

The History and Meaning of the Sabbath

by the Rev. Frederick L. Schnarr

“If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:7-8).

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it (Exodus 20: 8-11).

When the Lord gave this commandment to the Children of Israel from Mount Sinai, He was not instituting an utterly foreign or new practice. They already knew that the seventh day was to be a day of holiness, a day of ceasing all normal labors to pay respect to the Lord. From the very story of creation it was written that the Lord rested on the seventh day and that He blessed it and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-3). However, while the Children of Israel observed the seventh day as a day honoring the Lord, they did so from tradition and custom, from the feeling that it was a good and proper thing to do; they did not do it under the compulsion of a Divine command. Not until the Lord gave the commandment concerning the keeping of the Sabbath from Mount Sinai with His own voice did it become clear that Sabbath observance was decreed by Divine law, and not by man-made civil or moral law. It was no longer to be thought merely a right and proper thing to keep the Sabbath, but a necessity from Divine command.

The Children of Israel could see nothing of the internal sense within the command to keep the Sabbath. Thinking of Jehovah as an unusually powerful God who had somehow selected them as a chosen people, they could reason only that He desired to be honored and respected in return for the things He did for them. He commanded them to keep the Sabbath, they thought, not for any particular benefit to themselves, but so that He would not be forgotten. They obeyed Him and kept the Sabbath because they feared Jehovah, but as they saw nothing of the internal sense within the commandment, their keeping of the Sabbath was purely a matter of external ritual.

Why, we might ask, did the Lord give this command to keep the Sabbath to the Children of Israel, knowing how they would receive it, and how people would abuse the laws concerning it for many generations to come? The answer to this question lies in the reason for there being a church upon the earth at all times—a church where the Word of the Lord is known and preserved. We are taught in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church that people on earth receive all good delights and loves from heaven, but that such heavenly delights and loves can be communicated only through knowledges from the Word. Thus the Lord always preserves a church on earth where the Word is known in order that the human race may have communication with heaven. A true church exists on earth when the truths of the Word are known, received, understood and loved. But when people become so external that they cannot see or understand anything from the letter of the Word, then the Lord preserves communication with heaven

through representatives, such as rituals of worship, as was the case with the Children of Israel.

That is why the Lord gave such specific and detailed commands to the Children of Israel concerning the keeping of the Sabbath. Though the Israelitish Church was only the representative of a church, yet the communication of heaven and earth could be preserved through it. The Children of Israel did not in the least understand that the things they were doing were representative; much less did they understand what any of the representatives meant, but the angels of heaven understood and could communicate some delight by virtue of their understanding (*Arcana Coelestia* 7893).

We are able to understand this more clearly when we see what some of the representative laws pertaining to the keeping of the Sabbath really mean. For example, the Children of Israel were not to do any work: they were not to light fires, they were not to cut wood, they were not to prepare food. The angels understood the meaning of these representations. They knew that work on the Sabbath signified a person being led by his own selfish loves and not by the Lord. They knew that kindling a fire on the Sabbath signified the activity of the love of self, cutting wood on the Sabbath represented a person endeavoring to do good from himself, and preparing food on the Sabbath meant a person leading himself from his own intelligence (*Arcana Coelestia* 10367, 10732). The Israelites were commanded not to do these things on the Sabbath, which represented that people cannot approach and worship the Lord in a state of self-love and self-intelligence.

When we understand why it was necessary for the Lord to provide such representative laws for the keeping of the Sabbath, we are able to understand also why He did not follow the traditions which became attached to them when He came upon earth, and why they no longer pertain to keeping the Sabbath today. The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that “when the Lord was in the world, and united His Human to the Divine itself, He abrogated the Sabbath in respect to representative worship, or in respect to its worship such as it was with the Israelitish people, and made the Sabbath day a day of instruction in the doctrine of faith and love” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10360; cf. *True Christian Religion* 301; *Apocalypse Explained* 54, 965:2-4). The Lord abrogated or abolished representative worship at His coming, because people were no longer to learn of the Lord through representatives but from the Divine truth incarnate—the Divine Human plainly revealed before human sight. The knowledge of the Lord in His Divine Human, and the love of that knowledge, made possible a new church on earth and a new communication of heaven and earth. No longer would any use be served by merely representative worship, for now people were to worship the Lord from love.

