

Freedom Through Prohibition:  
Sabbath Observance for Lovers of Liberty

by Mark DeVine

"Give me Liberty or give me death." The plea attributed to Patrick Henry resonates deeply with American Christians in ways far removed from revulsion toward the British Sugar Act of 1775. That liberty which Colonial patriots demanded for their nation and congregations sought for their religious communities, individual believers sometimes covet for themselves in virtually every area of their personal existence.

For this reason, Henry's battle cry may find more welcoming ears among late twentieth century believers than another dictum more ancient but seemingly less freedom friendly -- "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8, NIV). However, today's aversion toward restrictive forms of Sabbath keeping may risk jeopardizing exactly what it sought to preserve -- freedom.

Growing up in the South, the words of the fourth commandment often fell upon my ears. Their meaning, and especially their immediate relevance for my weekend activities, was made clear to me at Church by the preacher and the Sunday School teacher; at home by parents, aunts and uncles; along the highways and among the hedges by fellow Christians with a predilection for instructing others. The Sabbath was equivalent to Sunday, the Lord's Day. It meant compulsory attendance in the House of God

and community "blue" laws restricting all nonvital business activity. "If you're too sick to worship God," my father typically replied to requests for a reprieve from Sunday services, "you're too sick for anything today except the bed!" On the surface, it is fairly clear why many have viewed the Sabbath as "an austere day for those who observe it, a day lacking joy and spirit."<sup>1</sup>

Past enthusiasm for "keeping the Sabbath holy" seems to have at least waned significantly, and has disappeared altogether from some pulpits as a matter of significant concern. One explanation for this reversal probably involves that special element of American cultural identity which Sabbath or Lord's Day observance would seem to challenge and even threaten, namely, freedom, or more precisely, the love of personal liberty.

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<sup>1</sup>Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, To Be a Jew (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1972), p. 72.

Amid such pervasive zeal for individual autonomy and perogatives, restrictive forms of Sabbath keeping may be viewed as unenlightened legalism. When keeping the Sabbath seems to emphasize prohibitions, it tends to appear as a day of negation, a day for intolerant and provincial "Thou shalt nots." A case in point is the gentlemen from Maine who was "rebuked and fined for 'unseemly walking' on the Lord's Day" and later protested that he "ran to save a man from drowning."<sup>2</sup> Did not Jesus himself wage a personal campaign against exactly such inhumane application of the fourth commandment (Mark 2:27)?

We Americans typically resist restrictions on personal liberty, partly in rebellion against a false caricature of our Puritan heritage, but mostly on principle. Many of us, whether Christian believers or not, cling to personal liberty as though it were an unassailable, inviolable ideal come down from heaven. Jesus's freedom statements and the apostle Paul's classic Galatian defense of Christian liberty (Galatians 5:1) are frequently cited to support a tenacious insistence upon individual freedom.

#### Free Creatures of the Liberating Creator

Ironically, the goal of both the Jewish Sabbath and the

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<sup>2</sup>Boaz Cohen, Sabbath Prohibitions Known as Shebut (New York: W. F. Albright, 1949), p. 21.

Christian Lord's Day was never the enslavement of its adherents, but their liberation. Even a brief exploration of the origins and development of the Jewish Sabbath reveals that the fourth commandment was intended to secure and nurture true human freedom.

At first, the Sabbath's liberating aim seems hidden. The verbal form of the word "Sabbath" (which renders the Hebrew "shabbat") means "to cease, to desist, or to rest." Indeed, the Jewish Sabbath, and for that matter, the Christian Lord's Day has appropriately been acknowledged as "the day of rest and abstention from work."<sup>3</sup>

However, the clue to the liberating purpose of Sabbath prohibitions lies in the two biblical, theological justifications for its observance. The Sabbath law is firmly established as the fourth of the ten commandments. In Exodus 20:8f., the rationale for Sabbath observance relates to God's creative activity, while in Deuteronomy 5:12f., it is grounded in God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage.<sup>4</sup>

In the Exodus passage, the theological rationale undergirding Sabbath observance derives from God's cessation of creative activity. Since the Creator rested from his own work on

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<sup>3</sup>Abram Kanof, "Sabbath," Encyclopedia Judaica, vol. 14 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1971), p. 557.

