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## The Sabbath Crisis

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B Y J . D A V I D N E W M A N \*

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# THE SABBATH CRISIS

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**A former editor of *Ministry* takes issue  
with two former colleagues.**

**T**his title, “The Sabbath Crisis,” has probably appeared a hundred times and more in Adventist publications during the past hundred years. It has usually referred to something outside the church—Sunday legislation, Adventist students facing an examination given on Sabbath (as in Romania recently), or the ferment in the Worldwide Church of God. Now, however, it is a fit description for a limited but widely publicized debate precipitated by two former Adventist ministers: Dale Ratzlaff, author of the book *The Sabbath in Crisis*, and Richard Fredericks, who has explained his rejection of the weekly Sabbath in presentations at the Damascus Road Community Church\*\* in Damascus, Maryland.

My interest in their viewpoints can hardly be described as academic. Dale and I were classmates at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Dale takes three pages (331-333) of his second book, *The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists*, to quote from my writings when I was the editor of *Ministry*. I worked closely with Richard Fredericks in the formation of the Damascus Road Community Church, when it was still part of the Potomac Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. I chaired the executive council (church board) and served as a volunteer associate pastor. Richard and I shared the dream of reaching

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people whom Adventists don't normally reach with the gospel.

Today Richard's church, which meets in Damascus, numbers more than 300; the small group of 30 members who stayed with the Potomac Conference's Damascus Grace Fellowship church has grown to 115 members, with 160 in attendance.

Ratzlaff, Fredericks, and I shared a number of things in common. We were raised Adventists. We attended Andrews University. We became pastors. We shared a passion for the gospel. We were committed to an ongoing search for truth as it is in Jesus. I know that Dale and Richard will agree that we are saved totally and only by the doing and dying of

Jesus Christ. They will agree that our supposed goodness, our works, our doing, form no part of the reason why God counts us to be His children.

I believe that they will agree that both justification and sanctification will be part of the life of the Christian. Justification, the imputed righteousness of Christ, is credited to my account when I place my trust in Jesus. It is always perfect and always extrinsic. Sanctification is the imparted righteousness of Jesus, which I receive the moment I experience the new birth. It is characterized by an always-growing experience.

Having said all this, why do we now differ on the importance of the Sabbath? Dale makes it quite clear in



Newman continues a hands-on ministry in the Damascus Grace Fellowship.

his book that Christians are not required to keep the Sabbath on the seventh day, and Richard, in three recent presentations, agrees fully with Dale's conclusion. The answer lies in how we regard and define the law. Let's look first at Ratzlaff's book.

Make no mistake, Ratzlaff is hard to pin down on the exact role of the law in the Christian's life. He makes it clear, however, that "Christians are released from the law as a guide for Christian service" (p. 210) and includes in his definition of law the Ten Commandments.

On page 207 Ratzlaff writes: "It is my prayer that the following may bring harmony to the clear statements of Scripture which declare the Ten Commandments are no longer binding upon Christians, and yet maintain the moral principles upon which they are based." He then takes several pages to explain that we are no longer under any specific law or code but that "we are not doing away with any of the moral principles contained within the old covenant" (p. 212).

Again (p. 217), he insists that "God's moral principles are not an option. They are eternal and apply to all mankind." However, Ratzlaff is unwilling to be more specific about the number of these moral principles and how they are to be applied in concrete ways. He thus leaves the perceptive reader with a number of very important questions:

1. Why did God give specific laws in the first place?

2. Are Christians mature enough to be able to live together on the basis of principles when there are no specific laws that they are agreed on?

3. If the answer is No, then who decides and how do we know what is normative for Christians today if the Bible does not tell us?

4. If living by principle is enough, why did God not just tell Adam and Eve to live by the principle of love instead of giving them a specific command (law) that they must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil?

5. If specific law was needed before sin entered the world, why are specific laws not needed when we are now imperfect beings, born as lawbreakers?

6. Since God is a God of law and the universe runs by specific laws, why would God not expect His creatures to also regulate their lives by specific laws?

7. Since "sin" is breaking the law (Rom. 7:7), how do we know when we have broken the law if there is no objective way by which to measure what "breaking" means? How do we tell when we violate an eternal moral principle?

Turning to a study by Fredericks (No. 3 Weekly Update [3/19/99]), we find that "always" is sometimes too long: "Whenever the term *Law* is used in the Old and New Testament,

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it always refers to the entire body of commandments, regulations, and decrees given by God to Israel through Moses. Thus all the moral, civil, or ceremonial decrees Moses gave are simply designated the Law.”

“Always”? Let’s test his thesis in Scripture. Where the Bible uses *law*, I will place in brackets his definition: “moral, civil, ceremonial.”

