

# An Open Letter to Dr. R.C. Sproul

*John G. Reisinger*

(Editor of [Sound of Grace](#))

Dear Dr. Sproul:

For many years I have benefited from your ministry. Your books present the reality of our sovereign, gracious God and his amazing love for undeserving sinners in clear, biblically accurate language. We have used your videos in Sunday School classes and youth groups and have encouraged many others to do the same. I was, therefore, greatly disappointed, but given your unreserved commitment to Covenant Theology, not at all surprised by your unjustified attack on New Covenant Theology in general and two other men and me in particular. Your magazine, *Tabletalk*, of September 2002 carried five articles against ‘antinomianism.’ One of those articles, “The Death of the Decalogue,” by Richard Barcellos, applied the odious label of theological antinomian to Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, co-authors of the book *New Covenant Theology* (page 55), and to me (page 16).

I have no doubt that your sincere concern is for the truth of the gospel. I believe that you, like my friends and me, are concerned to help the people of God to be more holy in their lives. The articles in your magazine make it clear that we disagree on the specific message that will best reach that goal.

We welcome all open discussion on the subject of law and grace. We are especially grateful to you for clearly defining, in the article by Morton Smith (pages 8-10, 54), what was historically considered antinomianism. We can only wish you had used that definition consistently throughout the entire issue instead of having it discarded for new and different definitions, especially the definition used by Richard Barcellos. In another article, “Dispensing with the Law,” by Keith Mathison (page 11), Dispensationalism is labeled as antinomian. If you agree with Mathison’s position, we can only wonder why you have Dr. John MacArthur, a man openly committed to Dispensationalism, and therefore, according to Mathison, an antinomian, as a speaker at your conferences. I have read nearly everything that MacArthur has written and I have not found any explicit or implicit antinomian statements despite the fact that he is an avowed Dispensationalist. Since I am not a Dispensationalist, I am not defending Dr. MacArthur on partisan grounds. For Mathison to automatically label MacArthur, or anyone else, an antinomian just because he is a Dispensationalist is wrong. Granted, a Dispensationalist disagrees with the Covenant Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith on some points relating to the law of God, but since the Confession is not equal with the authority of Scripture, this does not automatically make Dispensationalism equal to being an antinomian, or against the Law of God. Rejecting Covenant Theology’s view of law and grace and rejecting the Law of God itself are two different things.

I agree with you that true antinomianism is a heresy and a failure by church leaders to label it as such is a sin against Christ and his Church. If Mathison is correct, then it would

seem you are duty bound to condemn John MacArthur as an antinomian. However, to either falsely accuse someone of this heresy, or to use an inaccurate definition when labeling someone an antinomian is also a sin against Christ and a fellow believer. Morton Smith, on page 10 of *Tabletalk*, quotes a work entitled *Antinomianism Discovered and Confuted* by Thomas Gataker, a member of the Westminster Assembly, that lists six marks of antinomianism. **Not a single one of the six things on that list are true of Tom Wells, Fred Zaspel or me.** One of the six could conceivably apply, but only if our view was misunderstood. The other five are far off from our convictions. Your magazine's articles, especially the one by Barcellos, that use our name in print, rest their case on two major points. First, we disagree with Covenant Theology's view of the Sabbath (as does John MacArthur, and as did Calvin, Luther, James M. Boice, and others), and second, we believe Christ is a new lawgiver who, in revealing more fully and completely the character of God, not only raises the Law of Moses to a higher and more spiritual level, but also gives the church some new laws.

I do not at all enjoy writing in a public forum against a fellow believer whom I deeply respect. However, since you chose to use that setting to criticize me as a proponent of New Covenant Theology, I felt it appropriate to respond in kind.

Let me clearly spell out my view of the Ten Commandments. I ask you to show me what I believe that deserves your condemnation of me as an 'antinomian' heretic. Please show me where I am anti-law in any sense whatever in my understanding of the Ten Commandments. Apart from viewing the Sabbath as a ceremonial law, I hold to the same set of ethical standards, raised to an even higher level, than Covenant Theology holds. At the end of the day, I think the most that can be consistently claimed is that New Covenant Theology, as I understand it, is antinomian only because it presents the Sabbath as a ceremonial and not a moral law. The nature of the Sabbath commandment is the crux of the entire case. To be consistent with the basic charge against me, you would also have to charge Luther, Calvin, James Montgomery Boice and John MacArthur with antinomianism since none of them were or are Sabbatarians.

