text abolishes the Sabbath. But the historical context of

the letter to Colossae suggests that Paul objected to a mistaken motive for Sabbath observance, rather than Sabbathkeeping itself.

A complicated heresy apparently threatened the faith of those early Christians. Besides Sabbath observance, it included the worship of angels and various ascetic practices (cf. Colossians 2:18, 21). When Paul mentioned the Sabbath, he had in mind the kind of Sabbath observance involved in this false religious system, not Sabbath observance as such.

The New Testament does not state in so many words that early Christians worshiped regularly on the Sabbath, but there are indications that this was the case. Paul regularly attended synagogue services, as Jesus had done during His earthly life (Luke 4:16). During Paul's missionary travels he typically began proclaiming the gospel in each town by visiting the local synagogue, whenever there was one (Acts 13:14, 44; 14:1; 17:1, 2; 18:4, 19).

It is natural to assume that those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah continued to worship on the seventh day of the week. For example, at least 20 years after Jesus' crucifixion, Luke wrote that the women who prepared His body for burial rested on the Sabbath "according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). Apparently the Sabbath needed no introduction to Luke's readers. They were familiar with its observance.

The strongest indication that members of the apostolic church kept Sabbath may be the silence of the New Testament on the subject. We know that early Christians worshiped regularly (cf. Hebrews 10:25), and we know that many of them were Jews, with a lifetime of Sabbathkeeping behind them.

If becoming Christians led Jewish converts to give up the Sabbath or to worship on another day of the week, this would have been a drastic departure from their tradition. It would surely have been a source of controversy, just as was the question of circumcision, and it could hardly have escaped mention in the apostolic writings.

The New Testament says nothing to indicate that early Christians disregarded the Sabbath. Furthermore, it attaches no religious significance to the first day of the week. There are eight references to the first day in the King James Version of the New Testament. One of them, Mark 16:9, was probably not a part of the original Gospel. Four pertain to visits to Jesus' tomb early on the morning of His resurrection (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). The context of one of them, Luke 24:1, suggests that the women

visited the tomb on the first day of the week precisely because it did not have religious significance.

John 20:19 describes Jesus appearing to His disciples on the evening of the first day of the week, several hours after His resurrection. They were gathered behind shut doors out of fear of the authorities, not in order to hold a religious service.

In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul encourages his readers to put something aside on the first day of every week, so he can take a contribution to the Christians in Jerusalem. He doesn't want to solicit funds during his coming visit. Some people therefore conclude that the believers in Corinth were worshiping on Sunday. But this is advice to Paul's readers as individuals ("each of you"), not a call for collections during their worship services. In fact, the text says nothing at all about a religious service.

The only text in the New Testament to mention a religious meeting on the first day of the week is Acts 20:7. It describes Paul's eventful meeting with Christians at Troas, as he travelled toward Jerusalem to complete his third missionary journey. Several things prevent us from concluding that this verse describes a regular first-day service.

One is the fact that Paul planned to leave "on the morrow," after a week in Troas. The meeting was a farewell occasioned by Paul's departure, not a regular weekly occurrence.

Second, the meeting occurred in all likelihood on Saturday night, as we read in the New English Bible. So it may have been a continuation of Sabbath services that Paul and his fellow believers held together.

Third, the fact that Paul resumed his journey on the next day suggests that the first day of the week did not hold particular religious significance for him. In fact, it may be that he waited to start traveling until the Sabbath was over, because he wanted to keep it holy. So this text cannot be used as evidence for a regular Christian worship on the first day of the week.

Many people believe that Revelation 1:10, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day," indicates that the apostolic church held Sunday to be sacred. It is true that in time the expression, "the Lord's day," came to refer to the first day of the week. But the earliest evidence of its use in this way comes from the end of the second century. There is nothing to suggest that this was its meaning in the book of Revelation, which was written a hundred years earlier.

Those who maintain that Christians have no obligation to observe the Sab-

bath often argue that it was part of the Hebrew system of worship that the ministry of Jesus superseded. Like such things as animal sacrifices and circumcision, they believe, it once had a role to play in the lives of God's people, but is no longer important. However, several things about the seventh-day Sabbath distinguish it within Old Testament religion.