“Do we, then, nullify the law [moral, civil, ceremonial] by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law [moral, civil, ceremonial]” (Rom. 3:31, NIV).† Are Christians still to uphold the civil and ceremonial laws today? “What shall we say, then? Is the law [moral, civil, ceremonial] sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law [moral, civil, ceremonial]. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law [moral, civil, ceremonial] had not said, ‘Do not covet’” (Rom. 7:7). Do Christians define sin today by whether they follow the ceremonial law or civil laws of Israel?

“So then, the law [moral, civil, ceremonial] is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12). Are the civil and

ceremonial laws still holy and righteous and good? Was Paul saying they were still in force for Christians in Rome? Is Fredericks saying they are still in force for Christians in Damascus, Maryland?

“We know that the law [moral, civil, ceremonial] is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law [moral, civil, ceremonial] is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers. . . .” (1 Tim. 1:8, 9).

Obviously, the Bible does not always use the term *law* in the same way; it has different shades of meaning. Various commentaries and Bible dictionaries have arrived at the same conclusion. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (published by Eerdmans) says: “Paul employed the word law (Greek, *nomos*) in various ways. He used it for the whole OT law but also (Rom. 7:7; 138f) for the Decalogue” (Vol. 3, p. 89). This viewpoint makes sense. When Paul says the law is good and holy and we know sin only through the law, he is speaking *only* about the Ten Commandments. He even quotes a por-

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tion (do not covet).

We don't need scholarly tomes to draw this conclusion; the biblical context makes it clear. Ratzlaff quotes these texts so that the reader will think he has dealt with them, but he offers no explanation of how and why they undermine his central thesis.

If we read only the Book of Galatians, we find a very negative view of law. If we read the Book of James or the first Corinthian letter, we find a very positive view of law. Only when we combine them do we get a balanced perspective. Here are two examples: When writing to Galatia, Paul says; "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6). When he writes to the church in Corinth, he says: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Cor. 7:19). If, as Fredericks says, *law* always refers to all the commandments, regulations, and decrees God gave to Israel through Moses, Paul's distinction makes no sense. But he clearly distinguishes between the

moral and ceremonial codes.

Why the distinction in Paul's counsel to the two churches? The church in Galatia was consumed with rules and laws and codes. They believed you could not be a good Christ follower unless you kept all kinds of rules and regulations. Paul emphatically disagreed, summarizing his argument by concluding that the only thing that counts is faith—a true statement when it comes to what God requires for salvation.

His letter to the church in Corinth deals with the other extreme: presuming on God's love. Their unsavory record includes fighting, immorality, envy, and other sins. So Paul tells them that obeying God's specific commands is imperative, not as a way of salvation but as a loving response to Jesus. Context, then, is important in determining both that different laws are referred to and which one is being discussed. We'll quickly learn also that negative statements about the law are in the context of law as a means of salvation. God never intended that we keep the law in order to get to heaven. He gave the law to teach us how to live out the

principles of love and mercy.

I believe that Ratzlaff and Fredericks, like many others, have reacted to the way the Sabbath has been taught. Adventists have grown up believing that the Sabbath somehow is related to why God will take them to heaven. "You've got to keep the seventh-day Sabbath!" "Got to's" don't usually win friends and influence—positively—people. But let's be fair. Is it wrong to say "A Christian's gotta be loving"? Or "A Christian's gotta be forgiving"? Of course, "should be" would be better. Don't we believe that Christians *should* exhibit the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, and so on?

(Gal. 5:22).

Let's take a moment to discuss the role of the law (Ten Commandments) in the Christian life today. Paul says to Timothy: "We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers and mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted

## THE ESSENCE OF THE NEW COVENANT

**T**he New Covenant consists not in the replacement of the Ten Commandments with simpler and better laws, but in the internalization of God's Law. "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God" (Jer. 31:33, RSV). This passage teaches us that the difference between the Old and the New Covenants is not a difference between "Law" and "love." Rather, it is a difference between failure to internalize God's Law, which results in disobedience, and successful internalization of God's Law, which results in loving obedience.—Samuele Bacchiocchi in *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*.

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to me” (1 Tim. 1:8-11).

Paul says that the law is still good. It is still helpful, if we understand its proper role. He explains that people whose only aim is to follow God do not need a list of rules to tell them what to do. Rules are for lawbreakers. In Montana, until recently, there was no speed limit, so I could not break the law for speeding. But in Maryland if I drive 80 miles an hour I'll soon be in trouble. Without law there is no sin, no lawbreaking. Yet what would life be without concrete laws? We couldn't live without law.

I sometimes drive along highways with guardrails. I seldom if ever look at them. I look at the road. But if I fall asleep and drive off the road, I suddenly become very conscious of those rails and thankful for them as well. When I look at Jesus, I do not need the law. But if I take my eyes off Him, I need something that tells me, something specific, that I am in danger and that will prompt me back onto the road, back to looking to Jesus. That's why the law is still good.