Here is my view of the Ten Commandments, compared with that of Covenant Theology. Please show me where my view is antinomian.

One: Do you believe and teach that a Christian is duty bound to obey the first commandment - "No other gods" - see Exodus 20:3. I believe and teach the same thing. Breaking that commandment was, is, and always will be a sin. I cannot possibly be an antinomian, or 'be against the first commandment.' (See also Acts 14:15 and 1 Cor. 8:6.)

Two: Do you believe that a Christian is duty bound to obey the second commandment - "No idols / images" - see Exodus 20:4-6. I also believe and teach the same thing. Breaking that commandment was, is, and always will be a sin. I cannot possibly be an antinomian, or 'be against the second commandment.' (See also 1 John 5:21 and 1 Cor. 10:7).

Three: Do you believe and teach that a Christian is duty bound to obey the third commandment - "Don't take God's name in vain" - see Exodus 20:7. I also believe and teach the same thing. Breaking that commandment was, is, and always will be a sin. I cannot possibly be an antinomian, or 'be against the third commandment.' (See also James 5:12).

Four: Do you believe and teach that a Christian is duty bound to obey the fourth commandment - "Keep the Sabbath" - see Exodus 20:8-11. I believe and teach that Christ himself is our Sabbath and we "keep Sabbath with God" when we truly rest in Christ's

finished work of atonement. See our booklet, *The Believer's Sabbath* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002). I believe the Sabbath was the ceremonial sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exod. 31:14-18).

Five: Do you believe and teach that a Christian is duty bound to obey the fifth commandment - "Honor your parents" - see Exodus 20:12. I also believe and teach the same thing. Breaking that commandment was, is, and always will be a sin. I cannot possibly be an antinomian, or 'be against the fifth commandment.' (See also Eph. 6:1-3).

Six: Do you believe and teach that a Christian is duty bound to obey the sixth commandment - "No murder" - see Exodus 20:13. I also believe and teach the same thing. Breaking that commandment was, is, and always will be a sin. I cannot possibly be an antinomian, or 'against the sixth commandment.' (See also 1 John 3:11-15 and Rom.13:9).

Seven: Do you believe and teach that a Christian is duty bound to obey the seventh commandment - "No adultery" - see Exodus 20:14. I also believe and teach the same thing. Breaking that commandment was, is, and always will be a sin. I cannot possibly be an antinomian, or 'against the seventh commandment.' (See also Eph. 5:3-7 and 1 Cor. 6:9, 10).

Eight: Do you believe and teach that a Christian is duty bound to obey the eighth commandment - "No stealing" - see Exodus 20:15. I also believe and teach the same thing. Breaking that commandment was, is, and always will be a sin. I cannot possibly be an antinomian, or 'against the eighth commandment.' (See also Eph. 4:28).

Nine: Do you believe and teach that a Christian is duty bound to obey the ninth commandment - "Don't bear false witness" - see Exodus 20:16. I also believe and teach the same thing. Breaking that commandment was, is, and always will be a sin. I cannot possibly be an antinomian, or 'against the ninth commandment.' (See also Col.3:9 and Eph. 4:25).

Ten: Do you believe and teach that a Christian is duty bound to obey the tenth commandment - "No coveting" - see Exodus 20:17. I also believe and teach the same thing. Breaking that commandment was, is, and always will be a sin. I cannot possibly be an antinomian, or 'against the tenth commandment.' (See Eph. 5:3-7)

Dr. Sproul, can my view, as expressed above, in any sense whatsoever, be considered against law in general or against the Ten Commandments in particular?

The catch question that is often posed is this: "Do you believe that the Ten Commandments written with the finger of God upon the Tables of Stone are the rule of life for a Christian today?" Our reply is this: "We believe that the Ten Commandments, **as they are interpreted and applied by our Lord and his apostles in the New Testament Scriptures**, are a real and essential part of our rule of life." According to Morton Smith's stated definition (page 10), the very most that I can be called is a **1/10 antinomian**. The heart of the issue with New Covenant Theology and myself concerning the Ten Commandments boils down to whether the Fourth commandment, the Sabbath, is an eternal, unchanging, moral law, or the ceremonial sign of the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai (Exod. 31:14-17). As I understand it, the Sabbath alone is your real point of difference with New Covenant Theology. That one commandment alone is our only point of disagreement.

