

# Christians and Old Testament Laws

3rd edition

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## PREFACE

The chapters in this e-book originated, for the most part, in the years 1995–1999 as our denomination re-examined the question of Old Testament laws. Although several Old Testament laws were foundational to our existence as a denomination, we studied them afresh from Scripture, and found that we had built on the wrong foundation. There was a tremendous cost, both financial and human, to our doctrinal change, but we were compelled by the word of God to change. You can read more about our doctrinal journey at [www.gci.org/aboutus/history](http://www.gci.org/aboutus/history).

The articles have all been edited in 2012–2014 by Michael Morrison. We are happy to share them with others, not only on our website but also in this format. We believe that these studies can help many Christians come to a better understanding of how the Old Testament is relevant to Christians today.

May God bless you as you read and study.

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# **THE ROLE OF THE LAW IN CHRISTIAN LIFE**

By Joseph Tkach

At the heart of Paul's theology, in the center of his good news message about Jesus Christ, is the doctrine of justification by faith. God accepts us when we believe in his Son — he accepts us as righteous on the basis of what Christ has done, not on the basis of what we have done.

This may be interpreted as bad news by people who think they've done pretty well. Such people tend not to like the idea that God would lower his standards and accept people who aren't as good as they are, who haven't tried as hard as they have.

However, this is incredibly good news for those of us who know that we have messed up pretty badly, and that we could never redeem ourselves, no matter how many good things we do. We realize there is no special merit in doing the things we should have done. We know we can never make up for the fact that we have let God down — all we can do is rely on his mercy.

## **A demonstration of justice**

The good news is that God has guaranteed that mercy. He sent his Son to die for us. Because of Jesus' death for us, God remains righteous even though he declares the wicked to be justified (Romans 4:5; 5:6). God presented Jesus "as a sacrifice of atonement...to demonstrate his justice" in leaving sin unpunished (Romans 3:25).

As odd as it may sound, the death of Christ was a demonstration of God's justice — because it shows that God has the right to forgive sin. In forgiving

us, God does not just pretend that sin does not matter. Rather, he shows how much it matters by sending his Son to die for us, that is, by taking our sins upon himself. God has done everything that was needed so that he can justify the ungodly — he does not violate his own righteousness when he declares us righteous and acceptable.

This is grace. Since Christ died for us, we can be forgiven. Paul makes it clear that we are justified by faith (Acts 13:38; Romans 3:22, 26; 4:24; 5:1; etc.). We are accepted by God as his children — this is the heart of the good news of God’s kingdom. We don’t deserve it — it comes by grace — but it is guaranteed by God. The means of salvation is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).

## **Which law to obey?**

So far, so good, say some people. God brings you into his kingdom if you have faith. Now that you are here, they say, you should obey God. Specifically, you should obey the commandments he has given his people, commandments we find in the Holy Scriptures — clear commands regarding circumcision, festivals, Sabbaths, etc.

This was the Galatian heresy: false teachers said that Christians had to have both the old and the new covenants, both Moses and Christ, both law and faith, both merit and grace. It was an emphasis on continuity, on covenant faithfulness, on living by every word of God. It sounded logical, it sounded worshipful, but it was fundamentally flawed.

It is true that Christians should obey God, but the Law of Moses is the wrong law. The book of Galatians makes it clear that the Law of Moses is obsolete. Its authority has expired, and we are no longer “under the law.” Paul even says that the Sinai covenant produced a religion of bondage (Galatians 4:24-25), but that Christians are free.

We are children of the promise, children of the free woman (3:29; 4:31). “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (5:1). If you try to be justified by the law, then you will be alienated from Christ, and you will have fallen out of grace (verse 4). Paul emphasizes that we “were called to be free” (verse 13).

Not only is the old covenant the wrong law, Paul’s point is that we cannot be saved by any law. “If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:21). If a different law could have given us life, then God would have given us the life-giving law. But the very nature of law prevents it from giving us life. All a law can do is set forth requirements and

prescribe penalties for failure. Since we all fail at some point, the law prescribes penalties. It cannot give us life.

Since we never achieve perfect obedience in this life, we can never look to law as a standard for salvation. We can never say, Grace covered my past sins, but now my salvation depends on my obedience. If that were true, we would all be doomed. Our acceptance with God is *always* on the basis of grace and faith, and never on the basis of our obedience. We can never say that we deserve eternity with our Creator.

## **Loyalty to God**

What then is the role of law in a Christian's life? We know that Christians do not "sin deliberately so that grace may abound." We know that Christians want to please the God who saved them. We know that sin caused our Savior to suffer and die, so we do not want to have anything to do with sin. We want to obey God as best we can, even though we know we can't do it perfectly. We are obeying not because we earn anything through obedience, but because we love God and want to obey him. We are his children, not hired servants.

Our relationship with God is based on faith, not a list of rules. It is a personal loyalty to God, a loyalty that leads us to obey, but a loyalty that always looks directly to God, not to a list of rules as a gauge of our relationship. We never boast of obedience, nor despair of falling short. God has already made fully sufficient provision for justifying us even when we were wicked and ungodly.

When we are used to thinking of religion as a list of rules, Paul's teachings seem self-contradictory. If our salvation doesn't depend on the law, the reasoning seems to go, then why would anybody want to obey? Surely there has to be some kind of threat involved, or else the people of God would quickly jump into immorality. I exaggerate to make a point. The point is that we need to think about law in a different way, and we need to think of Christianity in a different way.

When people see laws and commands only in terms of reward and punishment, then they are naturally bewildered about the role of law when it is neither a basis of reward nor of punishment. Christ has removed it from such roles.

Why then should anybody obey? We need to reorient our thinking about law — away from thoughts of reward and punishment, away from a standard that we are measured by. We need to think of God's laws as a matter of personal loyalty, as integral and natural to a personal relationship.

## A new form of righteousness

God's law, which for us is the law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21), provides forgiveness for every transgression (except that of rejecting the forgiveness provided by Christ). This forgiveness is received by faith, not by penance, not by good works, not by our paying a price (Romans 3:28). This is not the kind of "law" that we are used to.

Christianity is a faith, not a list of rules. It is a belief in God's grace, in his love, in his promise and power to forgive and cleanse. God grants his children not only forgiveness of sin, but also a new life — a life in Christ. Where once we lived for ourselves, now we live for Christ. And we do so because the Holy Spirit resides in us, not because we have suddenly become righteous ourselves.

The New Testament does give us rules and behavioral expectations, but these should be seen as the *result* of a faith relationship, not as the *basis* for it. They are not the measurement of our righteous standing before God — and that's good, because we all fall short. We have no righteousness of our own, but when we put our confidence in Christ, God counts us as righteous (Romans 4:23-25). We have peace with God, not directly ourselves, but through Christ (Romans 5:1-2).

There is now a new righteousness that God has made known (Romans 3:21). It is a righteousness that does not come from the law. It is a righteousness that comes only from God himself (verse 22). The law and the prophets testified to this new righteousness, but it does not come from them; it comes only from God (verse 21).

This new righteousness comes from God through faith, to all who believe. Everyone is a sinner, and the only way we can have righteousness, the only way we can have peace with God, is by God giving it to us (verses 22-23). All who believe are made righteous, or justified, freely, by God's grace through the redemption that comes through Jesus Christ (verses 23-24).

## The fruit of the Spirit

Our righteousness, then, is not really ours — it is Christ's. God attributes the righteousness of the only righteous human, Jesus, to us, if we are united to him by faith. More than that, he actually works in us to live righteously. That is why the good that Christians do is called "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16-26). It is fruit of the Spirit because it is done only because God lives in us. The fruit is his, not ours.

God produces the fruit of the Spirit in us through faith, not because we

“set our wills” or “try really hard” to be good. The root of righteous living is faith, not personal virtue. Sin is no longer our master, because we are not under law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).

We strive to be found in Christ (Philippians 3:7-9), not to be found personally good. Christians are not pursuing a righteousness of our own that comes from the law, but the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ (verse 9). When we pursue knowing and loving God, our lives will naturally (because God is at work in us) begin to produce righteous fruit. We can't become righteous by trying to become righteous; we can become righteous only by trusting God, who makes believers righteous.

When our minds are set on knowing and loving Christ, the Spirit brings forth righteous fruit in us (Romans 8:5). When our minds are set on the desires of sin, we bring forth fruit of sin. The way to righteousness is through faith, and faith is strengthened when we are spending our time with Christ. It is through Christ, and not through ourselves, that we fully meet the righteous requirements of the law (verses 3-4).

As Christ loved us, so we are to love one another (John 13:34-35). In this kind of love, the whole law is summed up (Galatians 5:14). That is why John sums up God's law for us (which Paul calls the law of Christ) in the commands that we are to believe in Christ and that we are to love one another (1 John 3:23-24). Only when our trust rests in Christ can we love one another as he loved us.

## **Communion with Christ**

It is only because we are in Christ that we are able to live righteously. And that is not because we can do so, but because he already defeated sin for us. It is God who makes us stand firm in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). It is not our doing. All the glory is his because he has done every bit of it.

When we are in close communion, or fellowship, with Christ, we remember who we are and to whom we belong. We remember how destructive sin is, and that we have been set free from its power (Romans 8:1-4). We are inclined to heed the prompting of the Spirit and follow his lead (verses 12-16).

Our minds are led by the Spirit when we are spending time with Christ. But when we put our minds on the things of the sinful nature, we forget that we belong to Christ, that he has defeated the power of sin for us, that we are saved and that God loves us. All those things remain true, but our ability to see and believe them becomes clouded. In that condition, we are easy prey for the sinful nature.

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We are no match for sin. It “so easily entangles” us, Hebrews 12:1 says. But when we are in Christ, the victory is already won. We do not have to let sin rule, because it no longer has power over us. How can we “throw off” sin? By keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus (verse 2), the author and the perfecter of our faith. Our “feeble arms” and “weak knees” (verse 12) receive strength when our time and attention are kept on knowing and loving Christ.

That is why spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading, prayer, meditation, simplicity, service, worship, etc. are so basic to the Christian life. These are means God has given us to stay “tuned into” the real truth about God and about ourselves: God loves us, we are his beloved children, he has saved us and he has freed us from the power of sin. Through such means, we remain “close to” God and have the courage to stand in the power of Christ’s resurrection — power he has given to all his children (Romans 8:10-11).

God’s grace and power are wonderful beyond description, brothers and sisters. May we continually grow in our faithful walk with our Lord, Savior and Teacher, Jesus Christ.

## SIX REASONS TO OBEY GOD

By Michael Morrison

If God saves us by grace, apart from the good works that we do (Titus 3:5), why should we obey him? If there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) and our salvation is not in jeopardy, why should we struggle to obey?

1. The simplest reason is: It's our duty. Through his death on the cross, Christ has purchased us (Acts 20:28), and it is only fair that we do what he says. We are children of God, and we are to do what he commands. Of course, we do not obey in order to be saved. Salvation comes first, and obedience should follow. But obedience goes deeper than duty. Obedience should come from the heart, done because we want to, not grudgingly, because we have to. So why should we *want* to obey? There are three main reasons: faith, hope and love.

2. In faith, we believe that God's commands are for our own good. He loves us and wants to help us, not to give us unnecessary burdens. As our Creator, he has the wisdom to know how we should live, what works best and what causes the most happiness in the long run. We have to trust him in that; his perspective is much better than ours. Obedience expresses faith in his wisdom and love. Obedience is what he made us for (Ephesians 2:10), and life works better if we are in tune with the way we were made.

3. Obedience also involves hope in a future blessing. If there is no future life, then Christianity would be foolish (1 Corinthians 15:14-18). Jesus promised that his disciples would find that eternal life is worth far more than anything they might have to give up in this age (Mark 10:29-30). Everyone who is saved will have the joy of knowing God forever, but there are also rewards in addition to eternal joy. Jesus encouraged his disciples to "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19-21). Several of his parables indicate that we will be rewarded for what we do in this life. God rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

Paul also wrote about rewards: "The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does" (Ephesians 6:8). This is not talking about salvation, but about rewards in addition to salvation. He described the judgment as a fire that tests the quality of every person's work. "If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward" (1 Corinthians 3:14). If it is burned up, he will lose it, but he will still be saved (verse 15).

4. But reward is not the only reason we work, for we are children of the King, not employees who do only what we get paid for. Our fourth motive for obedience is love. This includes love for God, and for the people around

us, because they will be better off if we obey God than if we do not. God's instructions are sensible, not arbitrary rules. They help people get along with each other.

But most of all, it is our love for God that causes us to want to obey him. He has done so much for us, that we cannot help but be thankful and want to please him. "If you love me," Jesus says, "you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching" (verse 23). John later wrote, "This is love for God: to obey his commands" (1 John 5:3). "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar. . . . But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him" (1 John 2:4-5). When we are united to Christ, we will be more like he is.

5. Our love for God means that we want to bring him favorable publicity, so that others will come to love him, too. Obedience serves as a witness to God and the gospel. Obedience says that God is great and good and wise, and we adore him. Obedience says that God is important, that he is valuable, and that he deserves our loyalty. Let your good deeds be seen, Jesus said, so people can see them "and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

A bad example will bring the gospel into disrepute (Titus 2:5). But a good example can help people be favorably disposed to God. "Live such good lives among the pagans," Peter wrote, "that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12). "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27). Help the gospel be associated with good things, not bad.

6. This is the life of the age to come. If we really want to enjoy life in eternity without lying, cheating, stealing and other such behaviors, if we really want that sort of life, then we want it *now*, not just in the future. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit invite us into a life of love and goodness, not a life of selfishness and sin.

# WHAT IS THE LAW OF GOD FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY?

By John Curry

In the King James Version, 1 John 3:4 defines sin as “the transgression of the law.” John was referring to the law of God, but how do we define the law of God for Christians today? We know it can’t be all of the laws of the Old Testament, because the New Testament shows that the sacrificial system has ended.

But what about other Old Testament laws? Are they as binding on Christians today as they were for Israelites before the coming of Jesus Christ? Which Old Testament laws does God command Christians to obey today?

A similar question troubled the early New Testament church, and even required a council of apostles and elders to address the issue. The conclusion of that council, with the writings of the apostle Paul and other New Testament authors, help us understand what God’s law is for Christians today.

## The New Testament controversy

A controversy that troubled the early New Testament church was whether God required Gentile Christians to be circumcised and live according to the Law of Moses. The basic message of Paul to the Gentiles was that their salvation was a gift that came through faith in Jesus Christ, and that they were complete in him. Paul placed no demands on his converts that they be either circumcised or required to perform other Old Testament laws in order to be saved.

However, the position of some Jewish Christians was that “Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). Without the authorization of the apostles (verse 24), they had spread this disturbing message to certain Gentile congregations.<sup>1</sup>

This teaching implied that faith in Christ was not enough for salvation. These “Judaizers” wanted to combine the gospel of Christ with the observance of the Law of Moses. Their error was not that they substituted something for Christ’s work, but that they tried to *add* something to it. For them, salvation was not by faith alone: It was by faith in Christ *and* obedience to the law.

Paul strongly resisted the idea that the Law of Moses was a requirement either to get salvation or to maintain it. He fought a running battle with these “Judaizers,” whom he regarded as “false brothers” who had infiltrated the Gentile churches (Galatians 2:4). He wrote his epistle to the Galatian church to counter their teaching, which he labeled a “different gospel” (Galatians 1:6).

## **Paul and the covenants**

It is instructive to analyze how Paul responded to the heresy of the Judaizers in his letter to the Galatians. Although the focus of the Judaizers’ message appears to have been on ritualistic parts of the Mosaic Law (particularly circumcision), one doubts they would have been content with Gentiles observing these laws only. Paul seems to anticipate this view in Galatians 5:3, where he makes the point that, in order to be consistent, those who submit to circumcision are “obligated to obey the whole law.” The Mosaic covenant was a complete unit — submission to its laws could not be selective.

In countering the Galatian heresy, Paul did not limit himself to addressing only the ritualistic part of the Law of Moses. His strategy in his letter was to show that the entire old covenant (that is, the Mosaic covenant) had ended and has been replaced by a new covenant (Galatians 4:24–26). Christians now live under that new covenant and are not obligated to live according to the requirements of the old covenant. They are justified through faith in Jesus Christ, and justification does not require additional works of the law.<sup>2</sup>

Paul saw the new covenant as the fulfillment of the covenant God made to Abraham. This covenant, based on Abraham’s faith and God’s promise, was not set aside by the Mosaic “law” that came 430 years later (Galatians 3:17). Since the Mosaic covenant was added later, it could not disannul the promises made to Abraham.<sup>3</sup>

In Galatians 3:19, Paul asks what purpose the law served. He explains that it was “added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred [Jesus Christ] had come.” What Paul means by “added because of transgressions” is not clear, but it may mean something like “to make wrongdoing a legal offence” (New English Bible) — that is, to explain more clearly what behaviors were wrong. (A further explanation of this verse, showing when the sacrifices were added, is found in Appendix Two.)

Paul goes on to explain the purpose of the old covenant law. It was to serve as a custodian or schoolmaster for the children of Israel “until faith should be revealed” (verse 23). In other words, the old covenant law was

designed to keep them in the knowledge of God until Christ came, after which faith in Christ would prevail (verse 24). Paul concludes: “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (verse 25).

Paul saw the new covenant as a present reality for Christians, not a future hope.<sup>4</sup> In Galatians 4 he figuratively contrasted the old and new covenants to illustrate where Christians’ citizenship lies. The old covenant was represented by Hagar, who stands for Mount Sinai, which in turn corresponded to the city of Jerusalem (verse 25), then the center of Judaism.

The new covenant, on the other hand, was represented by the free woman (by implication, Sarah — see verse 22), who corresponds to “Jerusalem that is above.” She “is free, and she is our mother” (verse 26). Paul concluded that as Christians, “We are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman” (verse 31). In other words, Christians are the freeborn children of the new covenant, not slaves of the old covenant.

Then in chapters 5 and 6, Paul explains the implications in one’s behavior of living under the new covenant.

## The Jerusalem Council

Despite his vigorous efforts, Paul was not able by himself to stamp out the Judaizers’ heresy.<sup>5</sup> He therefore went to Jerusalem to have the church leaders settle the issue. This conference is recorded in Acts 15. After considerable discussion, Peter addressed the council. He explained how God gave uncircumcised Gentiles the Holy Spirit, thus revealing to Peter that God had accepted these people (verse 8). God “made no distinction between us [Jews] and them, for he purified their hearts by faith” (verse 9). After rebuking the Judaizers for testing God by putting a yoke on the Gentile believers, Peter announced: “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (verse 11).

James agreed with Peter’s conclusion, declaring that no salvation requirements should be placed on the Gentiles, besides their faith in Jesus Christ. However, James saw the need to ask Gentile converts to “abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (verse 20). The reason given for this ruling was because “Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (verse 21). Gentile Christians following these stipulations would not offend the sensibilities of those Jews living in the Gentile world who heard the law of Moses preached each week in their synagogues.

These stipulations appear to have been minimum rules for Gentile

Christians, the observance of which would facilitate good relations with both non-Christian and Christian Jews. At least as far as the dietary restrictions may have been concerned, the need for these minimum standards was because of cultural differences. Jewish culture was based on the laws of the Mosaic covenant, while Gentile culture derived from paganism. Some aspects of Gentile culture were particularly offensive to Jews. Thus, Jews considered Gentiles “unclean” and avoided interactions with them as much as possible.

To overcome this stumbling block for Jews, the church asked Gentiles to avoid eating meat that had idolatrous associations, blood, and meat that had not been properly drained of blood. Because these dietary rules would facilitate good relations with the Jewish community and fellowship with Jewish believers, and were not given as requirements for salvation, Paul had no objection to asking Gentile Christians to observe them.

Despite the conclusions of this apostolic council, questions and controversies about the law of God for Christians continued to disturb the early church. Paul therefore continued to address the subject in letters he subsequently wrote to various churches and ministers.

## **The new way of the Spirit**

With this historical perspective from the early New Testament church in mind, we can now examine different views about the law of God for Christians.

If God has already made his new covenant with Christians, what effect does this have on their relationship to Old Testament law? Some might assume that it means a Christian must now fulfill the law not only according to the letter, but also according to its full spirit and intent. Thus, the demands of the law are intensified and are even more rigorous for a Christian.

This view assumes that much of the law of the old covenant is simply transferred into the new covenant, with the additional benefit of the Holy Spirit. Such a view is flawed, as can be seen in the example of circumcision. If God expects Christians to fulfill both the letter and spirit of the law, then all males must be physically and spiritually circumcised. The early New Testament church decisively rejected this conclusion at the Council of Jerusalem.

This position sees everything in terms of laws to be obeyed, with Jesus Christ providing the perfect example of obedience and the Holy Spirit providing the power to obey the laws. It inevitably leads to legalism because it focuses on law rather than on Christ.

