## THE SABBATH OF HEBREWS 4:9

## ROBERT GROSSMANN

The question of the application of the Fourth Commandment to the Church after the first coming of Christ is one that has caused continuing division among theologians, especially among those who take the words of God in Scripture seriously.

The fact that the New Testament transliterates the Hebrew word sabbath into Greek and uses it quite extensively has served not to alleviate differences of opinion on this issue but indeed to sharpen them. This is because, while the New Testament has uniform use of the word "sabbath" for the weekly day of rest or for the week itself, it also speaks of the "keeping of days" as a practice relegated to the things which are adiaphora and of certain "sabbaths" as matters about which we are not to be judged by men (Colossians 2:16).

It is the conviction of this writer, however, that a more careful look at the use of the combination Hebrew-Greek word *sabbatismos* in Hebrews 4:9 will serve to alleviate much of the confusion with reference to the continuance of the Fourth Commandment and put the Church on more solid footing as it seeks to be true to the Commandments of the Lord.

The reason for the confidence just expressed (that there is still something that can be learned from the pericope in which the word sabbatismos occurs) is that sabbatismos stands in sharp contrast to the word otherwise used throughout this passage to refer to the Old and New Testament rests typified by the weekly sabbath-rest. Sabbatismos is coined by the writer to the Hebrews to tell his readers what he expects of them as the result of the fact that God's people still look forward to a resting with God. What he tells them is that there presently remains a sabbatismos for God's people. For the reasons given below we will conclude that this sabbatismos is nothing more or less than a weekly resting from labor, labor which is also required by the following verses 10-11 of this chapter of

Hebrews as necessary to our entering into the eternal rest contemplated. If this conclusion is accurate, Hebrews 4:9 stands as a clear New Testament reiteration of the "rest-command" of the Fourth Commandment while verses 10-11 stand as reiteration of the "labor-command" portion of that law.

The first thing that is very striking about the word sabbatismos as it appears in Hebrews 4:9 is that it is the transliteration of a Hebrew word with a Greek suffix tacked on. This word appears no where else in the New Testament and only once in other known literature (Plutarch, De Superstit, c. 3). The only way to take it is as a nominal form of a compound verb sabbatidzein, which would have to be translated, "to observe the sabbath." This verbal form does occur in the Septuagint in Exodus 16:30 with exactly this meaning. That the word must have this meaning is also the conclusion of more than one commentator. It is on this basis that Prof. John Murray argues that Hebrews 4:9 requires of the Christian in the New Testament age a continuing weekly sabbath observance.2 This agrees also with the meaning "keeping of a sabbath" for sabbatismos given by Young's Analytical Concordance, Since a great deal of the weight of our understanding of this verse depends on the exact meaning of sabbatismos, it is fitting that we examine the issue of its definition in some detail.

The first point of departure in attempting to get at the meaning of such a hybrid word as sabbatismos is to study the formation of similar words in the language in which it is found. Examination of the use of the suffix "-smos" to produce nominal forms from Greek verbs produces a wealth of information. This is very helpful to us since it is then possible to be certain of our conclusions about the formation of the word at issue. "-smos" is indeed a very common suffix used to denominate verbs so that they may serve in the place of nouns in sentence structure. A brief study shows that there are many examples of "-smos" used to denominate verbs ending in "idzo," "adzo," and "udzo." A typical example familiar to most students of New Testament Greek would be that of baptismos from the verb baptidzo. As is the case uniformly in the use of the suffix "-smos," the meaning produced here is "a baptizing," or as we would put it in English, "a baptism." Thus the etymology of this rare word sabbatismos is not hard to determine. It fits in clearly with the common practice of nominalizing a verb form, which in this instance would have to be sabbatidzo, or sabbatidzein in the infinitive.

In this same way the meaning that we should assign to the com-

pound word is also quite clear, especially in view of the uniform New Testament use of the root word sabbat for the weekly rest day or for the week itself. The meaning of sabbatidzein must be, as Murray holds, "to keep a sabbath." Only a preponderant use in some other sense could throw this etymological consideration into question. Thus the nominal form sabbatismos would have to be translated, "a sabbath-keeping," What the exact denotation of that sabbath-keeping should be is not finally determined by this etymological definition. But the meaning itself cannot easily be changed to mean simply a "rest." Thus those versions of the Bible which translate sabbatismos by "rest" do injustice to the writer's intention in using this word, particularly, as we will point out later in this article, in light of the fact that the writer changes from using the normal Greek word katapausis throughout the pericope to a singular use of sabbatismos in verse 9. To ignore this change in word use is to miss in part the writer's main purpose in the passage.

