

May the Sabbath Day Become a Blessing

Editorial

The theme for this issue of Mishkan is the Sabbath. Different contributors take different approaches to the theme and arrive at different conclusions. The lack of a definitive conclusion should encourage further reflection on the Sabbath and the problems and blessings related to it.

Only the rite of circumcision rivals the Sabbath in giving and maintaining Jewish identity through the ages. It is therefore natural that Jewish believers in Jesus today show concern for the Sabbath – and circumcision. When Jewish people previously came to faith in Jesus and were baptized they were considered ex-Jews by the Church. Messianic believers today do not consider themselves ex-Jews. They have taken a more positive approach to the Sabbath than the Christian Church previously allowed them. This more positive approach to the Sabbath has also been assumed by some theologians and missiologists within the Christian Church. But what kind of positive approach? And do Messianic believers actually consider it sufficient?

The first time the word “Sabbath” is used in the Gospel of Matthew it regards a dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees (Matt 12:1ff). Later, when the Church was dominated by a gentile majority another dispute arises concerning Jewish believers’ Sabbath observance. This theological debate continues even today. It has been part of the discussion of the modern Messianic movement of the last three or four decades, but existed in 19th century as well. The debate in the second century took place at a time when the Jewish part of the Church was diminishing. In the 19th century the debate occurred when Jewish believers in Jesus were again appearing on the agenda of the Church. In the intervening 16 centuries — the vast majority of church history — the discussion was limited to theologians interested in the early history of the Church. There were hardly any Jewish believers in Jesus who contradicted the Church and its theologians on its viewpoint of the Sabbath. Those Jews who had come to faith had become “Christians.” In the eyes of the Church this meant that they ought not — or could not — take a positive approach to Judaism and consequently, not Sabbath — the Sabbath, which the Lord of the Church kept.

The New Testament makes it clear that there was a debate between the Jew Jesus and the Pharisees on several issues relating to the Sabbath. Jesus criticizes part of the very detailed Sabbath code of the Pharisees. However, the New Testament also shows that Jesus kept the Sabbath. This creates a tension. The validity of the Sabbath is not questioned by Jesus. Neither is it possible in the New Testament to find statements saying that Sabbath observance has been replaced by Sunday observance. What Jesus criticizes are man-made regulations that hide God’s intention regarding the Sabbath. The Son of Man, Jesus, is Lord of the Sabbath. He has divine authority to manifest the real meaning of the law. Authoritatively, he interprets the law in agreement with its intention. But regardless of his good or bad intentions, man must not make regulations concerning the Sabbath which set aside mercy and compassion. Scripture references like Matthew 12:1-14; Mark 2:23-3,6 and Luke 6:1-11 are important in order to understand Jesus’ view of the Sabbath. Any discussion of the Sabbath will therefore also need to deal with these

passages — a task assumed by many of this issue’s contributors. Any discussion of the Sabbath which does not relate to these passages and the tension therein is incomplete.

Four Examples from History

We will briefly deal with four historical examples which underline the tension that Jewish believers in Jesus experience. Based upon this we will ask some questions for further reflection, not only for the gentile church, but also for Messianic believers.

Justin Martyr’s “Dialogue with Trypho the Jew”

Justin Martyr of the second century provides us with a relevant example in his book *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. In strong terms he turns against the kind of Jewish Christian who — although he maintains Jesus is the Messiah — nevertheless considers him to be only a man of men. But Justin knows of other Jewish Christians who, while having true faith in Christ, still observe Sabbath and circumcision. He records Trypho asking: “But if someone, knowing that this is so, after he recognises that this man is Christ, and has believed in and obeys him, wishes, however, to observe these institutions, will he be saved?” To this Justin answers: “I my opinion, Trypho, such a one will be saved, if he does not strive in every way to persuade other men — I mean those Gentiles who have been circumcised from error by Christ, to observe the same things as himself, telling them that they will not be saved unless they do.”¹

In the same context Justin mentions that there are gentiles of a different opinion. In other words: Compared to the first century, when gentile believers did not question the adherence of Jewish believers to Jewish customs (cf. Acts 15), the situation in the second century differed. Only the moderate elements within the gentile church accepted that Jewish believers would keep Jewish customs. From having been an honored minority Jewish believers in Jesus became a tolerated minority in the eyes of these moderates. In the eyes of the less moderate gentile believers they were a minority that had excommunicated itself from the Church.