The Lord tried to show the Pharisees that the real observance of the Sabbath was not merely a matter of laws and rituals but an expression of love to the Lord and toward the neighbor. It was a time to approach the Lord, to seek instruction from His Word, to meditate upon it, and to do works of love to the neighbor. That is why the Lord taught on the Sabbath, and healed the lame and the sick in utter defiance of the traditional Jewish laws. When the Pharisees asked Him why He allowed His disciples to break the Sabbath, the Lord replied: “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28). The Jews thought that people were made for the Sabbath, that is, that Jehovah demanded regular periods of worship from man for His own Divine benefit and satisfaction; not for the use that such worship would serve to form people’s spiritual life. The Lord made it clear

that the Sabbath was commanded for people's sake, because it was necessary for the formation of heavenly loves within us.

A person's responsibility on the Sabbath was to approach the Lord in the Divine truths of His Word, to humble his self-love and self-intelligence before the Word, and to seek instruction from it as to how to live his life. In telling the Pharisees that the Son of Man was also Lord of the Sabbath, the Lord was showing them that the Divine truth, now incarnate in His Divine Human, was what people were to approach on the Sabbath. The importance of the Sabbath lay not in physical things but in spiritual things. A person did not keep the Sabbath merely by being as idle as possible and making this idleness the essential of the Sabbath. "Which of you," the Lord asked, "having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 14:5). Here the Lord refuted the Pharisees' idea of idleness as the essential of the Sabbath, and again expressed the real use of the Sabbath—to lead people out of evil and falsity by means of instruction from the Word. A "pit" signifies the evils and falsities of the life of hell, while a "donkey" and "ox" signify the truth and good of the natural man. This good and truth can be drawn forth from evil and falsity only on the Sabbath, that is, by a person's approaching the Lord in His Word (*Apocalypse Explained* 537:6).

In the history of the Christian Church the keeping of the Sabbath has involved many different forms and customs. The strictness of the Jewish observance was strangely mixed with the seemingly liberal attitudes concerning the Sabbath shown by the Lord at His first coming. Some Christian sects have formed elaborate rules for the keeping of the Sabbath, until the distinction between what is of Divine authority and what is of human origin has been lost, and the real meaning of the Sabbath has again been buried in externalism. Other Christian groups and individuals have interpreted the Lord's teachings concerning the Sabbath so freely as to deny that there are any specific things which must be done on it. Today, as the Divine authority of the Word is increasingly called into question or denied, and as emphasis is placed more and more on the development of science and the provision of security and comfort, the uses of keeping the Sabbath have been perverted or have fallen into decay or oblivion.

In such conditions the Lord has again come among humankind and revealed in plain rational language the means whereby people may tread the path to heaven. He has presented heavenly doctrines to people, so that they may have the means of establishing a proper sense of values, of seeing intelligently the relative uses of spiritual and natural things, and of judging and acting accordingly. He has opened the internal sense of the Scriptures so that we may see the Word as one Divinely-organized body of truth, so that we may see the Ten Commandments, not just as the natural laws of God, given to keep man in natural order, but as the spiritual laws of good which provide the means for our salvation. When we review the third commandment from the internal sense of the Word, we are presented with a new and profound idea of keeping the Sabbath, an idea which is to rule over any other ideas of the Sabbath that we may have formed. This heavenly concept of the Sabbath is to form an essential part of the life of the New Church .