<sup>4</sup>Hans-Joachim Krause, Worship in Israel (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 79.

the first Sabbath, so ought humankind to desist from ordinary human labor one day out of seven. Thus, the first reason to observe the Sabbath is "to emulate God," and by so doing, acknowledge his divine claim upon the universe and ourselves.<sup>5</sup> When, as God's creatures, we cease ordinary work and activity one day out of seven, we testify that the world is not ours and indeed, we ourselves belong to the Creator who is Lord of the universe.<sup>6</sup>

In the Deuteronomy passage, Sabbath observance called for intentional remembrance of God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery. If, on the one hand, the duty of Sabbath keeping highlighted human subjection to God, it also emphasized divine emancipation from human rulers. Accordingly, "slaves, servants and even animals all are to be free of servitude to human masters on the seventh day."<sup>7</sup> The Sabbath was to serve as a weekly recurring divine protest against all slavery and oppression. For this reason, tyrants of all times have forbidden the Jews from celebrating the Sabbath.<sup>8</sup>

Israel's recognition and embrace of the Sabbath's liberating impulse has taken the forms of community rest, political protest

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<sup>5</sup>Simon Greenberg, A Jewish Philosophy and Pattern of Life (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1981), p. 347.

<sup>6</sup>Donin, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

and social concern. During the period of the monarchy, the Sabbath was a "popular, joyous holy day, marked by cessation of business and celebrated publicly and by individuals, in the sanctuary and outside it."<sup>9</sup> Not only before, but during the Babylonian Exile, the poor were to be relieved on the Sabbath of carrying any burden for their masters (Jeremiah 17:19f.).<sup>10</sup> Sabbath observance became an important confessional act of covenant identity for captive Israel in Babylon where different time systems prevailed.<sup>11</sup> In actual practice, Israel acknowledged the Sabbath's importance for the securing of human freedom for God's chosen people.

#### Freedom for God

Yet, the ultimate purpose of Sabbath keeping was never to free humanity from anything, whether it be work, slavery, or various political constraints. These negative freedoms from oppressors are meant to remove barriers to another freedom for a specific Someone. The goal of the Sabbath is always to liberate human beings for the two-dimensional activity for which they were created, namely, the glorification and enjoyment of God, their

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<sup>9</sup>Kanof, p. 559.

<sup>10</sup>Nathan S. Barack, A History of the Sabbath (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1965), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup>Kraus, p. 87.

Creator.<sup>12</sup> An attempt to relate the creation (Exodus 20) and redemption (Deuteronomy 5) rationales for Sabbath keeping helps illuminate both its positive, God-centered goal and the necessity of its prohibitive, restrictive elements.

God's saving activity demonstrated his intolerance for the enslavement of his people, whether by Israelite masters or foreign oppressors. However, the call for Sabbath remembrance of such saving activity indicates the reason for this divine intolerance. Sabbath remembrance points humanity back to its creation, and thus to its essential nature as dependent, precious possessions of a loving and providing Creator. Thus, the Sabbath does not intend to liberate believers in an abstract sense, but specifically to free us for God, in relation to whom alone we are at liberty to be our true selves.

Ironically, the Deuteronomic justification for Sabbath keeping (the remembrance of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt) does not fully comprehend the liberating aim of the fourth commandment. Only as it points to the Sabbath's grounding in creation as an assertion of the divine claim upon his people does the positive implication of Sabbath observance burst forth. God frees his people for Himself, and by so doing, liberates them

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<sup>12</sup>Cf., "The Westminster Shorter Catechism," of A.D. 1647: "Question. 1. What is the chief end of man? Answer. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." See Philip Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 675.

from all oppressors, including that of an autonomous, unbridled personal liberty.

### Six Days for the Sake of One

Once the Sabbath's relationship to humanity's true, created nature is seen in connection with its call for humanity's exclusive devotion to the Creator, one prevalent misunderstanding of the Sabbath's intended purpose becomes visible. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the seventh day seems not to have been given primarily for the sake of the remaining six. Rather, the six days were given for the sake of the seventh and must serve the seventh.