We feel we have much biblical evidence for our view. Exodus 31:16 specifically states that to keep the Sabbath was to actually keep 'the covenant.' "*The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant,*" and both verses 11 and 17 state that the Sabbath was the **sign of the Mosaic covenant**. It is vital that

we recognize that the Sabbath, like circumcision, the ceremonial sign of the Abrahamic covenant, was indeed the ceremonial covenant sign of the Mosaic covenant. To violate the ceremonial sign of a covenant was to disown the entire covenant. This is why both signs, circumcision and the Sabbath, even though ceremonial in nature, carried the death penalty for violation. Within the context of marriage, the worst thing I could do would be to take off my wedding ring, throw it at my wife, and walk out. That one act would be a deliberate and total rejection of our entire covenant relationship. That is exactly what the man did who 'merely' picked up a few sticks on the Sabbath. He threw the wedding ring in God's face. That is what Moses was doing by not having his son circumcised. He was refusing to wear the wedding ring.

A particular day of the week cannot be intrinsically holy, in the sense of moral purity, any more than a spoon, an article of furniture, certain clothing, or a piece of land can be holy. The Most Holy Place ceased to be holy in any sense the moment the veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom. Everything that God in any way associates with worshipping him was always prefixed with the word holy. However, in most cases, the connotation of the word 'holy' is "separated unto God" and not "morally pure." Holy days, including the seventh-day Sabbath, are in the same category as the Holy Place, holy garments, holy ceremonies, holy altars, holy furniture, etc. None of these things reflect the eternal, 'moral' character of God.

Dr. Sproul, please explain why your magazine labels New Covenant Theology as antinomian when we not only affirm just as strongly as you that the Christian is not only under clear objective ethical commandments in the New Covenant, but we also insist those New Covenant laws are even **higher than those written on stone**. How is it possible for our belief in a *higher law* to be turned into *anti law*? Your September issue of *Tabletalk* condemns us as heretics simply because we believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is a true lawgiver in his own right and, as such, gives higher and more spiritual laws than anything Moses ever gave. Why do we deserve the odious label of antinomian simply because we believe that Christ replaces Moses as the new lawgiver in exactly the same way he replaces Aaron as High Priest? Our view is completely consistent with the teaching of Hebrews 3:1-6. What is anti-law about binding a Christian's conscience to obey the higher demands of grace found in the Sermon on the Mount and the Epistles? How do we in any way demean either Moses or the holy Law of God by insisting that the law of God under the New Covenant demands a higher and deeper spiritual response than that given through Moses? Does progressive revelation not in any way apply to ethical behavior? Do you really believe that law can demand more than grace? Why must the highest, fullest, unchanging standard of moral conduct that God ever gave be those laws written on the stone tablets of the Covenant (Deut. 9:9-15 and Heb. 9:4) that God made with Israel? Why do you insist that Moses must be the greatest lawgiver; the giver of the 'eternal, unchanging, moral law of God,' and Christ merely be the greatest exegete of that law that God gave Moses? If the Sermon on the Mount is really no more than the greatest Rabbi's true exposition of the Ten Commandments, then would it not be correct to call that sermon "the Talmud of Jesus?" How is it unbiblical for us to insist that Christ is a greater lawgiver than Moses? How are we in anyway demeaning either Moses or the holy Law of God in any way by exalting Christ over Moses as the new Lawgiver?

I am especially grateful that your magazine made the real bottom line issue so crystal clear. After condemning my view as "more dangerous than explicit antinomianism" (I find it hard to believe that is possible), Barcellos then clearly states his own definition of

antinomianism. He plays games with the words ‘against’ and ‘anti’ and then says the following. The emphasis is mine.

In other words, although NCT may not be against law in an absolute sense, if it denies that the moral law of the Old Testament is the moral law of the New Testament, and if it **replaces the moral law with another**, then it is antinomian on two counts. (page 15 )