The one use of the verbal form sabbatidzo in Exodus 16:30 serves to throw additional light on the meaning of the nominal form we are studying in Hebrews 4:9. Not only is this instance in reference to the keeping of the Sabbath day as a day of rest, that is, it is clear that sabbatidzo means to fulfil the Sabbath Commandment, but it is in the most emphatic of circumstances that one could imagine for the use of a word. Many will remember that Exodus 16 contains the account of the Sabbath-breaker who is commanded by God Himself to be stoned to death. Now while it may be somewhat of an issue as to just how aggravated this man's sin was (many have taken it to be commercial activity), there can be no doubt as to the meaning for the rest of the people of Israel. God is serious about this resting on the sabbath! Not only will there not be Manna available on that day; other activites which are clearly "servile work" must be avoided at all costs. It is in the conclusion of that pericope, namely, the report by Moses as to what Israel's reaction was to this punishment, that the word sabbatidzo is used for what Israel then did. They kept the sabbath! Not surprisingly the Hebrew text behind this Septuagint translation also uses the word sabbath, and that in the verbal form. The text literally reads, "And there rested (sabbathed) the people on the seventh day." Thus the single use in the Septuagint of the verbal form of the word before us in Hebrews 4:9 clearly substantiates the conclusion that it refers to a "sabbath-keeping." Indeed, the fact that here the issue of weekly sabbath-keeping is most emphatically in view should not be lost on us.

Turning from the etymology and use of the word sabbatismos itself, it will perhaps be fitting now to see what use is made in the New Testament of the root-word sabbat. That too will have a great bearing on the meaning of sabbatismos. The word sabbat is fairly common in the New Testament, so that we are able to draw some useful conclusions about its meaning as the root to which the Greek suffix "-smos" has been added here in Hebrews 4:9. Sabbat is found in Greek in two forms: the singular, sabbaton, and the plural, sabbata. These are used somewhat interchangeably so that the context determines whether the translation of the plural would better be expressed by the singular in English. For example, Luke begins the account of the disciples plucking grain on the sabbath by using the singular while Matthew uses the plural. Both are normally translated with the English singular as the reference is taken to be to a single instance of this activity. The point of greatest interest to us, however, is that the two forms of sabbat are used only for days set aside for rest in accord with the Old Testament laws. There is no use at all of a verbal form which could in any way have the general significance of the Hebrew shabbath, which can refer to a rest of any kind. In other words, sabbat is transliterated into Greek only with technical reference to a day of rest; it never can in the context mean only a "rest." It always means a "day of rest." This use, which totals 59 separate instances, can hardly be called rare. It thus amounts to very strong evidence for how the root sabbat ought to be taken in the word sabbatismos in Hebrews 4:9.

The indication of this evidence of the use of *sabbat* in the New Testament is that by the time of the writing of the New Testament, the word *sabbat* had become part of the Greek language, at least among the Jews, which referred to those days of rest commanded in the Old Testament or to the week of seven days determined by the day of rest. *Sabbat* is obviously a technical term which the Jews transliterated rather than translated, just as we do "baptism." There are, of course, more than just the weekly sabbath days commanded in the Old Testament, and we will have to contend with the question as to whether a *sabbat* in Greek could be one of those rest-days not connected with the Fourth Commandment.

It should be general knowledge among Christians that a large number of Sabbath days were commanded in the Old Testament as a part of the ceremonial system. As examples, note: 1) The first day as well as the seventh day of the week of unleavened bread (Exodus 12:16, Leviticus 23:7); 2) The day of Pentecost (Leviticus 23:16,21); 3) The first day of the feast of trumpets (Leviticus 23:27); 4) The 128

day of atonement (Leviticus 23:28); and 5) The first and the eighth days of the feast of tabernacles (Leviticus 23:35,36). Each of these days has the same requirements as those of the weekly sabbath which is declared to be "an holy convocation" in which no "servile work" is to be done. Now, since these sabbaths were clearly a part of the ceremonial system which foreshadowed the work of Christ, they must pass away with the finishing by Him of the work so foreshadowed. The question then arises as to whether the word sabbat is ever used in the New Testament to refer to such ceremonial sabbaths from the Old Testament. The only possible candidate for such a reference for sabbat in the New Testament is found in Colossians 2:16.

