

An Analysis of Adventist Arguments for A Seventh-Day Sabbath

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[Metro-North Pastoral Conference, Brookfield, WI, January 26, 1970]

Introduction

The Seventh Day Adventists in 1966 numbered 375,000 members in the United States, which makes it a church body just slightly larger than our own Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Yet it is probably more widely known in the world than our Synod. This is due to its extensive mission program (1957 total budget was \$79.5 million through tithes) and its teachings on the second Advent of Christ and the observance of the seventh day Sabbath—hence their name.

A Christian Church

The Adventist Church and similar denominations are often referred to as Christian. They have never adopted a formal creed or confession. Yet we can learn of their theology through various publications. At first glance their teachings appear to be quite orthodox, at least on the fundamental truths of Christianity.

They say that the Scriptures are verbally inspired and fully sufficient for salvation. They identify God as the Trinity and Jesus Christ as Very God. They confess that man is saved by grace, not by the law, through the vicarious atonement of Christ for sinful man.

Yet their interpretation of Scripture is extreme literalism, especially in the Books of Daniel and Revelation, from which they derive their millennialism. The faith that saves is not total dependence on the promises of God in the Gospel. They make the Gospel into a new Law and faith is obedience. Their legalism makes of the vicarious atonement of Christ the work of God to reshape man into the divine pattern of moral righteousness. Christ merely makes us happy to do God's will. Christian sanctification leads to perfectionism which must therefore exclude worldly practices such as card playing, theatergoing, dancing and abstaining from such things as alcoholic beverages, tobacco in all forms, and from unclean foods. This will then result in a utopia for man on earth and the establishment of Christ's kingdom here for eternity.

Hence they are sectarian and have nullified the Gospel of Christ with legalism. They are the modern day Judaizers and follow the history of Montanism, the Anabaptist movements of the Reformations and the other similar sects in our day.

Background

The modern Adventist movement began under William Miller (1782-1849), a New York farmer. He began as a Baptist, but soon became a millennialist, even setting the date for Christ's return. Using the Book of Daniel, he predicted Christ's advent would occur "between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844." He soon had 50,000 followers. But when the date passed by uneventfully, there was great dismay and disappointment. Some of Miller's followers however soon showed that Miller had made a miscalculation, and reset the date for October 22, 1844. The enthusiasm and fervor was greater than ever before. But as we know, they were wrong and there was again disappointment among Miller's followers and many disbanded.

One group, however, under the leadership of Joseph Bates, James Whites and his wife, Ellen G. White, took up a new claim. They said that Miller had been right, and that just the nature of the event had been wrongly described. Soon Mrs. White had a vision which proved the Adventists were right. She saw a narrow path leading to the heavenly Jerusalem with only Adventists walking on it led by an angel. In another vision, Mrs. White was further informed by revelation that: 1) the hour of God's judgment had come in 1843-44; 2) Babylon, that wicked city, fell when the Adventists left the regular denominations; and 3) a warning is issued against worshiping the beast, the Antichrist, who introduced Sunday in place of the Sabbath. The Adventist's

mission of God, therefore, was to announce to the nations the impending doom proclaimed by the angel in her visions to warn against worshiping the beast and his image, to impress on all their obligation to observe the commandments of God, especially the Sabbath.

Mrs. White had several more visions to substantiate this teaching. In one she allegedly saw Jesus raising the lid of the ark in the heavenly sanctuary, displaying Moses' two tables of the Law with the Third (their Fourth) Commandment surrounded by a halo, thereby indicating its superiority over the other commandments. Exodus 31 and Ezekiel 20 are quoted to support this, where the Sabbath is called God's seal and the means by which God indicates His ownership. In accordance with Revelation 7, therefore, God will place His seal upon the forehead of His servants, which means, they say, those that keep the seventh day Sabbath. But the beast (pope) of Revelation 14 will attempt to put his seal on those who ultimately will be tormented. The seal of the beast, taken from Daniel 7, is the change from the Saturday Sabbath to Sunday. For the Adventists, the difference between the saved and the lost is whether they choose God's seal (Saturday) or the beast's seal (Sunday) for worship.

The extreme literalism and legalism of the Adventists can thus be seen. Unless one worships on Saturday, he cannot be saved. It is a matter of justification for every soul. Incidentally, the Adventists also reject the immortality of the soul. They believe in psychopannychism or the sleep of the soul until Christ's return when the souls of believers will be taken into heaven and the souls of unbelievers will be annihilated together with Satan. There is no real hell in Adventist doctrine, either. Thus we can now begin to see with what kind of group we are here dealing.