Barcellos could not possibly have stated the heart of the issue more clearly. His position, as yours, grows out of his unconditional commitment to the perpetuity of the Decalogue or Tables of the Covenant. To change in any way the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments (Exod. 34:28), written on the Tables of the Covenant, the Decalogue (Deut. 9:9) is, in Barcellos’ eyes, to be antinomian. What an admission! It does not matter if ‘changing the law’ means raising it to a higher and deeper level, it is still antinomianism. It does not matter that our Lord himself raised the standards. Even that is immaterial; it is still antinomianism. In other words, the actual content of the law we preach may be built upon and go past the laws written on the stone tables, but that makes no difference, we are still antinomian! The fact that we changed, even by raising to a higher level, the “unchanging moral law of God” justifies Barcellos in accusing us of being worse than the worst of Antinomians. It does not matter what law we used to replace the law of Moses, even if we use the very law of Christ himself, **we are still antinomian**. Our teaching that Jesus Christ has raised the law of Moses to a higher level is heresy simply because we have dared to believe and teach that the Sermon on the Mount makes higher and deeper demands upon the children of grace than the Decalogue. We have dared to say that the law of Moses is not the highest law that God ever gave. We insist that our Lord’s law is higher than the law given to Moses.

When Barcellos declares that anyone who “replaces the moral law with another... is antinomian,” he is laying it all on the table. He is dogmatic that the Decalogue gives us the highest revelation of the moral character of God that has ever been given. We reply, no, our blessed New Covenant prophet goes past Moses and gives us a higher revelation of God’s moral character. Barcellos does not care if we replace the laws written on stone with the laws given us by our Lord himself; we are still more dangerous than explicit antinomians like Agricola. If believing that the sovereign grace of God and the authority of Jesus Christ our new Lawgiver demand a higher and deeper spiritual response than the law of Moses, then we plead guilty to the charge of antinomianism. In the name of Christ our New Covenant prophet, and, we trust to the glory of God and the good of his church, we will continue to insist that our Lord replaces Moses as God’s lawgiver over the church in exactly the same way he replaced Aaron as High Priest. We only ask that those who condemn us realize the true grounds upon which we are being condemned. We are labeled and condemned as ‘against law,’ not because we are at all opposed to any law, but solely because we believe the higher law of Christ replaces the Law of Moses. Barcellos has written a book entitled *In Defense of the Decalogue*. A response to that book could well be entitled *In Defense of Jesus Christ, the New Lawgiver*. The Barcellos quotation cited above demonstrates how these two titles define the heart of the issue.

Let me say again, I am grateful that your magazine has clarified the issues. The bottom line has nothing to do whether we believe in clear, objective, moral absolutes. We preach those as clearly as you do. The question concerns whether Jesus Christ is merely a true, full, and final **interpreter** of Moses or whether he is a new lawgiver who replaces Moses in exactly the same way he replaces Aaron as High Priest. Is he only a scribe, even the greatest of all scribes, or is he a true prophet who gives new and higher laws? That is the real issue.

Barcellos introduces his article in *Tabletalk* with a quotation from Ernest Kevan.

“The main object of the moderate Antinomians was to glorify Christ; but, failing to understand the true relationship between ‘law’ and ‘grace,’ they extolled the latter at the expense of the former.” (page 14)

I am sure there were some people who may have been guilty of Kevan’s charge. However, I also think that *Tabletalk’s* attempt to glorify Moses and his revelation of law has been at the expense of the greater glory of Christ and his new and higher revelation of law.

If Covenant Theology’s position that Jesus never changed any of the laws written on the Tables of Stone is true, we should not be able to find one unambiguous example where Jesus clearly and definitely changed one of the Ten Commandments. We can show more than one such instance. Before doing that, we may legitimately ask if Covenant Theology has indeed changed one of those unchanging laws. We might ask, “Where does any New Testament writer command that the seventh day Sabbath be changed to the first day, and observed for a totally different reason than the two reasons given in the two different versions of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5?” We must remember that an example does not constitute a commandment, especially when we are considering (1) changing one of the ‘eternal, *unchanging*, moral laws’ of God written in stone, and (2) that the particular commandment that we are changing is no less than the specific sign of a covenant document. When we read in the New Testament Scriptures of the furor that was created by the Jews because the apostles taught that circumcision was no longer necessary, can we possibly believe that the apostles could have changed the holy Sabbath of God from Saturday to Sunday and the Jews would have never said a word of protest? I submit that if the apostles had changed God’s holy day, the Jews would have created havoc and yet there is not a single word of that problem mentioned in the New Testament! Why? Because the New Testament does not command a change of days. The grounds upon which this is done are purely circumstantial and in reality, arbitrary.

Let me show some instances where Christ, the new lawgiver, changes one of the Ten Commandments written on stone. As stated earlier, one example only is necessary to refute the basic premise of the position you are not only defending, but are using as the grounds to condemn New Covenant Theology as heretical.

