

ARE CHRISTIANS BOUND BY THE SABBATH COMMANDMENT?

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There is much more that could be said on the subject of the Sabbath. What I intend this morning is to outline for you why the church does not observe the Sabbath.

Why Christians Are Not Bound by the Sabbath Commandment

I. The Sabbath commandment was given to Israel as part of the Mosaic law, the law of the old covenant. God did not command people at creation to observe the Sabbath.

A. God did indeed "rest" on the seventh day of creation, meaning ceased from his work of creation, but no mention is made in Genesis of a Sabbath (a rest) for man. The seventh-day rest of Genesis focuses exclusively on God. There is no command for mankind to observe anything regarding the seventh day. In fact, the word *Sabbath* (*Shabbāt*), which is the name given to the commanded observance of the seventh day by Israelites, is never used in Genesis. As Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna observes in *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 14:

The human institution of the Sabbath does not appear in the narrative. . . . [A]s we read in Exodus 31:13, 16, and 17, the Sabbath is a distinctively Israelite ordinance, a token of the eternal covenant between God and Israel. Its enactment would be out of place before the arrival of Israel on the scene of history.

B. Sabbath observance is first mentioned in Ex. 16:21-30, and it seems the Israelites were not familiar with it. This is consistent with the fact there is no mention of anyone observing the Sabbath prior to that time.

C. In Ex. 20:8-11 Israel is commanded to remember the Sabbath day (that was given to them in Exodus 16) by keeping it as a special day separate from every other day and dedicated to God. It states:

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

D. Exodus 20:11 does not say that God blessed and sanctified the Sabbath day **at the time of creation.**

1. As I've said, Sabbath day is the name of the seventh day as a day of rest **for man**, so there was no Sabbath day at creation. Rather, Ex. 20:11 explains that God **at that time**, at Mount Sinai, blessed and sanctified the Sabbath day, the seventh day as a commanded day of rest for man, because he previously, at the time of creation, had rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:3). This understanding of Ex. 20:11 is supported by two considerations.

a. First, Deut. 5:15 says the Sabbath commandment is based on a prior historical event: because God rescued the Israelites from Egypt, he therefore **at Sinai** commanded them to keep the Sabbath day. Reading Ex. 20:11 in a parallel manner yields: because God rested on the seventh day of creation, he therefore **at Sinai** blessed and sanctified the Sabbath day.

b. Second, the Hebrew particle used in Deut. 5:15 and Ex. 20:11 and translated "therefore" (*'al-kēn*) normally is used "in the Pentateuch to connect causally an event in the past with a situation some time later (cf. Gen. 2:24; 25:20; 42:21; 47:22; Exod. 13:15; Num. 21:27; Deut. 24:18); hence, it is better translated '**consequently now**' (in the sense of *post hoc* ['after this'] and *propter hoc* ['on account of this'])." Harold H. P. Dressler, "The Sabbath in the Old Testament," in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 38 (n. 43).

2. So the seventh day was blessed and sanctified on two occasions for two different but analogous reasons. It was blessed and sanctified at creation because it was the day on which God rested from his work of creation (Gen. 2:3) and it was blessed and sanctified at Sinai because it was the day on which the people of Israel, by God's command, rested from their labor.

E. The fact Deut. 5:15 states expressly that the Sabbath commandment was based on God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, where they had no rest, makes clear that it was given after the Exodus and that it applied only to the people of Israel.

F. Nehemiah 9:14 confirms that Sabbath observance was unknown to the Israelites prior to Exodus 16 by declaring that God made the holy Sabbath known to the Israelites **through his servant Moses**.

G. Exodus 31:12-17 and Ezek. 20:12-13 confirm that Sabbath observance was required only of Israel by specifying that it was **a sign between God and Israel**, a reminder of the covenant God had made with Israel upon delivering them from Egypt.

II. The Sabbath commandment of the Mosaic law does not have ongoing applicability in the new covenant.

A. The new covenant that was instituted through the sacrifice of Christ rendered the old covenant obsolete or no longer operative (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15 – 4:7, 4:21-31; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13), and with the fulfillment in Christ of the planned

obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant, the *set of commands* that were embedded in that covenant, *the Mosaic law*, ceased to be binding.

B. That the Mosaic law ceased to be binding is clear from texts like Rom. 10:1-4, Gal. 3:23-25, and Heb. 7:11-14 but also from the fact specific regulations that were part of the Mosaic law – such as food laws (Rom. 14:1-15:13; 1 Cor. 10:23-11:1) and circumcision (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 2:3-5, 5:2-6, 11-12, 6:12-13; Phil. 3:2) – are said to be no longer binding. That is why Paul, a Jew, could declare that he was not under the Mosaic law (1 Cor. 9:20).

