

Sabbath in the Pacific around the Dateline

Statement of Principles and Considerations

The Biblical Research Committee of the South Pacific Division was asked by Trans Pacific Union to make an assessment of principles and practices for Sabbath keeping in the Pacific in relation to the date line.

This statement is the result of wide consultation. The Biblical Research Committee has listened to and received advice from a number of sources, such as theologians both inside and outside of the Division, Trans Pacific Union administration and members; and submissions have been received by, among others, William G. Johnson, Bruce Roberts, Ray Coombe, Paul Cavanagh, and David Hay. The issue has also been presented and discussed at the Pacific Island's Administrator's Council, among others.

In the process of reaching a conclusion the Biblical Research Committee has made the following observations in regard to the divine origin of the Sabbath and the keeping of the Sabbath during the time of the Bible and in various cultures and historical eras.

- The biblical Sabbath was established by God at the time of creation to be celebrated by all people (Genesis 2:1-3).
- Among the central purposes of the Sabbath is individual and communal fellowship with, and worship of God (Revelation 14:6-7).
- As sin entered the world, and the toil and hardship of human existence became our reality, other elements of God's intention were highlighted, such as trust in God's providence by resting from labor and work, faith in God's forgiveness and redemption in spite of our sins (Exodus 20:11; Isaiah.58:13)
- One of the purposes of the Sabbath highlighted by Scripture with special significance towards the end of earth's history, is for the Sabbath to be a sign of loyalty toward the Creator. The believing community is to worship on the Sabbath day, even during times of opposition and persecution (Revelation 14:6-12).
- At Sinai the Sabbath commandment was given as part of the Ten Commandments, built upon the laws of love (Exodus 20:8-11; Matthew 22:35-40; Deuteronomy 6:4-5; 10:12-13).
- Though some details in the specific laws for Sabbath keeping given in the broader Mosaic code were unique to the people of Israel, the principle of Sabbath keeping as part of the Ten Commandments belongs to God's universal law for all mankind everywhere on earth (Roman 13:8-10; James 2:8-12; Deuteronomy 4:13-14; Isaiah 56:3-7).
- Both at creation and in the laws given to Israel, the Bible makes it clear that the Sabbath lasts from sunset to sunset, and Seventh-day Adventists around the world have come to follow that principle in their Sabbath keeping (Genesis 1:5 ff; Nehemiah 13:19; Luke 4:40).
 - In arctic areas where the sun for periods of the winter does not set, there is still a darkest and a lightest time of the day, and the Adventist Church has on that basis been able to maintain the principle even in these remote areas of the earth.
- The Bible contains no statements regarding the dateline and the challenge of keeping the Sabbath around the dateline.
- The dateline which is necessary because the earth is round, is not established by any divine principle, but solely on the basis of historical and practical human considerations.
 - While choosing the 180th meridian is practical, it has never been consistently followed by human authorities and societies, and the deviations from it are

- all generally accepted by the same authorities which established and accepted the position of the dateline in general.
- The Seventh-day Adventist pioneers coming to the Pacific understood, however, the 180th meridian to be the natural dateline and chose to keep the Sabbath in accordance with that.
 - They observed that the sunset moved in a consistent line across the globe, without any random deviations, and the setting of the sun implied to them a biblical principle.
 - For various historical and practical reasons, a few societies deviate from the general dateline at the 180th meridian and follow an Eastern hemisphere calendar, even though they are positioned in the Western hemisphere. As a consequence, Seventh-day Adventists in those places today face a choice either to celebrate the Sabbath on the Sunday of their nation's calendar by selecting a different dateline than commonly accepted, or to drop the allegiance to the 180th meridian and keep the Sabbath on the Saturday of their national calendar. This is the challenge for Tonga, Wallis and Futuna, and more recently, the Christmas Islands of Kiribati.
 - A few nations cover areas on both side of the 180 meridian and choose to follow the same calendar for all of their territory. These are USA (Alaska), Kiribati, and Fiji (Lau islands).
 - We cannot take for granted that the situation in any of these places will remain as it is. A change of Adventist Sabbath practice might, therefore, lead to considerable tension, if Tonga, for instance, as a state decides to change to a calendar which follows the meridian, and the Adventists had to change once again. Such a scenario could cause people to lose respect for the Sabbath keeping practices of the Church and, consequently, for the very message of the Church.
 - At least in one of these nations, namely Kiribati, the calendar has actually only recently been changed for Kirimati (Christmas Island) in the Line & Phoenix Island group located to the east of the 180th meridian. These islands are so far away from the rest of Kiribati that for all practical purposes they function as an isolated society. The calendrical change happened primarily in order to be the first country into the 3rd millenium. It created a challenge for the SDA community which for generations have kept the Sabbath in sequence on Saturday, but due to the calendrical shift either had to change the sequence in accordance with the culture, or, as chosen by the Adventist on the Christmas Islands, to keep their Sabbath on what is now the national Sunday.
 - Any change under such circumstances would create serious pastoral problems.

On the basis of these observations and the wide consultation sought, the Biblical Research Committee of the South Pacific states that

- As there is no clear "Thus saith the Lord" for the establishment of the dateline and the keeping of the Sabbath around the dateline, it is important to listen to the local Seventh-day Adventist community and its leadership,
- And as there is a general sense of agreement with present practice in the Pacific islands, and as any attempt to change would create serious and complicated pastoral problems,

- And as the present calendar is subject to change by any future government at any time, as has recently occurred in Kiribati,

We recommend that

- The present practice of Sabbath keeping in the Pacific Islands around the dateline be maintained.

Further

- that initiatives be taken and a strategy developed to teach the theology and existential meaning of the Sabbath in the areas involved, in order to maintain a clear understanding of this important aspect of Seventh-day Adventist identity in present and future generations.

For the Biblical Research Committee
Paul Petersen, secretary