One is the nature of the event commemorated by the Sabbath. Unlike the Passover, which celebrates an important event in Hebrew history, the Sabbath is a memorial of Creation. It celebrates the origin of the world, rather than national deliverance. Consequently, the Sabbath has universal significance. It is meaningful for every human being.

The seventh-day Sabbath is also unique in its relationship to the weekly cycle. The Hebrews observed other sabbaths and holy days, but all of them are identified by the day of the month, not the day of the week. The day of atonement, for example, was the tenth day of the seventh month.

Not only does the Sabbath come more often than any other holy day, but its occurrence does not correspond to any natural phenomenon. Months, of course, are determined by the behavior of the moon. The year is related to the cycle of the seasons. But there is nothing in the realm of nature that establishes the seven-day week, and with it, the weekly Sabbath.

Some people question whether the days of our week now are continuous with the weekly cycle of biblical times. They wonder if changes in the calendar have affected the identity of the Sabbath. There is no indication that the seven-day weekly cycle has ever been interrupted. Calendar changes have involved the day of the month. Their purpose was to keep our dates consistent with the season of the year, but they did not affect the days of the week. As a matter of fact, we now make an adjustment in the calendar every four years in order to account for the actual time of the earth's rotation around the sun. But adding a day to the month of February does not affect the weekly cycle. If February 28 comes on a Monday, the next day is always Tuesday, whether we call it February 29 or March 1.

The most distinctive feature of the Sabbath in the Old Testament is its inclusion in the Ten Commandments. The law given at Sinai is often referred to as the "moral law," because it embodies universal human obligations. There is nothing temporary or restricted in its scope. It applies to human beings in every situation, in every period of history.

Right in the middle of the timeless pre-

cepts of the Ten Commandments is the command, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). Its location implies that it is just as important as any of the other commandments.

In fact, the Sabbath commandment is unique. It is the only one that specifically identifies the Giver of the law. It states that He is the Creator of the world. So it establishes God's authority over human beings. He has the right to impose obligations and require obedience.

Second, the fourth commandment has a somewhat arbitrary, or gratuitous, character. Unlike the other nine, it does not follow as a logical consequence of recognizing that we have obligations to God and to other human beings. There is no reason to honor a day except that God asks us to.

Furthermore, there is no reason to keep the seventh day holy besides the fact that God set this particular day aside and endowed it with unique significance. This is one reason why Sabbath observance serves as a special indication of loyalty to God. It expresses the allegiance of people who need no other reason for doing something than the fact that God asks them to.

We have several indications that the Ten Commandments, or moral law, occupied a place of special significance among the many regulations that governed Hebrew life and worship (cf. Deuteronomy 10:1-5). According to the biblical account, God Himself spoke the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai to the entire congregation of Israel, not long after He delivered them from Egypt (Exodus 20:1). The law stated the basic conditions of God's covenant with the children of Israel, His chosen people.

But the Israelites were so overwhelmed to hear the voice of the Lord that they begged Moses to intercede for them. So God communicated His other instructions to Moses, who wrote them down and taught them to the people (Deuteronomy 31:9).

According to the biblical narrative, God Himself inscribed the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets. They were the only commands to receive such direct divine attention, and the only ones to be placed within the ark of the testimony which occupied the most holy place in the Hebrew sanctuary (Exodus 25:21).

It is clear, then, that the Ten Commandments in general, and the Sabbath commandment in particular, were not just ritual requirements that came to an end with Christ's death. The evidence indicates that they embody God's expectations of human beings in every time and place. By definition, moral obliga-

tions are permanent. They can never be done away with, or "fulfilled" in this sense of the word (cf. Matthew 5:17, 18). The Ten Commandments are not a means of gaining righteousness, of course, but this doesn't mean we can ignore them. They continue to express God's standard for human behavior, and they provide a guide for living.

To summarize, the Bible upholds the importance of the Sabbath in both the Old and New Testaments. The Sabbath began with Creation, and occupies a place in the Ten Commandments. It signified God's special relationship with the people of Israel. But its meaning applies to all human beings, as well. Jesus honored the Sabbath and illuminated its true significance. There is no indication in the New Testament that early Christians disregarded the Sabbath, or transferred its significance to another day of the week.