C. Though the **set of commands** that constitute the Mosaic law ceased to be binding, many of the **individual commands** included in that set have an ongoing or renewed applicability, and indeed find their full expression, in the new covenant.

1. For example, Paul in Eph. 6:2 commands children to "honor your father and mother," quoting from the Ten Commandments in Ex. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16. The Ten Commandments also are reflected in N.T. commands and prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting.

2. You can see this concept in terms of the various state laws. When you're in Arizona you are subject to the laws of Arizona, but if you move to Florida you are no longer subject to the laws of Arizona. Yet, you will find that some of the laws to which you are subject as a resident of Florida are the same as those to which you were subject as a resident of Arizona. Though you are no longer under Arizona law there is an overlap of the laws of the two jurisdictions. So too there is an overlap of the moral requirements of the old and new covenants, the Mosaic law and the law of Christ. The fact dishonoring one's parents is sinful under both covenants does not mean the old covenant is still in effect.

D. The question is whether the Sabbath command is one of the commands that has ongoing applicability in the new covenant (like the command against coveting) or whether it is one that does not have ongoing applicability (like sacrifices, circumcision, food laws, etc.). It is clear to me and has been clear to the vast majority of believers throughout history that the Sabbath command does not have ongoing applicability under the new covenant.

E. Witness of Scripture

1. Paul makes clear in Col. 2:16-17 that Christians are not obligated to observe the Sabbath commandment.

a. The context is Paul's admonition in 2:8-15 not to be taken captive by certain false teachers who were presenting a manmade doctrine that centered on elemental spirits of the universe rather than on Christ. The Jewish aspect of this heresy resulted in a tendency to impose old covenant rituals. It seems the false teachers were

urging obedience to these rituals as a way to satisfy the spiritual powers so as to advance toward fullness with God.

b. Because God in Christ completely disarmed the spiritual powers by canceling the record of the Colossians' sin, Paul commands the Colossians in 2:16 to let no one pass judgment on them with regard to food and drink or concerning a religious festival, a new moon celebration, *or Sabbath days*. He is referring here to Jewish kosher laws (food and drink), extended to include wine as they had been in Paul's day, and to the annual (religious festival), monthly (new moon celebration) and weekly (Sabbath days) Jewish holy days (see Ezek. 45:17 and Hosea 2:11, and in reverse order, 1 Chron. 23:31, 2 Chron. 2:4, 31:3, Neh. 10:33). In other words, Paul specifically tells the Colossian Christians that they are not to yield to the pressure of the false teachers to abide by the Sabbath. It belongs to the shadow that has given way to the reality found in Christ (2:17).

2. Paul makes the same point in Gal. 4:8-11.

a. In Gal. 3:1-4:11 Paul is explaining the foolishness of the Galatians' defection to the Judaizers' "gospel," which really is no gospel at all. He reminds them in 3:1-5 that they received the Spirit by accepting his gospel, not that of the Judaizers. In 3:6-9 he points to Abraham's example of faith, and in 3:10-14 he explains that reliance on the Mosaic law yields a curse. In 3:15-18 he shows that the promise to Abraham was not affected by the giving of the Mosaic law, and in 3:19-29 he explains how the giving of the law is consistent with his gospel. In 4:1-11 he argues that submitting to the Mosaic law is a return to slavery.

b. In Gal. 4:8-11 Paul questions how the Galatians can even consider returning to slavery by accepting the Judaizers' gospel. He tells these Gentile Christians that before they were Christians they were enslaved to pagan gods, which are not really gods at all (but perhaps demons – see, 1 Cor. 10:18-22). For a Gentile to submit to the Mosaic law is for him to return *in principle* to his former enslavement. The law, rendered weak and beggarly (outdated) by the coming of Christ, has points in common with the pagan cultic requirements that formerly enslaved the Galatians, *particularly the observance of days, months, seasons, and years*. This undoubtedly refers to the Jewish holy days, including the Sabbath. Having been freed from analogous requirements by becoming Christians, by having been known by God, Paul asks how they can possibly return to that slavery by submitting to the Mosaic law. He obviously did not believe these Christians were obligated to obey the Sabbath.

3. Romans 14:1-12 also makes clear that Christians are not obligated to observe the Sabbath commandment.

a. Paul here tells the Gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome that they must accept one another. Unlike the Judaizers, who insisted that Gentiles must submit to the Mosaic law to be saved, the Jewish Christians in Rome continued to practice ritual aspects of Judaism as a matter of personal conscience. Having been taught all their lives the importance of Jewish dietary rules and observance of holy days

(especially the Sabbath), it was difficult for Jews who became Christians to accept in their hearts that these things no longer mattered to God. They tended to think that those Christians who did not abide by these rules were less faithful or less devoted to God and to hold them somewhat at a distance. Conversely, there was a tendency on the part of the Gentile Christians, who did not follow the Mosaic law, to look down on their Jewish brothers as unenlightened and arrogant.

b. Paul tells the Gentile majority that they are to welcome or receive the one who is "weak in faith," meaning the Jewish Christian who is weak in his grasp of the implications of the faith, who had underdeveloped convictions about what the faith allows. He tells the Jewish minority that they are not to judge (as inferior or less pious) the Gentile whose faith permits him to eat and drink what may be ritually unclean and to ignore old covenant holy days like the Sabbath. In saying this, Paul establishes beyond question (in my mind) that Sabbath observance is not binding in the new covenant.