Justin had in mind two groups of Jesus-believing Jews. As a gentile Christian he dared to evaluate them based on Christological (Jewish!) criteria. He approved the one group — there is freedom to keep the Sabbath. But other group he can’t approve as their Christology is unacceptable. The question to the Christian Church today is: Will it, together with Justin, give its approval to Jewish believers for them to continue to live as Jews? The question to Messianic Jews on the other hand is: Will you, if necessary, question fellow Jews who emphasize an external “Jewishness” rather than maintaining a true Jewish Christology?

According to Justin, Jewish believers in Jesus ought to have the freedom to live as Jews — a view that is repeated in the 19th century (see below). However, in the following we shall first mention the opposite viewpoint which (shamefully) dominated the Church from the second and third century until our time.

¹ *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, 46,1-2, cf. Ray Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Jerusalem-Leiden: Magnes Press-E. J. Brill, 1988), p. 19-20.

Professions of Faith from the Church of Constantinople

In *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue*, James Parkes has collected some professions of faith which were demanded from Jews who converted to Christianity in the Middle Ages. They show in no uncertain terms that when a Jew was to be baptized, the Church demanded a total breach with all things Jewish. Suffice it to mention a brief extract from “Professions of Faith,” from the Church in Constantinople:

As a preliminary to his acceptance as a catechumen, a Jew must confess and denounce verbally the whole Hebrew people, and forthwith declare that with a whole heart and sincere faith he desires to be received among the Christians. Then he must renounce openly in the church all Jewish superstition, the priest saying, and he, or his sponsor if he is a child replying in these words:

“I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of lambs of the Hebrews, and all the other feasts of the Hebrews, sacrifices, prayers, aspersions, purifications, sanctifications and propitiations, and fasts, and new moons, and Sabbaths, and superstitions and hymns and chants and observances and synagogues, and the food and drink of the Hebrews; in one word, I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom and above all I renounce Antichrist, whom all the Jews await in the figure and form of Christ; and I join myself to the true Christ and God. And I believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”²

According to this and similar Confessions of Faith made by the Christian Church it is impossible for Jesus-believing Jews to believe in Jesus the Messiah and at the same time live as Jews. The question today is: Does the Church still — although not with the same words — hold similar views as expressed in the above-mentioned Profession of Faith?

With this question in mind we shall move on to the 19th century where both Jesus-believing Jews and gentile Christians questioned that “Jewishness” and “faith in Jesus” were mutual exclusive.

Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement in Kishinev

Joseph Rabinowitz (1837-1899) — “the Herzl of Jewish Christianity”³ — was able to place on the agenda the question of whether faith in Jesus and Jewishness were mutually exclusive concepts in a way that nobody else had done in modern times.

In a meeting between Joseph Rabinowitz and representatives from foreign mission organizations in March 1884 Rabinowitz expressed that he and others like him desired liberty to observe Jewish customs handed down from their fathers. This was before the Russian authorities granted him permission to hold services for The Israelites of the New Covenant, the name he used for his congregation. The gentile Christian participants in the conference were afraid that Rabinowitz and his adherents would nevertheless keep the commandments not merely because of national but also religious motives. For the sake of clarity regarding Rabinowitz’s attitude, the question was asked “Does a Jesus-believing Jew who does not circumcise his child commit a sin?” Rabinowitz’s reply was: “He does not commit a sin, but he thereby estranges himself from

² James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (New York, Atheneum: 1977), p. 397.

³ Cf. H. J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity, From the First to the Twentieth Century* (London, 1936), p. 223.

his people.” He gave a similar reply when asked if Jesus-believing Jews who do not keep the Sabbath committed a sin. From a “religious” point of view, Rabinowitz and his adherents believed that the law had been perfectly fulfilled by the Messiah. But from a “patriotic” point of view, they felt obligated to keep the law as much as national circumstances allowed.⁴

From the beginning of his public preaching, the words of Paul in Romans 10:4 became one of Rabinowitz’s key words: “The Messiah is the end of the law.” Rabinowitz’s point of departure is that he was Jewish and that his faith in Jesus didn’t make him an ex-Jew. From 1885 until his death in 1899 he held his services mainly on Sabbath. But according to Professor F. Delitzsch, Rabinowitz was going too far when it came to Sabbath and circumcision. In 1887 Delitzsch expressed the hope that Rabinowitz with his Pauline attitude would finally draw the Pauline conclusion and abandon his view. “Israel’s national distinctiveness must be maintained and will be maintained without circumcision and with Sunday instead of the Sabbath,” Delitzsch said.