The opposite of this view is that Christians are under “grace,” and

therefore all law is abolished. However, this leads to antinomianism (Romans 3:8), which Paul strongly rejected. Rather, he upheld the law (Romans 3:31) and made it clear that being under grace was not permission to sin (Romans 6:15–23).

The alternative to these extremes is that under the terms of the new covenant, a Christian’s relationship to Old Testament law is *transformed* rather than intensified or abolished. This is brought out in Romans 6 and 7. Paul explains that Christians “are not under law, but under grace” (6:14) and that they “died to the law through the body of Christ” (7:4). He writes,

By dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the *new way* of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. (7:6)

This is elaborated in 2 Corinthians 3, where Paul contrasts the administrations of the old and new covenants:

He [God] has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (verse 6)

So under the new covenant Christians serve in a “new way” — the way of the Spirit. The “old way” of the written code has been superseded. It has ended because the old covenant was a temporary system designed to act as a guardian for the nation Israel until the Messiah came. Humanity’s relationship to God is no longer regulated by a written law code on tables of stone or in a book, as it was for ancient Israel. It is now based on faith in Jesus Christ (verses 22–24). “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (verse 25).

In what way is our relationship to old covenant law transformed through faith in Jesus Christ?

“Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4). The Greek word *telos*, translated as “end,” can mean 1) termination,” “cessation,” or 2) “goal,” “culmination,” “fulfillment.” In this verse, it is best understood in the latter sense, that Christ is the fulfillment of the law. He brought the law to completion by perfectly obeying its demands and by fulfilling its types and prophecies. Through his life and death, Jesus fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the law, thereby freeing Christians from the condemnation of the law.

A major purpose of God’s law is to lead humans to Christ by convicting them of sin. But because believers are justified by Christ’s righteousness, the

law has no legal claim over them. After explaining in Romans 7 the accusatory nature of the law, and that rescue is through Jesus Christ, Paul writes,

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1–2)

As its fulfillment, Jesus Christ transcends the law. This is what Jesus meant in Matthew 5:17-19: “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Jesus’ teaching does not abolish the Law or the Prophets, but brings them to their intended climax. (For a discussion on this passage, see Appendix One.)

In terms of the new covenant, the law no longer exists in the form of a written code apart from Jesus. God’s law, in its spirit and intent, exists in Christ alone. He is greater than the law. The law kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6). Fulfilling the law is through trusting *him* rather than obeying an external written code.

Our spiritual connection with God is based on a personal relationship with Christ, not on obedience to an impersonal list of rules. Living faith can be to Jesus Christ only, because salvation is through him.

## The Law of Christ

In 1 Corinthians 9:20–21 Paul explains his approach in preaching the gospel, and in doing so he revealed which law he obeyed:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.

Paul describes himself as not being under the law. From the context it is obvious he means Mosaic Law, the law of the old covenant. But this does not mean he saw himself as without law. Paul was not free from God’s law — he was now under “Christ’s law.” It is important to appreciate this distinction. The Mosaic Law was God’s law for the nation of Israel under the old covenant. The “law of Christ” is God’s law for Christians in the New Testament era. The two are not the same.

Serving in the new way of the Spirit rather than the old way of the written code is what Paul describes as fulfilling “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). In Galatians he used the term in the context of bearing each other’s burdens.

Yet the thought behind the phrase encompasses all that Paul wrote concerning living in Christ. Fulfilling the law of Christ is the way of holiness, as opposed to legalism or antinomianism. According to Raymond T. Stamm,

This law of Christ is not a law in the legal sense of the word, but the life principle of all who take up his cross of creative suffering. (*The Interpreter's Bible* [Abingdon, 1953], vol. 10, 574)

Paul used the phrase “law of Christ” after writing about living “by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16, 25) as opposed to living “under law” (verse 18). Because the Galatian members were so enamored with law, Paul used the word *law* in a way they had not anticipated. They were not under Mosaic Law, but they were under the law of Christ, which required them to bear each other’s burdens.

In arguing against the position that Christians are no longer under the law, the Judaizers would claim that this would lead to antinomianism. Paul’s response to this reasoning is summarized by John Montgomery Boice:

Finally, the opponents of Paul charged that the Gospel he preached led to loose living. By stressing the law, Judaism had stressed morality. Jews looked down on Gentile sin and excesses. But what would happen if the law should be taken away? Clearly, lawlessness and immorality would increase, the legalizers argued.

Paul replies that this is not true (chapters 5, 6). It is not true because Christianity does not lead the believer away from the law into nothingness. It leads him to Jesus Christ, who, in the person of the Holy Spirit, comes to dwell within him and furnishes him with the new nature that alone is capable of doing what God desires. The change is internal. So it is from within rather than without that the Holy Spirit produces the fruit that is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (5:22-23). Life in the Spirit is free from and above the kind of religion that would result in either legalism or license. It is true freedom — a freedom to serve God fully, unencumbered by the shackles of sin or regulations. (*Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan, 1976], vol. 10, 411)

Oscar Fisher Blackwelder comments:

All this, said Paul, is fulfilling the law of Christ. Law? After the struggle he had gone through to get the law properly placed in his thinking and in his own life, after getting the Galatians free from their entanglement with the law — why on earth did Paul turn again to that

word? Was it to give the Galatians a totally new conception of law? Here law undoubtedly means for him the way of Christ, the principles on which the Christian life operates, the act itself of love, of putting into daily living all that he had written about burden-bearing and about the restoration of those who trespass. (*The Interpreter's Bible* [Abingdon, 1953], vol. 10, 579)

Equating the law of Christ with the way of Christ hearkens back to Jesus' parting words to the disciples before his death. Jesus said to them:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)

Jesus was expanding the injunction in Leviticus 19:18, which Paul quoted in Galatians 5:14, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Christians show they are disciples of Jesus Christ by loving one another as he loves them. The Gospels record how Jesus loved. He was not particularly concerned with the externalities of religious observance, but he was concerned with "the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23) and "the love of God" (Luke 11:42). He ministered to people in their suffering, he showed them the love of God through kindness, compassion and mercy, and he forgave their sins. They would fulfill the law of Christ by following the example and teachings of Jesus that he gave for the church.

F.F. Bruce identifies features of the law of Christ in Romans 12 and 13, showing how Paul reiterates major teachings of Jesus. He links them with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Mutual love, sympathy and esteem within the believing brotherhood are to be expected, but this section [Romans 12:9–21] enjoins love and forgiveness towards those outside the brotherhood, not least towards its enemies and persecutors. (*Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* [Eerdmans, 1991], 110)

Paul's conclusion concerning law is found in Romans 13:8–10:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

For Paul, a Christian's obligation was to love, and everything else was secondary. Regarding circumcision, for example, Paul wrote:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6)

The Judaizers who wanted Gentiles to be circumcised and come under the Law of Moses were not motivated by love. Paul saw this, and called them false brothers (Galatians 2:4). They wanted to bring the Gentiles into a form of religious bondage under their control (Galatians 4:17; 6:13). Because their motivations were not right, they violated the law of Christ.

Fulfilling the law of Christ is people-oriented rather than task-oriented. It focuses on relationships, not works of law. The law of Christ cannot be imposed according to an externalized written code, because it is written in the heart of the Christian. A written code cannot encompass the law of Christ, because it would need to encompass Christ, which is impossible. Christ's law is an internal principle and way of godly living that produces "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22–23).

Under the old covenant, the Israelites lived according to the Law of Moses. Under the new covenant, Christians are to live according to the law of Christ. The difference is love generated by the Holy Spirit. It is possible to fulfill outwardly the Law of Moses without love in your heart. It is impossible to fulfill the law of Christ unless there is love in your heart.

## **Legalism versus the Spirit**

The result of attempting to relate to God through obedience to Old Testament law, or even to a "New Testament" set of rules, is to descend into legalism. Christianity becomes regulations. The gospel is reduced to a law system.

Just as old covenant Israelites knew what their obligations were by reading the law, so Christian legalists can look to their set of rules, whatever they may be, to know what they should do. The rules vary according to the religious tradition of the legalists. For some, it would be Sabbath and Holy Day observance, scrupulously setting aside tithes and avoiding "unclean meat." These behaviors are not wrong, but it is wrong to observe them in a legalistic manner, as the Pharisees did.

In other churches, the rules can include strict Sunday observance, no drinking of alcohol, no dancing or going to movies, vegetarianism, rejecting

blood transfusions to save life, etc. Decisions are easier in this black-and-white approach, and it results in generally good behavior. But it omits the weightier matters of the law that require spiritual discernment and sometimes difficult decisions as to which principle is most important.

Legalistic rules also become the measuring stick by which behavior (both one's own and that of others) is judged as acceptable or deviant. Christians think that God is on their side, if only they follow the rules and perform their religious duties. The problem with this approach is that the legalists' faith is in their rules, and not in Christ to lead and teach them by his Spirit to understand the spiritual intent of the law. Often without realizing it, legalists rest in their own works instead of the redemptive work of Christ.

Christians today can choose to live according to Mosaic Law, just as Jewish Christians did in the first century. However, their law-keeping will not cause God to give them his Spirit and work miracles in their lives (Galatians 3:5). Nor will it lead them into a deeper understanding of spiritual truths, compared to those who live according to the law of Christ. The opposite may even be true, because the more that Christians rely on law to direct them, the less they rely on the Spirit. It seems that it is impossible to rely on law and the Spirit simultaneously — it's either one or the other.

This is the point Paul makes in Galatians 3:1–5. The Galatians had received the Spirit through believing in Christ, not through human observance of the law. Paul asks, “After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (verse 3).

Can adherence to the Law of Moses work contrary to the law of Christ? Yes, it can. Consider the New Testament example of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3–11). The Law of Moses called for the death penalty by stoning (verse 5), but Jesus did not condemn her. Instead, he demonstrated kindness, mercy and forgiveness. This was an example of the law of Christ in action. God has replaced the administration of death by the “more glorious” administration of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:9) — old rules are set aside so that more important principles can prevail — in this case, mercy.

Another example is found in Matthew 12:1–8. In response to the Pharisees' accusations that Jesus' disciples were breaking the Sabbath by picking heads of grain, Jesus referred to the incident when David ate the consecrated bread from the tabernacle of God, something that was lawful for Levites only. However, because David was hungry and there was nothing else to eat, God did not regard his eating of the bread as sinful. David's actions were not lawful according to the Law of Moses, but because of the circumstances, he was blameless. Mercy is more important than strict obedience, which, in that case, could have imperiled human life (see verse 7).<sup>6</sup>

The lesson is that compassion is a better guide to godly behavior than blind adherence to rules.

Legalism continues to exist today in many denominational traditions — wherever Christians define and limit their dealings with others according to the rules of a written law code.

There is no doubt that Christian legalists are sincere in their emphasis on rules, though their thoughts and actions may be contrary to the law of Christ. Legalists are deceived in their belief that the letter of the law is most important to God and that God is more concerned with obedience to rules and regulations than with expressing the love of Christ in relationships. For legalists, law takes precedence over people. Legalists dishonor God's name when they make the genuine needs of people secondary to the letter of the law.

### Conclusion

Christians are called to live a holy life in obedience to Christ. They are to live by every word of God as it applies to them. The law system applying to Christians is not the law of the Old Testament, but the law of Christ. It is not a written code that one defines by rules and regulations. It is the application of God's living law of love that affects every area of our lives.

This does not mean that Christians discard Old Testament law as if it has no relevance to them today. There is much relevance because it expresses the will of God for a particular people during a particular age. The principles underlying many Mosaic laws are valid for Christians today. As D.J. Moo observes:

Jesus never attacks the Law and, indeed, asserts its enduring validity. But it is only as taken up into Jesus' teaching, and thus fulfilled, that the Law retains its validity. The Law comes to those living on this side of the cross only through the filter of its fulfillment in Christ the Lord. ("Law," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [InterVarsity Press, 1992], 450)

Often the application of the law of Christ coincides with laws and principles in the Old Testament. Sometimes it does not. But whenever there is a conflict between them, the law of Christ prevails because it more fully expresses the will of God.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Why circumcision was so important to Jews is explained by Unger:

Circumcision became the external token of the covenant between God

and his people. It secured to the one subjected to it all the rights of the covenant, participation in all its material and spiritual benefits; while, on the other hand, he was bound to fulfill all the covenant obligations. (Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* [Moody, 1974], 207)

<sup>2</sup> Paul also makes this point in Ephesians 2. After explaining that salvation is not by works but is a gift through faith in Jesus Christ (verses 8-9), Paul goes on to show that the Gentiles who were excluded from citizenship in Israel and from the covenants of promise (verse 12) have now been brought near through the blood of Christ (verse 13), thereby “abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations,” which had been a dividing barrier between Jew and Gentile (verse 15). Consequently, Gentiles “are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (verse 19).

<sup>3</sup> F.F. Bruce writes,

The gospel was the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, which antedated the law by centuries. Abraham, whose faith in God was counted to him for righteousness, was the prototype of all who are justified by faith. The [Mosaic] law was a *parenthetical dispensation*, introduced to serve a temporary purpose, but was rendered obsolete by the coming of Christ, the true offspring of Abraham, in whom the promises and their fulfillment were embodied” (F.F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* [Eerdmans, 1977], 182; emphasis ours).

<sup>4</sup> One view is that God *is making*, not *has made*, his new covenant with Christians, and that Christians live under the terms of the new covenant. However, the typology of the old covenant argues against this view. God made the Mosaic covenant with Israelites at Sinai shortly after they came out of Egypt, even though many of the covenantal promises were not fulfilled for 40 or more years. God was not *making* his covenant with them during the decades in the wilderness — it had already been made and sealed in blood at Sinai (Exodus 24:8).

Likewise, God has already made his new covenant with Christians, even though they have not received the fulfillment of all its promises. The covenant requires faith precisely because the promises are not yet fulfilled, but the promises have been given and the covenant has been made. The agreement and relationship has been established. God makes his new covenant with individuals when they repent of their sins and are forgiven through their faith in the blood of Christ. He then seals them with the down payment of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their eternal reward (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13–14).

<sup>5</sup> Commentators differ as to when Paul wrote Galatians. According to the North Galatian Theory, Galatians was written between A.D. 53 and 57. An alternative view is that Galatians was written to the Christians living in the southern area of the Roman province of Galatia, in 48-49. If this second view is correct, then the epistle was probably written before the apostolic council discussed the issue. This would seem to explain why in Galatians Paul did not refer to the decision of the council.

<sup>6</sup> It is sometimes argued that Jesus was showing that human need takes precedence over obedience to the law. However, this idea misses the purpose of

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biblical law. According to D.J. Moo:

Jesus is not claiming that one can break the Sabbath command when human needs dictate, but that the Sabbath command itself must be so understood as to include this basic purpose in its promulgation. The Sabbath is truly obeyed only when its intention to aid human beings is recognized and factored into one's behavior. This is why, rather than being a violation of the Law, Jesus' Sabbath-Day healing of a woman was a true fulfillment of that law ("it was necessary" [*edei*] that she be healed on the Sabbath: Lk 13:16).

For Jesus, then, love for God and for others, being basic to God's intention in giving the Law, must always be considered in interpreting the meaning of that Law. (*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [InterVarsity Press], 1992, 453).

## **APPENDIX ONE: MATTHEW 5:17–19 — HOW DID JESUS FULFILL THE LAW?**

In Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17–19)

People have frequently appealed to these scriptures as proof that “the law” continues to be binding on Christians today. This is usually in response to the claim that Jesus did away with some aspect of the law by his death on the cross. For them, the meaning is that Jesus came to show what the law really means; or that Jesus fulfilled the law by obeying it perfectly, thus setting the perfect example for Christians to follow as they, too, fulfill the law.

There are problems with interpreting Matthew 5:17–19 in these ways. Note, first, that in verse 17 Jesus was speaking of the Law *and the Prophets*, not of the Law only. Jesus did not restrict what he had come to fulfill to the Mosaic Law code. He said he also came to fulfill the prophetic writings.

Second, Jesus said that “not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (verse 18). If Jesus meant by “the Law” the Mosaic Law code, then even the most minor law of the old covenant has ongoing validity. This would mean that every ceremonial and sacrificial law continues to be binding on Christians. Few, if any, Christians believe that they must obey all the laws of the old covenant that God gave to the nation of Israel more than 3,000 years ago.

Therefore, what did Jesus mean when he said that he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them, and that nothing would disappear from the Law until all is accomplished?

Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets by bringing them to their intended

climax in himself. He fulfilled and continues to fulfill in himself all the types and prophecies of the Old Testament that pointed to him. Jesus made this clear after his resurrection. On the road to Emmaus with two of the disciples, Jesus revealed that everything that had recently happened in Jerusalem was spoken of by the prophets. “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Shortly afterwards Jesus appeared to the assembled group of apostles and disciples in Jerusalem. He said to them,

This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. (verse 44)

Luke here records Jesus as saying he fulfilled all three parts of the Old Testament — the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. (Psalms are representative of the Writings, as they are the first book of the third section of the Hebrew Old Testament.) It appears that “the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 5:17), “Moses and all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27), and “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44) are synonymous terms for “all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27).

In verse 18 of Matthew 5, Jesus makes the point that nothing will disappear from the Law until all is accomplished. What did he mean by “the Law” here? It is unlikely Jesus meant merely the Mosaic Law code. That is because verse 18 builds on what Jesus said in verse 17. To repeat the full phrase “the Law and the Prophets” was unnecessary. “The Law” here represents all the Old Testament writings.<sup>1</sup>

The fulfillment (“until everything is accomplished”) takes place in the ministry, passion, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. We can then take Jesus’ words literally, rather than having to make artificial distinctions about what laws Jesus may have had in mind that would not disappear. In Matthew 5:18 Jesus was emphasizing that nothing in the Old Testament that pointed to him could fail to occur.

Then Jesus proceeded to say that:

Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (verse 19)

What commandments was Jesus referring to here? Did he mean all the

commands of the Old Testament, from the least to the greatest? If so, then the early church was wrong in concluding that physical circumcision was unnecessary to become a Christian. The answer is found in the context of the preceding verses, and in those that follow — the Sermon on the Mount. The commandments of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Christ (Romans 10:4), and as such are redefined and magnified according to his teaching.

Some laws of the old covenant, through their fulfillment in Christ, are not binding on Christians today. They include the ceremonial and sacrificial laws that foreshadowed Christ (Hebrews 10:1). However, other laws do have application in the life of the Christian. In Matthew 5:21–48, Jesus illustrated how certain old covenant commandments now applied through their fulfillment in him. He did not, as some people claim, make Old Testament laws “more binding,” so that Christians now obey according to both the letter and the Spirit, thereby enabling them to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees (verse 20). Rather, he *redefined* the law of God and showed its full spiritual intent. He established the spirit of the law as the norm for Christian behavior instead of the letter of the law (Romans 7:6).

Sometimes the letter of the law and the spirit of the law complement one another, as in Jesus’ teaching about murder and adultery (Matthew 5:21–30). With other laws, Jesus’ spiritual teaching overrides the letter of the law, as in divorce (verses 31–33). Elsewhere in the Gospels we read of Jesus’ application and defining of the law of God as fulfilled in him.

Thus, we should not see in Matthew 5:17–19 Jesus’ confirmation of the law of the old covenant as the law of God for Christians. Rather, Jesus explained that he fulfills in himself everything to which the Old Testament Scriptures point. He illustrated how the law of God given to Israel is transformed through its fulfillment in him.

Scot McKnight captures the essence of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

In using his own teachings as the basis for righteousness, Jesus revealed that the Old Testament Law and Prophets (Mt 5:17) were being fulfilled in his own teachings and that he is the Messiah. Jesus fulfilled the Law and so revealed a new standard of conduct (Mt 5:20). From the cross onward, the righteousness of God’s people is determined by conformity to the teachings of Jesus, which in turn fulfill the Old Testament revelation of God’s will. Jesus expects his followers to be righteous in their conduct (Mt 5:6, 10), to do God’s will (Mt 7:12, 13–27) and to pursue justice (Mt 23:23 [*kerisís*]; 25:37; Jn 7:24).

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According to Jesus, only those who are righteous are finally acceptable to God (Mt 10:41; 12:37; 13:43, 49; 25:46; Lk 14:14; Jn 5:30). Again, this righteousness is not an outward conformity to the Law or an appeal to ritual observances, but the necessary fruit of commitment to Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Jesus illustrated the link between commitment and obedience at the end of his Sermon on the Mount: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them....” (Mt 7:21–27). (“Justice, Righteousness,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [InterVarsity Press, 1992], 413)

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> In John 10:34, John quotes Jesus as using the term *Law* to refer to the entire Old Testament. Jesus asked the Jews, “Is it not written in your Law?” and then quoted Psalm 82:6. In this instance Jesus referred to the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole, not just the Pentateuch. See also John 12:34 and 15:25.