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God." The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that, inmostly, what was represented prophetically in this commandment was the union of the Divine and the Human in the Lord. In the supreme sense, the Sabbath represents that union, and that is why it was

commanded that the Sabbath should be remembered and kept holy, for people can know and love the Lord only in His Divine Human. The six days of labor signify the Lord's labors and combats in fighting against and overcoming the hells when He was in temptations on this earth. The seventh day signifies the end of the Lord's combats, when He had completely conquered the hells. It is called the Sabbath because, as the Lord conquered the hells, rejecting evils and falsities, He put off the maternal human and in its place took on a Divine Human, which He united to the Divine itself. That union is represented by the Sabbath. In the Hebrew language "Sabbath" means rest or peace. That the Lord came into a state of rest or peace after He had conquered the hells and glorified His Human is what is meant by its being said that He "rested the seventh day" and that He "blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it." It was blessed and hallowed because, through the Lord's glorification, the means were provided for the human race to be saved. That no person or animal was to do any work on the Sabbath day signified that the union of the Divine and the Human was complete, and that the Lord would never again suffer temptations. Through labors and combats in temptations the Lord made heaven, the earth and the sea; that is, He made His Divine Human such that He could approach people through it on all planes—spiritual, natural and even sensual (*Arcana Coelestia* 8884-8895, 10356, 10360, 8504).

Besides this supreme representation of the third commandment, the Sabbath also represents our regeneration, the conjunction of good and truth in us, for human regeneration is an image of the Lord's glorification. In this sense, the six days of labor represent the process of regeneration: the process in which a person is led by truth to do good, in which he endures temptations and has to use the power of truth to fight the evil loves and desires of his selfish heredity. The seventh day, or the Sabbath, is the final state of regeneration, in which truth and good have been conjoined and the person is led by the loves of heaven. When a person enters this state after death, temptations cease and he comes into the rest and peace of heavenly life. That the person is then no longer tempted is what is meant by his doing no work on the Sabbath. Such a state of supreme love to the Lord and toward the neighbor is the Sabbath of a person's life—a state the Lord can bless with untold gifts of delight and happiness.

In His second coming the Lord has made it perfectly clear that people are to observe the Sabbath by attending church regularly, by humbling themselves before the Lord in periods of worship, and by diligently listening to instruction from the Word. This is to be a matter of conscience with us, and we must be careful to judge sincerely and wisely in placing anything else above it. The Heavenly Doctrine does not lay down definite laws for the observance of the Sabbath, except that we are to provide time for worship, instruction and meditation. What else we may do in regard to work or play is left to our own judgment.

While we are on earth and our loves and thoughts are alternating between the things of heaven and the things of hell, we need ultimate forms and practices as means of urging us to turn our thoughts away from the love of self toward the love of the Lord and the neighbor. The worship of the Lord on the Sabbath is the foremost ultimate that serves this purpose. For this reason we should endeavor to keep the Sabbath—even if it means that we must compel ourselves (*True Christian Religion* 301; *Charity* 173-183).

The third commandment is to be obeyed in the New Church as it has never been obeyed before:

with the understanding that it is a Divine means to lead people in the way of regeneration; and with love so that we may cherish the things of heavenly life that it seeks to bring.

When we approach the Lord on the Sabbath through the ultimate forms of worship, we are really acknowledging what the Sabbath itself represents, the cornerstone of the faith of the New Church—the Divine Human of the Lord. More than this, we are acknowledging that the life of regeneration rests in the truths which the Lord reveals to us through His Divine Human; it rests in the learning, understanding, loving and using of those truths and the goods of life which they bring forth.

If we endeavor to keep the Sabbath in this way, both spiritually and naturally, we will fulfill the words of the Lord's command: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." And then the Lord will bless us as He promised in the prophecy of Isaiah:

"If thou turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; and shalt honor Him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: then shalt thou delight yourself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob your father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (Isaiah 58:13-14).

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 20:1-17; Mark 2:23-28, 3:1-6