The use of the plural genitive sabbatoon in this Colossians passage is the only one in which the context may well indicate a reference to the ceremonial Old Testament sabbaths rather than to the sabbath of the Fourth Commandment. In all other uses of "sabbat" the context rules out any possible reference to anything but the weekly sabbath or the week itself as determined by the sabbath commandment. As an example of the use for "week," the Christians are said to meet on the "first of the sabbath" which is usually and properly translated as the "first day of the week" (Acts 20:7).

The evidence that the sabbatoon of Colossians 2:16 are most likely to be construed as being those listed above as part of the ceremonial system is as follows. First of all, these sabbatoon are directly connected in that verse with the "feasts" and "new moons." These are given as a list in which the literal translation of the verse is, "Therefore let no one judge you in food or drink, or in respect of a feast, or of a new moon, or of sabbath days." Thus these "sabbath days" are part and parcel with laws of food and drink, special feasts and new moons, all of which obviously part of the ceremonial system of the Mosaic administration. The implication is that the sabbath days connected with these ceremonies are the ones in view. Second, these sabbatoon are specifically declared in the very next verse to be ones which foreshadowed the realities found in Christ. That the sabbaths which were part of the ceremonial feasts were but foreshadows of the work of Christ is easy to grasp. That the sabbath of the Fourth Commandment, based in the order of God's activity in creation, is to be seen only as a foreshadowing of the realities in Christ is a far less than obvious matter. It is indeed denied by the main passage before us here, Hebrews 3:7-4:13. Third, the exhortation in Colossians 2:16 is to "let no one judge you" about the keeping of these things. It is not an exhortation

based on the idea that God will not hold us responsible for what we do with respect to the Fourth Commandment. Thus the exhortation seems to be directed to exactly that situation in which our Lord Iesus Christ also found it necessary to distinguish the commandments of men from the commandments of God. The Pharisees judged Jesus to be evil, because in their eyes He broke the sabbath day by not keeping their rules. The interesting thing is that Jesus argues against them not contrary to the Old Testament but rather on the basis of Old Testament evidence which shows them that their rules for sabbath-keeping do not square with it. The fourth reason for not looking at these sabbatoon in Colossians 2:16 as Fourth Commandment sabbaths is that Paul clearly declares here the matters in mind to be "after the commandments and doctrines of men." It is very difficult to see how the Fourth Commandment could be considered a "commandment and doctrine of men." It is easy to see how the ceremonial sabbaths would become the "commandments of men" if men required them to be obeyed after the coming of fulfillment in Christ. On the other hand, the New Testament clearly takes the decalogue as an indestructible whole to be given the respect of Christians in everything that it requires. Notice, for example, the argument of the apostle James that we may not subract any of God's laws from the decalogue (which James calls the "perfect law of liberty") because the same God gave each of the commandments contained in it (James 2:10-12).

In this fashion then it may be convincingly argued that the sabbatoon of Colossians 2:16 are indeed not the weekly sabbath days but the sabbath days of the Mosaic ceremonial system which has been fulfilled in Christ. Nevertheless, that being the case, the word sabbat is found not to be a reference to anything but the idea of a rest-day in the New Testament. In that sense we may certainly conclude that the usage is uniformly in reference to days of rest. Furthermore, the instance of Hebrews 4:9 of sabbatismos cannot fit any but the weekly rest because it is in a pericope which is very concerned to declare that there remains a heavenly rest for God's people in the future. That future heavenly rest is one that finds its antecedant type most specifically in the Fourth Commandment. Therefore, if the word sabbatismos does refer to a rest-day, as we are contending, it must refer to the rest-day of the Fourth Commandment, or at least of the creation ordinance underlying the Fourth Commandment. For a cogent argument that the Fourth Commandment is indeed the decalogue statement of the creation ordinance of weekly rest, see the article entitled "The Sabbath Institution" by Murray in the first volume of his collected writings.