Karl Barth has aptly reminded us that God, not man, had been working on the first six days of creation. "And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work" (Genesis 2:1-3). Indeed, "God's seventh day was man's first."<sup>13</sup> Primarily, this was the day of the Lord and therefore a time for giving witness to God's completion of His work, sharing in His Sabbath freedom, Sabbath festivity, and Sabbath joy, the special time to be with God. So, the time of humanity begins with "a day of rest and not a day of work; with freedom and not with obligation; with a holiday, and not with a task; with joy and not with labor and toil; under the

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<sup>13</sup>Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 3:2, p. 457.

Gospel and not under the Law."<sup>14</sup>

The Sabbath, then, as a time for the glorification and enjoyment of God frees humanity to fulfill the chief purpose of its creation, not to "rest up" for the "real" work to come in the six days ahead. On the contrary, the six remaining days provide space for the thankful labor inspired and initiated by acknowledgement of God's work on the seventh day. Man's six days of toil have both their origin and goal in the God-centered, creative, and redemptive Sabbaths which mark their beginning and end.

When the Sabbath is recognized as humanity's first day, the Christian adoption of Sunday as "the Lord's Day" or as the Christian Sabbath, appears as less of an innovation than is sometimes assumed. Of course the first reason for Christian observance of the first day of the week as its special time of worship and celebration is the Sunday resurrection of the crucified Jesus from the dead. What could be more appropriate since one central dimension of Jewish Sabbath observance is the deliberate anticipation of the coming of the promised Messiah. "Every sabbath is a messianic celebration. For twenty-four hours a foretaste of the Messianic kingdom is savored by the Jew in peace and security and spiritual concentration."<sup>15</sup> The Rabbis

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 458.

<sup>15</sup>Steven S. Schwarzchild, "The Messianic Doctrine in Contemporary Jewish Thought," Concepts that Distinguish Judaism (Washington, D.C.: B'nai B'rith Books, 1985), p. 245.

agreed--"If Israel keeps one sabbath as it should be kept, the Messiah will come."<sup>16</sup> From the standpoint of the Christian confession of Jesus as Messiah, Sabbath observance on the first day of the week celebrates the fulfillment of Jewish messianic hopes. From the perspective of humanity's created nature as revealed in the first Sabbath, it re-establishes the original sequence of humanity's week, namely, beginning with a Sabbath. From both angles Sabbath keeping clearly seeks to free God's creatures to celebrate and give thanks for the work of God, whether in creation or redemption.

#### Sabbath: An Easy Yoke

Ardent, lifelong Sabbath keepers testify to its liberating rewards. The dismal caricature of the Sabbath as viewed from outside its observance contrasts sharply with the delight and peace confessed from within. One Midrash<sup>17</sup> has God speaking thus: "A precious jewel have I in my possession, which I wish to give to Israel, and Sabbath is its name."<sup>18</sup> Nathan Barak dedicated his history of the Sabbath to his parents, "in whose home the Sabbath was a day of peaceful rest, joy and holiness."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Kanof, p. 562.

<sup>17</sup>An early Jewish exposition of the underlying significance of a Bible text.

<sup>18</sup>Donin, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup>Barack, dedication page.

Donin found the joys of Sabbath observance almost inexpressible: ". . . to describe the feeling that overcomes one on the Sabbath is like trying to describe a beautiful sunset to a blind man."<sup>20</sup>

Far from the binding oppression of a legalistic duty, the Sabbath has freed those who have taken its yoke upon them (Matthew 11:28-30). The liberation enjoyed was, specifically, the freedom to worship, thank, listen to, and, in short, commune with God. We creatures require a Sabbath since communion with our Creator is the unique activity for which we were designed.

#### Space for Sabbath Keeping

So, Christian Sabbath observance is meant to liberate believers for the glorification and enjoyment of God. When these two elements are present, genuine communion with God is possible. Few of us would deny the need for such freedom and communion. What many do resist though, are the restrictive aspects of Sabbath observance. The question is whether the freedom promised to Sabbath observers is achievable without the aid of reasonable "Thou shalt nots."

