

The Sabbath - and its Relation to the Christian

I. THE SABBATH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. The Beginning of the Sabbath

The Sabbath was part of the Law of Moses and its observance began with him. Prior to Moses no one was ever commanded to keep the Sabbath nor is there any record of anyone doing so.

The word Sabbath in Hebrew means "to cease" or "to rest" and first appears in Exodus 16:22-30. Though keeping the Sabbath was not commanded as a perpetual practice yet, the fact that on the sixth day they were to gather extra food so they could rest on the seventh day prepared them for the command about to come in Exodus 20.

The next time the word "Sabbath" appears is in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:8-11. There the Jews are commanded to ***remember*** what they had been told in Exodus 16 and to practice a weekly Sabbath.

B. The Practice of the Sabbath

Deuteronomy 5:12 states that the Sabbath was to be a holy day. That is, it was to be set apart from the other days of the week as a special day dedicated to God. This does not mean that it was intended to be a day of worship (though they were allowed to worship on that day - Ps. 92) but a day when the Israelites were to rest from work. This cessation from work included family members, servants and even animals (Deut. 5:14).

The reason it was to be a day of rest is given in Exodus 20:11; "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it." The Israelites were to rest on Saturday (the seventh day of the week) because God had established this pattern in the week of creation.

From time to time the meaning of Sabbath rest was defined and clarified. There was to be no gathering of food (manna) or traveling (Exo. 16:23-30); no gathering of wood (Num. 15:23); no carrying anything (Jer. 17:21); and, no trading or marketing (i.e. no business transactions - Amos 8:5; Neh. 10:31; 13:15, 19).

It should be noted that nothing is said in the Law of Moses about the Sabbath being a day of worship. Leviticus 23:3 states that the Sabbath is a "Sabbath of the LORD *in all your dwellings.*" That is, the Sabbath was to be observed at home with the family. In addition, other practices were observed by the priests, such as replacing the showbread in the Holy Place in the Temple (Lev. 24:8) and doubling the daily sacrifices (Num. 28:9). The Sabbath synagogue services did not exist prior to the time of Babylonia captivity in 605 B.C. .

Failure to observe the Sabbath was to result in death; "You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death" (Exo. 31:14; 35:2-3).

C. The Purpose of the Sabbath

The OT mentions two purposes for the Sabbath besides rest. It was to be a sign that Israel was set apart from the nations, and a reminder that God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

According to Exodus 31:12-17 the Sabbath was to be a sign of the Mosaic covenant just as a rainbow is a sign of the Noachic covenant and circumcision a sign of the Abrahamic covenant. Exodus 31 says, "'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*'. The sign can only be between God and Israel with whom the covenant was made. The Sabbath was a sign that Israel was sanctified (i.e. set apart) by God from among the nations of the world. Every time the Israelite observed the Sabbath he remembered his responsibility to the covenant. To break the Sabbath was to disregard the covenant. To keep it resulted in blessing (Isa. 56:4-5, 6-7; 58:13-14).

The Sabbath was also a sign that God brought Israel out of the land of Egypt. Deuteronomy 5:15 states, "remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; *therefore* the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (also see Ezek. 20:12-20 for the same connection).

D. The Sabbath and the Christian

As we have studied, the Sabbath was a sign of the Mosaic covenant and a sign that God had delivered His people from Egypt. Even so, there are Christians who insist that we should keep the Sabbath today. Since there is no New Testament passage that commands Christians to keep the Sabbath they must resort to the Old Testament to support their view. This being so, we would expect that the Sabbath they preach to be the same one described in the Old Testament. Instead we find that the only similarity between the Old Testament Sabbath and the "Christian Sabbath" is the word Sabbath. The *practice* has changed, the *purpose* has changed, and even *the day it is observed on* has been changed. It would be fair to ask in what sense they can even claim to be keeping the Sabbath?

There are three major arguments that support a mandatory Sabbath.

1. The Sabbath was a creation ordinance, that is, it was instituted at creation for the benefit of all humanity. The Sabbath for all mankind was implied in the divine plan of creation.

It is claimed that the first Sabbath, the very basis of all Sabbath observance, is found in Genesis 2:2-3 (cf. Exo. 20:11).

"And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made."

However, it should also be observed that:

a. no ordinance is actually mentioned here. There is no command stating what *man* must do on the seventh day. All that it says is what *God* did. He alone rested.

b. the crucial word, Sabbath, does not even appear. Genesis 2 does not speak about an institutionalized day of rest at all.

c. the period between Adam and Moses reveals not even a hint of the Sabbath being practiced. The silence speaks for we know quite a bit about the religious practices of the patriarchs - circumcision, sacrifices, tithes, marriage. The institution of the Sabbath is not mentioned because it did not exist.