The seventh commandment says, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod.20:14). We believe that commandment is just as binding on us today as it was when it was written on stone. However, we also believe that Jesus clearly changed the definition of what constitutes adultery. Under the Law of Moses, divorce was possible under different rules than it is for a Christian living under the new laws of Christ based on grace. The old rules allowed divorce for reasons other than adultery. Actually, they allowed divorce, according to some commentators, almost at the whim of the man. Here is what the Law of Moses says about divorce and remarriage.

1. *If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house,*
2. *and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man,*
3. *and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies,*

4. *then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. (Deut. 24:1-4 NIV)*

All agree that “something indecent” in verse one could not be, or even include, adultery. That would have been punished with death. Under the Mosaic law, remarriage after divorce for “something indecent” was not considered adulterous. In Matthew 19:1-9, Jesus said the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 concerning divorce was given because of the hardness of men’s hearts. It would also seem it was designed to protect women against that hard-heartedness. Regardless, it is clear that Jesus is saying, “In my kingdom, I am raising the standard and redefining adultery. ‘Something indecent’ is replaced with marital unfaithfulness as the only grounds for divorce.” Later on, Paul will make another change and add another ground for divorce (I Cor. 7:12-15). Both Jesus and Paul changed the definition of adultery as it had been expressed in the seventh commandment, and detailed in the explanatory correlating material. **Jesus specifically forbids precisely what Moses allowed.** This is in no way a contradiction. The old rules, or Law of Moses, were fine for hard-hearted sinners who lived under a covenant based on law, but members of the new kingdom of grace are not hard-hearted sinners as were most of those under the Old Covenant. Every person in the New Covenant has a heart of flesh; both God’s will and God’s love are written on those hearts (Heb.8:7-12; 10:15-17). That is the very greatness of the New Covenant based on grace over the Old Covenant based on law.

We might ask if the Old Covenant believer had Deuteronomy 24:1-4 ‘written on his heart’? One thing seems certain; he did not have Matthew 19:1-9 ‘written on his heart.’ It cannot be denied that there are clearly different rules under the Law of Moses and under the law of Christ concerning divorce and remarriage, and both sets of rules could not be applicable to the same person at the same time. Divorce, adultery, and re-marriage had different laws, or different canons of conduct, under the Old and New Covenants. I am aware that this proposition is impossible within the system of Covenant Theology. Just as there is one Covenant of Grace and one redeemed people under that one covenant, so there must also be only one unchanging canon of conduct for that one people. If there are two different canons of conduct, one for Israel and one for the church, and I have just demonstrated that such is the case, then Covenant Theology is without a foundation in its view of law and grace.

The second change in the seventh commandment (as expounded in Deuteronomy 24) concerns the legitimacy of allowing a man to remarry a woman after he had divorced her. Under the Law of Moses that situation was not allowed under any circumstance. The very same thing is **not** forbidden in the New Covenant under which we live. It is obvious, in this case, that what was “*detestable in the eyes of the LORD*” under the Old Covenant is not detestable to him under the New Covenant.

A third change to the adultery commandment concerns polygamy. Under the Law of God given to Moses, polygamy was not considered adultery. In fact, the Law of Moses actually mandated that a man had to sleep with both wives if he took a second wife (Exod. 21:10, 11). I think any honest person will admit that a change from a law allowing, even if we make it a reluctant tolerance, polygamy to a law insisting on monogamy alone (Eph. 5:22, 23) is more than just a surface change in the definition of adultery and marriage. John Murray clearly saw this problem, and because he was an extremely honest writer, frankly admitted what was at stake. He wrote his treatise on ethics attempting to prove that Polygamy was just as sinful for David as it would be for us today.<sup>2</sup> If that cannot be proven, and it surely cannot, then there

are two canons of conduct, one for Israel and one for the Church, and Covenant Theology loses its foundation.

I repeat; if Covenant Theology's position concerning the absolute "unchanging" character of the Ten Commandments as written on the Tables of Stone is correct, I should not be able to produce one clear specific change to a higher level in any of those commandments. I think I have done that without question. I also repeat that we insist that Christ is not in any way contradicting Moses as if Moses were wrong. Contrasting and raising a law to a higher level is not a contradiction. Laws to govern unregenerate rebels are not always the same as laws to govern regenerate saints.