The Sabbath Law

Adventists hold that the Sabbath Law for Saturday is universally binding because: 1) it is a part of the Moral Law; 2) it was given at the Creation; and 3) it was not abrogated in the New Testament. Let us now look at these three arguments in the light of the Word of God.

Argument #1

The Sabbath is part of the Moral Law and is therefore universally binding. They argue: The Sabbath commandment is part of the Decalog; the Decalog is the Law of God; God's Law is true; therefore heaven and earth shall pass away, but God's Law can never pass away (Matthew 5:17-19).

If this was true, then the Adventists could not use pictures in their publications as they so elaborately do, for this would violate strict observance of the Second Commandment. Then they would also invoke the penalty for violation of the Sabbath Law—death by stoning. And that would have to be done universally.

The fact is Scripture gives no evidence that we must worship on the exact seventh day of the week—or even on one day out of seven. The strict observance of the Sabbath Day for the Jews was all part of the Ceremonial Law, not the Moral Law.

The added argument that the ancient pagans worshiped the sun (hence SUNday) is not at all valid, for those heathen worshipers did not observe one day out of seven, which is a basic demand of the Sabbath laws.

Furthermore, such an observance of the Sabbath does not flow from the holiness of God nor from love of our neighbor, as do the other commandments. Christians observe this commandment, not by resting from labor one day in seven, but by sanctifying every day and making them true "rest days" through the Word of God in which our Lord Christ says, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you **rest**. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, and ye shall find **rest** unto your *souls*." (Matthew 15) This is the true rest which we should and can have **every** day by faith in Christ.

Argument #2

The Sabbath Law is said to be universally binding because it was instituted at Creation and affects all men. The Adventists say that by resting on the first seventh day the Lord instituted the Sabbath and now demands that men observe each succeeding seventh day. They insist that the seventh day Sabbath has been observed uninterrupted since Creation and it is man's solemn duty to continue it so until Christ's return. They say: God is just and since giving the Sabbath law at Creation, He has also preserved unbroken the cycle of seven days so that each recurring Sabbath is in a perfect multiple of seven days since the first complete week of time.

Undoubtedly they have trouble with Joshua's long day which surely made that week longer than our 168 hour week. They must also do some manipulating to get over the international dateline and the setting of our modern calendar.

If God had wanted this Sabbath law to be universally binding, then surely He would also have not waited 2500 and more years before causing the Pentateuch to be written or before giving the Third Commandment. Before the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, the Decalog was **unknown** to the Jews. Through the Fall the natural knowledge of God had become obscured. So the Decalog was given to Israel to remind them of God's deliverance from Egypt and especially to remind them of God's creation and the first seven days. This would not have been necessary if they knew it already and had been putting it into practice. Besides, it was only with Israel that God chose then to make this covenant of the Law, and not with the whole world. They alone in the Old Testament were to be His chosen and distinct people.

In addition, this seventh day observance of rest was to be only a prelude or foreshadowing of what God's people would really enjoy once the Messiah had come. This fact the apostle Paul reminds us of in Colossians 2:16, 17. All of the Ceremonial Law was to point ahead to Christ. He says "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the *sabbath days*; which are a shadow of things to come but the body is of Christ." To continue observing these laws and days now is to nullify the redemption Christ won for us by His perfect obedience to the Law. We are free as New Testament Christians. We do not have to observe certain days or laws regarding our worship of God. In Galatians 4, Paul even calls such observance of "days, and months, and times, and years", "the weak and beggarly elements." In Romans 14, Paul makes it clear that it doesn't matter one bit anymore which day is which because we are now free to observe as many or as few days (even none) as we want. "One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." No one has the right to say now that one day is better or more important than another day.

The Adventist argument that in Colossians 2, Paul was talking just about the special Sabbaths is unfounded. Paul makes no distinction. They all belong to the Ceremonial Law which was ended in its demands on us with the cross of Christ.