2. Observance of the Sabbath was to continue for all generations

Exodus 31:13 states, "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.'

Likewise, Exodus 31:16 says that the Sabbath is to be a perpetual covenant and is a sign between God and Israel forever (Exo. 31:17).

If the Sabbath was to be perpetual, eternal, kept for all generations, then it is intended to be practiced today. Though other parts of the Mosaic Law came to an end (sacrifices, the Levitical priesthood, etc.) this was to continue forever.

However, it should be noticed that:

a. Exodus 31:13 is specifically addressing the Israelites, not all of humanity.

b. the word translated "forever" in Hebrew doesn't necessarily mean "forever." In Hebrew there was no word for eternity or "forever," though *olam* (עֹלָם) is often translated that way. *Olam* (עֹלָם) can simply mean the end of a time period.

For example in Exodus 21:6 "forever" (*olam* - עולם) simply means "until the end of life."

"then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever."

This does not mean that the slave will serve his master even into the eternal state, but that he will serve him as long as the master lives. Here *Olam* (עולם) simply means the end of a time period, in this case the end of the man's life. (cf. Deut. 15:17; I Sam. 1:22; I Chron 28:4, etc. for similar usage)

c. "throughout your generations" is used of many other things in the Mosaic Law besides the Sabbath. It is used of such things as the kindling of the lampstands (Exo. 27:21; Lev. 24:3), the ceremony of showbread (Lev. 24:8), the service of the altar (Exo. 30:21); the Levitical priesthood and their garments (Exo. 28:43; Lev. 7:34, etc.), and of certain sacrifices (Lev. 16:34). The words "perpetual covenant" are also used of the ceremony of showbread (Lev. 24:9) If one insists that on the basis of the words "throughout your generations" or "perpetual covenant" that the Sabbath must be perpetuated forever, to be consistent with word usage he must also insist that all the other facets of the Mosaic Law be enforced where the words appear.

3. The keeping of the Sabbath is found in the Ten Commandments which is God's moral Law binding on all people at all times

Exodus 20:8 - "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."

It is claimed by some that the Law can be divided into three categories; the moral, ceremonial, and civil Law. Based on this division they believe that the moral Law found in the Ten Commandments and other places in the OT is binding on all men everywhere because God's morals never change. Sin is always sin in every age. The civil and ceremonial Laws, such as the Levitical priesthood, festivals and sacrifices, however, ended with Christ.

This division can be seriously challenged, but even if the opponents to this view were correct, one would have to ask if keeping the Sabbath is ceremonial or moral in nature. According to them only the moral Law of God is binding on all men. When we try to determine what category the Sabbath fits in (i.e. is it moral, civil or ceremonial law?), we discover that Sabbath observance has many elements that indicate it is a ceremonial, not moral, in nature. Such things as gathering food, traveling, gathering wood, carrying things, and conducting business are all forbidden. Yet if these were moral issues they would also be forbidden the rest of the week as well. For example, adultery is always wrong no matter what day of the week it is. Adultery is clearly a moral issue. But if the Sabbath is ceremonial, then the whole argument falls apart for opponents of keeping the Sabbath claim that the ceremonial Law is no longer binding.

CONCLUSION:

Those who hold that the Sabbath is binding upon Christians today do so with very little consistency - both logically and biblically.

1. Though the rainbow is a sign to all mankind that God would never again destroy the earth by flood (Gen. 9:13-16), no one believes that circumcision was a sign to all mankind. It is clearly a sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:9-14). In the same way the Sabbath was (1) a sign of the Mosaic covenant and (2) a practice that reminded the Israelites that God had delivered His people from Egypt. Neither of these apply to Christians today; we are not under the Mosaic covenant, nor has the church been delivered from slavery in Egypt.

2. To say, "We must observe the Sabbath," but then strip it of its original meaning, purpose, and practice is to observe a day that only has its name in common with the Old Testament descendant from which it has come. In essence, "to observe the Sabbath" in the language of modern Christians only means "we need to rest sometime." Though in principle this isn't bad, to make the Christian live back under the Law is disastrous and contrary to grace.

II. The Sabbath in the New Testament

A. The Sabbath in the Gospels

"In Rabbinic Judaism, the Sabbath had become an end in itself. In fact, the belief was that Israel was created for the purpose of observing the Sabbath. The Sabbath became highly personified and looked upon as a queen (*Malchat Shabbat*) and a bride." (Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 666). One rabbi said, "The Sabbath weighs against all the precepts: if they keep it they are reckoned as having done all" (Shemoth Rabb. 25; Hiebert, *James*, 168). In other words, keeping the Sabbath covered for other moral lapses.