Horatius Bonar, a great 19th-century pastor and hymn writer, explained it this way: “Love is not a

rule but a motive. Love does not tell me *what* to do; it tells me *how* to do it. Love constrains me to do the will of the beloved One; but to know what that will is I must go elsewhere. The Law of our God is the will of the beloved One, and were that expression of His will withdrawn, love would be utterly in the dark; it would not know what to do. It might say, I love my Master, and I love His service, and I want to do His bidding, but I must know the rules of His house that I may know how to serve Him” (*God's Way of Holiness*, pp. 75, 76).

In his *Systematic Theology*, Dr. Berkhof expresses it this way:

“It is possible to say that in some respects the Christian is free from the law of God. The Bible does not always speak of the law in the same sense. Sometimes it contemplates this as the immutable expression of the nature and will of God, which applies at all times and under all conditions. But it also refers to it as it functions in the covenant of works, in which the gift of eternal life was conditioned on its fulfillment. Man failed to meet the condi-



tions, thereby also losing the ability to meet it, and is now by nature under a sentence of condemnation. When Paul draws a contrast between the law and the gospel, he is thinking of this aspect of the law, the broken particular sense, both as a means for obtaining eternal life and as a condemning power. Believers are set free in Christ, since He became a curse for them and also met the demands of the covenant of works in their behalf. The law in that particular sense and the gospel of free grace are mutually exclusive.

“There is another sense, however, in which the Christian is not free from the law. The situation is quite different when we think of the law as the expression of man’s natural obligations to his God, the law as it is applied to man apart from the covenant of works. It is impossible to imagine a condition in which man might be able to claim freedom from the law in that sense. It is pure Antinomianism to maintain that Christ kept the law as a rule of life for his people, so that they need not worry about this any more. The law lays claim, and justly so, on the entire life of man in all its aspects, including his relation to the gospel of Jesus Christ. When God offers man the gospel, the law demands that the latter shall accept this. Some would speak of this as the law in the gospel, but this is hardly correct. The gospel itself consists of promises and

is no law, yet there is a demand of the law in connection with the gospel. The law not only demands that we accept the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ, but also that we lead a life of gratitude in harmony with its requirements” (pp. 613-616).

This is why Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15, NKJV). I do not believe that God has given us only principles. God has given us specific commandments He wants us to follow out of love for Him. I mentioned earlier that God gave even Adam and Eve a specific law, a commandment, in Eden before they sinned. Why?

Sin is first and foremost rebellion against God, a rupture of the trust relationship with Him. But how does God let people know when they have broken this relationship? How would Adam and Eve know if they were not following God trustfully? God gave them a measure, an objective way for them to know whether they were committed to Him. If sinless humans needed an objective way, how much more do we need it?

The Book of Genesis is not a book of law but of origins. Yet law is found there. God says this about Abraham: “Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws” (Gen. 26:5, KJV). Are we to conclude, as Ratzlaff does, that there were no specifics included?

The Ten Commandments were the

only part of the law that God wrote with His own finger (Ex. 31:18), and were the only part of the law placed inside the ark of the covenant (Deut. 10:1-5). In the Book of Revelation is an even more potent evidence of the importance of this law and its distinction from all other laws. John in vision “looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened” (Rev. 15:5). In the first five books of the Bible the term *Testimony* always means the Ten Commandments. For example: “When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God” (Ex. 31:18).

The ark of the covenant itself was often called the “ark of the Testimony” (see Exodus 25:22).

Many years after the cross when God gave John a vision of heaven, He chose to show Him the Ten Commandments. Why, unless they were still valid? Still the standard for Christians to follow? Strange indeed, that no one ever argues over nine of the Ten. Only the fourth has engendered controversy over the centuries. Many are the arguments—including that the law is not moral but ceremonial—advanced for not following the Creator’s command to observe His Sabbath, the specific day He blessed and made holy. It was the same Creator God who walked among us, as one of us, to “magnify”

the law by pointing out its spiritual dimensions. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” was not adulterated; rather He made it even more specific: He who lusts is an adulterer. He who hates is a killer. And holy time is holy time still.

I’ve observed firsthand that those who say God no longer expects us to follow a list of specific requirements still vote specific covenants for members and staff to follow. . . . Why? Is it because they recognize that even good Christian people need to be held accountable to the community, and that cannot be with a list of abstract principles. There is law in the church, law in society, and God still has His specific laws for us to follow.

Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). So we do, not as a means of salvation, but as our response of love. □

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\*\* A comprehensive answer to Ratzlaff appears in Samuele Bacchiocchi’s book *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*. See also “Under Fire: A Look at Recent Controversy Over The Sabbath” in the June 1999 North American Division edition of the *Adventist Review*. Bacchiocchi discusses four major anti-Sabbath arguments: (1) The Sabbath is not a created ordinance; (2) The Sabbath is an Old Testament institution that was terminated at the cross; (3) Christ fulfilled the Sabbath by becoming our salvation “Rest”; (4) Paul teaches abrogation of the law and the Sabbath.

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†Unless otherwise indicated, Bible texts in this article are quoted from the New International Version.