## **APPENDIX TWO: GALATIANS 3:19 AND JEREMIAH 7:22 — WERE THE SACRIFICIAL LAWS ADDED LATER?**

Some churches teach that the laws of the old covenant apply to Christians today (except for the sacrificial laws). Christians are to obey these laws, not in the strictness of the letter, but according to their full spirit and intent. Thus, they teach the ongoing validity of old covenant laws such as the first, second and third tithes. One scripture sometimes used in support of this idea is Galatians 3:19a, where the apostle Paul wrote:

What, then, was the purpose of the law? *It was added because of transgressions* until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.

“The law” here is equated with the *sacrificial* law system that was part of the Law of Moses. This part of the Law of Moses was supposedly not part of the covenant made at Sinai, as recorded in Exodus 20–23. Rather, it was “added because of transgressions.” Because the Israelites sinned after the initial giving of the law, God gave them a regulated system of worship. It began about one year after the making of the Sinai covenant. The idea is that this is the law that came to an end when Christ came, and that all other old covenant laws are still in force.

The major weakness in this interpretation of Galatians 3:19 is that Exodus gives no indication that the sacrificial law was added to the covenant. Rather, the sacrificial system was an intrinsic part of the old covenant. God spoke of sacrifices even before the Israelites reached Sinai; they were part of the plan all along (Exodus 10:25; 20:24). Although the sacrifices began about one year after the covenant was made, preparations for them began almost immediately afterwards. It was not possible to begin the sacrifices without first building the tabernacle, instituting the priesthood, etc. (Exodus 25–40). Once these preparations were completed, the sacrifices began.

Jeremiah 7:22 is sometimes used to support the idea that sacrifices were a secondary addition. The New King James Version reads,

For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices.

This verse seems to support the idea that the sacrificial system was added

later. However, according to Charles L. Feinberg, this verse illustrates the role that rhetorical negatives play in Hebrew. They highlight points of emphasis. The thing spoken of negatively is not literally being denied. Its rhetorical denial emphasizes the greater importance of that with which it is contrasted. One needs to understand this idiom to grasp Jeremiah's argument.

A rhetorical negation is used to point up antithesis between [Jeremiah 7] v.22 and v.23 more emphatically (cf. Deuteronomy 5:3). Moreover, the negative in Hebrew often supplies the lack of the comparative — i.e., without excluding the thing denied, the statement implies only the prior importance of the thing set in contrast to it (Hos. 6:6). In short, the Hebrew idiom permits denial of one thing in order to emphasize another (cf. for a New Testament parallel Luke 14:26). The idiom does not intend to deny the statement but only to set it in a secondary place. (*Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan, 1986], vol. 6, 431)

A close examination of Feinberg's references to Deuteronomy 5:3 and Hosea 6:6 confirm his point. In Deuteronomy, Moses says that God did not make the old covenant with the fathers (or perhaps ancestors) of those who were about to enter the Promised Land. But that's exactly what God did. In Hosea, God says to old covenant Israel that he does not desire sacrifices. In truth, under the old covenant, he did. As Feinberg has commented, these are not falsehoods, but rhetorical negatives to emphasize the things with which the negatives are compared. Further on Feinberg writes:

Judah had left out the main element: obedience to God. In view of the passages just cited, and in view of the Pentateuchal legislation, sacrifices were always meant to be of secondary importance to obedience and godliness. Neither Jeremiah nor any other prophet decried sacrifices as such. They meant that moral law is always paramount to the ritual law. (ibid.)

The *New International Version* seems to capture the intent of Jeremiah 7:22 (emphasis ours): "For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not *just* give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices."

This verse does not support the erroneous explanation of Galatians 3:19. In Galatians Paul teaches that the entire old covenant has come to an end through Christ. Paul is not referring to the sacrificial part of the Law of Moses

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only. There are many non-sacrificial laws of Moses that no longer apply, such as the law to wear tassels on garments, to travel to one central worship location for the annual festivals, etc.

### **APPENDIX THREE: MATTHEW 23:23 — DID JESUS CONFIRM THE LAW OF MOSES FOR CHRISTIANS?**

A verse sometimes quoted to support the idea that the law of the old covenant is binding on Christians today is Matthew 23:23. Here Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees:

Woe to you, teachers of the law, and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

The focus is put on the last sentence of the verse, “You should have practiced the latter...” Jesus’ words are interpreted to mean that Christians should practice the more important matters of the law without neglecting lesser laws, such as the old covenant laws of tithing.

While tithing is a valid biblical model for voluntary giving to the church to support the preaching of the gospel, this verse does not support the view that Jesus here confirmed the ongoing validity of old covenant law. Those who hold this interpretation overlook the context in which Jesus said these words.

Jesus was speaking to people who were under the old covenant. This covenant applied to them, and God required them to live by its terms. Verse 23 records part of Jesus’ condemnation of Pharisaic legalism (see the entire chapter). Among other things, the Pharisees were meticulous about fulfilling the letter of the law in their tithing, but ignored the weightier matters of the law. Yes, they should have been tithing as commanded in the Mosaic covenant, but they should have also been showing such things as love, justice and mercy.

Another illustration of Jesus commanding a person to fulfill the requirements of the Law of Moses is found in Mark 1:40–43. In this instance, Jesus healed a leper and said to him:

See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing as a testimony to them.

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Just because Jesus instructed this man to offer sacrifices according to the requirements of the Mosaic Law does not mean that his words have universal applicability for Christians. The context determines the application. Jesus was speaking to a Jew under the old covenant. God does not require a Christian healed of leprosy to offer sacrifices as Jesus instructed this man. The Christian is under the new covenant, and different conditions apply. Matthew 23:23 was spoken to Jews under the old covenant; we cannot assume that its instructions apply to Christians today.

## COVENANTS IN THE BIBLE

By Michael Morrison

To understand the old and new covenants, we need to first understand what the word *covenant* means. In simple terms, it is a formal agreement. It may be an agreement between two people, a treaty between nations (for examples, see appendix 1 below), or a relationship between God and a human individual or nation. A covenant is more personal than a contract — it involves loyalty and allegiance, not just a financial exchange.

God has made several agreements or covenants with humans. He gives commands and makes promises. What does he command? What promises has he made?

This paper surveys every biblical covenant. In the conclusion, we will give special attention to passages in Romans, Galatians and Hebrews that clarify the difference between the old covenant made at Mt. Sinai and the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ.

### **Abraham, Isaac and Jacob**

Of greatest importance today are the covenants that God made with the patriarchs and the nation of Israel. God called Abram out of Mesopotamia and promised to give his offspring the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1-7). Abram went to Egypt, returned to Canaan, was generous to Lot, rescued Lot and gave tithes to Melchizedek (Genesis 12-14).

God then reaffirmed his promise that Abram would have offspring (15:1-4). God promised that Abram's descendants would be as numerous as the stars (15:5). This was a phenomenal promise, but "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). Paul develops this statement further in Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

God then repeated his promise to give Abram the land of Canaan, and Abram asked for evidence (Genesis 15:7-8). So God asked for some animals, and Abram cut in half a heifer, a goat and a ram, and also offered a dove and a pigeon (15:9-10). He arranged the pieces, but did not burn them.

God caused Abram to fall into a deep sleep, and in a dream God affirmed that Abram himself would not possess the land, but his descendants would. A smoking firepot and a blazing torch then passed between the pieces of the sacrificed animals. In ancient custom, people making a covenant walked

between the halves of a sacrificed animal as part of their oaths (Jeremiah 34:18-19 shows this ancient custom, as does the Hebrew idiom for making a covenant — literally, cutting a covenant).

In this dream and covenant, God was giving Abram evidence that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. This covenant that God made with the father of the faithful is also referred to in Nehemiah 9:8 and Galatians 3:17.

Many years later, God confirmed his covenant, changing Abram's name to Abraham, since he would be the father of not just one nation, but of many nations (Genesis 17:1-6). He promised to renew the covenant with Abram's descendants — not only that they would be numerous, but also that he would be their God (17:7). This is more than the original covenant promised. God also required more from Abraham and his descendants: Circumcision was to be the sign of the covenant (17:9-14). The covenant was both renewed and expanded. Circumcision — cutting the foreskin — was a continuing reminder that God had cut a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. This covenant is referred to in Acts 7:8 and Romans 4:11.

God promised that Abraham would have children not only through Hagar but also through Sarah (Genesis 17:15-17), and God promised to renew the covenant with Isaac (17:19-21).

At Bethel, God gave similar promises to Jacob (28:10-15; 35:11-13). We are not specifically told that this was a covenant, but it apparently was.<sup>1</sup> God referred to his covenant with Jacob and his covenant with Isaac and his covenant with Abraham, as if they were three distinct covenants (Leviticus 26:42), but he could also refer to them as one single covenant, since they contained the same promises (Exodus 2:24; 2 Kings 13:23). The same basic covenant was renewed with each generation. Peter mentioned the covenant that God made with the fathers (plural), characterized by the promise given to Abraham (Acts 3:25). This covenant is also referred to in Exodus 6:4-5.

## **The covenant at Mt. Sinai**

God remembered the covenant he had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and he brought their descendants out of slavery in Egypt. While they were on their way to the land of Canaan, God made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai. As their ruler, he gave laws, and they agreed to keep them. "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant," he told them through Moses, "then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.... You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6).

The people said they would do everything the Lord had said (19:8). After

God spoke the Ten Commandments, the people asked Moses to be their mediator for the remainder of the covenant (20:1-19). Through Moses, God then gave regulations about altars (20:22-26), servants and slaves (21:1-11), murder and sins against others (21:12-32), sins against personal property (21:33-22:15) and other laws of social responsibility (22:16-27; 23:1-9). There were rules about blasphemy, cursing, offerings, firstlings (22:28-30), Sabbath years and days, Holy Days and offerings (23:10-19). God spoke all these laws, and then promised to give the people the land of Canaan (23:20-31).

The Abrahamic covenant, although it included obligations, stressed God's promise. The Sinaitic covenant, although it included mercy and promises, stressed human responsibilities. Moses told the people the laws, and the people said, "Everything the Lord has said we will do" (24:3). And Moses wrote it all down.

The next day, they had sacrifices, Moses read the book of the covenant,<sup>2</sup> and the people again agreed to obey (24:4-7). So Moses sprinkled blood on the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (24:8). As Hebrews 9:18-20 says, the first covenant was put into effect with blood. An animal was cut, and the people came under the covenant by being sprinkled with its blood.

The Ten Commandments formed the core of this covenant. "The words of the covenant — the Ten Commandments" — were written on tablets of stone (Exodus 34:28). Although the covenant was equated with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13), the covenant included all of Exodus 20-23. The Lord wrote "the law *and* commands I have written for their instruction" (Exodus 24:12).

The tablets of stone were called the "tablets of the covenant" (Deuteronomy 9:9, 11, 15; Hebrews 9:4). They were placed in the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:16, 21; 31:18), thus giving a name to the ark, and the covenant was said to be inside the ark (1 Kings 8:21; 2 Chronicles 6:11).

In this covenant, the people agreed to be servants of God, and he agreed to protect them. The covenant was made not only with Israel as a nation, but also with Moses as its leader (Exodus 34:10, 27). Many of the laws in Exodus 34 are quoted from Exodus 23. It was a covenant renewal or restatement with some variations. Hebrews 9:1 says that original covenant also included regulations for worship and the sanctuary (Exodus 25-30). The covenant was developed as time went on.

Although the Sabbath was part of the Ten Commandments (20:8-11), and part of the larger covenant (23:12), it was made its own covenant in Exodus 31:16. Just as circumcision was an everlasting covenant and a sign of Abraham's covenant (Genesis 17:10-11), the Sabbath was also called a sign

and an everlasting covenant (31:12, 16-17). Just as circumcision was a covenant in conjunction with the Abrahamic covenant, the Sabbath was a covenant in conjunction with the Sinaitic covenant.

Also in conjunction with the Sinaitic covenant was the weekly showbread, which was also called an everlasting covenant (Leviticus 24:8). An everlasting covenant was made with the priesthood, too (Numbers 18:19; 25:13). Grain offerings were covenantized, too, since God commanded, “Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings” (Leviticus 2:13).

## **Covenant renewals**

When the Israelites were ready to enter the promised land, Moses repeated to them the laws of God (Deuteronomy 1:1-5). He rehearsed some history, reminded the Israelites to obey God and worship him only, and he repeated the Ten Commandments. Although the people he was talking to were either not yet born or only children at Horeb (Mt. Sinai), Moses said that God had made the Sinaitic covenant with them, not with their parents (5:2-3).<sup>3</sup>

Moses not only repeated the Ten Commandments, but gave numerous other laws as well (Deuteronomy 6–26). After he described blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, he led the people to covenant anew with God to be his people. Most of the book of Deuteronomy then forms the “terms of the covenant the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb” (29:1). The covenant was renewed and expanded. This Deuteronomic covenant was built on the foundation of the Sinaitic covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Moses reminded the people that they were making a covenant with the Lord not only for themselves but also for their descendants (29:12-14), and he exhorted them to be faithful to this covenant (29:9). This was a confirmation of the covenant God had made with the patriarchs (29:13) — it was a development from that patriarchal covenant. Moses wrote down the Deuteronomic law, and it was placed beside (not in) the ark of the covenant (31:9, 24-26).

The covenant was renewed in the days of Joshua (Joshua 24:1-24), Asa (2 Chronicles 15:12) and in the days of Joash (23:16). Hezekiah planned to make a covenant with God (29:10). Josiah and the Jews renewed the covenant, apparently the Deuteronomic law (2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chronicles 34:31-32). Jeremiah called the people to obey the terms of the covenant they had made when their forefathers came out of Egypt (Jeremiah 11:2-6).<sup>4</sup> In Jeremiah’s

day, the people made a covenant with God (34:15), but they were going back on it, and God would treat them “like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces” (34:18).

Yet another covenant was made in the days of Ezra, in which the people agreed to put away their foreign wives and children (Ezra 10:3).

Throughout Israel’s history, covenant was an important concept. They were the “people of the covenant land” (Ezekiel 30:5); their ruler was “the prince of the covenant” (Daniel 11:22). An attack on the Jews was considered an attack “against the holy covenant” (11:28, 30). Paul noted that one of the advantages of the people of Israel is that they had the (plural) “covenants of the promise” (Romans 9:4; Ephesians 2:12).

## **A new covenant prophesied**

However, something was seriously wrong with the Israelite covenant. The people did not have the heart to obey, and God knew it (Deuteronomy 31:16-21, 27-29). Unlike Abraham, they did not believe and were not faithful (Hebrews 3:19). The fault was with the people (Hebrews 8:7-8).

The Sinaitic covenant had regulations for worship, but it could not transform the heart or the conscience (Hebrews 9:9), and yet that is what people really need. The priests had to serve continually, but the high priest could approach God’s throne only once a year. This indicated that the sacrificial rituals were not effective (Hebrews 9:7-9; 10:1-3). The people’s minds were dull; they could not understand (Matthew 13:14-15; 19:8; 2 Corinthians 4:4), so they remained in the slavery of sin.

Therefore, God predicted a new covenant. He hinted at it even in the old — he said that, after his people had been sent into captivity because they had broken the covenant, he would gather them again and “circumcise your hearts” (Deuteronomy 4:25-31; 30:4-10).

The prophets predicted a *new* covenant between God and humans — a new basis of relationship. There would be no need for this new covenant, of course, unless the old were deficient.

In a messianic prophecy fulfilled by Jesus Christ, Isaiah noted that God would make the Servant “to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles” (Isaiah 42:6; 42:7 is similar to 61:1, which is quoted in Luke 4:18). The Servant himself would be the covenant — *he* would be the basis of the relationship for both Jews and Gentiles. This was fulfilled in Jesus, for he shed his blood, and it is only through him that we may enter God’s holy nation. Malachi 3:1 predicted that the Lord would be the messenger of the new covenant.

Isaiah again predicted that God would make the Servant to be a covenant for the people in the day of salvation (Isaiah 49:8). Just as God had sworn to Noah that he would never again destroy the earth with a flood, he will never remove this “covenant of peace” (54:9-10). “Come to me, all you who are thirsty,” God calls (55:1), a scripture fulfilled in Jesus Christ (John 7:37). “Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you” (Isaiah 55:3).

“The Redeemer will come to Zion,” Isaiah 59:20 prophesies, “to those in Jacob who repent of their sins.” God will make a covenant with these repentant people. His Spirit will be upon them, and his words will remain in them (59:21). They will keep the covenant because they will be changed on the inside.

Isaiah 61 was also fulfilled by Jesus. God’s Spirit was upon him, so he preached good news, freedom and comfort (61:1-2; Luke 4:18-21). Isaiah predicted a nation of priests (61:6) who will receive a great inheritance (61:7). God will “make an everlasting covenant with them” (61:8).

We are familiar with Jeremiah 31:31-33, since it is quoted in Hebrews. Jeremiah predicted a new covenant, which the people will not break, because God’s law will be in their minds and hearts. All the people will know the Lord, their sins will be forgiven (31:34), and God will never reject the people (31:35-37).

In other prophecies of regathering, Jeremiah predicted an everlasting covenant (32:40), in which the people will never turn away from fearing God (32:38-40; 50:5).

Ezekiel also foresaw that God would remember the covenant and regather the people; he will then “establish an everlasting covenant with you.” He will make atonement for the people, and they will be repentant (Ezekiel 16:60-62). After gathering them, he will make “a covenant of peace” with them, an everlasting covenant (34:25; 36:27; 37:26). Hosea 2:18 describes a similar covenant.

All these prophets predicted a new covenant, a new basis of relationship with God. This covenant will repair the defective hearts of the people, and will therefore not need to be replaced. It will be an everlasting covenant of peace, a covenant of reconciliation.

## **Jesus and the new covenant**

At the Last Supper, Jesus proclaimed that the wine-cup represented his own blood, which would be the blood of the new covenant (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Hebrews 10:29). The cup represented the “new covenant in my

blood” (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). Just as the Sinaitic covenant was sealed with blood, so also the new covenant was ratified when Jesus’ blood was poured out on the cross. We renew that covenant and reaffirm our commitment to it when we drink the wine and eat the bread, remembering the Lord’s death until he returns. The Lord’s Supper is a visible and tangible reminder of the covenant. But the wine is not sprinkled on the surface of the people — it is swallowed. The new covenant affects our innermost being.

The new covenant is superior to the old, for it has been founded on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). The old covenant could never make anyone perfect; no one could meet its righteous demands. It has now become “obsolete” (8:13); its laws are “set aside”<sup>5</sup> (7:18; 10:9) — replaced by a better hope, better promises and an effective transformation of the heart, a transformation that begins with faith.

Jesus Christ is the Messenger and Mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 8:6; 12:24). He is also the sacrifice — he himself *is* the new covenant. His teachings are the requirements of the covenant. Faith is required for participation in it. The Holy Spirit is given to transform the heart, and eternal life is the promised inheritance. It is an eternal covenant (13:20), guaranteed by Jesus (7:22). His blood has made us perfect, and he is making us holy (10:10, 14).

The new covenant has phenomenal promises, and all who believe them are counted as righteous. They are considered as faithful to the terms of the covenant. Their allegiance (loyalty and obedience) is given to Jesus Christ.

Our relationship with God is based on the new covenant. God takes away our sins (Romans 11:27). Jesus “died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant” (Hebrews 9:15). God’s Spirit gives us life (2 Corinthians 3:6). He puts the terms of the covenant within our hearts and minds so we can be faithful to him (Hebrews 8:7-10; 10:16). We may therefore “receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15).

## **Terms of the new covenant**

We now come to the most important part. The new covenant has been made, and the old covenant is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). What then are the terms of the new covenant? Is it simply faith and Spirit added to the old rules? No. Some of the old rules are obsolete.

The book of Hebrews explains that the sacrifices, for example, are done away. Hebrews does not say that the sacrifices are obsolete because they were later additions to the covenant. Rather, it is the Sinaitic covenant itself that is obsolete. There has been a change of the law (Hebrews 7:12). Levites

administered the old covenant; Christian ministers administer the new covenant, not the old.

When we compare the new covenant with the old, we see both similarities and differences. Some laws of the old covenant are continued into the new. The Tenth Commandment, for example, is quoted with approval in the New Testament. As another example, we should still obey Exodus 22:22: “Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.” Even though this commandment is not quoted in the New Testament, the principle is still valid.

Other laws are transformed in the way we apply them. Take Exodus 22:19, for example: “Anyone who has sexual relations with an animal must be put to death.” The prohibition is valid, but the church does not enforce the punishment. Part of the law is valid, and part is not.