From Sabbath to Sunday

Today the vast majority of Christians worship on the first day of the week. Since there is no biblical evidence to support the practice, it is natural to wonder when and why it began. There is no simple answer to this question. In fact, it is one of the most complicated problems in early Christian history. Although we cannot review the extensive background of this important question here, we can sketch some of the major factors the change involved.

The transition from Sabbath to Sunday observance by the majority of Christians happened gradually. It began very early in the history of the church, and took place over a long period of time.

People sometimes say that the Roman emperor Constantine changed the day of worship with his Sunday law decree in the early fourth century. But there is evidence that Christians worshiped on Sunday from as early as the middle of the second century—within 50 years of the death of the apostles.³

At the same time, there are indications that Christians attached special significance to the Sabbath down into the fourth and fifth centuries. So the change was not the effect of any single decision. It was the result of a long process.⁴

The writings of early Christians mention several reasons to support Sunday observance. The one most frequently cited is Jesus' resurrection from the dead on that day of the week. Another is the fact that Creation began on that day. This is ironic, of course, since the Bible describes the seventh-day Sabbath as a celebration of Creation, and the New Testament describes Christian baptism as a

memorial of Jesus' resurrection.

It is significant that no early Christian writer supports Sunday observance by an appeal to the Bible. In fact, Tertullian, an important theologian in northern Africa, openly admitted that there is no Scriptural support for the practice. But, he assured his readers, "You can vindicate the keeping of even unwritten tradition established by custom."⁵ In other words, the church practice is enough to establish something, even if there is no biblical evidence for it.

Another factor contributing to the change from Sabbath to Sunday was the growth of anti-Jewish feelings within the church. The Romans officially recognized the Jewish religion, and in the beginning Christians profited from the close relationship between Christianity and Judaism. But as Christianity grew in size and influence, this association became a liability, and Christians sought to distinguish themselves from Jews.

One way to do so was to disregard Sabbathkeeping, since this was a conspicuous Jewish practice. Consequently, we find early Christian statements discouraging Sabbath observance along with ones encouraging the observance of Sunday.

An early second-century letter from Alexandria, Egypt, for example, states that it is impossible for anyone to keep the seventh day holy. It goes on to say that Christians celebrate Sunday, the day Jesus rose from the dead.⁶ Later in the same century Irenaeus, an important church leader in southern France, took the opposite tack. He said that Christians should not keep idle one day of rest, because they are constantly keeping Sabbath by giving homage to God.⁷

Once Sundaykeeping was fairly well established, some writers argued that Christians didn't need Sabbath because they had Sunday to observe.

The growing support for Sunday observance reached a climax in the fourth century with two important developments. The Roman emperor Constantine issued the first Sunday law in A.D. 321. It read, "On the venerable Day of the Sun let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed." This law carried civil authority.

A number of years later, a church council held in Laodicea, a city in Asia Minor, issued the first Sunday law to carry religious authority. It said, "Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on Saturday but shall work on that day; but the Lord's day [an obvious reference to Sunday] they shall especially honor, and, as being Christians, shall, if possible, do no work on that day."

But Sabbathkeeping had not died out among Christians at this time. There is evidence from the third, fourth, and fifth centuries that Christians had a special regard for Sabbath as well as Sunday. Many of them celebrated the Lord's Supper on both days each week.

Because there is no biblical support for the practice, Seventh-day Adventists regard Sunday observance as a departure from the apostolic faith of the church. They believe that this development in the history of the church fulfills various biblical prophecies. The book of Daniel describes the attempts of God's enemies to change the law (Daniel 7:25). At one point in his ministry Paul predicted that fierce doctrinal conflict would follow his departure (Acts 29:29, 30). John indicated that religious errors were entering the church even during the days of the apostles (1 John 4:3).

Just because Sunday observance began early in the history of the church does not prove that it is a part of genuine Christianity. Historically, Seventh-day Adventists have interpreted their work as a continuation of the Protestant Reformation, which began the process of returning to the faith of the Bible. They believe that they have a specific mission to complete this work of reform by recovering the biblical Sabbath during the closing days of human history. So Sabbath observance has important eschatological significance for Adventists.

This is particularly evident in the description of the Sabbath as the "seal of God." Several biblical passages describe God's people receiving a seal, or mark, in the forehead (Ezekiel 9:4, 6; Revelation 7:3; 14:1). A seal is an instrument that leaves a distinctive mark, or impression. Official documents, for example, used to bear the seal of their author. The stone in front of Jesus' tomb bore a seal (Matthew 27:66).