However, this did not prevent Delitzsch from defending Rabinowitz when he was accused. Also in 1887, when the Lutheran pastor in Kishinev, R. Faltin insisted that a national Jewish-Christian church must be built within “the evangelical church in Russia,” Delitzsch came to Rabinowitz’s rescue, asking, “The Lutheran or the Reformed? ... As they wish to retain the Sabbath and circumcision, how could a Lutheran or Reformed church government officially legalize this retention?”⁵

The example of Rabinowitz raises the question today as to whether Rabinowitz went too far, as was Delitzsch’s opinion, and if so is the Church then still willing to support the Messianic movement, as Delitzsch was? The challenge to Messianic Jews is to answer the question regarding Paul’s intention in Romans 10:4.

From a Conference on Jewish Evangelism in Leipzig, 1895

The German pastor A. Wiegand gave a lecture on the correct attitude for Christ-believing Jews towards the Law (“Die Stellung des Judenchristen zum Gesetz”) at a conference in Leipzig, June 6-8, 1895.⁶

He mainly related to three areas: circumcision, Sabbath and dietary laws. Wiegand first mentioned the different attitudes towards the law in the Christian Church. While the Reformed church, following Calvin, regarded Sunday as a new “legal institution” which had taken the place of the Sabbath, the Lutheran church did *not* regard Sunday as a “legal regulation.” Wiegand then formulates three theses concerning the relation of Jewish Christians to the law:

The first thesis: From the point of view of the New Testament, the Jewish Christian has complete freedom to observe or not to observe the Jewish law.

The second thesis: Voluntary observance of the Jewish law is recommended to a Jewish Christian, especially if he is engaged in Jewish missions — from the point of love for his yet unbelieving tribesmen.

⁴ Kai Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement* (Grand Rapids- Edinburgh: Eerdmans-The Handsel Press, 1995), p. 56.

⁵ Kjær-Hansen, p. 139.

⁶ A. Wiegand, “Die Stellung des Judenchristen zum Gesetz” in *Nathanael* 1895, p. 110-128.

The third thesis: Voluntary observance of the Jewish Law is recommended to him — in the light of the hope of a future church in Israel.

The following discussion in the journal *Nathanael* shows that Wiegand's defense of the freedom of Jewish Christians to live as Jews was not shared by all involved in Jewish evangelism 100 years ago.⁷ With a little optimism it can be said that within parts of the Church today there is more understanding of the viewpoints represented by Justin in the second century and Wiegand in the 19th century — viewpoints that were contrary to those dominating the Church in the centuries in between. This means that Jews, who come to faith in Jesus have the freedom to live as Jews and therefore also the freedom to keep the Sabbath.

Is Freedom Enough?

Most Jewish believers in Jesus will no doubt welcome this development or rather this reconsideration within the Church. But one question needs to be answered. Gentile Christians will say that Jewish Christians have the *freedom* to live as Jews. Is this, from a Messianic Jewish point of view, too vague an attitude? Will not at least part of the Messianic movement argue for a theological-based *obligation* to live as Jews and keep the Jewish Sabbath. And even emphasize gentile Christians' *freedom* to keep the Sabbath rather than Sunday?

This raises the following questions to Messianic Jews today: Do Jesus-believing Jews, who do *not* keep the Sabbath, commit sin? (Compare the answer given by Rabinowitz above.) Are such non-observers second-class believers in the eyes of the observers? And what does it mean to be Sabbath observers? Is it possible to sanctify the Sabbath in Jesus' name without an authoritative and meticulous Sabbath code?

This is not a matter of asking trick questions in order to show inconsistency on the part of Messianic Jews. Gentile Christians would have enough in dealing with their own inconsistencies. The argument that Jewish believers in Jesus are more in danger than others of becoming slaves under the law is too naive. This is a danger for all believers, including gentile believers, who often have very specific regulations for what to do and not to do on a Sunday. Such regulations come closer to the Pharisaic Sabbath code than one wishes to realize.