With this background of word use and other scriptural data before us we may proceed to the main point of this article. The use of the word sabbatismos in Hebrews 4:9 is most arresting and singular in that verse in the face of the uniform use in the remainder of the passage of the ordinary Greek word katapausis to refer to any and all of the other varieties of "rest" in view. Beginning in verse 7 of chapter three and continuing through verse 13 of chapter four we find the following catalogue of varieties of rest denoted by katapausis: 1) The "rest" of the promised land of the Old Testament (Hebrews 3:11,18); 2) The "rest" prepared for the Christian in eternal life (Hebrews 4:1,3,8,11); 3) The "rest" of God which He took on the seventh day following the six days of creation (Hebrews 4:4.10); and 4) the "rest" of "ceasing from his own works" which may refer to the heavenly rest or may, as it is often taken by various interpreters, refer to the rest from sin in which the Christian is to participate even in this life. The point is that if the "rest" idea of verse 9 were any of these particular meanings, there is no reason to use another word, especially a word whose root is so uniformly used by Jews to refer to the technical idea of a weekly day of rest. Only one of the many commentaries on Hebrews available for this study even mentions this startling variation in word use.5 Among those who do not mention it are Calvin, Korte Verklaring, Matthew Henry, Meyer, etc. One reason for this is that one may read the passage in many translations without any notice given to this arresting change from katapausis to sabbatismos. In fact, it was only as this writer was doing a daily exercise in Greek reading that the phenomenon one day seemed to leap out from the text. It seems to this writer, however, that the main reason this phenomenon has not caught the attention of more interpreters is that it is such standard practice to refer to the eternal rest of the new heavens and earth as the "eternal sabbath." While indeed that is a very legitimate use of the term, since the sabbath day has from the very beginning pointed forward as a type of that eternal rest, we do need to see that such a use of the word "sabbath" is postscriptural. That is, there is no use of the word "sabbath" in the New Testament to refer to that eternal rest. Thus the ease with which that concept has been read into the word sabbatismos in Hebrews 4:9 has only served to cover up what the writer meant and what God is revealing to his people here.

The fact that there is the use of a very particular word in

Hebrews 4:9 to bring to application the previous discussion in the passage is of basic importance for our understanding of what that application might be. That this verse is indeed among the specifically applicatory ones in the pericope has been seen by others,6 and is apparent from the form of the statement. The word "therefore" (ara) at the beginning of the verse indicates that it is applicatory, as does also the reference to the concrete "people of God," as the receivers of this "rest-day." What is "remaining" to the people of God is a "weekly sabbath-keeping." That idea alone can fulfill the obviously purposeful choosing of the word sabbatismos in this verse. The idea taken by many commentators that this refers to the eternal rest, or to the present rest from sin, 7 simply does not agree with the use of sabbat in the rest of the New Testament nor with the obvious intent of the writer to distinguish this idea from those others by using the word he does. That is, if the writer were simply referring again to the eternal heavenly rest prepared for Christians since the foundation of the world, katapausis would be quite as fitting as it was earlier in the pericope. Indeed, it would be most misleading to use so technical and well-understood a term which means a "sabbath-keeping" to refer to what he had already called a katapausis. Therefore we are forced to conclude that the word sabbatismos was specifically chosen by the writer to convey emphatically the point that there remains a weekly rest-day for the people of God. Thus it stands as a reiteration of the weekly rest-day requirement which God has placed upon mankind since creation in imitation of his own pattern of work and rest in creation, and which appears in the decalogue in the Fourth Commandment.

This conclusion is confirmed by several points of data from the rest of the passage. First of all, this conclusion fits in very well with the purpose and message of the entire passage. The writer's purpose and message here are a warning to his readers not to fall short of the rest promised to them as the children of Israel fell short of the rest of Canaan which had been promised to them. The parallel drawn between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church is close; both they and we have the same gospel preached, In their case they fell short of the rest of Canaan because of their unbelief exhibited in disobedience. We too have been promised a rest; we too can very easily fall short by unbelief even though the "rest of God" to which we look forward was completed since the foundation of the world. The proof for this future rest is taken by the writer from the Old Testament, specifically from Psalm 95 which he not only argues was written after the Exodus but also includes the time datum by calling the time it was written "Today."