Some laws are simply discontinued, such as Exodus 20:24: “Make an altar of earth for me.” And Exodus 22:29-30: “You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep.” The promises of the old covenant are also discontinued — Christians do not expect God to drive the Canaanites out of the land.

The old covenant was a package of laws and promises between God and his people. That package is now obsolete. Although some laws in the old covenant continue to be valid, others have ceased to be valid. We cannot assume that any particular law is valid simply on the basis of it being commanded in the old covenant.

This principle is taught in Galatians 3:17: “The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.” Paul is not singling out ritualistic laws. He is talking about the entire package of laws that was given four centuries after Abraham. The Sinaitic laws cannot do away with the promises God gave to Abraham.

In other words, once a promise has been given, conditions cannot be added (3:15). God knew in advance that the Israelites could not obey the covenant he gave them, and he did not use their disobedience to abandon the promises he had given to Abraham. The old covenant was an addition, given for a temporary purpose. It is now expired, no longer in effect.

The Galatian Christians had received the Holy Spirit by believing the gospel (3:2, 5). By believing, they became children of Abraham (3:7, 29) and partakers of his blessing (3:9, 14). The Galatian believers had the same covenant with God that Abraham did, and so do Christians today. Paul is explaining that our inheritance depends on promise (3:18), not on the law of Moses. We are children of God by faith, not by law (3:26).

In other words, our relationship with God is based on faith and promise,

just as Abraham's was. We are justified by faith and saved by promise — by grace. Laws that were added at Sinai cannot change the promise given to Abraham, nor can those laws change the promise given to us, since we are Abraham's children by faith. God gave his oath to Abraham, and he cannot break his promise by introducing new requirements (3:15). The promise still stands.

Even circumcision, which was given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant, cannot change the original promise, which was given on the basis of faith. Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous, and therefore acceptable to God, while he was uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-11). The promise in Genesis 15 was given without conditions. Abraham is therefore the father of all who have faith, whether they are circumcised or not, and all who have faith can be heirs of the original promise (Romans 4:16). Circumcision, the sign of the covenant, is now a matter of the heart (Romans 2:29). Obedience should be in our hearts.

However, no one obeys perfectly. Everyone breaks the law. Law cannot give life (Galatians 3:21, 10-12). It was never meant to be a means of salvation. All it can do is condemn us. So what was its purpose? It was added because of transgressions and was to be in force only until Christ came (3:19). The law pointed out our need for forgiveness, our need for grace, our need for a Savior, and our need for faith.

“Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (3:25). The law — meaning the covenant added 430 years after Abraham — was temporary, added until the coming of the “Seed” the promise referred to — Christ (3:19). The old covenant was a temporary addition, and it is now obsolete.

By establishing the new covenant, Jesus set aside the first covenant (Hebrews 10:9). He did away with many laws, but he also reaffirmed various commands and stressed that obedience should begin in the heart. He also added commands not found in the old covenant at all. The new covenant has behavioral guidance of its own.

Faith in Christ means allegiance to him. Faith leads us to obey God. All that the Lord has said to us, we should obey. We look to Jesus' teachings, and the teachings of his inspired apostles, to see the way that Christian faith should work in our lives. Since we always fall short of these New Testament commands, however, they remind us that we are saved only by grace through faith in our Savior.

## Righteousness by faith

No one can be declared righteous by observing the law (Romans 3:20). The law cannot give eternal life (Galatians 3:21). But the gospel reveals a way in which we can be declared righteous — a way that was predicted by the Law and the Prophets (Romans 3:21; Acts 10:43). “This righteousness from God comes...to all who believe” (Romans 3:22). We can be “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (3:24).

God gave his unique Son as a means of atonement for us, so God can declare believers justified — righteous (3:25-26). No one can boast about observing the law, since the only way anyone can be justified is “by faith apart from observing the law” (3:28). We are accounted as righteous on the basis of Jesus Christ, and we are given salvation by grace. If we are judged by our works, we will be found guilty. Salvation comes only by grace. God has forgiven us because Jesus died for us; it is because of his one great sacrifice that God forgives all our sins. We are counted as acceptable to God if we have faith in Jesus Christ.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2).

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (8:1-4).

Since the law could not transform us and could not give us eternal life, God did what the law could not do. He did it by sending his Son as a sacrifice on our behalf. Through faith, through Jesus Christ, we are declared righteous — and we are led by the Holy Spirit and changed in the heart. As we remain in Christ Jesus through faith in him, we are counted among the righteous, not among the condemned.

Christians today have a new relationship with God — a covenant based on faith, a faith that is willing to obey God. We do not obey according to the old letter or the old covenant, but according to the new, according to the

Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6). We are ministers of a new covenant, servants of God based on new terms of relationship. The old covenant, with laws that humans were unable to keep, brought condemnation and death. But the glorious new covenant brings life and righteousness (3:7-9). The law brings condemnation; the ministry of the Spirit brings justification and righteousness (3:8-9). In this passage, Paul is emphasizing the differences between the old covenant and the new.

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (3:17). We are forgiven and freed from old covenant regulations, and we now serve Christ by living according to the new covenant. That is the ministry Paul was committed to — preaching the gospel of the glory of Christ (4:1-5). With assurance of salvation, Paul was zealous to preach the gospel (4:13-18).

In Galatians 4:21-25, Paul drew an allegory based on Abraham’s two sons. Hagar, the slave woman, represented the covenant made at Sinai, with its physical center in Jerusalem. Children of this covenant are slaves, under the law. In contrast, Sarah represents the new covenant, from above, because her child was the product of promise.

We are children of promise (4:28), and we are free (4:26, 31). Christ has set us free, and we are not to be enslaved by the yoke of the old covenant (5:1), not even by the circumcision that came before that covenant (5:2).<sup>6</sup> But our freedom is not permission to sin — it is for service (5:13). We become slaves of righteousness, exhorted to be transformed in our innermost being, encouraged to conform to the pattern of Jesus Christ, exhorted to abide by New Testament commands.

Paul makes a contrast between freedom in Christ and “the whole law” (5:1-3). The whole Mosaic law, as a package regulating a people’s relationship with God, is obsolete. “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (5:6). We are declared righteous by faith apart from the works of the law. Although faith is accompanied by works (Romans 1:5; 6:17; 12:6-21; James 2:14-17), it is faith and not works that is the basis of our justification and the basis of our relationship with God — the basis of the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

## **Old and new in Hebrews**

The book of Hebrews explains more about the old covenant and the new. Jesus is our eternal High Priest, but he is not a priest according to the old covenant, since he is not a Levite. But the priesthood of physical rites had been given to Levi as an everlasting covenant. Therefore, the change in priesthood implies the end of the old covenant and a change in the nature of

sacrifices (Hebrews 7:12-14). The old no longer applies; the Israelites had been so consistently disobedient, even to point of crucifying the Son of God, that the agreement was terminated, replaced with a new covenant.

The former regulation, the old covenant with its Levitical assignments, was “set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God” (7:18-19). The new covenant has better promises, and by it we are reconciled to God by the death of his Son. We have guaranteed access to God through our High Priest. Because Jesus lives forever, he is able to save us all (7:24-25).

We needed grace and salvation, and Jesus Christ meets that need (7:26). The book of Hebrews emphasizes that we have a new High Priest (8:1), and that implies a new covenant. Just as the Levites administered the old covenant, the terms of the old relationship between God and Israel, so also the ascended Jesus administers the terms of the new relationship for all who come to God through him (8:6).

The new covenant’s better promises include forgiveness, a cleansing of the conscience, which the old covenant could not do, and an internalization of the relationship between us and God. Each person will know God (8:6-12). There is therefore no longer any need for the old covenant (8:13). Why should we choose slavery when freedom is available?

The new covenant is not like the old covenant (8:5); the people are able to meet the conditions of the new covenant. That doesn’t mean that they will miraculously become able to obey all the old laws perfectly — rather, it means new terms of relationship. The external regulations applied only “until the time of the new order” (9:10). The worship rules were temporary. The animal sacrifices and regulations about ceremonial cleanness have been replaced by real forgiveness and cleansed consciences (9:13-14).

Christ set aside the first covenant when he established the second (10:9); the old is obsolete (8:13). There is continuity in that God requires faith and allegiance, but there is discontinuity in regulations, mediation, and spiritual status. Grace is made much more evident.

The blood of Christ, the blood of the new covenant, is able to cleanse our consciences, so that we may serve God (9:14). We have direct access, and we receive a better inheritance — eternal life — which we already possess as a down payment guaranteeing our future. Christ was sacrificed once, bearing our sins. When he returns, he will bring salvation (9:28). He has made us perfect (10:14). He has declared us righteous.

Can we believe these promises of God? If we do, we have the faith of

Abraham.

So what does the writer of Hebrews conclude: “Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (10:19-22).

Our faith-based relationship with God also has practical consequences in our relationships with other people: “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (10:24-25).

Forgiveness has ethical consequences. Because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us, we ought to do something in response. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1).

“You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20). “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:57-58).

“It is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident.... So we make it our goal to please him” (2 Corinthians 5:5-9). “Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (5:14-15).

Numerous verses could be added, but 2 Corinthians 5:15 summarizes it nicely. We are to live for Jesus Christ, to his honor and glory. All our lives ought to be dedicated to his service, because his life was given to serve us. If we have faith, we will obey, and the righteousness of Christ will be attributed to us. That’s the new covenant, the terms of the new relationship God has with humans through his Son who died for us.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As shown in Appendix 1, any agreement could be called a *berith* in Hebrew. Psalm 105:9-10 and 1 Chronicles 16:15-17 use *berith* as synonymous with *word* and *oath* and *decree*.

<sup>2</sup> The book of the covenant that Moses read apparently contained everything that the Lord had said (Exodus 24:4). This would mean everything the Lord told Moses

while he was on the mountain; it may also include the Ten Commandments. The “book of the covenant” found in Josiah’s day (2 Chronicles 34:30; 2 Kings 23:2) was apparently something else (perhaps the book of Deuteronomy), since it had instructions for Passover (2 Kings 23:21), and Exodus 20-24 does not.

<sup>3</sup> Taken literally, this is false, since their immediate fathers *were* the ones with whom God had made a covenant at Horeb. It may be a Hebrew figure of speech, giving emphasis to the second phrase: God made the covenant at Sinai “not *only* with our fathers, but with all of us” (Today’s English Version). Or the “fathers” may mean the patriarchs, indicating that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not have this covenant with God.

<sup>4</sup> This could be either the covenant made at Sinai or in Moab, since they both occurred as part of the Exodus from Egypt. Although differing in some details, the two covenants were essentially the same, requiring allegiance to the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> Christ came to fulfill the law, and he said that none of it would disappear until all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:17-19). Commandments like circumcision and sacrificial rituals have not disappeared. Nevertheless, they have been set aside and are not required today. These laws are instructive, even though they are no longer in force. The application has been changed. Matthew 5:17-19 does not tell us which laws have been changed and which have not.

<sup>6</sup> Circumcision is permissible as a voluntary practice, but it does not improve anyone’s standing before God. It should not be done as a commitment to old covenant laws, which was the issue in Acts 15 and Galatians 5:2-3.

## APPENDIX 1: HUMAN COVENANTS

Jacob and Laban made a covenant with each other, spelling out the terms of their relationship (Genesis 31:44). David and Jonathan made a covenant of friendship (1 Samuel 18:3; 20:8, 16; 22:8; 23:18). Abner made a covenant with David, pledging allegiance to King David (2 Samuel 3:12-13). Psalm 55:20 refers to a covenant between friends; Proverbs 2:17 and Malachi 2:14 refer to marriage covenants.

Business agreements seem to be the intent of Isaiah 33:8, Hosea 10:4 and Galatians 3:15. Hebrews 9:16-17 refers to what we call a will, which goes into effect only after a person dies.

Job uses the term figuratively, as an agreement with leviathan, or an agreement with nature, or a covenant with one's own eyes not to look lustfully at a girl (Job 5:23; 31:1; 41:4). Isaiah talks about a covenant with death (Isaiah 28:15, 18), and the heading of Psalms 60 and 80 refers to a song called "The Lily of the Covenant."

The word *berith* is often used for an agreement between one king and another. Eshcol and Aner were allied with or in covenant with Abraham (Genesis 14:13). Abraham made a treaty (*berith*) with Abimelech (21:27, 32). Abimelech proposed a treaty with Isaac, and they swore an oath to each other (26:26-31). Solomon and Hiram had a treaty (1 Kings 5:12). Asa made a treaty with Ben-Hadad, referring to a treaty their fathers had (15:19; 2 Chronicles 16:3). Ben-Hadad later made a treaty with Ahab, making concessions and agreements (1 Kings 20:34). Later, the king of Babylon made a *berith* with a ruler of Jerusalem, putting him under oath (Ezekiel 17:12-14). But the Jewish ruler broke the treaty, and Ezekiel predicted his punishment (17:15-18).

Covenants can also be made between one nation and another. God warned the Israelites not to make treaties with the Canaanites (Exodus 23:32; 34:12, 15; Deuteronomy 7:2) — but the Gibeonites tricked them into doing it (Joshua 9:6-16), and God criticized them for it (Judges 2:2). The *berith* included mutual obligations: The Gibeonites became servants of Israel, and Israel had to protect them from their enemies (Joshua 9:19-10:7).

Israel made treaties with other nations (Hosea 12:1). Other nations conspired together or made covenant together against the Israelites, which the psalmist counted as being an alliance against God (Psalm 83:4-5). The prophets criticized Tyre for disregarding a treaty of brotherhood (Amos 1:9) and predicted that Edom's covenant partners would turn against them (Obadiah 7). Daniel predicted that a future ruler would confirm a covenant

with many (Daniel 9:27).

Covenants can also be made between a ruler and his people. In one *berith*, Joshua made laws and decrees for his people (Joshua 24:25). The people of Jabesh Gilead made a covenant with the leader of the Ammonites, promising to obey him (1 Samuel 11:1). The Israelites made a covenant with David, accepting him as their king (2 Samuel 3:21; 5:3; 1 Chronicles 11:3).

Jehoiada made a covenant with army officers to protect King Joash (2 Kings 11:4), gave Joash a copy of the covenant (11:12) and make a covenant between all the people and the new king (11:17; also in 2 Chronicles 23:1-3, 11). Zedekiah made a covenant with the people of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 34:8-10).

## **APPENDIX 2: VARIOUS DIVINE COVENANTS**

Just as human kings made agreements with other kings or with their nations, God also has made agreements with individuals and with nations.

Hosea 6:7 may indicate that God had a covenant with Adam; the translation is not certain.

Genesis 6:18 and 9:9-17 tells us about God's covenant with Noah and all living creatures. It was a unilateral covenant, for God promised to do his part without any requirement that Noah do his. God established the rainbow as the sign of his covenant, a reminder of his promise not to destroy all life with a flood.

God made a covenant with the Levites that they would receive meat from sacrifices (Numbers 18:19). He made a covenant with Phineas, guaranteeing the priesthood for his family (25:12-13). The prophets referred to God's covenant with the priests and Levites (Nehemiah 13:29; Jeremiah 33:21; Malachi 2:4-5, 8).

God made a covenant with David, guaranteeing the kingship for his family (2 Samuel 23:5; 2 Chronicles 13:5; 21:7; Psalm 89:3, 28, 34). The covenant could be renewed with each descendant who ruled faithfully under God (Psalm 132:12). Jeremiah affirmed the permanence of the Davidic covenant (Jeremiah 33:20-25), but it was temporarily suspended during the captivity, and a psalmist wondered if the covenant had been renounced (Psalm 89:39, 49), but he concluded with a statement of faith in God (89:52). The promise is now fulfilled permanently in Jesus Christ, the Son of David who reigns forever.

Zechariah 11:10 refers to a "covenant I had with all nations."

## **APPENDIX 3: THE NEED TO BE FAITHFUL**

Agreements should be kept. God promised to keep his part of the covenant (Leviticus 26:9); he remembers it (26:45; 1 Chronicles 16:15-17; Psalms 105:8; 106:45; 111:5). He will not break the covenant (Leviticus 26:44; Judges 2:1) or forget it (Deuteronomy 4:31); he promised to keep his “covenant of love” (Deuteronomy 7:9, 12; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chronicles 6:14; Nehemiah 1:5; 9:32; Daniel 9:4). His covenant people are special to him (Psalm 50:5). His covenant will endure forever (111:9); he swears it with an oath (105:9-10; Ezekiel 16:8).

He confirms his covenant by giving blessings (Deuteronomy 8:18). He blesses those who obey (Psalm 25:10, 14). A psalmist, asking for intervention, asked God to have regard for the covenant (Psalm 74:20). Jeremiah asked him to remember the covenant (Jeremiah 14:21). And he intervened because of the covenant (Zechariah 9:11), and in the greatest remembrance, sent redemption through Jesus — a horn of salvation in the family of David (Luke 1:68-75).

The Israelites were exhorted, “Be careful not to forget the covenant” (Deuteronomy 4:23; 2 Kings 17:38). They were told to be monotheistic (2 Kings 17:35). And some Israelites did keep the covenant (Psalm 103:18). Levi was commended for guarding the covenant (Deuteronomy 33:9); a psalmist claimed to be true to the covenant (Psalm 44:17). God commended the eunuchs and the foreigners who held fast to the covenant (Isaiah 56:4, 6).

But Israel was for the most part unfaithful, just as God told Moses they would be (Deuteronomy 31:16, 20, 27). He pronounced curses on those who would violate the covenant (Leviticus 26:15, 25; Deuteronomy 17:2; 29:21), and the resulting national disasters would be a witness that the people had abandoned the covenant (29:25).

They violated the covenant soon after entering the promised land (Joshua 7:11, 15) and were again warned of the curses of rebellion (23:16). But they violated the covenant (Judges 2:20). Apostasy reigned throughout the period of the judges and again in the reign of Saul. David was faithful, and Solomon began that way, but he eventually stopped keeping the covenant (1 Kings 11:11).

The nation became so corrupt that Elijah thought he was the only faithful one left (1 Kings 19:10, 14). The history of the northern kingdom is summarized: “They rejected his decrees and the covenant” (2 Kings 17:15; 18:12; Hosea 6:7; 8:1). So they were sent into captivity; God was faithful to

his promised curses.

The Jews were also criticized for unfaithfulness (Psalms 50:16; 78:10, 37; Isaiah 24:5; Jeremiah 11:3, 8, 10). They forsook the covenant, violated it, did not fulfill its terms, broke it, despised it (Jeremiah 22:9; 34:18; Ezekiel 16:59; 44:7). So God promised to punish the nation (20:37-38), fulfilling the covenantal curses. But the violations will continue even to the end (Daniel 11:30, 32).

God considers the breaking of human agreements as a breaking of his covenant, too (Ezekiel 17:18-19; Malachi 2:10). He requires his people to be faithful to the agreements they make with one another.

## **THE OLD COVENANT AND THE LAW OF MOSES**

By Joseph Tkach

There are three major foundations for understanding the covenants and the Old Testament law. All three give the same conclusion. They are

- The old covenant is obsolete, and the new covenant has been established.
- Christians are not obligated to keep “the law of Moses.”
- When Paul discussed “the law,” he was often concerned with the entire law of Moses, and he wrote that Christians were not under the authority of that law. Our obligation to obey God is defined by a different law, a spiritual law, which in some cases overlaps Old Testament laws but in other cases supersedes them.

Let's examine each of these points and show that they all support the same conclusion. The New Testament is consistent. First, the matter of covenants. They are discussed in detail in the book of Hebrews, especially chapter 8. There, the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ is contrasted with the Levitical high priesthood. The ministry Jesus received is far superior to the Levitical ministry, and his covenant is far superior to the old covenant (verse 6).

But there was a problem with the first covenant — the people were not faithful and were not able to obey (verses 7-9). God therefore promised a new covenant, and “by calling this covenant `new,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (verse 13). The old covenant is obsolete — ended. The agreement and its terms of relationship no longer have authority.

The writer of Hebrews says that the old covenant “will soon disappear,” and indeed most of its operations ceased in A.D. 70 when Roman armies destroyed the Temple. Even though elements of the old covenant system continue to be observed in Judaism, the New Testament declares that the old covenant itself is obsolete.

Now, we must ask, just what was the old covenant? What laws are we talking about here? First, the *core* of the old covenant is the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13). As part of the old covenant, the people at Mt. Sinai also agreed to obey all the laws in Exodus 20, 21, 22 and 23. These additional laws became part of the covenant God made with Israel, and the covenant was then ratified with blood (Exodus 24:6-8).

This is the covenant that has been declared obsolete. It has no legal authority. Further, we cannot *assume* that any part of the contract is valid when the entire contract has been declared obsolete. We cannot *assume* that any particular group of laws must remain together.