A seal can be a stamp of approval, like the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval," or it can be a mark of identification, signifying ownership. In the relevant biblical passages, those who receive the seal of God enjoy a special relationship with Him. They are completely loyal to God, and He protects them from the judgments that fall on the wicked.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that Sabbath observance represents the "seal of God." As we have mentioned, the fourth commandment alone identifies God, the Giver of the law, as the Sovereign of the universe. So it bears His mark, so to speak, in a special way. In addition, the "arbitrary" character of the fourth commandment makes keeping it a matter of personal loyalty to God. So Sabbath observance distinguishes certain people

as God's very own.

However, the Sabbath acquires this special significance only during the period just before Christ returns, when religious and social conditions on earth reach an all-time low. Then, a public expression of loyalty to God makes people very conspicuous and invites persecution. At that time divine protection is essential for survival.

Besides the seal of God, the book of Revelation also speaks of the "mark of the beast." This is something that identifies those who give their loyalty to God's enemies. It signifies that a person has abandoned all allegiance to God. Since observing the Sabbath, the day of worship God established, is the seal of God, the mark of the beast logically represents a rival, or counterfeit, day of worship.

We have seen that Sunday observance has no biblical support, so it is a likely candidate for the mark of the beast. Seventh-day Adventists believe that the time will come when keeping Sunday will indicate that a person has removed his or her loyalty from God and given it to the powers that oppose Him.

We need to remember that Sabbath and Sunday observance acquire such dramatic significance only within a certain historical situation. Sundaykeeping becomes the "mark of the beast" only when people have a clear understanding of the issues involved in selecting a day of worship. That time has not yet come, so it is theologically inaccurate and personally irresponsible to speak of anyone as having the mark of the beast now.

The Meaning of the Sabbath

The significance of the Sabbath extends beyond eschatology to every aspect of Christian faith. To appreciate it, we need to explore its relation to all the major themes of Christian faith.

The Sabbath is a powerful testimony to the sovereignty of God. Only He can create, and only He can make something holy. This is why Adventists object so strongly to the change from Sabbath to Sunday as the Christian day of rest and worship. Without a clear divine mandate, such a development is nothing less than an affront to God. As the source of reality, God is radically different from everything else.

The Sabbath calls attention to the qualitative distinction between God and the world. So it excludes idolatry. It is impossible to represent the Creator adequately by means of any creaturely object.

The Sabbath not only emphasizes the infinite distance between God and the world, it also calls attention to God's closeness to the world. God did not

create the world and leave it to run on its own, or lose interest in it. The world continues to exist only because His power sustains it. He is deeply concerned with everything that happens in it. So the Sabbath expresses God's commitment to the world He made.

The Sabbath also demonstrates that God is a personal being. He is not a blind force, or an unconscious cosmic power that creates because it has no alternative. He creates out of personal freedom. The Sabbath shows that He creates when He chooses, and stops creating when it pleases Him.

The Sabbath further reveals that God not only enjoys and values what He creates, He also seeks fellowship with His creatures. He invites us to share the joy that He experiences with the completion of His creative work. The Bible speaks of the Sabbath as "entering God's rest" (cf. Hebrews 4:3-10). This suggests that the Sabbath is God's gift to us, not something He imposes on human beings to lord it over them or extract submission from them. The Sabbath is an opportunity to share a joyous experience with God Himself.

The Sabbath also has a lot to say about human beings. It describes our relationships to God, to one another, and to the rest of creation. In each relationship there are contrasting dynamics of distance and proximity. To begin with, the Sabbath reminds us that we are finite and dependent beings. We are creatures, subject to the sovereignty of our Creator. In view of God's infinite superiority, we owe Him praise and adoration.

In fact, this is our first responsibility—to love God with all the powers of our being (Deuteronomy 6:5). It takes priority over all other obligations—to family, friends, and society. Sabbath observance acknowledges our recognition of God's claims on our lives, but it does more than that. It celebrates His lordship. We rejoice in the knowledge that He is ultimately in charge of things.