As the writer points out, "For if Joshua had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day" (Hebrews 4:8). The conclusion of the passage is then not that there remains an eternal rest; that is the reason for the conclusion. The conclusion must be something else. And indeed it is! The conclusion is two fold: 1) There remains a sabbath-keeping by which we look forward to that rest (chapter 4:9); and 2) Labor therefore to enter into that rest (4:11 where "rest" is katapausis again). Both a sabbathkeeping and a continued labor are required of God's people as they look forward to entering into the eternal rest. Put the conclusion in the form of questions. Does the coming of Christ end the need for Christians to work in this life before entering into eternal rest? Of course not! And, does the coming of Christ end the need for Christians to keep a weekly sabbath? No. not that either! And why? Because the weekly resting still looks forward to the eternal rest. This is the only proper understanding of the passage.

The second reason in the passage for taking this as a reiteration of the weekly rest-day command is the parallel command for Christians to work as they look forward to entering into the eternal rest. The fact that this aspect of man's responsibility is mentioned right next to that of the sabbatismos only serves to heighten and solidify the conclusion that sabbatismos does indeed refer to a weekly restday. The very next verse to the one in which we have specifically been interested tells us that man has not entered into his coming rest for then he would have ceased from his works as God ceased from His works. The point is clearly made that there remains work for man to do before he may enter in to his rest. A failure to work would be a failure to obey God according to this verse. Not only that, a failure to observe a weekly rest-day would also be a failure to obey God according to the previous verse. Verse 11 serves to heighten the necessity of both work and rest by telling us that we need to be diligent in these things lest we fall after the example of the disobedience of Israel in the wilderness. The verb at the beginning of verse 11 does not mean specifically "labor," as some translations have it (although that certainly is in view from verse 10) but means to be "diligent" or "busy" (spoudadzo) if we are to have expectation of finally entering into that promised rest.

The third corroborating reason in the passage for taking the sab-batismos of verse 9 and the "not ceasing from work" of verse 10 to be a reiteration of the "work six days, rest one day" pattern of the Fourth Commandment is that the writer repeatedly refers to the rest of God on the seventh day after the beginning of creation as the

rest into which the Christian does finally enter. These references occur in verses 3, 4, and 10. This unmistakeable and repeated reference to the resting of God at the end of the creation week could not help but remind the Jewish reader to whom Hebrews is addressed of the weekly pattern of working six days and resting one day. The use, then, of the compound word sabbatismos to indicate what the writer was driving at makes it almost impossible for such a Jewish reader to come to any other conclusion than the one we have been expressing here. The further fact, known to every Jewish reader, that the Fourth Commandment distinctly bases the weekly pattern of rest and work on this creation activity of God adds another parallelism which is inescapable for the Jew, and ought to be for us as well.

The fourth corroborating reason for taking sabbatismos as referring to a present sabbath-keeping rather than to a future rest is the import of the verb of which sabbatismos is here the object. The verb in question, apoleipetai, which is translated "remains" in most English versions, carries with it the connotation of being "left behind." Thus "remains" is a fair enough translation as long as we realize that this particular connotation of "remains" is in view. This connotation is important for our question because what is "left behind" cannot very well be "left to the future," as would be the case if we considered sabbatismos to be the future rest waiting for God's people. Thus the verb used by the writer militates very strongly in favor of his wishing to tell us by sabbatismos about something that is left behind for us and not about something that is promised to us in the future. Indeed, one does not have to look very far to find an instance of word use by the writer to the Hebrews which establishes this point. If our understanding of this verb use is correct, and the writer would wish to inform us of something in the future as remaining for us, we would expect that it would be a promise of the future thing which would be "left behind." That is exactly what the writer does in verse 1 of this same chapter concerning the promise of the eternal rest. Again in this verse the writer uses a compound verb based on the root leipo (here kataleipo which has the same "left behind" connotation as apoleipo) but he wants to tell us about something future. To do that he does just what we would have to expect knowing the connotation of the verb. He says, "since a promise remains of entering His rest." Thus the point is that the verb used to tell us what our relationship is to the sabbatismos of Hebrews 4:9 militates very strongly in favor of an object to which we have a continuing present relationship and at the same time militates against an object to which we are to look forward in the future, no matter what the meaning of sabbatismos would happen to be. Of course this fits in perfectly with the meaning of sabbatismos we have found and thus corroborates that meaning as being truly in the mind of the writer.