The old covenant included much more than Exodus 20-23. Hebrews 9:1 tells us that it also included directions for the tabernacle. Instructions for the altar, Levitical priests and animal sacrifices were given in Exodus 25-31. These were part of God's original plan for Israel. He knew very well that the people would sin and would need a tabernacle and regular burnt offerings. It was all part of the plan, part of his relationship with his people, part of his covenant.

### **Added because of transgressions?**

Some have said that the sacrificial laws were added “because of transgressions,” as if sacrifices were not part of the original law. But this is not true. Moses told Pharaoh that the Israelites wanted to leave Egypt so they could offer sacrifices and burnt offerings in the wilderness (Exodus 10:25). Before the Israelites left Egypt, they sacrificed Passover lambs. Even within the old covenant, altars and burnt offerings were commanded (Exodus 20:24) — all this before the covenant was ratified and before it had a chance to be transgressed.

When Galatians 3:19 says that the law was added because of transgressions, it is talking about the entire law — everything that was added 430 years after Abraham (verse 17). This law had a mediator (verse 19) — this law was the covenant. The entire covenant was added, becoming part of God's relationship with his people, because of transgressions. The law is made for lawbreakers (1 Timothy 1:9). God gave rules for civil and religious behavior because the people, even before they got to Sinai, were disobedient — just as God knew that they would be. Sacrifices were not an afterthought — they were part of the original covenant.

The idea that sacrifices were not a part of the law as first given at Sinai was based on a misunderstanding of Jeremiah 7:22, which says that God did not at first speak to the Israelites about burnt offerings and sacrifices. If read literally, this flatly contradicts Exodus 10:25 and Exodus 20:24. But the phrase should not be read so literally. Jeremiah 7:22 is a Hebrew figure of speech indicating relative emphasis. When God brought the people out of Egypt, it was not because he wanted sacrifices and offerings. Rather, he wanted obedience, and the sacrifices were only a tool to help the people remember that they ought to obey. Obedience was the primary concern, even though the covenant also prescribed sacrifices for the inevitable transgressions.

(A similar figure of speech can be seen in John 12:47, where Jesus says he did not come to judge the world, but to save it. John 9:39, however, says that Jesus *did* come to judge the world. The “contradiction” is explained by understanding that John 12:47 gives a contrast in emphasis, not in fact. Although Jesus came to judge, his primary purpose was to save.)

The point of this digression is that the old covenant included not only Exodus 20-23, but other laws as well. When the Sinaitic covenant was renewed with the next generation of Israelites, all the laws of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers were included as part of the covenant. But these laws were still considered the same covenant (Deuteronomy 1:1-5; 5:2-3). The book of Deuteronomy contains many additional laws, all considered part of the same covenant, the same basic agreement or relationship between Israel and God.

## **The old is obsolete**

When the book of Hebrews says that the old covenant is obsolete, it is referring to the whole package of Old Testament law. Some individual laws, of course, are still valid, but the package as a whole is not an authoritative package.

We see this again in 2 Corinthians 3. In verse 3, Paul makes a contrast between the “tablets of stone” — a clear reference to the Ten Commandments — and the writing of God’s Spirit on the hearts of Christians. In verse 6, he contrasts the new covenant with “the letter,” which in context means the letter of the old covenant. Verse 7 talks about the law engraved on stones and the shining of Moses’ face. It is clear that Paul is talking about the Ten Commandments, for those are the engraved stones Moses had when his face shone in glory and he had to put a veil over his face.

The old covenant was glorious, but it was “fading away,” replaced by a covenant much more glorious. Paul was already administering the new covenant. The old was obsolete, and was fading away. Although sacrifices continued to be administered in Jerusalem, they would cease soon after Paul wrote. The old covenant has ended, and we should live by the terms of the new covenant.

Some people object, saying that God’s covenants are compared to marriage agreements, and we are only betrothed to Christ and the marriage has not yet taken place. Some have reasoned from this analogy that the new covenant has not yet been made. However, marriage is only an analogy, and we must not take it so far that it leads us astray from the facts!

Do we have an agreement with God? Has he promised to give us certain things through his Son? Yes, he has. We have an agreement, and an agreement with God is a covenant. We have a covenant with God, and it is

the new covenant. Hebrews 8:6 tells us that Christ's covenant "is founded on better promises." It "was established," says the King James Version; the New American Standard says it "has been enacted." The verb is in the past tense, indicating that the new covenant *has been made*. An analogy cannot contradict the clear meaning of this verse. Blood has been shed, ratifying the new covenant (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 10:29).

We have not received all the promised blessings of the new covenant, of course, just as the Israelites didn't receive their physical promises until many years after their covenant had been made. The fact that the promises are still future does not mean that the covenant hasn't been made. In fact, the very existence of the promises shows that the agreement has been made. We do have a relationship with God. Paul was a minister of the Spirit, not of the letter. He was a minister of the new covenant, not of the old. One aspect of the new covenant is that we are forgiven (Hebrews 10:17-18).

To summarize this section:

- The old covenant was built around the core of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28).
- The old covenant is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).
- The new covenant has been established (Hebrews 8:6).

## The law of Moses

Next, let's examine the way the New Testament uses the phrase "law of Moses." This term will also help us understand the difference between the Old Testament era and the New. The Jerusalem council (Acts 15) met to discuss this very question. "Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses'" (verse 5).

The council concluded that Gentiles did *not* have to obey the law of Moses. The New American Bible, for example, says this: "The Jerusalem 'Council' marks the official rejection of the rigid view that Gentile converts were obligated to observe the Mosaic law.... Paul's refusal to impose the Mosaic law on the Gentile Christians is supported by Peter on the ground that within his own experience God bestowed the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household without preconditions concerning the adoption of the Mosaic law."

In verse 28, the apostles told the Gentiles that they did not require anything beyond four particular restrictions. This did not mean that they were free to murder and blaspheme. They were to avoid murder and blasphemy because of Christ, not because of the law of Moses.

Just what is the "law of Moses"? What is being discussed? The New

Testament tells us what the law of Moses includes. This phrase is used six other times in the New Testament.

Luke 2:22: “When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.” So the law of Moses includes rituals regarding uncleanness after childbirth. It should be obvious already that it doesn’t make sense to claim that Christians ought to observe the law of Moses. Neither Jewish nor Gentile Christians have to observe these purification rituals today.

Luke 24:44: Jesus, after his resurrection, said to his disciples: “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” In this verse, the law of Moses includes prophecies about the Messiah. It’s not just ritualistic laws — it’s the five books of Moses, the Torah, the Pentateuch.

John 7:22-23: Jesus was talking to the Pharisees: “Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?” Here, the law of Moses includes the law of circumcision. Moses didn’t originate the practice, but he wrote about it. It is in his law.

Acts 28:23, where Paul is in Rome: “They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” Here again, the law of Moses includes prophecies about Jesus Christ. It is one section of the Old Testament.

1 Corinthians 9:9 — “It is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’” Here, the law of Moses includes civil laws. Paul could adapt the principle for the new covenant, but in the law of Moses it was a civil law.

Hebrews 10:28: “Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.” This is also talking about a civil law, the administration of the death penalty in ancient Israel.

The law of Moses included civil laws, religious ceremonies and prophecies. It referred to everything that Moses wrote, the books of Moses, the Torah or the Law. The law of Moses includes everything in those books, and that’s what the Jerusalem council was about. Some people claimed that the Gentile Christians had to be circumcised *and* to keep all the laws found in the five books of Moses. The council concluded that they did *not* have to keep all those laws. Instead, they gave only four prohibitions.

This is brought out again in chapter 21. Paul had returned to Jerusalem,

and rumors swirled that he had been teaching Jews to abandon the law of Moses (verse 21). The rumors were false. Paul had not been teaching any such thing. Although the rituals were not required for Christians, neither were they forbidden. Jewish Christians were free to participate in their traditional customs. To make this point clear, the Jerusalem elders suggested that Paul participate in such a ritual himself (verses 23-24).

In chapter 21, the controversy centered on whether Paul taught Jews to abandon the law. There was no question about the Gentiles, since they had already been given the four prohibitions (verse 25). Everyone accepted the fact that they did not have to keep the law of Moses. This is made even more clear in the Greek text used by the King James translators. The elders wanted Paul to demonstrate “that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that *they should observe no such thing*,” except for the four prohibitions they had already been given (verse 25, NKJ). Gentiles do not have to abide by the customs of Moses. They do not need to live like Jews in order to be Christians.

So, to summarize this section, we see that

- The law of Moses contains all the laws that Moses wrote.
- Some Pharisees thought that Gentile Christians ought to keep the law of Moses.
- The Jerusalem Council declared that they did not have to. The writings of Moses do not have legal authority over Christians. They are instructive, but obsolete in their legal authority.

## Not under the law

Next, let us examine some of Paul’s statements about the law. Portions of his epistles are difficult to understand. One reason is that he uses the word *law* with different meanings. That should caution us, but it should not prevent us from trying to see what he meant. We do not want to distort his writings to our own destruction by assigning meanings to his words that he didn’t intend. We have to study the epistles to see what he meant.

Consider the phrase “under the law,” for example. Does it mean under the penalty of the law, or does it mean under the authority of the law? Let’s see how it is used:

Romans 2:12: “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin *under the law* will be judged by the law.” The contrast here is between Jew and Gentile. Jews are under the authority of the law, and Gentiles are not.

Romans 3:19: “Whatever the law says, it says to those who are *under the*

*law*, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.” The law speaks to those who are under its authority.

1 Corinthians 9:20-21: “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those *under the law* I became like one under the law (though *I myself am not under the law*), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.”

Jews were under the law, so Paul, in an effort to win them, acted in accordance with the law, as we see in Acts 21. However, Paul did not consider *himself* under the law that Jews were under. He is talking about behavior, not his salvation status. He was free to act like a Gentile if he wanted to, and that’s what he did when trying to win Gentiles to the faith. He acted like a person who did not have the law of Moses. However, he makes it clear that he was under the law of Christ, God’s real law, the spiritual and eternal law. But Paul was not under the authority of the law that separated Jews from Gentiles.

Galatians 4:4-5: “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born *under law*, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.” Jesus Christ was born under the law — under its authority. He never broke the law, and did not deserve its penalty. By being born under the Jewish law, he was able to redeem Jews as well as those who do not have the law.

Galatians 4:21: “Tell me, you who want to be *under the law*, are you not aware of what the law says?” Paul is writing to Christians who were tempted to accept old covenant laws as requirements. They wanted to be under the authority of the old covenant – not its penalty. Which law is Paul talking about? The same “law” that says that Abraham had two sons (verse 22). It is the law that contains Genesis — the law of Moses, the books of Moses. Some of the Galatians wanted to be under that law, and Paul was arguing against it.

In the above passages, “under the law” means under the authority of the old covenant law. That is also its meaning in the only other occurrence in the New Testament: “Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” (Romans 6:14-15). We are not under the authority of the law, but under the authority of grace — but grace does not mean that we are free to do our own thing. Rather, grace comes with obligation — we are under the law of Christ. We are to obey him.

## **Dead to the law**

We see another revealing discussion of law in Romans 7:1-4. Paul speaks to the Jews:

Do you not know, brothers — for I am speaking to men who know the law — that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage.... So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God.

Paul says that we have died to the law — even the Jews have died to the law through identification with Jesus Christ. Therefore, the law no longer has authority over us, since we belong to Christ, not to the law. Christ is the one we obey, so that we can bear spiritual fruit. The law is contrasted with Christ, and it is the old covenant law that Paul is talking about — the Torah, the Law portion of the Scriptures. We can be under the law, or under Christ. Being under both is not an option.

Galatians 3 is also clear about the law. Verses 2 and 5 contrast faith with law. Paul is not talking about the eternal, spiritual law in this passage, nor is he talking about the sacrificial laws, which could not be kept in Galatia. He is talking about the Torah, “the Book of the Law” (verse 10). It is the law added 430 years after Abraham (verse 17), which includes all of Exodus and Leviticus.

Abraham’s covenant was based on faith (verses 6-7), and we are heirs of his promise (verse 29). The law was added to that covenant because of the transgressions of the Israelites (verse 19), but the law cannot alter the Abrahamic promises that we inherit. Rather, the law — the books of Moses — was a temporary measure until Christ, the Seed, came (verse 19). “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (verse 25).

Here we see the same conclusion. The Scriptures are consistent. Christians are not required to obey the laws of Moses. They were glorious for a time, but their purpose has been superseded by Jesus Christ.

Paul was not against all law. He talks often of the obligations that Christians have. Even in the book of Galatians, he concludes with exhortations about sins to avoid and righteousness to seek. These things are challenging — humanly impossible, in fact. We need to be led by God’s Spirit and transformed in inner character into the pattern of Jesus Christ. He is the standard; the old covenant law is not.

We see more in the next chapter, with Paul’s allegory of the covenants, Abraham, Hagar and Sarah. Hagar stands for the old covenant (verse 24), and Paul tells us to get rid of her (verse 30). Those who are under her covenant are slaves, whereas those under the authority of the new covenant have the full rights of children (verse 4).

In Galatians 5, Paul makes it clear again. Although the old covenant law enslaves those who are under it, we have been set free from that law (verse 1). But if we submit to the old covenant law of circumcision, then Christ is of no value to us (verse 2). We are either under the new covenant or the old; we cannot be under both. The basis of our relationship with God should be faith in Christ, not the law of Moses. But if we want to be under the old covenant, then we are “obligated to obey the whole law” (verse 3). Christians, however, are *not* obligated to obey the whole law. Paul is not talking about just sacrificial or ceremonial laws — he is talking about the entire law. The entire law of Moses is obsolete, and Christians are not under its authority.

Christians obey some of the laws of Moses, of course. We should not covet or lie to one another. But we obey these laws not because Moses wrote about them, *but because they are part of the Christ-like life*. We are under Christ, not Moses. Christ tells us to love our neighbors, and the New Testament explains that this means we do not lie or covet.

## Live like a Gentile

As one more illustration of Paul’s use of the word *law*, let’s look at Ephesians 2:11-19. Paul is saying that Gentiles were once separated from the covenants, separated from Christ. But in Christ they have now been brought near. How is this possible? Because Christ has destroyed the barrier that kept the Gentiles away. He has abolished the law. Which law? The law that had commandments and regulations separating Jews from Gentiles.

Because Jesus has destroyed the legal basis for discriminating against Gentiles, Gentiles have become part of God’s people. Does this mean that Gentiles have to become like Jews, and obey laws pertaining to Jews? Certainly not. That was the conclusion of the Jerusalem council, and it is the conclusion of Paul, too, since he says that even Jews have died to the old covenant law and are not bound by it. Paul had the freedom to live like a Jew, or the freedom to live like someone who lived uprightly though that person did not have the Jewish law.

Peter also understood that he was permitted to live like a Gentile (Galatians 2:14). Which laws would a righteous Gentile be expected to keep? Which laws of Moses separated “living like a Gentile” from “living like a Jew”? Apparently rabbis did not require righteous Gentiles to be circumcised, to observe Jewish dietary restrictions or to observe the Sabbath. Those three laws, from both Jewish and Gentile perspectives, distinguished Jews from Gentiles. James Dunn writes this:

In the phrase...works of the law...Paul has in mind particularly circumcision, food laws and sabbath, as the characteristic marks of the

faithful Jew, so recognized and affirmed by both Jew and Gentile.... Just these observances were widely regarded as characteristically and distinctively Jewish. Writers like Petronius, Plutarch, Tacitus and Juvenal took it for granted that, in particular, circumcision, abstention from pork, and the sabbath, were observances which marked out the practitioners as Jews, or as people who were very attracted to Jewish ways.... They were the peculiar rites which marked out the Jews as that peculiar people. (*Jesus, Paul and the Law*, pages 4, 191-192)

To summarize this section:

- To be under the law is to be under its authority.
- Christians are not under the law.
- We are not obligated to keep the Torah. Rather, we may live like righteous Gentiles who do not have the law of Moses.

A New Testament authority is needed before any old practices are imposed or required. That's because the law of Moses, the old covenant, the Torah, is obsolete. We are not under that law; we are not obligated to keep laws that were given to the Israelites only.

## COMPARISON OF OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

Feature	Old Covenant	New Covenant
<b>When established</b>	at Exodus	at crucifixion
<b>Parties: God and</b>	national Israel (Exodus 19-24)	Christians (Luke 22:20; John 3:16-21)
<b>People redeemed from bondage</b>	in Egypt (Exodus 20:2)	in sin (Hebrews 9:15)
<b>Mediator of the covenant</b>	Moses (Ex. 20:18-19; Heb. 9:19-20)	Jesus Christ (Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24)
<b>Ratified by blood of</b>	animals (Ex. 24:8; Heb. 9:19-20)	Jesus Christ (Matt. 26:28; Rom. 3:25)
<b>Promises offered</b>	prosperity, national security, become God's treasured nation (Ex. 19:5; Lev. 26)	eternal life (John 3:16), children of God (Rom. 8:14-17, 29), know God, law in heart, forgiveness (Heb. 8:10-12), with God forever (Rev. 21:3-7)
<b>Initiation sign of the covenant</b>	circumcision (Gen. 17:11; Ex. 12:48-49; John 7:22-23)	conversion of the heart (Matt. 5:8; Acts 15:8; Rom. 2:28-29)
<b>Continuing sign of the covenant</b>	observance of the Sabbaths (Ex. 31:16-17; Ezek. 20:12)	new life of faith in Christ (Eph. 2:4-10; 4:17; 5:1-2)
<b>Obligations</b>	obedience to the law that was given through Moses (Ex. 24:3; Lev. 26; Deut. 28)	be perfect (Matt. 5:48), believe, obey Christ (Gal. 6:2; 1 John 3:23-24; Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 10:5)

CHRISTIANS AND OLD TESTAMENT LAWS

<b>Duration of the covenant</b>	during time of national Israel, temple and Levites (Heb. 8:13)	eternity (John 5:24; 6:54-58; Heb. 9:15; 12:22-28; Rev. 21:3-7)	
	<b>Priesthood</b>	Aaron and sons (Ex. 29:9; Lev. 8)	Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:14-16; 5:5-6), believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9)
		<b>High Priest entered presence of God</b>	symbolically once a year on the Day of Atonement after offering the required blood sacrifices (Lev. 16; Heb. 9:7)
	<b>Holy place where God can be worshiped</b>	tabernacle in wilderness (Deut. 12), temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:29-30)	temple of the Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16), wherever believers are (John 4:21-24; Matt. 18:20)
	<b>Commemorations</b>	weekly Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15) and seasonal festivals (Lev. 23)	Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19-20; Cor. 11:26-28)
		<b>Sacrifices</b>	continual offering of animals and food offerings (Lev. 1-7; Heb. 10:1) as a reminder of sins (Heb. 10:30)
	<b>Law</b>	Ten Commandments (Ex. 20; Deut. 5) and 603 additional laws governing moral, civil and religious affairs, fulfilled by adherence to	Sermon on the Mount reveals Christian attitude and way of thinking (Matt. 5-7), law of Christ fulfilled by

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<b>Contrast</b>	the letter of numerous rules (Ex., Lev., Deut.)	loving God and humans (John 13:34-35; Rom. 3:8-10; Gal. 5:14; 6:2; 1 John 2:3-6; 3:7-10, 21-24)
	the letter kills (Rom. 4:14-15; 2 Cor. 3:6), slavery (Gal. 4:24-25; 5:1)	The Spirit gives life (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6), freedom (Gal. 4:26; 5:1)
<b>Main feature</b>	the law was a shadow of the good things to come (Heb. 10:1)	Jesus Christ, God in the flesh (Isa. 42:1-7; 49:5-13; Heb. 1:9; 11-15; 10:5-10)
<b>Contact with God</b>	through priesthood (Lev. 1-7)	individual comes to God's throne (Heb. 4:16)

## HAS THE NEW COVENANT BEEN MADE?

By Michael Morrison

Several people teach that Christians should keep the Sabbath and several other laws that are found in the Old Testament. However, Christians are not required to keep the Sabbath, to keep annual festivals, to avoid “unclean” meats, and to give two or three tithes. One approach that can help people understand this is a study of the biblical covenants. Below are three Question and Answers that focus on the covenants.

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**Question:** Has the new covenant been made?

**Answer:** In the old covenant, God listed numerous laws and promised to drive the Canaanites out of the land (Exodus 20-23). The people agreed to obey God, and Moses sprinkled “the blood of the covenant” on the altar and on the people, finalizing the covenant (Exodus 24:1-8). Even though the covenant had been made, Israel’s relationship with God was only in its beginning stages. They had not yet demonstrated whether they would be obedient, and God had not yet given them the land he had promised.

Hebrews 8:6 tells us that Christ’s covenant “is founded on better promises.” It “was established,” says the King James Version; the New American Standard says it “has been enacted.” In other words, the new covenant has been made. The Greek verb is *nomotheteo*, meaning “to give or to establish a law” (Louw-Nida lexicon). In Hebrews 8:6, it is in the perfect tense, indicating that something was completed in the past and it continues to have an effect. This verse clearly says that the new covenant has been legally made, and it continues in that legally ratified status.