While it emphasizes the vast distance between human beings and God, the Sabbath also points to the close relationship between them. Created in God's image, human beings have a unique capacity for fellowship with Him. In His company, we can enjoy the fruits of His creative activity. The Sabbath gives us an opportunity to celebrate our heritage as God's representatives in the world He has made.

The Sabbath also speaks to our relationship with other human beings. Here, too, we find the dynamics of distance and proximity. The Sabbath is a day of free-

dom, and freedom from labor means freedom from bondage to other people. According to the fourth commandment, servants are not to work on the Sabbath. Since no one is subordinate to another on Sabbath, each person stands before God with individual identity and dignity.

On Sabbath we step out of the various stations we occupy during the week. This reminds those who work for others of their basic liberty as children of God. It also reminds those who direct others during the week that they, too, are under the sovereignty of God.

By setting us free from labor, the Sabbath reminds us of our true significance. We have a tendency to look to our occupations or our income for assurance that our lives are worthwhile. But the Sabbath tells us that we are important because we matter to God. He loves us as His children, quite apart from what other people think of us. The Sabbath reminds students that academic accomplishments do not define their significance as human beings. It reminds others that their status within the organization that employs them, or the profession for which they have trained, is not the most important thing about them.

The Sabbath is a day of freedom for, as well as freedom from. Because it frees us from the things that separate us during the week, the Sabbath gives us unique opportunities for fellowship. On the Sabbath differences of occupation and education lose their importance. We realize that what we have in common before the Lord is more important than the various structures that distinguish us during the week, so we can associate as equals. We can enjoy others' company as brothers and sisters in Christ.

For these reasons, the Sabbath has important social implications. It attaches such value to human beings that no person can ever be merely the property of another. A real appreciation for the Sabbath would therefore make slavery abhorrent. The Sabbath speaks against every practice that deprives human beings of their sense of worth and dignity. Oppressive economic and social structures, which make it impossible for people to provide for themselves, contradict the message of the Sabbath. Those who appreciate the meaning of the Sabbath will seek to eliminate such inequity.

The Sabbath also illuminates the relationship of human beings to the rest of creation. By reminding us of our creatureliness, the Sabbath makes us aware of our unity with the natural world. In light of the Sabbath, we see our dependence on the environment to supply our needs,

and we sense our common destiny with the earth.

We also become aware of what distinguishes us from the other forms of creaturely existence. This sense of distance from creation does two things. On the one hand, it allows us to see the world as something valuable and significant in its own right. It does not exist merely for us; it exists for God. He made it and pronounced it good. So the Sabbath permits us to enjoy the world for its own sake. It prevents us from viewing everything in light of its potential to meet our needs.

This sense of distance from the rest of creation also encourages a sense of stewardship. The ability to step back and look at the world as something worthy in itself, and not merely valuable to us, is the same ability that enables us to have such an effect on our planet. We have a responsibility to care for the world, not merely to enjoy it. We do not need to apologize for using the resources of the earth to meet our needs. But we must exercise this ability responsibly. We might say that the Sabbath provides the basis for a theological ecology. It calls for us to respect our environment.

As a day of worship, the Sabbath reminds us of our uniqueness. Unlike the rest of earth's creatures, human beings are not exhaustively defined by their place within the natural cycles of this planet. We can look beyond the specific space-time continuum in which we live.

Because it elevates us above the daily round of activity that meets our physical needs, the Sabbath calls attention to the needs of the spirit. It reminds us that our source and destiny lie beyond the realm of material things, significant as they may be. So the Sabbath is an opportunity for self-realization. We can become most fully human on this day.

In addition to its important connections with the doctrines of God and human existence, the Sabbath also relates to the doctrine of salvation. To begin with, the Sabbath commemorates God's saving, as well as His creative, activity. As we noticed earlier, the rationale for Sabbath observance in Deuteronomy 5 is God's deliverance of Israel. This was the primary example of salvation in the Old Testament.

Some New Testament scholars see a parallel between Creation week and passion week, the momentous climax of Jesus' life, that began with His cleansing of the temple and ended with His crucifixion on the sixth day. And just as God rested when the work of Creation was complete, Jesus rested in the tomb when the work of redemption was complete.

On the Sabbath we can celebrate both accomplishments.