4. The inapplicability of the Sabbath command in the new covenant is confirmed by the fact it is the only one of the Ten Commandments that is not reiterated in the New Testament. Moreover, breaking the Sabbath is never mentioned in any New Testament listing of sins, some of which are quite extensive (e.g., Mk. 7:21-22; Rom. 1:29-32; Gal. 5:19-21; 2 Tim. 3:1-4). Neither Christ, the apostles, or anyone else in the New Testament commands Christians to keep the Sabbath.

5. Just as the commands regarding sacrifices, circumcision, and food laws are no longer applicable because they find their fulfillment in Christ, so the commandment regarding Sabbath rest finds its fulfillment in Christ. As indicated in Heb. 3:7-4:11, those in Christ now share by faith in the end-time rest of God, the goal toward which creation moves, though that rest will not be fully realized until Christ returns. The Sabbath rest of the Mosaic law thus is transcended by the Christian's participation in the divine rest.

F. Witness of History

1. The inapplicability of the Sabbath command in the new covenant is further confirmed by the testimony of the post-apostolic church. Second-century writers like Ignatius, Pseudo-Barnabas, Justin, Aristides, Tertullian, the author of the *Acts of Peter*, and the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* all share the understanding that the literal commandment to rest one day in seven was a temporary ordinance for Israel that had passed with its fulfillment in Christ.

2. I'll quote just three of them, one from the early, one from the middle, and one from the late second century.

a. Ignatius of Antioch wrote in his letter to the church at Magnesia (par. 9), a city fifteen miles from Ephesus:

If therefore those who lived according to the old practices came to the new hope, **no longer observing the Sabbath but living according to the Lord's Day**, in which also our life arose through him and his death (which some deny), through which mystery we received faith, and on account of which we suffer in order that we may be found disciples of Jesus Christ our only teacher, how shall we be able to live apart from him for whom even the prophets were looking as their teacher since they were his disciples in the spirit?

b. Justin Martyr wrote the following in *Dialogue with Trypho* (10:1): "There is no other thing for which you blame us, my friends, is there than this? That we do not live according to the Law, nor are we circumcised in the flesh as your forefathers, nor do we observe the Sabbath as you do." In v. 3 the Jew Trypho acknowledges that Christians "do not keep the Sabbath."

c. Tertullian wrote in *On Idolatry* (14:6): "To us Sabbaths are foreign." He wrote in *An Answer to the Jews* (4:1): "It follows, accordingly, that, in so far as the abolition of carnal circumcision and of the old law is demonstrated as having been consummated at its specific times, so also the observance of the Sabbath is demonstrated to have been temporary."

3. This is not to deny that some Christians observed the Sabbath, along with the Lord's Day, after the first century. It is to say that there was wide recognition that Christians were not obligated to do so and even opposition to their doing so. The stricter groups of Jewish Christians that continued to view the Mosaic law as obligatory were regarded as heretical. Richard Bauckham, an expert on the early church, states in his review of the Sabbath commandment in the second century: "It must be stressed that, outside Jewish Christianity, all second-century references to the Sabbath commandment either endorse the metaphorical interpretation or reject the literal interpretation as Judaistic or do both." Richard Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church" in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 269.

G. These reasons have persuaded the vast majority of believers throughout history that the Sabbath commandment is not applicable under the new covenant.

III. Lord's Day Is Not a Christianized Sabbath Day

A. The normative practice of the apostolic church was to assemble for worship on Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection. I do not have time to establish that fact now, but the point I want to make is that worshiping on the Lord's Day was not, as some think, a transfer of the O.T. Sabbath to Sunday. In other words, Sunday is not a Christianized Sabbath.

B. Rather, as the renowned church historian Everett Ferguson concluded:

The view that the Sabbath is binding on Christians rests on no explicit text in the NT or early Christian literature. It is surpassingly strange that a supposedly central Christian religious duty depends on the interpretation of an OT text. Rather than seeing a continuing validity of the Sabbath, which was changed from Saturday to Sunday, whether legitimately by the apostles in the first century or illegitimately by the church in the second (or by Constantine in the fourth), it is better to see the Sabbath command as a part of the superseded Mosaic institution and the Lord's day as a different type of day, a day of assembly and worship.