It is of course tempting to ask Jewish believers in Jesus who are Sabbath observers to come up with a Sabbath code. What is permitted and what is prohibited on the Sabbath? But this would mean asking for a detailed list of regulations that most likely could be compared to the Sabbath regulations that the Pharisees followed in the time of Jesus — regulations that Jesus criticized. And then we are right back to our point of departure concerning the discussion on the Sabbath: Jesus and his relationship to the Sabbath. What did he mean?

⁷ Cf. Kjær-Hansen, p. 114.

A Challenging Thesis

Stephen Westerholm, a Swedish scholar, in his challenging doctoral thesis *Jesus and Scribal Authority* deals also with Jesus' relationship to the Sabbath.⁸ Without distorting the picture of the Pharisees — they were sensitive to human needs on the Sabbath and in exceptional cases they could allow the Sabbath command to be overridden — Westerholm maintains that there is a fundamental difference between the Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees regarded “the law as statutes, i.e. as made up of prescriptions whose very wording was binding for legal procedure.”⁹ According to Westerholm, Jesus' understanding of the law is not governed by statutory laws.

In dealing with the well-known words of Jesus “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27) Westerholm notes that a saying similar to this can be found in rabbinic writings (e.g. Mekilta to Exod 31:13). But Westerholm reminds his readers that a basic difference remains:

For the Pharisees, even such a concession had to be formulated as a rule of halakhah, and behaviour patterned after the rule. Thus, for the rabbis, the words “Man is not given over to the sabbath” are used, not to justify violations of the halakhah, but to justify the halakhic principle that human life takes precedence over the Sabbath laws. The case where human life is in danger thus finds satisfactory solutions within the sphere of halakhah. The latter takes on a humane character, but man is still its subject. And the will of God is still seen as human submission to divine statutes. On the lips of Jesus, the words “Man was not made for the sabbath” affirm that the primary purpose of the command was the securing, not of human submission, but of human well-being. To subject man to a code of law based on the casuistic application of the command is to distort and defeat the divine purpose.¹⁰

According to Westerholm, Jesus defends his healing on the Sabbath “not with legal arguments bringing them in line with Pharisaic or any other halakhah, but with appeals to compassion as a criterion for sabbath behavior transcending casuistic regulations.”¹¹ Westerholm denies that the difference between Jesus and the Pharisees can be explained by maintaining that Jesus showed greater concern for the needs of men than the Pharisees did. Even if Jesus went further than Pharisaic halakhah in what we may call a humanitarian direction, the Pharisaic halakhah was a human one, Westerholm claims. He concludes with the following words:

The essential difference is another. The Pharisees treated the scriptural commands as binding statutes, to be interpreted for practice by the competent authorities. Certainly practical and humanitarian considerations coloured their exegesis of scripture and supplementary legislation; but behaviour was still to be determined by the resulting system of casuistic regulations. Jesus for his part not only opposed specific regulations in cases where they prevented the meeting of human needs, but showed in general a non-halakhic approach to sabbath observance. His opposition never took expression in specific regulations proposed as alternatives to Pharisaic ones. When pressed as to the legality of his behaviour, he countered by undermining on moral rather than legal grounds the understanding of his opponents. And, in a *mashal* (parable) summarizing his view on the sabbath, he

⁸ Stephan Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1978), p. 92-103.

⁹ Westerholm, p. 21.

¹⁰ Westerholm, p. 99-100.

¹¹ Westerholm, p. 102.

indicated that subjecting man to a casuistic system defeats the purpose of the sabbath. In his view, not casuistic, but compassion; not rules developed on the basis of scripture's letter, but an awareness of the purpose of scripture's Author, determines what in a given situation is the will of God.

It should be noted once more that there is no suggestion that Jesus intended to bring a new law for the sabbath, or that his coming marked the end of the old one. His words are concerned only with a true understanding of what God intended with the sabbath command.¹²

The real issue concerning Sabbath observance is, after all, that the Sabbath day becomes a blessing for ourselves and for others. God was active on the seventh day of creation, the first Sabbath. He rested from all his work and then he blessed the day and made it holy. This kind of "work" is not against the Sabbath.

Kai Kjær-Hansen

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¹² Westerholm, p. 102-103.