The Sabbath is an appropriate symbol of the nature of salvation, as well. It reminds us that our salvation is the work of God, not a human achievement. On Sabbath we cease from our works in the world to contemplate the works of God. We sense our utter dependence on God and realize the relative insignificance of anything we can accomplish. We are aware that of ourselves we can do nothing.

All of this resembles our situation in the experience of salvation. Salvation is entirely the gift of God. We do nothing to make ourselves worthy of it. We can only accept what God has done for us. To receive salvation, we have to give up all self-reliance, and trust completely in Him.

The Sabbath further illuminates the experience of salvation with its emphasis on divine-human fellowship. The purpose of salvation is to reconcile human beings to God. The Sabbath symbolizes this experience. And because the Sabbath is also a sign of sanctification, according to the Bible, it directs our attention to that aspect of salvation, too. It calls our attention to God's desire to work within us to transform our lives into His likeness.

As a symbol of salvation, Sabbath observance can help us to experience salvation more fully. The clearest indication of this is Jesus' Sabbath miracles. It was no coincidence that Jesus healed so often on the Sabbath. His purpose was not just to show that the prevalent concept of the Sabbath was mistaken. He wanted to do more than prove that the Sabbath was not meant to be a burden. He wanted to demonstrate the positive value of the Sabbath, so He healed people to get this point across.

The message He sought to convey is that the Sabbath is a day for wholeness and restoration. The Greek word for "healing" also means "salvation." Jesus intended His dramatic actions to awaken people to the fact that Sabbath could be an experience of salvation for all of them. It is a day for wholeness, an opportunity to live life in all its fullness. When we realize its saving significance, Sabbath-keeping can enhance and contribute to the experience of salvation.

The Sabbath also has implications for the doctrine of the church. First, it reminds us that the community of the Spirit is the creation of God. Some scholars believe that the outstanding example of God's creative power in the Old Testament was the origin of Israel. God created Israel out of nothing, so to speak, and made of her a nation. Similarly, the

Christian church owes its existence entirely to the power of God. It is not the product of human activity.

Because the Sabbath frees human beings from various forms of bondage, it frees them for new and richer fellowship with one another. This certainly has a bearing on the life of the church. The Sabbath reminds us that every member is essential to the body of Christ, and it provides us with opportunities to enjoy the company of other Christians. This makes the Sabbath the appropriate day for public worship.

Finally, the Sabbath has eschatological significance. Adventists believe that it will become a decisive religious issue just before Christ returns, but it has eschatological meaning for other reasons, too. One is the way the Sabbath directs us beyond the things of this world. By calling us apart from the ordinary activities of life, the Sabbath reminds us that our present situation is not permanent. The things that occupy our time and attention during the other six days of the week do not deserve our ultimate devotion. We are on our way to something better, and we must not allow the joys and sorrows of this life, however worthy of our interest, to distract us from it.

At the same time, the Sabbath gives us a foretaste of what the life to come will be like. It makes available to us in a promissory way the ultimate reward of God's people. The work of salvation will reach its goal when God makes His eternal home with human beings in the new earth. But the Sabbath anticipates the future by providing an opportunity for intimate relationship with God here. The experience of eternity can begin now in the lives of those who appreciate the meaning of the Sabbath and experience salvation to the fullest.

The Sabbath also directs us to the future with its assurance that God has not abandoned the earth. God instituted the Sabbath as an expression of His commitment to creation. In spite of all that sin has done to destroy the beauty of this planet, it is still God's world, and He promises to restore its former splendor. Not only that, He intends to fulfill His purposes for all His creatures, particularly human beings.

The Sabbath assures us that we will eventually become everything that we were meant to be. There are indications, too, that the Sabbath has a permanent role in human destiny. One prophetic portrait of the future life describes the inhabitants of the new earth coming to worship God from Sabbath to Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23).

The Sabbath, then, is a powerful symbol for the entire experience of salvation. It illuminates all its dimensions—personal, social, and historical, just as it sheds extensive light on the fundamental doctrines of God and human existence. All this makes it clear that the Sabbath has enormous theological importance. Far more than a curious religious practice observed by a relatively small segment of Christianity, the Sabbath adds significance to the entire range of Christian beliefs, and provides a means of uniting them into a cohesive, coherent body of faith. □

This is the last in a series of two continuing education articles on Bible doctrines.

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