Analogies, such as the analogy of a covenant as a marriage agreement, cannot negate the clear meaning of Hebrews 8:6. Some of the new covenant promises have not yet been fulfilled, but we have been given a down payment as a guarantee that all the promises will be fulfilled. In contract language, the agreement has been signed, though all the goods have not yet been delivered.

Covenants were traditionally ratified with the blood of a sacrifice (Genesis 15:8-18; Exodus 24:1-8). The new covenant was also ratified with sacrificial blood. Hebrews 10:29 calls the blood of Jesus the “blood of the [new] covenant,” which has sanctified us, that is, made us holy. His sacrificial death “has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (verse 14). The

blood of the covenant has been applied to us; the new covenant has been made and ratified. Our relationship with God may have only begun, but it *has* begun, and it is continuing on the basis of the new covenant, made possible by the blood of Jesus Christ. He is the guarantee and the mediator of the new and better covenant (Hebrews 7:22; 8:6).

Jesus mentioned the new covenant during his last meal with his disciples. The cup of wine represented “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). Jesus’ blood, the blood of the new covenant, was poured out for us at the crucifixion, ratifying the new covenant. No one can alter or annul this covenant; it has been made.

Paul wrote that God “has made us...ministers of a new covenant,” which is characterized by God’s Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:3-6). A covenant must be made before it can be administered, and the fact that we have been given the Holy Spirit indicates that the new covenant has already begun to be implemented in us. God’s law is written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit, which guarantees the future promises.

We should live under the terms of the new covenant. The reason we should live this way is that the new covenant has been made.

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**Question:** The NIV says that the old covenant is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). The King James Version, however, says only that it is decaying and growing old, implying that it is still here. Can you prove from the King James Version that the old covenant is obsolete?

**Answer:** Hebrews 10:9 (KJV) says that Jesus Christ, as God in the flesh, came to do the will of God the Father. He *took away* the first covenant so he could establish the second. Hebrews 8:6 (KJV) says that he is the mediator of a better covenant, and that the better covenant has already been established. These two verses show that the old covenant has ended. When he established the new covenant, Christ made the old covenant obsolete. The new agreement replaces the old. Our relationship with God is on the basis of the new covenant, not the old.

The old covenant included both the tabernacle and the sacrificial system (Hebrews 9:1). These are now obsolete, indicating that the law requiring them is also obsolete. We do not have to offer both physical and spiritual sacrifices; we do not keep all the old laws and simply add the Holy Spirit to help us keep them in their spiritual intent as well as in the letter. Instead, such commandments are set aside, disannulled, no longer required, made obsolete (Hebrews 7:18).

For example, the old covenant required sabbatical years, jubilee years, tree-branch booths, phylacteries and the destruction of mildew-infested homes. The reason that we do not have to obey these laws is because the covenant itself is obsolete. (Some old covenant laws, such as the law forbidding adultery, are continued into the new covenant. But they existed before the old covenant, and we can demonstrate their continuing validity from the new covenant.)

2 Corinthians 3 also discusses the old and new covenants. Verse 3 refers to the tables of stone on which the old covenant was written, and the writing of the Holy Spirit on the heart, which is the new covenant. Paul notes that the new covenant is already being administered (verse 6). The old covenant was glorious, Paul said (verse 7), but he also refers to that covenant as “that which is done away” (verse 11).

Galatians 3 also makes it clear. Verse 17 mentions the Abrahamic covenant and a law that was added 430 years later. What law was given 430 years after a covenant was made with Abraham? The law at Sinai, including the covenant and all its sacrifices — both its commandments and its penalties. This law was added long after the covenant of promise through faith was given to Abraham. The covenant at Sinai was made with Abraham’s descendants in Moses’ day “because of transgressions, till the seed [Christ] should come to whom the promise was made” (verse 19).

The laws and penalties were designed to be a “schoolmaster” (KJV) to bring us to Christ (verse 24). Before we were brought to faith in Christ, we were “held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith would be revealed” (verse 23, NIV), but after faith has come, we are no longer under a “schoolmaster” (verse 25). Galatians is talking about an added law that has become obsolete.

Is it possible that this additional law was only the law of sacrifices? Were the sacrifices temporarily added to the Ten Commandments, which are (according to this interpretation) a permanent covenant? If so, verse 17 would then need to be understood in this way: “The law, which was added two months after the covenant was made, cannot disannul the covenant.” But this is not what verse 17 says. The covenant mentioned in verse 17 is the promise given to Abraham, and “the law” is the covenant made at Sinai 430 years later. Galatians is not arguing about sacrifices at all. The Levitical sacrifices could not be performed in Galatia, and they were not part of the controversy Paul was addressing.

In Galatians 4, Paul is contrasting the covenant given to Abraham with the covenant given to Moses. Abraham had two sons, and in an allegory they

are compared to two covenants (verses 22-24). The son of the bondwoman corresponds to Sinai and the temple in Jerusalem (verses 24-25). But Christians are children of the promise — we are under the Abrahamic covenant, not the Sinaitic covenant (verses 28, 31). “Cast out the bondwoman and her son,” Paul quotes with approval (verse 30). Do not put yourself under the old covenant, but under the new.

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**Question:** Is the new covenant really established? Hebrews 8:11 says, “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Does this verse prove that the new covenant isn’t established, since not everyone knows the Lord?

**Answer:** We must understand the context of the verse. Hebrews is a book that compares and contrasts an old order with a new order. It shows that Jesus Christ is superior to the angels, superior to Moses and the Aaronic priesthood, and he is the mediator of a better covenant.

After drawing these comparisons and contrasts, the author shows that something was wrong with the old order, the old covenant (Hebrews 8:7). The flaw of that covenant was with the people (verse 8). In light of this, God announced that he would establish a new covenant. This covenant would include better promises.

In verses 8-12, the author quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34, which is a prophecy about a new covenant. This covenant focuses on three things: God will write his laws on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10), knowledge of the Lord will be available from the least to the greatest (verse 11) and our sins will be remembered no more (verse 12). Verse 13 ends the section by stating that the first covenant is obsolete. We are now under the new covenant.

The author quotes part of Jeremiah’s prophecy again in Hebrews 10:15-18. In this passage he says that the forgiveness of sins has been achieved, implying that Jeremiah’s prophecy has been fulfilled. In using Jeremiah’s prophecy, the author shows that in the old covenant, people did not personally know the Lord because they had to be taught about him. Human mediation accompanied the old covenant. Knowledge of God was made possible through the priesthood. Instead of the law being internalized or written on the “inward parts,” the people memorized the law as an external code. This resulted in a knowledge about God but not necessarily a personal relationship with him.

Under the new covenant, believers know the Lord through a personal

relationship with him. Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy says that those who know the Lord, from the least to the greatest, will know the Lord in a better way. Believers know the Lord without a required human mediator or the memorization of an external code.

In the new covenant there is no class (such as priests) who alone could teach others to know the Lord, no class distinctions by age or sex or race, but the knowledge of God is available to everyone across the whole range of humanity. Everyone in the Body of Christ is on an equal footing through a common and personal knowledge of God (see Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, volume 15, page 177).

Covenants, like promises, are made *before* they are fulfilled. For instance, part of the Abrahamic covenant began to be fulfilled centuries after it had been made. The Mosaic covenant was made 40 years before the Israelites even entered the land that it promised. Likewise, God has already made his new covenant with Christians, even though they have not received the fulfillment of all its promises. The covenant requires faith precisely because the promises are not yet fulfilled, but the promises have been given and the covenant has been made. The agreement and relationship has been established. The church still looks forward to the fulfillment of all the promises of the new covenant. Many blessings do await, and they are new covenant blessings.

The *prophecy* that the new covenant would be made has been fulfilled, for the new covenant *has* been made. The new covenant has *begun* to be fulfilled, but it has not been completely fulfilled yet, for not all the promises have been completed. But it is still correct to say that the new covenant has been made, even though many people do not yet know the Lord.

## THE NEW COVENANT IN A NUTSHELL

By Joseph Tkach

Someone asked, “We know that the new covenant brought an end to various old covenant rituals. But what is the new covenant itself? Can you put the new covenant in a nutshell?”

Good question — and I will respond in a nutshell. Then I will expand it, because the central truth can be developed in many ways as we study this in the Bible.

In simple terms, a covenant is *an agreement* between two parties. It can be an agreement between a husband and wife, a friendship pact between two people, an alliance between two nations, or an agreement between God and humans. The new covenant is an agreement between God and humans. God sets the terms, he makes the offer, and we respond to it with either cooperation or resistance.

How can we have a relationship with God? How can we become his friends? How can we become citizens of his holy nation? Sinful humans aren’t in a position to make deals with their Creator. As sinners, we are alienated from him, estranged from him. Sin and corruption cannot enjoy his presence. But because he is good, because he loves us, God has acted decisively to end our alienation and restore us to his household.

### God sets the terms

God is the one who sets the terms of this relationship. He tells us in advance what he will do. He calls the shots, and makes us free to respond to his terms.

The terms God has set are these: Jesus died for our sins. In a financial metaphor, he has paid for them. There is no more debt. We have been forgiven. Our works cannot add anything to it. God has in Christ acted unilaterally, reconciling all things to himself (Colossians 1:20).

At its core, the new covenant is *Jesus Christ*. He embodies everything the new covenant is. He is the Word of God and the Son of God, made human for us. He is the Message of God, the Mind of God, the Meaning of God, made flesh for us to see and know and love. In himself, he enables us to be friends with God. In Jesus Christ, God has given us a new basis for our relationship with God. This is the covenant God has given; we respond to Christ with either yes or no.

You might ask, How can Jesus — a person — be an agreement? In a prophecy about Christ, Isaiah 42:6 says that the Messiah, or Christ, would be made a covenant. The Bible calls Jesus a mediator, a go-between. A mediator's purpose is to get two parties to relate positively to each other. His work is what causes the barriers to come down and the relationship to bear positive fruit. Jesus was the greatest diplomat, the brilliant negotiator of the greatest covenant, or agreement, in human history. Jesus could do that because he was both God and human. He was not only able to *represent* both parties, he was able to *be* both parties. As God, he did what only God could do: forgive us. As a human, he did what humanity was supposed to do: respond perfectly. Just as his death counts for all humanity, so does his perfect response.

How does Jesus accomplish this? Romans 5:8-10 puts it like this: *Christ died for us*, and because of his death we are now *justified* before God, *saved* from any fears of punishment and *reconciled* to God as one of his dearly loved children. Through the death and life of Christ, God has provided the one and only means by which we can be the faithful and loving friends and children he created us to be.

How should we respond to what Jesus has done? We should turn away from self-reliance and put our confidence completely in Christ to wash us clean of sin, clothe us with righteousness and bring us into the family, the household, the kingdom of God. One way to describe it is that we quit doing things the devil's way (relying on self) and do things God's way. We stop building our own kingdom and accept the kingdom he has built for us. We accept the covenant-promise he has given us. That is how we can be in harmony and allegiance with him.

## Different ways to describe it

Let's look at some additional aspects of this wonderful gift of our loving Father. Paul says that Christ died for us; he also says that Christ died for our sins (Romans 4:25). Although he was innocent, he suffered the consequences of our sins. In some ways this is a very simple concept, but there are very complex ideas under the surface — see Galatians 3:13 or 2 Corinthians 5:21 for two examples.

The term “justified” was sometimes used in a courtroom. In the courtroom of heaven, God declares us justified, or not guilty, because of what Christ has done for us. When Paul says that we are reconciled, he is referring to a relationship that has gone from hostility to friendship.

Paul also uses language from the slave market to say that we have been bought at a price (Christ himself being that price) so that we may now serve our new Master. Other biblical images include those of being cleansed, of

being newly created, of being born again, of being adopted. Each of these ideas helps us see different aspects of the central picture: that we are able to have a good relationship with God because Jesus Christ died for us and was raised again.

Jesus Christ is the basis of the new covenant, the bond of friendship that God has given us. We can accept this or reject it. Because he loves us with indescribable love, he urges us to accept it — to put our faith, our trust, in Jesus Christ — to trust him with our lives, and to accept him as our only means of salvation.

All this is a gift — it is not something we could ever earn. If we look at what we *deserve*, we deserve to be alienated from God and therefore separated from the joy of knowing him and participating in his eternal blessings. *But the good news is that we don't have to be alienated* — Christ has already reconciled us. We can live forever enjoying harmony with God because of Jesus Christ, because of what he did for us in his death and resurrection.

Our salvation — being rescued from destruction and restored as favored friends and children of God — depends entirely on Jesus Christ. He is the basis of this great rescue. Accepting him is the one requirement that God makes as the basis of this magnificent agreement we call the new covenant.

Accepting Jesus is not a work that we perform in order to meet the conditions of the contract, so to speak — it is simply an intrinsic part of enjoying what God is giving us. In one respect, we have already been brought into a new relationship with God — our choice is whether to enjoy it, or resist it. When we enjoy a beautiful sunset, our joy has nothing to do with our skill, and we certainly have not earned the joy — that is simply the appropriate response.

If we believe the good news and trust in Jesus, then we are experiencing a right relationship with God (and all the responsibilities and privileges that go with that right relationship). Jesus Christ is the core of the new covenant. That is why he must always be the center of our church, our preaching, our proclamation and our personal lives.

## Entering the kingdom

Another way to talk about our relationship with God is to use kingdom terminology. The good news of the kingdom of God is that we are qualified to the kingdom through Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:12-13). Without him, we are disqualified. But *he* is qualified, because he is the Son of God, and he has united himself to us. By becoming one of us, taking our sins on himself, dying in our place and being raised to glory, he has perfected us and taken us up into himself. Because we are now, as believers, united with him, we are qualified to be in his kingdom.

Jesus is the door, the key and the true path to the kingdom of God. The good news is that God has qualified humans to enter his kingdom in Jesus Christ. We cannot qualify on our own, no matter how good we are. Nor does “being good” maintain our salvation. Salvation is a free gift, from start to finish.

The Bible uses many ways to describe the same thing. Being in the kingdom is the same as being adopted as children of God. It is the same as being born again as his children. It is the same as being redeemed from death. It is the same as being washed by the blood of the Lamb, or justified by his death. All these phrases are about the gift of a right relationship with God, and in all of them, Jesus Christ is the key, the focus. The “new covenant” is simply another way of talking about the same thing.

Jesus preached about the kingdom — a kingdom we are invited to enter in this life. The apostles, however, preached primarily about salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are not two different messages. The apostles were not misrepresenting the message of the Master. Rather, the apostles were inspired to explain the message of the kingdom of God in different ways. The kingdom is not good news unless we can be part of it. The gospel is a message about how humans receive intimate loving fellowship with God, how they enter his kingdom — something that is made possible only by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## **The gospel**

The new covenant is, to use another nutshell, *the gospel of salvation*. It describes how we have been saved from sin and death so we can live forever in a loving relationship with God through the saving work of Jesus Christ for us. We always keep coming back to the center-point, Jesus Christ. He is God himself, who has offered himself to us. If we want eternal life with God, it must be through Jesus Christ.

At its core, the new covenant is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the message of salvation by grace through faith in him. That is why it is important for us to understand it and teach it. It is the basis of our eternal life!

That is why we emphasize Jesus Christ. That is why we emphasize faith and grace. That is why we emphasize the new covenant, the gospel and eternal life. All these are bound up with each other. The gospel tells us that we can live forever with God — not because of good things we have done — but because of what Jesus Christ did for us. God gives us this amnesty, forgiveness, and a new and wonderfully good relationship with him. He tells us that he has accepted us, and urges us to believe this message of his goodness and put our confidence in what *he* has done for our salvation.

When Jesus announced a new covenant in his own blood (Luke 22:20),

he was announcing something dramatically new! Never before had God made a covenant using *human* blood. The previous covenants had used animal blood. God did not allow human sacrifices. Jesus was not announcing a renewal of the old covenant, or a slight revision. Instead, it was a completely *new* covenant, made in a way forbidden by the old covenant! Simply in making the new covenant, Jesus was announcing the fact that the old covenant no longer applied.

The new covenant has different blood, a different basis, and it presents a different basis of relationship between God and humans. The new basis is Jesus himself and his blood. Jesus did what we could not do, and he sacrificed himself for us as a gift, as grace. To enjoy the new covenant, we admit that we can't earn our way into God's presence — we will never be good enough — but we instead rely on his mercy.

In summary, the new covenant is the relationship we have with God, made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ — a relationship based on faith and grace rather than on works of the law.

Friends, I am deeply thankful that Christ has helped us come to know him and love him more deeply. I am awed by his mercy; I praise him for his greatness. I celebrate his birth into humility, his death for me on a shameful cross, and his resurrection into glory.

Saul of Tarsus thought he knew God and what God wanted him to do. Then he met Jesus, and from Jesus he received a chance to see again. From then on, he was a Christ-centered man. He resolved to know Christ and to preach Christ. O, that we might do the same!

## **THE NEW COVENANT IS OLDER THAN YOU THINK**

By Paul Kroll

Christians are under the guidance and authority of the new covenant, not the old covenant. This brings up an important question: What is the relationship between the two covenants?

It's sometimes said that the new covenant is a magnification of the old. In an informal way of speaking, this may be acceptable. However, by thinking of the new covenant as only a modification of the old, we may be led to accept the erroneous idea that the new grew out of the old. If the new covenant is only an expanded version of the old, then this creates a question. Perhaps some of the practices (such as avoiding unclean meats) commanded under the old should also be commanded in the new?

Also, to say that the new covenant develops from the old is to imply that the new is only a Johnny-come-lately, whose existence depends on something that came before it. We might be left with the wrong conclusion that the old covenant is the real basis for the new. This is absolutely not the case. That's why the title of this article is "The new covenant is older than you think." This title insists on the ironic conclusion that the new covenant existed long before the old covenant did.

The old covenant existed on a much lower, physical plane. It was kind of a teaching tool pointing to the intent of that which was God's original and ongoing purpose with humanity. This covenant had a limited existence for a specific time in history for a specific people under special circumstances. The best it could do was point, for a limited time and in a somewhat veiled way, to the reality of God's purpose in Christ — the new covenant.

On the other hand, the new covenant should be understood as *timeless*. We cannot attach an age to it, because it goes back to "the beginning." It was the original plan all along — what some theologians call "the covenant of grace," the covenant under which all other covenants were given. Creation has never existed without the new covenant, even though God's purpose is not yet fully achieved.

The New Testament insists that the new covenant goes back to the beginning. Of course, such passages do not use the words "new covenant." For this reason we need to get a working definition of the new covenant so

we can understand when it is being spoken about. Essentially, the new covenant can be defined in the following phrase: the working out of God's purpose to create human beings to transform them out of their fallen condition into the image of his Son, and give them eternal life.

But here is where things get complicated. We infer from Scripture that God purposed human beings to be created in such a way as to allow them – if they choose – to become prisoners of the fallen world order, which includes sin and death.

## **Bondage to sin and decay**

We understand this aspect of the new covenant from the New Testament. The apostle Paul, for example, summed it up with these words:

The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we are saved. (Romans 8:20-24)

Our bondage to sin and decay forms the underlying problem the new covenant is meant to deal with. Without the new covenant promises, every human would die and decay into eternal nothingness. God's purpose would be stopped dead in its tracks. But we know the rest of the story — the new covenant. God provided a means whereby sinning humans could be rescued from the evil world order, from Satan (Ephesians 2:2; 1 Corinthians 4:4; Revelation 12:9) as well as from sin and death. God, in the person of the Son or Word, would become a human being (Jesus Christ), would die for humanity's sins, and be resurrected as Savior.

God would forgive humans their sins, image them in his Son through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, and ultimately raise them from the dead. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the new covenant. Under the new covenant, sin and death are defeated, and God's purpose to provide humans with eternal life comes to pass. That is the new covenant in a nutshell.

But to say it again, the new covenant is much older — eternally older — than the old covenant. (Since God's purpose ultimately wins out, his purpose is as good as done, even before it occurs it is manifested in creation.) A

number of New Testament verses testify to the eternal existence of God's plan, now known as the new covenant. These scriptures refer to the promise of Christ's atoning work and God's purpose to give eternal life in him.

Christ is the basis of the new covenant. Let's see, in rapid-fire fashion, how insistently these scriptures tell us of the eternal existence of the new covenant.

- The new covenant is God's "eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ephesians 3:11).
- Jesus (the Lamb) "was slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).
- We were redeemed from our empty way of life by the blood of Christ, who "was chosen before the creation of the world" (1 Peter 1:18-20).
- God's "work has been finished since the creation of the world" (Hebrews 4:3).
- It was God's purpose to choose humans for salvation "before the creation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4).
- The kingdom we are to inherit has been prepared "since the creation of the world" (Matthew 25:34).
- God's purpose to save us and call us to his grace "was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time" (2 Timothy 1:8-9).
- The new covenant has been eternally in existence. It is "the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time" (Titus 1:2).