In your own article "To the gallows with Moses!" you quote Johannes Agricola: "His full statement was this: 'Art thou steeped in sin, an adulterer or a thief? If thou believest, thou art in salvation. All who follow Moses must go to the Devil. To the gallows...'" (page 5). If Agricola had changed the tense of his verbs to read, "If you **will** truly believe, you **will come** into salvation" he would have been preaching the gospel. However, his statement as it stands is the epitome of antinomian heresy because it teaches that a person can willingly live in sin and still be a child of God. Likewise, if he had said, "All who follow Moses **in the hope of being saved by their obedience to him** must go to the Devil", he would have been telling the truth. Your readers, by implication, have every reason to believe that Wells, Zaspel and I believe the same thing as Agricola. However, we have preached, and will continue to preach, the absolute necessity and certainty of the final perseverance of the saints. We disagree with Agricola just as strongly as you do. You unjustly malign us by innuendo.

Your caricature of antinomianism by using a parody of a great hymn again lumps us into the same camp as Agricola:

Free from the law,  
O blessed condition;  
We can sin all we want  
And still have remission.

If your parody is indeed the "theme song of antinomianism" (page 6), then I have never met a true antinomian. All the New Covenant people with whom I associate would, like you, totally reject the philosophy set forth in your parody. However, we would also unashamedly sing from grateful hearts the original words of the hymn you choose to use for your caricature.

Free from the law,  
O happy condition,  
Jesus hath bled,  
and there is remission;  
Cursed by the law  
and bruised by the fall,  
Grace hath redeemed us  
once for all. (P.P. Bliss 1873)

If that hymn is talking about justification, and it most certainly is, then it proclaims the gospel in all of the purity of sovereign grace. It presents the blood of Christ our Lord as the sole grounds of remission of sin. This is precisely the point that Paul drives home in Romans 3:20-31. To mock that hymn is to mock the very gospel itself. Where is the theological flaw in this hymn that praises God's grace alone for full, free and forever justification?

You mention how the Reformers correctly sought to qualify the truth of justification by faith and protect it against antinomianism. They said:

“Justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.” Luther, in keeping with the epistle of James, argued that saving faith is a *fides viva*, a living faith that always yields the fruit of good works. (page 6)

Tom Wells, Fred Zaspel, I and all of our New Covenant friends have been faithfully and fervently declaring that very same thing for many years; even using those exact quotations. No one has fought ‘easy-believism’ and empty professions of faith any harder than we have.

I would like to believe that it was not the intention of *Tabletalk* to label us as true antinomians, but the facts seem to show otherwise. Barcellos wants to eat his cake and have it too. He first admits that we are not “morally antinomian” and then further also admits that we are not “typical antinomian.” However, he then says that New Covenant Theology is “**more dangerous than explicit antinomianism**” (page 15). So he actually labeled us as holding an even more heretical antinomianism than the worst of the explicit antinomians described in the rest of the articles. We are even more dangerous than Johannes Agricola. Unless you and Barcellos have adopted a very extreme ‘carnal Christian’ doctrine, your readers have absolutely no reason to believe that you consider those who hold to New Covenant Theology as truly converted.

Your magazine accepted and printed an article that publicly labels us as more dangerous than ‘explicit antinomians’ which means we are outside the camp of true orthodox Christianity. I believe this draws a false line in the sand. An open discussion of issues involving law and grace, especially as they relate to the Sabbath, is long overdue. The September 2002 issue of *Tabletalk* has raised the issue, but does not promote such a discussion. You may, with the use of false labels, help to widen the present gap and create even more divisions among believers and churches. Surely this is not the outcome either of us would desire.

We have received many reviews of the Wells / Zaspel book, *New Covenant Theology*. Nearly every one, even those from people within your own camp, are far different responses than that expressed by Barcellos in *Tabletalk*. We would welcome your own opinion, based on your personal reading of the book. Perhaps you would agree with Barcellos, but it is just as possible that you would express a far different sentiment. It might, at any rate, open the door for further discussion.

Following are five quotes that contribute insight into *Tabletalk's* view of antinomianism. These quotes clearly demonstrate John Calvin, Martin Luther (along with most early Reformation Churches) John MacArthur, Colin Brown, James Montgomery Boice all consciously rejected the Westminster Confession of Faith's view of the Sabbath. In no sense whatever am I suggesting that any of these men would agree with my understanding of New Covenant Theology. What I am saying is that everyone one of these men deserves the odious label of antinomian if they are judged by the standard that was used to judge me. They all clearly affirm that our blessed Lord dropped one of the laws, the Sabbath, that Covenant Theology considers to be a part of the ‘eternal, unchanging, moral law of God.’ It is clear that Christ viewed the Sabbath as no longer in force but as fulfilled in Himself. As the new Lawgiver, he had every right to do so.