Enemies of all prohibitive forms of Sabbath keeping abound. Professed Christians who neglect congregational worship on Sunday frequently claim the need for "rest" in order to prepare themselves for the labor of the coming week. Household chores and recreational activities beckon those fortunate enough to be

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<sup>20</sup>Donin, p. 62.

free of secular employment on the Lord's Day. For many, Sunday is a time to "catch up" on the many things left undone after a busy week, or to indulge oneself in whatever pleasure the workweek schedule prevents.

Accordingly, Sabbath prohibitions against many seemingly innocuous activities may strike us as unnecessarily severe and even unhealthy. For certain strict Jews, Sabbath observance means no cooking, washing clothes, gardening, shaving, carrying, pushing or moving an object more than six feet; no riding an animal, boating, playing a musical instrument, radio, television, or operating an automobile.<sup>21</sup> While these constraints might not be advisable or even workable within our own communities, such detailed strictures do take seriously important dimensions of human sinfulness with which all genuine Sabbath keepers must cope. I am speaking of self-enslavement to mundane tasks or pleasures at a time when our Creator would command our special wholehearted attention.

Agreement among Christians even of very close spiritual kinship on the exact manner of biblical Sabbath keeping is not that easy to find. While many Puritans prohibited "play and recreation" on the Lord's Day, their spiritual forefather, John Calvin, disagreed. Calvin did not find any Christian justification for proscribing work and play outside of regular worship service time on Sunday. However, Calvin, as well as the

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<sup>21</sup>Donin, pp. 89-96.

Puritans, saw the Christian Sabbath as "a rest from all activities of our own contriving so that, having God work in us (Hebrews 13:21), we may repose in him (Hebrews 4:9) . . . ." <sup>22</sup>

The Sabbath is a time in which "we must be wholly at rest that God may work in us; we must yield our desires; we must resign our heart; we must give up our fleshly desires." <sup>23</sup>

It is surely true that what diverts one soul from "attending to God," may facilitate genuine Sabbath keeping for another. However, the danger of self-deception is great. Whatever else Sabbath keeping might mean, it certainly requires the serious attempt to have God alone fill our attention and desire to the exclusion of other objects of concern. Is it reasonable to expect that any such serious attempt to glorify and enjoy God could succeed without definite restrictions and self-denials? Slavery does not consist merely of doing forced labor without compensation. Failure to do what one recognizes as good and wishes to accomplish is equally indicative of human servitude (Romans 7:14-24).

When mundane tasks and otherwise innocent pleasures divert our attention from the Sabbath communion with God we require, we have become our own cruelest taskmasters. We think we must

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<sup>22</sup>John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II:vii, 29. Emphasis mine.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. Cf. J. I. Packer, A Quest For Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), pp. 236-243.

finish every job. We cannot stop. There are deadlines to meet, obligations to fulfill, things which must be taken care of.

There are conferences and business commitments. There is house cleaning, laundry, shopping. We drive ourselves day in and day out, and "we think we are free!"<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, we do not leave this frenzy of activity behind when the weekend arrives. From the Sunday morning scramble through metropolitan newspapers to the tedium of motor car excursions to competitive sports, we transfer the tension of the weekdays to the weekend.

Sabbath prohibitions meet this cycle of frenetic enslavement with a resounding "NO!" and chart out for us a better way. Out of the raging sea of this - worldly burdens and pleasures, the Sabbath invites us to an "island in time," in which as Christian pilgrims we may taste and see that the Lord is good, and that He is the one whose work has always and will always sustain His children. In this way we may begin to anticipate and enjoy our heavenly citizenship before the time.

Until communion with God secures its rightful pre-eminence in our desires, inferior concerns and demands are bound to crowd out and deny our fundamental need for our Heavenly Father. Sabbath prohibitions are necessary in order to clear space for the recognition and satisfaction of this original desire and so, also, for the fulfillment of our true nature and destiny. By

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

denying lower appetites, the higher appetite asserts its superiority and its priority so that in Sabbath self-denial we are free first for God and then, in Him, for ourselves:

If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath  
and from doing as you please on my holy day,  
if you call the Sabbath a delight  
and the Lord's holy day honorable,  
and if you honor it by not going your own way  
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,  
then you will find your joy in the Lord,  
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land  
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.  
The mouth of the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 58:13-14)

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