

## Theological Aspects of the Sabbath in Samoa

The issue of the change of the dateline in Samoa is a very sensitive one and the on-line discussions have been vigorous and passionate. It is encouraging to see how the Spirit of God has been slowly working through this dialogue. The discussions have advanced far beyond the first few humble attempts to explain how the church should meet the challenge. Maybe God has allowed this situation to arise to ensure that we practice our faith intelligently rather than just by maintaining a misunderstood tradition. The net effect is that all have moved on from where they began and have developed a healthier appreciation of the issues, but more importantly, of the Lord of the Sabbath.

Most people have come to realise that the main issue is not the dateline, but the theological rainbow surrounding it. This short paper will discuss those surrounding theological issues.

### Theological aspects

Despite the word “dateline” appearing nowhere in the Bible, its change for some nations close to the dateline has a number of theological implications. These include: the Sabbath is at the core of Adventist identity; it forms an important part of Adventist eschatology; the Sabbath has a number of names attached to it; it is described as a sign between God and His people; and it is separate and distinct.

#### (a) Sabbath at the Core of Adventist Identity

Seventh-day Adventists chose their name in 1861. It combined the two primary concerns of the early believers—the hope of the immanent return of Jesus and the sacredness of the seventh day. Even more basic than this was the central place of God Himself—He was at the very centre of the early Adventists’ affection and worship. So it is no surprise that their faith, their hope, their mission, their very purpose for being was focused in God and in worshipping Him on the Sabbath. The identity and purpose of God’s people is still very much tied to the Sabbath and their focus on the Lord of the Sabbath.

### **(b) Importance of the Sabbath in Eschatology**

When the three Angels' Messages assumed importance among the early Advent believers, the mission impact of the church became more powerful. The Sabbath especially assumed greater significance in the context of final judgment and the end of time. When the Sabbath was contrasted with Sunday and the Seal of God was contrasted with the Mark of the Beast it sparked great debate in every country where Adventists resided and helped define Adventist identity in the Christian community. It also spurred many people into joining the church.

### **(c) What's in a Name?**

What name is attached to the seventh day? Adventist evangelists and writers have stressed from the very beginning the importance of worship on Saturday as opposed to Sunday. Therefore it has become firmly ingrained in people's psyche that Saturday is the only Sabbath and that Sunday is only connected with the Mark of the Beast. Although this is true in most places, it is not true in those countries close to the dateline where the weekly cycle has been disrupted by political and economic change. When Friday, December 30, 2011 fell out of the Samoan calendar, time was recalculated as a jump from Thursday night straight to Saturday morning; the seven-day cycle was disrupted, and Saturday became the sixth day of the week. Although this is extremely uncomfortable, we must face this reality. We cannot pretend that nothing has happened. The weekly cycle has been disrupted and we must admit it and meet it head on. We will continue to maintain the seven-day cycle handed on to us by our forefathers and we will continue to be Seventh-day Adventists, not just Saturday Adventists.

### **(d) The Sabbath a Sign Between God and His People**

Both Moses and Ezekiel affirmed the distinctive nature of the Sabbath and called it a sign between God and His people.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.'" (Exod 31:12, 13.)

When Ezekiel repeats this he expands it:

Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them. Hallow My Sabbaths, and they will be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God. (Ezek 20:12, 20.)

From this we understand that the Sabbath was a God-given gift to His people—something that Jesus underscored (“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath, Mark 2:27). We also see that the Sabbath assumes significance as a sign both to the people themselves that God is sanctifying them, and as a sign to the world that God has covenanted Himself to a people.

#### **(e) A Distinct and Separate Day**

The specialness of the Sabbath was established at Creation when God blessed and sanctified the seventh day, separating it from all other days. This specialness is particularly highlighted during the Exodus with the introduction of the manna, and the giving of the law. The manna event not only showed the uniqueness of the Sabbath, but it also underscored the Israelite’s freedom from slavery—they no longer had to eke out an existence each day of the week, but were given the privilege of a day off—celebrating God’s freedom rather than being ground down in their slavery. The giving of the law on two occasions during the Exodus (separated by a gap of nearly 40 years) pinpointed the specialness of the Sabbath. The first occasion was at Sinai where the Sabbath was seen as confirmation of the Creator, and in the second occasion on the plains of Moab, nearly 40 years later, when the Sabbath command focused on God as Redeemer.

#### **(f) The Church and its Identity**

This discussion has raised the spectre of a church that does not know itself. It may be vaguely familiar with its tradition, but it has become rather obvious that today’s generation has not internalised its faith very well. It seems the Sabbath has been merely reduced to a Saturday vs. Sunday debate. That has been an important issue in times and places past, and it may be again. But this is not the issue that faces Samoa. What faces Samoa is how to meet the crisis of the change of the sequence of days. What still remains is the value of the Sabbath as a day of rest and recreation for a world that is exhausted by its promiscuity and partying, hedonism and head-banging, over-indulgence and overload.

There is a lot more to being an Adventist than the Sabbath. For a start there is the great struggle between good and evil, at the centre of which is the importance of God’s law. This all climaxes at Jesus’ second coming—an event that will be seen by all. And when Jesus returns, the dead, who have waited in their graves till the Second Coming, will rise again in plain sight for all to see. It is at that time that God will bring justice to every past and present injustice, and

when it will be obvious that there is no second chance—today is the day of salvation. It will also be seen that God places a limit on evil (as indicated by the time prophecies), but more than that, God will allow people to know how he has decided who will or will not be in Heaven.

Meanwhile, as we wait for that incredible climax, our life is hid with Christ in God, and we rejoice in a hope that redeems, frees, and forgives us, inviting us to live life in His presence, recognising that all we are and all that we have, belongs to Him. Clearly, this is not a life-as-usual reality, but it becomes a real game changer. And the world needs to know about it. Now.

Finally, being Adventist means a strong conviction that evil will come to an end—it will not burn on forever. God will restore the world to its original perfection, and we will share the inheritance that Christ secured for us at Calvary.

### Summary and Conclusions

The Sabbath is one of the two key features of what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist (the other is the Second Coming). This discussion has underscored the importance of ensuring that the Lord of the Sabbath is given His rightful place. He is the source of our faith, our hope, our mission and our very purpose. This focus continues right to the very end when the Sabbath becomes a test for the people of God. This test was hinted at in the beginning, when the Sabbath was described as a sign between God and His people.

At the end, just before Jesus returns, the world will become polarised between those who honour the Lord of the Sabbath and those who are “marked” because they give their allegiance to “the Beast.” But as we saw, the specialness of the Sabbath is maintained by “remembering” the day that was instituted at Creation—the day originally sanctified by God. The Sabbath has survived the change to the Gregorian calendar from the Julian one, and it survived the European attempts to change the calendar by placing Sunday as the seventh day. And this same Sabbath has also survived the introduction of daylight saving and the wobbles of the dateline.

The net effect of all this is that God’s people before us have always recognised the correct time to rest with God on His day. Therefore, respecting that historical continuity, the Church has chosen not to keep the day called Saturday in a few selected lands close to the IDL because their legislation

changed the weekly cycle. To change the daily sequence because of a decree from an earthly government is not according to the law and plan of God. "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).