**One: R.L. Dabney, an avowed Sabbatarian, in his Systematic Theology, gives a clear and honest statement of Luther's and Calvin's views of the Sabbath.**

We find that, in theory, almost all Protestants now profess the views once peculiar to Presbyterians and other Puritans ... (p. 366). The historical fact, of which many intelligent Christians are not aware—that the communions founded at the Reformation, were widely and avowedly divided in opinion as to the perpetuity of the Sabbath obligation. A number of the Reformation churches, including some of the purest, professed that they saw no obligation in Scripture to any peculiar Sabbath observation (p. 366). The second opinion [that the Sabbath is a moral commandment and not ceremonial] is that embodied in the Westminster symbols, and, to the honor of Presbyterianism be it said, first avowed in modern times, even among Protestants, by that party in England ... (p.367)

On pages 368–371, Dabney shows that the Mennonites, Lutherans and Anglicans were all non-sabbatarian. He then says:

[Calvin's] views of Sabbath-observation are substantially those of Luther. (p. 372)

Dabney concludes:

On the whole, it may be said that the Protestant Churches of continental Europe... properly speaking, have never had the Sabbath; for it has only been to them a holy-day, ranking no higher than Christmas or Easter. (p. 373)

**Two: John MacArthur's view.** *The MacArthur N.T. Commentary, MATTHEW 8-15*, by John MacArthur, Jr., (Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1987).

**Sabbath** observance was at the heart of the Jewish legalistic system, and when Jesus violated the traditions as to how that day should be honored, He struck a raw nerve. (p.280)

But that law [Sabbath commandment] is the only one of the Ten Commandments that is non-moral and purely ceremonial; and it was unique to the Old Covenant and to Israel. The other nine commandments, on the other hand, pertain to moral and spiritual absolutes and are repeated and expanded upon many places in the New Testament. But Sabbath observance is never recommended to Christians, much less given as a command in the New Testament.

When Jesus began His ministry, the Old Covenant was still in effect and all its requirements were binding on Jews, the special people of that covenant. Jesus observed every demand and met every condition of Scripture, because it was His own Word, which He came to fulfill and not destroy (Matt. 5:17).

Because the **Lord of the Sabbath** had come, the shadow of His Sabbath rest was no longer needed or valid. The New Testament does not require Sabbath observance, but rather allows freedom as to whether or not *any* day is honored above others ... The Lord's Day is not the "Christian Sabbath," as it was considered to be for many centuries and still is in some groups today. (p.287, 288)

**Three: From: *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown, Vol. 3, (Zondervan).**

Sabbath observance is strongly emphasized in both versions of the Decalogue, though a slightly different form and with a different reason suggested. (p. 405)

The Sabbath was to be kept holy, because Israel was a redeemed people. The Deuteronomic version then includes a second reason for its observance. Creation and redemption are both [equal] motives for its observance, the one for all men, the other for Israel. (p. 405)

Galatians 4:10. Paul is addressing Gentile converts who now, after their conversion, are turning to a scrupulous observance of Jewish ritual, special days, new moons, feasts and the yearly observances [and *weekly*] enjoined in the Levitical regulation [note in Leviticus 23 that the weekly is the head of the list]. They are taking on themselves the Jewish law. Paul will not countenance a reversal to Jewish practices for Gentile Christians. (p. 410)

Colossians 2:16. Here Paul argues that the Jewish law (the legal demands) were canceled in the death of Christ (v. 14), and therefore the Jewish food regulations and religious calendar are not binding on the Christian. Included in this ritual was the Jewish sabbath observance. These observances, Paul claims, pointed to a spiritual reality fulfilled in Christ. (p. 410)

There remains one other passage bearing on the sabbath. This is Hebrews 4:9: “there remains a keeping of sabbath [*sabbatismos*] to the people of God.” Here the rest typified by the sabbath is seen as the rest of the heart, provided in Christ (cf. Matt. 11:28) as realized partially now and finally in the life to come. (p. 410, 411)

**Four: J.I. Packer and the Reformer’s view of the Sabbath.** Taken from: *A Quest for Godliness*, by J.I. Packer, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990).