By creating many Sabbath rules and regulations, the Pharisees made the Sabbath rest a burden in itself. "Jesus accused the Pharisees of totally misconstruing the purpose of the Sabbath. The purpose of the Sabbath was to help man and not enslave him. It is the human element in the Sabbath that should be emphasized, because the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath (Mk. 2:27)." (Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 666)

Jesus observed the Sabbath as prescribed in the Old Testament Law, but not in accordance with Rabbinic Judaism.

To claim that the Christian should keep the Sabbath because Jesus did is not logical unless one also wants to claim that the believer should keep the other 612 commandments in the Law as Jesus did.

B. The Sabbath in Acts

One of the nine times that the word Sabbath appears in the book of Acts it is used as a measure of distance (about 3,000 feet): "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a **Sabbath** day's journey" (Acts 1:12). The remaining eight refer to the day in which Jewish unbelievers met for the synagogue service. They say nothing of a Christian standard to be followed (Acts 13:14, 27, 42, 44; 15:21; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4).

This does not mean that Jewish believers were not present in synagogue services on Saturday since many continued their Jewish customs

for various reasons. But none of the reasons had to do with being commanded to keep the Sabbath, nor did they think that they were meeting as a church.

However, two passages in the book of Acts may have a bearing on the Sabbath issue.

One is in Acts 15:1-29.

In Acts 15 certain men began to teach that it was necessary to circumcise the gentiles and to command them to keep the Law of Moses in order for them to be saved (Act. 15:1, 5). The church in Antioch decided to send a delegation consisting of Paul and Barnabas to meet with the elders of the church in Jerusalem to discuss the issue. Peter reviewed the salvation experience of Cornelius (a gentile) and asserted that he had received the Holy Spirit just as the Jews had. In other words, Cornelius was saved by faith apart from any work of the Law; so Peter asked, "Why then do they test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither their fathers nor they were able to bear?" (Act. 15:10). In the context the yoke is clearly the yoke of the Law of Moses. Peter's point is that if neither the forefathers nor the Jews then living could keep the Law, why demand such a thing of gentiles? His logic was sound and they concluded that the gentiles were not to be required to keep the Law. By way of concession, however, the elders decided to ask the gentiles "to (1) abstain from things polluted by idols, (2) from sexual immorality, (3) from things strangled, and (4) from blood." (Act 15:20). By avoiding the practices that were most offensive to their Jewish brethren there would be no cause of stumbling when they gathered together to worship and eat. "Things polluted by idols" is explained in Acts 15:29 as "foods" sacrificed to idols. Paul teaches the same principle in I Corinthians 8 about being sensitive to another person's conscience. Immorality is always wrong but was particularly prominent in the gentile world and its religions. Therefore, special warning is given. Animals strangled without the proper draining of the blood was also a great offense to the Jews. The distinction is not between what is binding on all Christians and what is not, but what were the appropriate table manners in the early church to prevent another brother from stumbling.

It may be significant that keeping the Sabbath was not even a concern and the fact that the Law of Moses was likened to a yoke that was not needed, shows that keeping the Law was not a part of New Testament salvation, nor was it a part of Christian obedience.

The other passage is Acts 21:20-25.

In Acts 21 Paul met with the elders of the Jerusalem church a second time. Some there had heard that Paul had commanded "all the Jews who are among the *Gentiles* to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children or to walk according to the customs" (Act 21:21). But they discovered that such was not so and that Paul himself kept the Law (Act 21:24). They repeated to Paul what they had earlier requested of the gentiles, namely, "that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality" (Act 21:25).

Again there is no specific mention of the Sabbath. However, this passage does show that the Jewish believers practiced much more than was required and most likely observed the Sabbath as did Paul. This does not teach that the Law was to be observed by all Christians, but that the Jewish believers had the freedom to observe the Law if they wanted to. Sabbath keeping was voluntary, not mandatory. Paul says it best in I Corinthians 9:20-22; "to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without Law, as without Law (not being without Law toward God, but under Law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without Law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some."

C. The Sabbath in the Epistles of Paul

In all of Paul's epistles the Sabbath is mentioned only once.

Colossians 2:16-17 says, "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or **sabbaths**, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."

This section follows what Paul has said about the ordinances being blotted out by the death of Christ. Because of Christ we are no longer under the Law. This is true of the Sabbath as well. It was a mere shadow of things to come. As with the rest of the Law, festivals and the Sabbath have lost their intrinsic value though they can be enjoyed by those who wish to observe them.

Though not mentioning the Sabbath there are two other passages relative to the discussion at hand in Paul's epistles.

The first is in Romans 14:4-6; "Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks."

One of the areas Paul forbids condemning judging others is in the area of observing days. Though this is not specifically the Sabbath it certainly includes it. Some value one day above others while some value each day the same. According to Paul these are both valid options. If someone wants to worship on the Sabbath, he may, and should not be judged as long as he doesn't make his freedom mandatory for everyone. Likewise, those who worship on Sunday have the same freedoms.