## Hidden purpose

The new covenant is extremely old. It appears new only because it didn't come into general force until nearly 2,000 years ago. The fact of its existence before this time was generally hidden from humans. (It was discussed in the Hebrew Scriptures, but we see this primarily in retrospect, because the Reality has now come.)

One of Jesus' purposes was to reveal the prior existence of this eternal new covenant. Matthew, quoting one of the prophets, said of Jesus' teaching: "I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world" (13:35). Paul said God's new covenant purpose to include all people in his plan of salvation "has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints" (Colossians 1:26). It was, said Paul, "God's secret wisdom" (1 Corinthians 2:7). Elements of the new covenant, however, existed partially long before the old covenant. Here are some examples.

- The new covenant ministry of Melchizedek existed before the old covenant ministry of Levi (Hebrews 7). The new covenant high priest in the Melchizedek line existed before the old covenant high priest Aaron.
- John tells us that the Logos existed before Moses.
- The new covenant “fruits” of the Holy Spirit existed before the giving of the old covenant law at Sinai.
- Salvation was given by grace to people such as Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham long before the old covenant people of Israel (Hebrews 11:5-12). In Galatians 3:8, Paul says God “announced the gospel” — the new covenant — “in advance to Abraham.”

The fact that the new covenant existed before the old has many implications for us. As Christians, we would want to look to that which came first — to the real thing — as our authority for truth and that in which we put our hope. That’s the new covenant. We would not look to the old covenant, which was but a temporary imitation — a copy or shadow.

Since the old covenant has become obsolete, it would of itself not determine how we should worship God. The old covenant institutions — temple, Levitical priesthood, law etched on stones, various worship regulations and the sacrificial system — would not be normative for us under the new. That is, we would not determine what must be done under the new covenant by looking at the institutions of the old. The book of Hebrews makes this clear. So does Paul in his letters.

## **Shadow and reality**

Let’s summarize the difference between the two covenants. The old covenant institutions were the shadow; the new covenant is the eternally existing reality. The shadow points to the real thing, and cannot exist by itself. The new covenant does not grow out of the old, just as a shadow does not grow out of the reality. Rather, the old covenant grew out of the new. Under the old covenant, Israel became the matrix or setting for the coming of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work.

The new covenant did not come into existence with Christ’s death, resurrection and coming of the Spirit (although that is when the old covenant ended), nor did the new covenant come into existence with Abraham. The new covenant came into existence as God’s original purpose for the human race. Even from before the beginning of time, God has purposed and promised to be gracious to all humanity, to bring us into a joy-filled, never-

## CHRISTIANS AND OLD TESTAMENT LAWS

ending relationship with Father, Son and Spirit.

The very old “new” covenant is the authority for how we are to live our lives in Christ and the framework – through Christ – of our faith.

## **ARE OLD TESTAMENT LAWS STILL BINDING ON CHRISTIANS?**

By Joseph Tkach

Christians often wonder, Are Old Testament laws still in force?

The New Testament gives two basic answers to this question: Yes, and no. Some verses indicate continuity, and others indicate change. Some verses maintain the validity of the law; others describe it as having been superseded by Christ.

If we look at one group of verses, we might conclude that we have to keep all Old Testament laws. If we look at another group of verses, we might conclude that they are all done away. Both answers have scriptural support and validity, so we need to look at both sides of the question.

Let's start with an emphasis on continuity. A passage like Matthew 5:17-19 can be used to argue that all Old Testament laws are still in force. Jesus didn't do away with *any* of God's laws. Rather, he emphasized that we ought to obey God not only in our actions, but also in our hearts. We have to keep every Old Testament law in the spirit, in its attitude and purpose. God's laws are written in our hearts and minds (Hebrews 8:10). They are internalized, so we should want to keep them. Hebrews 8:10 is a quote of Jeremiah 31:31-33, one could argue, and the laws that Jeremiah had in mind were the laws that were valid in his day: the old covenant laws. They were all given by God.

If this line of reasoning is correct, our love for God will motivate us to be circumcised, to keep the Jubilee year and sabbatical years. We will be diligent to avoid all forms of uncleanness, and we will wear phylacteries and only pure fabrics. We will offer sacrifices, not only for sin but also for fellowship offerings and thank offerings. When Jeremiah described the kingdom of God, old covenant customs were included.

### **Spiritual application**

These laws *are* still valid – but, as we know, they are applied in a spiritual way. The application of the law has been transformed by the coming of Jesus Christ. If our hearts are circumcised, it does not matter whether we have been circumcised in the flesh. If we are offering spiritual sacrifices, we do not need to offer animals.

If we are always forgiving debts and liberating people from bondage, we

do not have to do anything different on sabbatical years. If we are treating our livestock and farmland properly, we do not have to do anything different on sabbatical years. If we live by the spirit, the letter of these laws is not required.

If we examine our hearts for corruption and are being cleansed by Jesus Christ, then we do not have to destroy houses that have mildew. If our thoughts are pure, we don't have to worry about our fabrics. If we are always thinking of God and his laws, we don't have to wear phylacteries. The laws are valid, but the way in which we obey them has been transformed by the coming of Jesus Christ.

## **Spiritual dimension**

Some Old Testament laws are, in Christian application, spiritualized. They are removed from the dimensions of space and time and transferred into the spiritual dimension of attitude and interpersonal relationships.

Some people fight against spiritualizations. I've heard of one person who says Christians *should* offer animal sacrifices if the temple were still standing! And yet, as far as I know, he does not wear phylacteries or blue threads in tassels on his garments, nor does he advocate the destruction of a home when mildew is discovered. Moreover, I don't know why the absence of a temple should stop an obligation (if it really is an obligation) to sacrifice animals. Sacrifices were part of correct worship long before Moses, so the end of the old covenant simply means that sacrificing is no longer the exclusive duty of Levites. We ought to worship God like Abel, Noah and Abraham did – and they sacrificed animals.

According to this logic, ministers ought to make animal sacrifices, preaching all the while that these animals remind us of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We ought to kill Passover lambs in addition to partaking of bread and wine, because Jesus only added to the law; he did not take anything away. The sacrifices may be shadows, but even when the reality has come, the shadow still exists! Animal sacrifices are very educational, full of spiritual meaning, and it would be wrong to ignore any of God's commands.

I have been arguing facetiously, but elements of the above argument have been used to promote various old covenant customs. My main point is that some Old Testament laws are spiritualized. Almost everyone can agree on that.

However, there are all sorts of opinions concerning which laws may be spiritualized and are not. Some fringe groups want physical circumcision. Some want land sabbaths. Some may even want tree-branch booths. Some

want first title but not second and third. Some want weekly Sabbaths but not annual. Some want new moons. Many different doctrinal packages exist; each person thinks his own is the biblical one and that the others are inconsistent.

Some people are willing to say that the old covenant is obsolete; others are not comfortable with this statement. Some are willing to say that Gentiles do not need to keep the law of Moses; some are not willing to say that. Some are willing to say that the “law” of Galatians 3:19 is the old covenant; some are not.

With so many opinions floating around, it’s difficult to know where to start in a rational discussion. What biblical criteria can we use when discussing which laws are spiritualized and which must be kept in the letter as well as the spirit?

## Critical questions

We need to start by defining the issues – can the person agree that the new covenant has been established (Hebrews 8:6)? Can the person agree that Christians should live by the terms of the new covenant? Can the person agree that some Old Testament laws, such as tassels and phylacteries, are obsolete even if the New Testament says nothing about such laws? Can the person give a rational reason why some old laws are valid in the letter and others are not, or is the position irrational?

The Old Testament clearly commanded the Israelites to wear blue threads in tassels on their garments (Numbers 15:38-39). Was this law inspired by God, or not? Answer: It was. Is this law obsolete? Answer: It is. Who has the authority to declare a God-given law obsolete? Answer: Only God.

Does the New Testament specifically rescind this law? Answer: No. It says nothing about this specific law. Then how can we prove, with divine authority, that it is obsolete? Answer: Because the New Testament declares the entire old covenant obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). As a law code, as a source of laws, it is not valid.

That brings us to our second approach to Old Testament law: None of it is valid. Christians do not have to keep the law of Moses because those laws were a temporary package, designed to be in force only until the Messiah came. Now that he has come and given us a better covenant, the first is obsolete.

The old covenant was something like a contract. In business, people make contracts. A farmer agrees to deliver tomatoes to the store every Tuesday, and the store agrees to pay a certain price per pound. If he comes on Monday, the store is not necessarily obligated to buy. If he brings broccoli, the store is

not obligated to buy. Now, what happens if the farmer is simply unable to bring tomatoes on Tuesday because his entire crop is rotten? Perhaps there will be penalties; it depends on how the contract is written.

Suppose now that the store makes a new contract with the farmer: Bring every vegetable that you have, as often as you pick it. This new contract even specifies that the old contract is null and void. The old restrictions (only tomatoes, only on Tuesday) are irrelevant, because the new contract supersedes the old.

A farmer and a store can have several contracts simultaneously, concerning different vegetables, different prices and terms and expiration dates, but God has only one covenant with his people. We do not add the new on top of the old and try to keep both the letter and the spirit of every law. We do not have to wear tassels on the outside and keep the law in our hearts as well. The new has replaced the old (Hebrews 10:9), and we focus on the spirit rather than the letter. In some cases the proper spirit will cause us to keep the letter, but in other cases it will not.

Consider the spirit of adultery, for example. If we avoid lust, then we will also (without any need for a written law) avoid physical acts of adultery. The letter of this law is still valid. If we do not covet, then we will (without any need for a written law) not steal. This law is also valid in the letter. If we are not angry at our brother, we will (without any need for a written law) not murder. Again, the letter is valid. Keeping the spirit of the law has thwarted these sins at their very source.

However, consider how different the Feast of Unleavened Bread is. The spirit of the law is (in moral terms) that we repent of sin and (in Christological terms) that we partake of the sinless Bread of life.

If we are abiding by the spirit of the law, do we automatically (without any need for a written law) look to a calendar based on the agricultural seasons of Judea, and observe a specific seven days of the year, specifically by avoiding bread made with yeast and avoiding work on the first and seventh days? This is not automatic at all. Rather, it is based exclusively on the written old covenant. In this case, there is a dramatic difference between the spirit and the letter of the law.

Or consider whether we must live in booths during the Feast of Tabernacles. Arguing about the details would be missing the point, for the simple reason that the new covenant says that the old contract is obsolete. The new contract does not require booths, nor does it forbid them. It says nothing about tomatoes, Tuesdays, or palm-branch sukkahs.

Instead, the new covenant requires us to remember always that we are

strangers and pilgrims on this earth, journeying on our way to God's promised new earth (1 Peter 2:11; Philippians 3:20). Just as with phylacteries and tassels, if we keep this law in our hearts, we do not need to worry about the letter. The purpose has been fulfilled.

## **Fulfillment in Jesus Christ**

We know that sin offerings were shadows of the real sacrifice for sin, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:1-3). Now that the real sacrifice for sin has been made, the physical symbolism does not need to be reenacted. But what about peace offerings and fellowship sacrifices? The New Testament doesn't specifically say that they are done away, but Jesus Christ fulfilled them, too. We keep these laws in the spirit, not in the letter.

Jesus has made atonement for us once for all, making us at one with the Father. We do not need to commemorate Christ's atonement with the goat rituals of Leviticus 16. Their purpose has been fulfilled, and the purpose for fasting on the 10th of Tishri (Leviticus 16:29-31) has also been fulfilled. Fasting can be a beneficial spiritual discipline — but it is neither commanded for nor restricted to the Day of Atonement.

Christ, by bringing a new covenant, has transformed the law. The same underlying law still exists — the law of love. Jesus did not change that law at all. Rather, he fulfilled it. The old covenant, including the sacrifices, tassels and Jubilee years, had specific, physical applications of the underlying law of love. But those specifics are, in many cases, now obsolete. The spirit of the law remains, but the letter does not. The old covenant way is not the way to apply the purpose of the law. There are other ways to express our devotion to God and our love for our neighbors.

The Sabbath commandment, as our last example, had several purposes. It was a reminder of creation; it was a reminder of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt; it was a reminder of their special relationship with the Creator. It provided physical rest for animals, servants and families.

Morally, the Sabbath symbolized our duty to cease from evil works. Christologically, it symbolized our need to find spiritual rest in Christ, to trust in him rather than our own works for salvation. It symbolized the completion of our creation at the end of the age.

Now, if we have the spirit of the law written in our hearts, will we automatically, without need for written instructions, refuse to work on a particular day of the week? Will we, from our hearts, know that holy time extends from evening to evening? Will we automatically perceive that this specific time is so important that we should be willing to lose our jobs

because of it? The answer is obvious: No. These things are dependent on the written old covenant. They are not automatic even if our hearts are right with God. The spirit of the Sabbath law does not automatically produce the letter – but Christians are to focus on the spirit.

## **Perpetual remembrance**

The real purpose is that we enter the rest of God through faith in Christ. Our salvation is in him, not in a specific day of the week. If we are in Christ and he is in us, we will always remember our special relationship with him. We will be in perpetual remembrance of the new creation being done in us. We will cease from evil work every day of the week. We will do good works on every day of the week. We will worship on every day of the week. We will also recognize that new covenant love should motivate us to meet with one another regularly to encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Resting on the Sabbath may picture a changed life, but many Sabbath-keepers do not have changed lives. Sabbath-keeping cannot change our hearts. Spiritual Sabbath-keeping, however, does change our hearts – because spiritual Sabbath-keeping means the life of faith in Christ, which changes us from the inside out. Jesus Christ has magnified the Sabbath law far beyond the temporal restrictions of the letter. If we are keeping the spirit of this law, the physical restrictions are not required. It is not wrong to rest on the Sabbath day. The physical benefits are still there. But it is wrong to see the physical as required for all Christians.

But, some say, we should keep both the letter and the spirit of this law. It is easy to make that claim, but there is no proof for it – and there is certainly no reason to condemn people on the basis of a different interpretation of how we should obey God. It is just as easy to make the claim that people truly abiding by the spirit of the tassels will also be wearing tassels. The flaw of such logic is exposed by the realization that the new covenant declares the old contract obsolete. We must focus on the spirit and purpose of the laws.

A Sabbatarian approach to the Sabbath emphasizes Matthew 5:17-19, and that usually leads to a distorted meaning for such verses as Colossians 2:16 and Romans 14:5.

However, after we recognize that the letter of some Old Testament laws is obsolete, then we realize that Matthew 5:17-19 has to be qualified or restricted in some way. So do Romans 3:20, 31; 7:12, 14 and other verses of continuity. These verses do not tell us which specific laws are still in force, and they do not prove the continued validity of any specific law. They are general, not specific.

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Once we recognize that some Old Testament laws, although still valid in purpose, are obsolete in the letter, then we are free to accept the implications of what Paul wrote in Colossians 2:16. We should not let anyone judge us regarding Sabbath days, just as we shouldn't let them judge us regarding new moons. Everyone should be convinced in their own mind, and they should not judge other Christians regarding such matters.

## **CIRCUMCISION: A TEST CASE FOR EVALUATING OLD TESTAMENT LAWS**

By Michael Morrison

Circumcision was an essential part of religious practice for the nation of Israel. Is circumcision a required practice for Christians today? Let's examine the biblical evidence and explore the validity of arguments concerning old covenant customs.

### **Abraham**

In the first biblical mention of circumcision, God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. God said to Abram, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." God then explained his part of the covenant — he would be the God of Abraham's descendants and give them the land of Canaan (Genesis 17:1-8); God then further explained Abraham's part of the covenant (verses 10-14). "This is...the covenant you are to keep." Every male was to be circumcised, and this physical rite was to be "the sign of the covenant" with God, and it was "an everlasting covenant."

Every male in Abraham's household was to be circumcised immediately, and from then on every new baby boy was to be circumcised on the eighth day. Whether they were Hebrews or whether they were purchased as slaves, the males had to be circumcised. If they were not, they would be cut off; they had broken the covenant.

Abraham did what God told him to do (verses 23-27; 21:4). The practice of circumcision became the defining characteristic of the Abraham-Isaac-Jacob clan. Many years later, the sons of Jacob used this custom to get revenge on Shechem (Genesis 34:14-29). They said they could cohabit and intermarry only with people who were circumcised (verse 16).

### **Moses**

The custom may have continued when the Israelites lived in Goshen. But Moses, reared in the court of Pharaoh and later a refugee in Sinai, did not circumcise his own son. Zipporah had to do it (Exodus 4:24-25). Under the leadership of Moses, the entire nation of Israel did not circumcise their male infants in the wilderness. Joshua had to reinstitute it (Joshua 5:2-8).

It is not clear why these lapses occurred, but it *is* clear that the omission had to be corrected before the plan of God proceeded. God could call Moses even when he was a covenant-breaker, but his son had to be circumcised before Moses could do his job. Nor would God allow the Israelites to live in the promised land unless they were faithful to the covenant God had made with Abraham.

Since circumcision was already a requirement for the Israelites, it is natural that it was included within the old covenant laws (Leviticus 12:2-3). People had to be circumcised to participate in the Passover (Exodus 12:44, 48).<sup>1</sup> Even Gentiles had to be circumcised if they wanted to worship God by means of this festival.

However, circumcision was not merely a physical and external practice. It symbolized something internal. God described idolatry and disobedience as a result of an uncircumcised heart (Leviticus 26:41); he described repentance as a circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6). This spiritual meaning did not eliminate the need for the physical practice; the Israelites were to obey both the letter of the law and its symbolic meaning.

## History and prophecy

The Israelites apparently continued the practice of circumcision. Even in the lawless period of the judges, the Israelites were distinguished from others by the fact that they were circumcised (Judges 14:3; 15:18; 1 Samuel 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Samuel 1:20; 1 Chronicles 10:4).

When Samson and David called the Philistines “uncircumcised,” it was not a mere medical description — it was an ethnic, earthy insult. It was probably impolite then, just as it is impolite today, to make references someone’s sexual organ. But this use of the term illustrates how definitive the practice of circumcision was for Israelite self-identity, and the depth of emotion involved in this ethnic tradition.

The prophets used the term “uncircumcised” as a synonym for Gentiles (Isaiah 52:1). When Ezekiel predicted death for the ruler of Tyre and the Pharaoh of Egypt, he said they would die the death of the uncircumcised and be buried among the uncircumcised (Ezekiel 28:10; 31:18). This conveyed a death in opposition to God; the connotation was that these rulers were ungodly. This was developed further in Ezekiel’s lament for Pharaoh in Ezekiel 32. In verses 19-32, Pharaoh was said to have his fate with other uncircumcised soldiers who are now buried. Throughout, the implication is that they were all enemies of God.

Ezekiel criticized those who permitted uncircumcised people into the

temple (Ezekiel 44:7). The prophets elaborated on the *spirit* of circumcision, too. Jeremiah exhorted his people, who presumably were already physically circumcised, to circumcise their hearts (Jeremiah 4:4). It was a metaphor for repentance. God said he would punish Israelites and Gentiles who are circumcised in the flesh only and not in the heart (Jeremiah 9:25-26). Physical circumcision was not enough; spiritual circumcision was also necessary.

Isaiah emphasized the importance of circumcision in one of his prophecies of God's glorious rule. He described a time when only circumcised people would be allowed to enter the new city of Zion (Isaiah 52:1-2). In Isaiah's culture and time, that meant people who were physically circumcised. Isaiah may have also meant those who were circumcised in heart as well. This was part of his prophecy of redemption (verse 3) — when good tidings of salvation are preached and God rules (verse 7) — when the Lord returns to Zion (verse 8) and reveals salvation throughout the world (verse 10). Ezekiel also prophesied that only people who were circumcised in both the flesh and the heart could worship properly (Ezekiel 44:9).

## Controversy in the early church

The Law and the Prophets consistently upheld the need for circumcision, and the intertestamental period did, too. Circumcision was one of the Jewish customs forbidden by Antiochus Epiphanes (1 Maccabees 1:48). Hellenizers who tried to surgically reverse their circumcision were considered to have “abandoned the holy covenant” (verse 15).

Circumcision was so important to Jewish self-identity and worship that faithful Jews were willing to die rather than abandon this physical reminder that they were God's covenant people. The books of Maccabees record their eventual victory. Circumcision and other Jewish customs were enforced and were emphasized as religious obligations for Jewish people.

John the Baptist and Jesus were circumcised (Luke 1:59; 2:21). Jesus' only comment about circumcision was favorable: It was part of “the law of Moses,” and the Jews were willing to circumcise children on the Sabbath. Since it was a religious rite, it could be done on the Sabbath (John 7:22-23), just as priests could “desecrate” the Sabbath to perform sacrifices (Matthew 12:5).

