

Samoa and the Dateline – Newsletter

Dr David Tasker, Wairoonga, December 2011

The issue of the change of the dateline in Samoa is a very sensitive one and the on-line discussions have been vigorous and healthy. It is encouraging to see how the Spirit of God has been 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 maintaining a misunderstood tradition. I am sure that we have all moved on from where we began and have developed a healthier appreciation of the issues, but more importantly, of the Lord of the Sabbath.

I have read most of the papers that are being circulated, and their passion is to be commended. (Some people chose not to send their papers to me). The discussion has moved, developed and matured as many different participants have helped to shape ideas. Above all, people with stridently different opinions are still valued friends. In this, the Island community can teach the Palagi community a thing or two. Instead of fracturing into opposing camps, healthy discussion has been pursued and friendships remain intact at the end of it.

The thoughts below have developed from the on-line discussions. Most have come to realise that the main issue is not the dateline, but the theological rainbow surrounding it. I will therefore discuss the theological aspects, the role of the Church in all this, and the question of how the Sabbath Cycle is determined—by the individual or by the land where the church resides.

1. Theological aspects

Despite the word “dateline” appearing nowhere in the Bible, its change for Samoa 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 names people attach to the Sabbath; the Sabbath being described as a sign between God and His people; and its separateness and distinctness.

(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 wonder 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 it became a case of the Seal of God vs. the Mark of the Beast. This sparked great debate in every country where Adventists resided and helped define Adventists in the Christian community. It also spurred many people to join 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 falls out of the Samoan calendar and time is reckoned as a jump from Thursday night straight to Saturday morning, the seven-day cycle will be disrupted, and Saturday will become 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 becomes particularly marked 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 also pinpointed the specialness of the Sabbath—in both occurrences of law-giving. 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, the Sabbath command focused on God as Redeemer.

2. Role of the Church

Despite the fact that the Christian Church has perpetrated great wrongs through the centuries, Jesus spoke confidently of his church. “Truly I tell you,” He said, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt 18:18). It is not easy to dismiss those words, especially when He repeats them in the next verse; “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in Heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matt 18:19, 20).

Jesus was not condoning any sort of papal supremacy or infallibility with those words. History demonstrates that the church made many decisions and enforced many actions that were completely against the plain Word of Scripture. The Reformers therefore were quite justified in challenging the religious

establishment as they appealed to Scripture with God-given power. So in our day, we need to recognize the weight that Heaven places on decisions of the church in matters of faith and practice. Unless there is a plain “thus saith the Lord” to direct us otherwise, we are called upon to support the decisions of the church in fulfilling the Gospel Commission.

This same principle is expanded on in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) when the young church met to discuss a crisis that was tearing them apart. It was James who gave the concluding remarks (it seems that James was considered the leader of the church at that time, not Peter) and he laid down the principles to guide the church from then on. (Acts 15:19, 20). He then drafted a letter to be read out in all the churches (Acts 15:23–29). And that was the end of the matter. There is no hint in this account that these matters were optional. This became the norm for the churches from then on.

It is interesting that Ellen White also gave counsel to the early Advent believers to maintain their unity. In volume one of the Testimonies (pages 204–9) there is an interesting story of a brother who was convinced the church should move with him on an issue that he had discovered in the Bible. He and his wife created such a stir that Ellen White wrote to them and told them that God does not give truth to just one or two, but leads the church as a whole, and she told them to be quiet. The story is even more remarkable because the issue was eating pork—five years before Ellen White had her vision on the importance of diet and health.

The issue was not correct theology but the importance of a dominant voice not being allowed to split the church. God leads the church as a whole, not by isolated individuals who think they are the only ones with God’s truth. As a safeguard, she also states; “Angels of God are commissioned to have oversight of the work; and if it does not move right, those who are at the head of the work will be corrected, and things will move in God's order without interference of this or that individual” (1T, 204).

3. The land vs. the Individual

In the same way that just one individual does not lead the church, the timing of Sabbath is not based on an individual either. What happens, for example, when we cross the dateline and enter another country that is keeping Sabbath out of sync with our own body clock? Is that reason to maintain an unbroken sequence of days in each of us individually? Definitely not! The Sabbath is attached to the land, so we need to observe Sabbath when the Sabbath comes to that land.

The Scriptural roots for this principle are found in Lev 25. The first part of the chapter (verses 1–7) describes the Sabbath of the land; the Israelites were to let the land lie fallow every seventh year after their entry into the Promised Land. It was specifically called “a Sabbath to the Lord” (v.4). The second part of the chapter (verses 8–55) describes the year of jubilee—based on 7 cycles of the Sabbath of the land—in which any land sold to strangers was to return to the tribal owners, and any Israelite sold as a slave had to be released. This special occasion dramatically combined the themes of the land and of human redemption—all under the umbrella of the Sabbath.

The prophet Jeremiah also dramatically draws on these themes. He is lamenting the extent of idolatry in the land, and prophesies judgement upon the people and upon the land because of it. All the people’s wealth and treasures, their temple, their inheritance; all this would be lost. In chapter 17, forever-burning fire at the beginning of the chapter (v.4) and unquenchable fire at its end (v.27), links the sin of idolatry and the desecration of the Sabbath with the land and judgment upon it. This is further evidence of the intimate relationship between the Sabbath and the land.

The outcome and climax of all this is seen in 2Chr 36:21.

The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.

So the land kept 70 “Sabbaths” during the 70-year Babylonian captivity while the majority of its inhabitants were exiled in Babylon. Jeremiah explains this in terms of the land keeping the 7-year Sabbaths that its inhabitants had neglected to observe. When the people interrupted, neglected or ignored the God-given Sabbath cycles the results were seen in the land being desolated and deserted and the people becoming slaves again. In other words, the Sabbath is connected to the people through the land. The passage of the sun over the land determines both the time of day and the weekly cycle, fulfilling what was decreed at Creation—that the sun would rule the day (Gen 1:16).

4. Conclusions

The Sabbath is one of the two key features of what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist (the other one being 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 very 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, and that survived the change from the Gregorian calendar to 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 wobbles of the dateline, and the introduction of daylight saving. 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 because after December 29 it will no longer be the correct Sabbath day. To change the daily sequence because of the decree of an earthly government is not according to the law and plan of God.

We have also noted the role the church and its leaders play. As Protestants we are wary of the Church authorities imposing their will upon us. Some have been uncomfortable with the way this issue has been handled, and in hindsight, there probably was a better way to do it. I for one apologise if any of my brethren have felt that I have walked over them. This was certainly not the intention. But now is the time to pull together in unity, to affirm each other, and to answer the prayer of the Lord of the Sabbath “that they may be one...so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21). Our unity is essential for our witness to the world, and becomes a necessary part of the Gospel Commission.

Finally, nothing takes God by surprise. And as the world’s TV cameras are trained on Samoans in the street in the next few weeks to ask them for their reaction, I have confidence that our church members will be given the words to say.