A second passage is Galatians 4:10-11; "You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain." The entire book of Galatians is focused on showing believers that once saved they are not subject to the Law any longer. The months refer to the New Moon Festivals, the seasons to the seven holy seasons of Israel. The days most likely refer to Sabbath days. The years most likely refer to the sabbatical years, or perhaps the year of Jubilee.

What does this tell us of Paul's view of the Sabbath? For Paul the important factor in the issue was motive, not practice. Most likely he

encouraged those who wanted to keep the Sabbath to do so. The non-Jewish Christian need not. Mandatory observation seems to be out of the picture.

D. The Sabbath in the Book of Hebrews

The book of Hebrews treats the Sabbath as a type of something greater that was to come rather than an actual day of rest.

In Hebrews 3:7-4:13 the writer likens the Sabbath to the spiritual rest we receive in Christ and the future heavenly rest we will experience some day.

In 4:9 he says, "There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God." But his intended meaning follows in the next verses, "For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience."

Although the meaning of this verse is debated, it seems probable that he writer of Hebrews is speaking of our final rest in the eternal state. In that condition we have ceased from good works as God did (Cf. Rev. 14:13).

The chapter can be outlined as follows:

1. God's rest (creation rest) 4:4 - the present blissful condition of God He longs to share with creation
2. Canaan rest (3:7-19)
3. Salvation rest (4:1, 3a, 8, 9)
4. Heavenly rest (4:10-11)

Needless to say, none of this is directly tied to the keeping of the Sabbath.

E. Sunday

By the second century worship outside of Israel on Sunday was a common practice. It wasn't until some time later that church councils applied Sabbath rules to the day and made it a day of rest.

In the New Testament, Sunday was never called the Sabbath, but "the first day of the week." Nor is it even called "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10 is disputed as to meaning), though the church fathers referred to it as such.

It's true that by the second century churches worshipped on Sunday (Act 20:7-8, 11) but it is clear that no one considered Sunday the Sabbath nor did they cease to work on that day. Even Acts 20:7 does not support a Sunday Sabbath since the first day of the week for the Jew began at sundown on Saturday night, not midnight. It appears that the Jewish believers met on Saturday night not Sunday morning as we do.

The verse says, "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight."

1. It's clear they met on the first day of the week (sometime between sundown Saturday and sundown Sunday in Jewish reckoning)
2. Paul was going to depart the next day. That is he would be traveling the following morning (Sunday morning)
3. Paul preached until midnight. The church met Saturday evening and Paul preached until midnight. If Paul meant he had met at 11:00 a.m. Sunday morning, as some believe, he would have preached for 13 hours straight!
4. Verse 8 supports the idea of an evening meeting by mentioning the number of lamps present.

In other words, there is strong evidence that among Jewish believers the church met on Saturday night after observing the Sabbath for there was no other time to worship. Other believers met on Sunday. Neither group viewed the day of their meeting as the Sabbath. Neither group practiced "transference theology" by applying the Sabbath rules to Sunday.

In conclusion the day one chooses to meet for worship is not mandatory. To meet Sunday morning is fine. To meet another day is also fine. But to impose one day over another finds no support in the Bible and as a practice should be stopped.

III. Final Comments

Based on all that has been said some may think we should conclude that we should just forget about a day of rest altogether. But just because we are not under the law does not mean that the Law is no longer important; for the will of God is found in the scripture which includes the Law. II Timothy 3:16 says that "all scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." Notice how sweeping Paul's statement is. He says "*All* scripture . . . is profitable." "All" means that every part - even the Law of Moses with its moral, civil and ceremonial elements - are to be used for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that we may be adequate, equipped for every good work. We are not *under* the Law, but because the Law is inspired it is full of valuable doctrine and lessons for us.

James says that the Bible is like a mirror by which we able to see ourselves as we really are (Ja. 1:23-25). Our thinking and conduct should be molded by the Word of God. Though the Law is abolished (II Cor. 3:11, 13) it still remains part of the mirror of the Word of God and as such is profitable to us. But our conduct is also molded as we look in the mirror at Christ. From Him we learn that we ought to walk as He walked (I Jn. 2:6), suffer as He suffered (I Pet. 2:21), love as He loved (I Jn. 4:9, 10; 3:16) and keep His commandments (Jn. 14:21, 23) as He kept His Father's commandments (Jn. 14:31).

To be sure there is a progress in revelation and the believer's expression of faith varies in different ages; some things are superseded; some may be abolished; some things are more important than others. But all things are governed by the will of God as revealed in the Scripture and the person of Christ.

For further study:

1. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, Israelology; the Missing Link in Systematic Theology, 594-599

2. D.A. Carson, ed. From Sabbath to Lord's Day