A final note must be taken of the fact that during the Mosaic period certain ceremonial elements were connected with the observance of the Fourth Commandment.

This is true, for example, of the weekly renewal of the shewbread on the table in the Holy Place before the LORD (Leviticus 24:8). Thus, while the principle of the weekly sabbath-day rest is reiterated here in Hebrews 4:9, it cannot carry with it the reestablishment of all the Old Testament concommitants of Mosaic sabbath keeping. Surely it is not hard to see how the ceremonial aspects of Mosaic era of sabbath-keeping are fulfilled in Christ while the periodic pattern of labor and rest continues unchanged from the beginning of the creation until the end of the world. Perhaps this is why in this pericope, which we denominate as parts of the third and fourth chapters of Hebrews, the author refers to the seventh day of creation rest of God rather than specifically to the Fourth Commandment. In any case, there ought not be any problem with accepting this idea of a reiterated pattern of work and rest while holding that the ceremonial elements of Old Testament sabbath keeping are seen as fulfilled in Christ, Indeed, is not that the pattern which held from the time of creation until the time of Moses? A pattern of six and one which was only later connected with the ceremonial aspects particularly designed to point forward to the coming of Christ?

Thus we may hold consistently that the several requirements of the Fourth Commandment are reiterated in Hebrews 4 while at the same time holding with John Calvin that the ceremonial observances connected with it at the time of Moses are fulfilled in Christ and therefore laid aside. Our difference with Calvin would be, as has been that of most of the Reformed Churches in history, that not the Fourth Commandment but certain observances connected with it are ceremonial. Calvin seems to have thought that even the setting aside of one day in seven is ceremonial and that what is done on the day of rest is pretty much up to the Christian community which has chosen to rest. On the other hand the Protestant churches have consistently held that the "Lord's Day" ought to be celebrated weekly as a replacement for the Old Testament "sab-

bath" even though there is some difference as to whether it ought also to be seen as a continuance of the sabbath-keeping commanded in the Fourth Commandment. Reformed Churches, by their creeds, have all held that the Fourth Commandment is in effect today since it is part of the decalogue.

It is clear, however, that those who have held to a more formal continuance of the Fourth Commandment have the support of the writer to the Hebrews in 4:9. Thus we must conclude that the requirement of a sabbath-day of rest continues in the New Testament and that this weekly sabbath-keeping is not to end until we enter the eternal sabbath (which is *not* the *sabbatismos* of Hebrews 4:9!).

The pattern of six days of work and one day of rest is completely and only in the heart of man when it is instructed by the word of God in Scripture. *Nowhere* in creation does anything operate naturally in this pattern. Therefore no practice in heart and life can better establish the individual or the covenant community as being wholly bound to the Creator God and as looking forward to the eternal rest of heaven than can that of weekly sabbath observance. This observance consists in the biblically commanded practices of a godly rest from labor and a holy gathering for worship. Indeed, only on this supposition can the very severe warning concerning the fires of hell awaiting those who forsake the assembling of themselves together as God's people, made by this same writer to the Hebrews, make any sense at all (Hebrews 10:24-26).

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Gottlieb Luenemann, Commentary on Hebrews, in Meyer's Commentaries on the New Testament. 485.

<sup>2</sup>John Murray, Collected Writings, Vol. 1, 216.

<sup>3</sup>James Hope Moulton, Grammar of New Testament Greek, Vol. 2, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 350-351.

<sup>4</sup>Heidelberg Catechism, Question 103. John Calvin, Commentaries on Hebrews 4:9 (Calvin Translation Society).

<sup>5</sup>J.P. Lange, gen. ed., Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical Commentary, 23 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1868), vol. 22: The Epistle to the Hebrews, by C.B. Moll, 87.

Lange, 87.

7Meyer, Lange, et al.

8Calvin, on Hebrews 4:10.

°See for a careful presentation of this subject, Richard B. Gaffin, Calvin and the Sabbath, a Master's Thesis presented to the faculty of Westminister Theological Seminary in 1962.