

Why Do Seventh-Day Adventists Keep the Sabbath?

Bible Answers About Denominations

To Seventh-day Adventism, the most important of all God's commands is the keeping of the Sabbath. Mrs. White called it "the greatest commandment in the Decalogue" (Early Writings, p. 65). Mrs. White, in writing to Joseph Bates, recounted a vision in which she had "passed into the Holy of holies" in heaven. There, she declared, she saw the Ten Commandments shining brightly, the fourth brighter than the rest. "The holy Sabbath looked glorious – a halo of glory was all around it." She said, "I saw that the holy Sabbath is, and will be, the separating wall between the true Israel of God and unbelievers; and that the Sabbath is the great question to unite the hearts of God's dear waiting saints. And if one believed and kept the Sabbath and received the blessing attending it and then gave it up and broke the holy commandment, they would shut the gates of the Holy City against themselves, as sure as there was a God that rules in heaven" (A Word to the "little Flock," pp. 18-19).

Some time before January 5, 1849, Mrs. White had a vision in which she saw "a company who were howling in agony." She reports: "On their garments was written in large characters, 'Thou art weighed in the balance, and found wanting.' I asked who this company was. The angel said, 'These are they who have once kept the Sabbath and had given it up.' I heard them cry with a loud voice, 'We have believed in Thy coming, and taught it with energy.' And while they were speaking, their eyes would fall upon their garments and see the writing, and then they would wail aloud. I say that they had drunk of the deep waters, and fouled the residue with their feet – trodden the Sabbath underfoot – and that was why they were weighed in the balance and found wanting" (Early Writings, p. 37).

These quotations from Mrs. White clearly prove that she taught that Sabbath observance is necessary to salvation. By so teaching she denied that salvation is always to be had apart from law keeping and, therefore, by grace. The other founder of this movement, Joseph Bates, held the same view. He called the Sabbath "the crowning truth of all, and consequently, the seal of the living God; because the sealing cannot take place until the truth is first believed" (The Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, 1850-51, p. 58).

Adventist leaders have stated that they repudiate the view that keeping the Sabbath "is in any way a means of salvation." However, as long as these uninspired leaders continue to advocate the inspiration of Mrs. White, they cannot dismiss her teaching as a thing of the past. If Mrs. White had the gift of prophecy, as is claimed by Adventists, then her pronouncements are final. Are they prepared to say that Mrs. White was not inspired and did not speak for God? And if the Sabbath is not essential to salvation then why do they continue to practice something that divides the other professed followers of Christ?

Sabbath Keeping Is a Violation of the Law of Christ

Some Gnostic teachers at Colossae were attempting to bind Sabbath keeping on the church. Paul refuted their false doctrine by arguing that the death of Christ on the cross blotted out “the hand-writing of ordinances which was against us, which was contrary to us” (Col. 2:14). Paul then forbade the Colossian Christians from allowing anyone to judge others on the basis of meat, or drink, or in respect to any holy day, or of the new moon or of Sabbath days (Col. 2:16). If the Sabbath had been binding on the early Christians, would it not have been legitimate and even mandatory to judge others’ faithfulness on the basis of Sabbath keeping?

II Corinthians 3 provides one of the most powerful arguments concerning the removal of the Law of Moses and the institution of the gospel of Christ. Paul referred to the Corinthian Christians as his epistle “written in our hearts, known and read of all men.” The Corinthians were “manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not in ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart” (II Cor. 3:2,3). In using this language, Paul does not intend to deny the inspiration of the Old Testament (or covenant), but to show that it had been removed and the New Testament had been given to bring us to faith in Christ and to obedience to His word. The writer of Hebrews stresses the same truth. “Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:9-10).

The law God gave to Israel through Moses included the Ten Commandments which were written “in tables of stone.” The Old Testament writers speak only of the Ten Commandments as being written in tables of stone. The fact is very significant as one examines the rest of II Corinthians 3. In contrast to the law’s being written in tables of stone, the gospel of Christ is written in “fleshly tables of the heart.” This contrast between the two covenants is what the writer of Hebrews calls “the law of carnal commandment” and “the power of an endless life” (Heb. 7:16). Both covenants originated in the mind of God, but the old was temporary and carnal; the new was bound on mankind to the end of the age.

Paul expressed trust in God’s goodness which has been given through Jesus Christ. Paul’s confidence did not come from his own sufficiency but from the living God. It was God, Paul affirmed, “who has made us (the apostles—not Christians in general) able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (II Cor. 3:5-6). Hebrews 8 gives us further insight into the new covenant as contrasted with the old. “For if that first covenant (or testament) had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second....In that he says, A new covenant, he has made the first old. Now that which decays and waxes old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:7, 13). If the old covenant were waxing old and ready to vanish away almost two thousand years ago, how could anyone imagine that it is still binding on anyone today? Continue to observe the contrast between the first covenant and the second as given in II Cor. 3:3-18.

Paul also argued that if one endeavors to keep the first covenant one falls from grace. John wrote, “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The Jew lived in and through the law, but the Christian by and through grace (Eph. 2:5, 8-10). To return to Moses is to make Christ of no effect to us and to fall away from grace. “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have

been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (Gal 5:1-4). Certainly nothing could be binding on Christians to cause them to fall from grace. The Sabbath has been taken away, and is not bound on Christians. The injunction of the apostle Paul is still in order: “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy or vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.... Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross ... Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect to a holy day or of the new moon, or the sabbath days which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ” (Col. 8:14, 16, 17).

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