First, however, we must fill in the historical background of our study.

The Puritans created the English Christian Sunday—that is, the conception and observance of the first day of the week as one on which both business and organized recreation should be in abeyance, and the whole time left free for worship, fellowship, and ‘good works.’ This ideal was never generally accepted by continental Protestants [Luther’s and Calvin’s view - JGR]... (p. 235)

James I’s Declaration of sports (1618) laid it down that apart from bull-and bear-baiting and bowls, all the popular games of the day might be played on Sunday after church. In fact James hereby ‘simply reiterated what had been the law of the State and the Church since the early days of the Reformation’ ... (p. 235)

Against this background of history we now turn to the Puritan teaching itself.

1. The meaning of the Fourth Commandment (Ex. 20:8-11). Here the Puritans advanced on the Reformers. These latter had followed Augustine and medieval teaching generally in denying that the Lord’s Day was in any sense a Sabbath. They held that the Sabbath, which the Fourth Commandment prescribes, was a Jewish typical ceremony, foreshadowing the ‘rest’ of a grace-faith relationship with Christ. (p. 236)

Packer then proceeds to show “the Puritans, however, corrected the [Reformers] inconsistency.” (p. 237)

**Five: Dr. James Montgomery Boice’s View:** Dr. Boice, in the April 1994 issue of his *Bible Study Hour* monthly magazine (pages 38-45) reviews the three basic views of the Sabbath. After stating the Sabbatarian view, Dr. Boice acknowledges that the “Westminster Confession of Faith takes this view, calling the Lord’s Day the ‘Christian Sabbath’” ... There is no question that this was the view of the English and American Puritans. It is held by most Reformed churches today.

Dr. Boice then gives his own view which is “Sunday Worship as a new ‘Lord’s Day.’”

This view holds that the Sabbath has been abolished by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that a new day, the Lord’s Day, which has its own characteristics, has replaced it ... This is my view also.

Are differences on this matter divisive? Yes, in some cases. Speaking of my own denomination only, it is worth pointing out that the most serious conflicts within the Presbyterian Church of America, which is a conservative denomination, are between those who insist on a strict adherence to the Westminster Standard, with its Sabbatarian view, and others who hold to the Standards more loosely ... In our denomination there are people who would like to get pastors such as myself excluded, because we think this is a non-essential matter on which the Westminster Confession of Faith has gone beyond what ought to be required of anyone.

Dr. Boice then gives his reasons for rejecting the “Sunday worship but as the Sabbath” view and accepting the “Sunday worship as the new ‘Lord’s Day.’” He shows how the first view can easily lead to legalism and the second view can lead to libertinism, and then warns against both dangers. The context in which Dr. Boice is discussing the whole Sabbath question is Christian liberty as set forth in Romans 14:5, 6. His conclusion would be ‘vile heresy’ to anyone who adheres, without reservation, to the creeds.

Let me say that I do not believe you are “breaking the Sabbath” by eating out on Sunday, playing ball with your children, going to a football game or even-horrors of horrors-going to a movie. When my wife and I lived in Switzerland we used Sunday evening for evangelistic work, and that sometimes included taking our non-Christian friends to movies. But even though the right approach is not legalism, surely you can see that you are somehow missing the boat if Sunday is not a day of spiritual refreshment, an evangelistic opportunity, hours of genuine worship, and a time of joy for you. If going to church is something you want to get over with quickly, I would almost rather have you think of Sunday in a legalistic fashion.

It is interesting that Dr. Boice pleaded for tolerance and acceptance because there are sincere Christians who *hold both views*. It is even more interesting that Dr. Boice realized that the strict Sabbatarian view of the Westminster Confession finds it essential, in most cases, to make its view of the Sabbath a test of fellowship. *Tabletalk’s* readers could infer from the September issue that its authors and editor would fall into the camp that labels any view but that of classical Covenant Theology as antinomianism. We would echo Dr. Boice’s plea for tolerance and acceptance, and above all urge all involved to openly discuss the biblical data instead of sticking an undeserved label on those who disagree with a creed.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Pastor David Frampton for the above. It was taken from his tract, “Me, An Antinomian? You Must be Kidding!” (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media).

<sup>2</sup> *Principles of Conduct*, by John Murray, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, pages 14-18.

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The above "*An Open Letter to R.C. Sproul*" by John G. Reisinger was published by **Sound of Grace**. See [Volume 9 Number 4](#).

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