Argument #3

The point that Christ and the apostles observed the Sabbath and did not abrogate it or substitute Sunday is also unfounded. The facts are that Christ and the apostles restate all Commandments of the Decalog except the Sabbath Law. Nowhere does the New Testament mention the strict observance of the Old Testament Sabbath as now mandatory. The early Christian Church, long before the rise of the papacy, observed Sunday and not Saturday as the Sabbath. In fact they no longer call it the Sabbath but the Lord's Day. (For references to the first day of the week as the Lord's Day, see Rev. 1:10, Acts 20:7, and 1 Cor. 16:2) In fact, whenever Christ ran up against the Jews on the Sabbath Law, He made it clear that the Ceremonial laws concerning the Sabbath are to be done away with (Mark 2:23-28). He said, in fact "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath." Jesus thereby indicates that as far as that part of the commandment about a specific day is concerned, it is of a ceremonial and transient nature, which in itself should be respected as long as that Ceremonial Law is in force, but may as readily be omitted when the law was

abolished. If the Sabbath was “made for man”, on account of man’s needs and for his benefit, then the conditions being changed will also change the law. And this very thing Jesus had the authority to abolish and even did so.

St. Paul, the apostle of Christ, says that we now should not let anyone judge us on the keeping of the Sabbath days. Why? Because there is no longer any law regarding them. If there were a law, there would have to be a judgment. All ceremonial laws, including the Sabbath law, were abrogated because they “were a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.” Such laws were only to point ahead to Christ including the Sabbath law. Moses himself said that when Shiloh (the Rest-Giver) comes “Unto Him shall the gathering of the people be” (Gen. 49:10). We don’t need the Old Testament Sabbath (Rest). We now have the real Rest, Christ Himself. In Him we have rest not just for our bodies but especially for our souls. He shall finally bring us into the perfect rest of God’s presence in heaven (Hebrews 4).

Certainly Jesus and the first disciples worshiped on Saturday, between sunset Friday and sunset Saturday. Christ came to fulfill the whole Law for us in order to redeem us and set us free from all its demands and penalties. The disciples went to the synagogues on the Jewish Sabbath, it is true. But when else were people going to hear God’s Word preached? Besides, they wanted to make use of the opportunities to make known the truth that Christ had come as God had promised. There is ample evidence that when the Jews rejected Christianity, they chose another day on which to worship the true God, namely, Sunday as a memorial to the Resurrection of Christ from the dead and to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The important thing for them was that they be allowed to continue steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. (Acts 2:42)

New Testament Sabbath

Just one last word. Though we might not insist on a seventh day Sabbath, yet we are in danger of making Sunday into a Sabbath like the Old Testament one. The Reformed Churches have done so in much the same spirit as the Adventists insist on Saturday. The *Presbyterian Confession* says: “God, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath to be kept holy unto Him; which from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ was the last day of the week, and from the resurrection of Christ was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord’s Day and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath.” (XXI, 7)

The *Augsburg Confession*, on the other hand, says: “They greatly err that think that by the authority of the church the observation of the Lord’s day has been instituted instead of the Sabbath, as necessary. The Scripture has abrogated the Sabbath, and teaches that all Mosaical ceremonies may be omitted, after the Gospel is revealed. And yet, because it was necessary to appoint a certain day, in order that the people might know when they ought to come together, it appears that the church for that purpose appointed the Lord’s Day; which for this cause also seems to have been preferred, that men might have an example of Christian liberty, and might know that the observation neither of the Sabbath nor of another day is necessary.” (Article XXVIII) And we all know what trouble the “Blue Laws” in our country have caused because of this legalism of the Reformed churches and other sects.

We have, in other words, no right to insist that Sunday be observed. We are to use God’s Word, both privately and publicly, as did the early Christian church. For public worship and study of the Word we need a fixed time, or else none would know when to come and we would not have order. We are not to neglect or deliberately absent ourselves from such access to the Means of Grace as Hebrews 10:25 says, “Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.” Christians should attend such meetings. They should come to them regularly, never missing if they can come at all. As Luther says, “We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.”

But such assemblies may be held on Monday, Tuesday, or any day of the week; and we may meet in the morning, at noon, or at night. Perhaps in our modern urban times when there is much competition for worship on Sundays (working, shopping, traveling, sports, etc.) we should try to make available to people more possible days and hours of worship. Our insistence that “we have church on Sundays at 10:00 and you better be there” type attitude comes dangerously close to making the New Testament Sabbath a yoke of bondage. The Lord Himself said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Paul told Timothy (2 Tim. 4)., “Preach the Word; be instant in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine; ... endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.”