Stephen mentioned the covenant of circumcision that God had given Abraham (Acts 7:8), but he criticized the Sanhedrin for having uncircumcised hearts and ears (verse 51). They were physically circumcised, but not obedient to what God had told them through Jesus. Physical circumcision should have been followed by a circumcision of the heart.

The biggest controversy about circumcision came when the gospel began going to Gentiles. Circumcised believers (i.e., Jews) were astonished when the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius (Acts 10:45). Circumcised believers criticized Peter for going to the house of an uncircumcised person and eating with Gentiles (Acts 11:2-3).

The problem surfaced again when more and more Gentiles began responding to the gospel by believing in the Lord Jesus (verses 20-21). Later, some Jewish believers came to Antioch and taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised or else they could not be saved (Acts 15:1). They also said that the Gentiles should obey the entire law of Moses (verse 5). In Antioch, this would not have included sacrifices (unless they traveled to Jerusalem), but it would have included other Jewish customs traceable to the five books of Moses. By “circumcision,” these messianic Jews meant full proselyte status, since circumcision implied an obligation to all the other laws (Galatians 5:3).

## Argument of the Judaizers

The Jerusalem conference concluded that circumcision was not required for Gentile believers. They did not have to obey “the law of Moses.” Today, we understand that circumcision is not required for Gentiles. But perhaps we will better understand the significance of this decision if we try to argue the case *for* circumcision. Luke does not report the actual arguments used by the Judaizers, but they could have made a strong case:

“Circumcision goes back to God’s eternal covenant with Abraham, in which God promised to be the God of his descendants. These Gentiles are claiming Abraham as their spiritual father. He is the father of the faithful, and Genesis 17:12 tells us that *all* who are his descendants, whether physically or otherwise, are under the covenant of circumcision. If they really have the faith that Abraham did, they will be willing to do what Abraham did. If they really have a covenant with the same God, they will gladly accept the sign of that covenant. The covenant was revealed as everlasting, not a temporary arrangement. It was commanded by God himself.

“God has called these people, and that is good. But just as our ancestor Israelites could not inherit the promises until they were circumcised, so also these Gentiles cannot inherit the spiritual promises (salvation) unless they are circumcised. Until they are circumcised, they are strangers to the covenant of promise. We should not allow them to participate in the bread and wine with us until they are circumcised; even though they have believed in Jesus our Passover, they should not partake of the meal or receive the benefit of his

sacrifice unless they are circumcised. There is solid scriptural precedent and support for this. The example of the ancient Israelites was written for our admonition.

“Circumcision is not only a physical command from God; it also has important spiritual symbolism. It pictures repentance, but this symbolism doesn’t eliminate the need to obey God physically, too. If these people really were repentant, they would not want to spiritualize away God’s command to be circumcised. Isaiah clearly said that when the good news of salvation is preached, only circumcised people will be able to enter the daughter of Zion, which is the church today. These Gentiles are being grafted into Israel, and they therefore need to keep Israelite laws.

“What advantage is there in being circumcised? Much in every way! Our nation has the promises and covenants, and our Lord said that salvation is of the Jews. The only thing Jesus said about circumcision was positive. And he said that if something causes sin, we ought to cut it off. Circumcision helps us picture that important truth, but we lose its symbolic value if we abandon the practice. Circumcision has value if a person observes the law, and we certainly don’t want to encourage these new converts to be lawbreakers. Our Messiah specifically said that he didn’t come to do away with the law, and none of it would pass away. He fulfilled the symbolism of sacrifices, but that doesn’t do away with our need to obey the plain and clear commands of God.

“God justifies people by faith, but the faith isn’t genuine if these people aren’t willing to obey clear commands of God in the God-breathed Scriptures that are able to make us wise for salvation. No one should rely on circumcision as a guarantee of salvation, but neither should we reject it. Abraham believed first, and then he obeyed. That’s what these Gentiles need to do to be saved. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.”

Would we be able to answer such an argument without the writings of Paul? We could read the conclusion of the Jerusalem conference, but then right after that we would read that Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). Paul was accused of teaching against circumcision (Acts 21:21), but that was clearly a false accusation. From Genesis to Acts, the Scriptures are supportive of the rite of circumcision except for one chapter. Although Acts 15 gives us the overall conclusion that circumcision is not required for Gentiles, it does not answer all the specific arguments that the Judaizers could have had.

However, Peter, Barnabas and Paul radically reinterpreted the law of circumcision by keeping the spiritual meaning but rejecting the physical rite. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they explained that Abraham received the

promises by faith before circumcision; therefore the circumcision of the most-respected patriarch, although commanded as an everlasting covenant for his physical heirs and extended household, cannot be a requirement for salvation. Why? Because Peter, Barnabas and Paul saw a dramatic *discontinuity* between the old and the new. Even a ritual confirming the promises, a ritual given hundreds of years before Sinai, could be swept aside, as a requirement for salvation, by the new situation that Jesus had inaugurated.

Few among us would have been so bold.

Many Jewish Christians could have been deeply troubled by the conclusion that circumcision was not required. An ancient and culturally important religious law was rejected without even a hint that Jesus was against it. Why was this necessary? Let us now see what Paul later wrote, and understand his rationale for the discontinuity between old and new.

## **Circumcised in and by Jesus Christ**

“Circumcision has value if you observe the law,” Paul writes (Romans 2:25), but he does not explain what that value is. After all, if a person observes the law he is counted as circumcised (i.e., in Abraham’s covenant) whether or not he is actually circumcised (verse 26). A Gentile who obeys is better than a Jew who disobeys (verse 27); mere circumcision cannot guarantee salvation. If a person is Jewish only externally, in physical circumcision, but not in the heart, such a person is not one of God’s people, since real circumcision is not “merely” physical (verse 28).

Paul’s comments so far might be agreeable to a messianic Judaizer who advocated that both physical and spiritual circumcision were necessary. But Paul’s next comment would be too sweeping: A man is one of God’s people if he is *inwardly* circumcised, since the real circumcision is a spiritual matter, of the heart, “not by the written code” (verse 29).

But what value is there in being circumcised? Or, in synonymous terms, what advantage is there in being a Jew? Much, replies Paul (Romans 3:1-2). He does not describe any health benefits, but he mentions that circumcised people have in their community the words of God (verse 3). That is a great value, but it is wasted if they do not obey — and that brings Paul to the crux of the problem.

There is none righteous, no not one. No one keeps the law perfectly; we all fall short. How then can we be saved? By faith. “There is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (verse 30). Justification by faith is the central reason that the

physical rite of circumcision is not necessary. Faith is a more significant identifying characteristic for those who are in good relationship with God.

Paul examines the example of Abraham again, and notes that Abraham was counted as righteous even while he was uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-10). Even though he later received a physical sign or seal of his righteousness, his righteous status before God did not depend on circumcision (verse 11). He is the father of all who faithfully live as he did before he was circumcised (verse 12). That was an exemplary faith, since Abraham packed up and moved without knowing where he was going.

To the Corinthians, Paul made it clear that if a person was called while uncircumcised, he should not attempt to change his anatomy (1 Corinthians 7:18). His reason is surprising: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (verse 19). The surprise is that circumcision *had been* one of God's commands, and yet it doesn't count. The law of circumcision was a religious rite that had nothing to do with our moral responsibilities to our neighbors.

Paul explained circumcision in greatest detail in his letter to the Galatians. They were being misled by a heresy that demanded that Gentile believers follow up their faith with physical compliance with old covenant commands. But Paul explained that it is wrong to view physical circumcision as *necessary*, because that would imply that faith in Christ was not enough. "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Galatians 5:2).

Paul did not forbid circumcision; we have already noted that he circumcised Timothy, whose mother was Jewish. But he explains that Titus, a Gentile, was not circumcised (Galatians 2:3). It was not a requirement for salvation, nor a requirement for leadership within the church. Circumcision is permissible as a voluntary practice, but it should not be taught as a requirement. It does not enhance anyone's standing before God. It should not be done as a commitment to old covenant laws, which was the issue in Acts 15 and Galatians 5:2-3.

Circumcision was only the beginning of the legalistic demands. What they were really insisting on was the whole law of Moses as a requirement (Galatians 5:3). They were insisting on the Mosaic covenant. Faith in Christ is great, they probably said, but we have to add to our faith some works as specified by the writings of Moses. Not so, said Paul. "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (verse 6).

Paul had to state that he was *not* preaching circumcision (verse 11). Why

was this necessary? Probably because the legalists were claiming that Paul was actually in favor of circumcision. Like other Jewish preachers seeking proselytes, Paul taught morals and virtues. Once people had accepted the morals, the Judaizers claimed, Paul would add circumcision as the capstone requirement. Not so, said Paul. He was not going to add requirements to what he had already taught the Galatian believers. He was so upset about the legalistic agitators that he exclaimed, “I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (verse 12). Moreover, if the Galatians submitted to this work of the law as if it were required, they could not be saved (verse 2)! They would be looking to their own works, instead of trusting in Jesus Christ.

The circumcisers, he said, had selfish motives. They wanted to look good by bringing in converts for messianic Judaism, and they didn’t want to be criticized by fellow Jews regarding the shameful death of Jesus (Galatians 6:12). They talked about obedience, but they were sinning and in need of the cross they were ashamed of (verse 13). Circumcision is obsolete, Paul said, since it has been replaced by the cross of Christ and all that the cross symbolizes (verse 14). Through faith in our Savior’s death on our behalf, we are acceptable to God *on the basis of faith*, and we do not need a physical sign of the covenant we have in Jesus’ blood.

“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation” (verse 15). If we are born anew in Christ, if we have faith that works itself out in love, then we are acceptable to God. We do not have to observe this ancient rite in order to be saved.

Because the Gentiles were uncircumcised, they were once considered excluded from the covenants of promise and cut off from God. But now, through the blood of Christ, they have been brought near to God (Ephesians 2:11-13). In Jesus’ own flesh, by his own obedience to old covenant rules, he has abolished the commandments and regulations that had separated Jews from Gentiles (verses 14-15). He gave all ethnic groups access to God and made them fellow citizens with each other; it is in Christ that we are being built together as a spiritual temple for God (verses 19-22).

Paul also warned the Philippians about the circumcision advocates. “Watch out for those dogs,” he said, using Jewish slang for Gentiles in reference to the Judaizers (Philippians 3:2). They are evil men, “mutilators of the flesh” — a Greek view of the rite of circumcision. But the Spirit fights against the flesh; Paul emphasizes that the physical rite, at least to the Greek mind, takes away from its spiritual meaning. It is *believers* who are the true circumcision — all “who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ

Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (verse 3).

Paul was circumcised (verse 5), but he counted it as loss for the sake of Christ (verses 7-8). His righteousness did not come from the law, but from faith in Christ (verse 9). Justification by faith means that the rite of circumcision is spiritually obsolete.<sup>2</sup> The principle of salvation by faith, which Abraham received before his circumcision, gave Paul the logical foundation for saying that obedience to a command of the Old Testament was not necessary for salvation. A physical requirement cannot supersede a promise of God given through faith.

Paul told his Gentile converts in Colosse that they were circumcised in Christ (Colossians 2:11). Since he is our righteousness, and we are in him, we have been given fullness in him (verse 10). We can be accounted righteous because he himself is righteous. Therefore we are as good as circumcised if we are putting off our sinful nature and putting on Christ. Our circumcision is not done by humans, but by Christ himself. How? Through baptism (verse 12). That is how we express publicly that Jesus is our Savior, that our old life died with him, that we — now circumcised in the heart — live in his service and that we have faith that we will live again through him.

When we were separated from God in our sinful nature, we were spiritually uncircumcised. But God has now made us alive again with Christ (verse 13). He forgave our sins, canceling our spiritual debts (incurred through transgressing the written code that was against us), including the regulations that concerned the symbolic forgiveness of sins (verse 14). He likewise canceled the regulation of circumcision, which may have symbolized repentance and sanctification. Since the fullness of those regulations has come, the symbol is no longer required. Christ has given us the fulfillment.

## **The eternal validity of God’s law**

Physical circumcision, which was once commanded by God, is no longer required. How can this be? God, the perfect and unchangeable Lawgiver, changed a fundamental aspect of his law — not only circumcision, but also sacrifices and temples and priesthoods. The infallible Scriptures contain commands that are obsolete.

But Jesus said,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until

everything is accomplished. (Matthew 5:17-18)

Jesus was talking about the entire Old Testament — the Law and the Prophets. How can his statement be reconciled with the fact that some commands of the Old Testament are not required today? Perhaps the best way to explain this is to understand that the laws are valid in their intent, but changed in their application. Laws regarding sacrifice continue to be valid, but we obey them through faith in Jesus Christ, who was the real sacrifice. The law required sacrifice, and Jesus confirmed its validity at the same time as he made it unnecessary for us to perform it.<sup>3</sup>

When God commanded animal sacrifices, he commanded an administration of the law that was perfectly appropriate to the times. When David said that God did not want animals (Psalm 51:16), that was also a perfectly appropriate administration of the law of sacrifice, because David was inspired to understand that repentance was the real command (verse 17). When Christ sacrificed himself, he rendered all animal sacrifices unnecessary (Hebrews 10:8-10). The administration of the law shifted to faith in the effectiveness of Jesus to remedy our sinfulness. When we have faith in him, we are effectively obeying the laws regarding sacrifice.

Likewise, we are obeying the law of circumcision when our attitudes are circumcised. The real law — allegiance to God — is eternally valid; the physical administration of it has changed. We live in a different age, needing a different administration.

God's law is to be "written on our hearts" by the Holy Spirit. This does not mean the details regulating physical specifics of worship practices, but it means the intent behind those regulations, especially faith and love and other fruits of the Spirit.

God's law did not originate with Moses — since sin existed before Moses and sin does not exist without law, law existed before Moses (Romans 5:12-14). God's law existed, and the people transgressed it. God's law does not depend on its Mosaic administration. There is a law *behind* the law of Moses. The Mosaic administration was a valid expression of God's holy, spiritual, righteous law, and it was perfectly appropriate for its situation, but it is not appropriate after the death of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

To impose or to attempt to combine the Mosaic administration into Christian faith and practice can cause many problems. New wine makes old wineskins burst (Matthew 9:17). The old covenant is obsolete. However, many of the Mosaic rules, especially those concerning the way we should treat other people, are still valid applications of the spiritual purpose. Jesus explained them in the Sermon on the Mount, for example.<sup>4</sup>

But many other laws of Moses, especially those concerning worship, are not valid practices because we have been given the spiritual fulfillment that those rites only symbolized. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for paying too much attention to those rules and not enough on human relationships (e.g., Matthew 23; Mark 7:11-13).

In summary, laws can remain on the books, and remain valid in purpose, and yet we may no longer be required to keep them in the letter. A simple citation of Matthew 5:17 does not automatically prove that an Old Testament law must be administered in the way it was under Moses. The law of circumcision illustrates the new covenant approach to old covenant laws.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Since the Israelites did not practice circumcision in the wilderness (Joshua 5:5), and uncircumcised people could not partake of the Passover, only the generations that left Egypt kept the Passover. There may not have been enough lambs in the desert to keep an annual slaughter for the whole congregation (Numbers 11:13).

<sup>2</sup> Circumcision may have medical benefits, but the Bible makes no such claim. If people want to argue that circumcision has medical benefits, they need to discuss the medical evidence both for and against it.

<sup>3</sup> John R. W. Stott writes,

“The law” was a comprehensive term for the total divine revelation of the Old Testament. None of it will pass away or be discarded, he says, not a single letter or part of a letter, until it has all been fulfilled.... The law is as enduring as the universe....

“The law and the prophets,” namely the Old Testament, contain various kinds of teaching. The relation of Jesus Christ to these differs, but the word “fulfillment” covers them all.... Jesus “fulfilled” it all in the sense of bringing it to completion by his person, his teaching and his work....

The whole ceremonial system of the Old Testament, both priesthood and sacrifice, found its perfect fulfillment. Then the ceremonies ceased. Yet, as Calvin rightly comments, “It was only the use of them that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed.” They were but a “shadow” of what was to come; the “substance” belonged to Christ. (John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1978, 1985, pages 71, 73)

<sup>4</sup> Stott writes:

The Old Testament contains ethical precepts, or the moral law of God.... Jesus fulfilled them in the first instance by obeying them.... He does more than obey them himself; he explains what obedience will involve for his disciples. He rejects the superficial interpretation of the law given by the

scribes; he himself supplies the true interpretation. His purpose is not to change the law, still less to annul it, but “to reveal the full depth of meaning that it was intended to hold.”...

Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because it is deeper, being a righteousness of the heart.... The scribes and Pharisees...were trying to reduce the challenge of the law, to “relax” the [ethical] commandments of God, and so make his moral demands more manageable and less exacting.... They made the law’s demands less demanding and the law’s permissions more permissive. [They did this for laws about interpersonal conduct, but the Pharisees had the opposite approach regarding the Sabbath!] What Jesus did was to reverse both tendencies. He insisted instead that the full implications of God’s commandments must be accepted without imposing any artificial limits. (Stott, pages 72, 75, 79)

## **ARE SOME MEATS UNCLEAN? A LOOK AT THE OLD TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF UNCLEANNES AND WHETHER THE NEW TESTAMENT SAYS SOME MEATS ARE UNCLEAN**

By Michael Morrison

Among the regulations God gave the ancient Israelites were various laws about cleanness and uncleanness. These laws were not concerned with hygiene, but ceremonial status. People who were unclean were not allowed to participate in religious ceremonies.

Do these laws apply to Christians? Let's examine the evidence in the five books of Moses and the New Testament.

To gain a context for the concept of clean and unclean foods, we will discuss other sorts of uncleanness first. This may seem tedious, but it will help us better understand the Old Testament concept of uncleanness.

### **Religious purity**

The word for "clean" (*tabôr*) may also be translated "pure," as we see in numerous places in Exodus. The tabernacle furniture and utensils had to be made with pure gold.

Jacob told his household to get rid of their idols and to "purify" themselves and change their clothes (Genesis 35:2). We are not told *how* they purified themselves, but it seems to have been related to worship. Later, Levites were purified with "the water of cleansing" (Numbers 8:6, 15, 21).

Portions of a sin offering had to be incinerated outside the camp in a clean place (Leviticus 4:12). Ashes of the burnt offering had to be put in a clean place (Leviticus 6:11). The priests were to eat sacrificial meat in a clean place (Leviticus 10:14).

If priests performed an offering when they were unclean, they were to be expelled (Leviticus 22:3). They could eat the offerings only when they were clean (Leviticus 22:4-7; Numbers 18:11-13).

If something unclean touched meat of the fellowship offering, that meat would have to be incinerated (Leviticus 7:19). Only clean people could eat meat of the fellowship offering (verses 19-21). If an unclean person ate the meat, that person was to be expelled (verses 20-21). However, unclean people could eat meat that was not part of a sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:15, 21-22;

15:21-22).

In these passages, the distinction between cleanness and uncleanness was made for religious purposes, relating to the Levitical and sacrificial system of ancient Israel.

## Sexual impurities

The Hebrew word for “unclean” (*tame*) may also be translated “defiled,” and this is how the NIV translates it in Genesis 34:5, 13, 27. When Shechem had sex with Dinah, she became defiled. A person who committed sexual sins was defiled (Leviticus 18:20-23). Adultery was called impurity or defilement (Numbers 5:12-30). A woman who remarried was defiled for her first husband (Deuteronomy 24:4). Witchcraft and child sacrifice would also defile a person (Leviticus 18:21; 19:31; 20:2-3).

Sin was involved in the cases above, but *in the vast majority of cases uncleanness did not come from sin*. For example, normal sexual intercourse rendered both men and women unclean (Leviticus 15:18). Childbirth made women unclean. For a boy baby, the mother was unclean for a week, and cleansed or purified 33 days later. For a girl baby, the mother was unclean for two weeks, and purified 66 days later. In both cases, her purification ceremony involved a burnt offering and a sin offering (Leviticus 12:1-8).

Menstruation caused uncleanness for seven days, and whoever touched the woman’s bed was unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:19-23). If a man slept with her during her menstruation, he would also be unclean for seven days, and any bed he laid on would also be unclean (Leviticus 15:24).

An emission of semen caused uncleanness, whether it was during intercourse or a nocturnal emission (Leviticus 15:16-18; Deuteronomy 23:10).

Unusual discharges, sexual or otherwise, caused a man or woman to be unclean (Leviticus 15:2-3, 25-27). If an unclean man touched anyone or spit on anyone, that person would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:7-8). If the unclean man touched a pot, the pot had to be broken (Leviticus 15:12). When the discharge stopped, the person could be cleansed after a week, with a sin offering and a burnt offering (15:13-15, 28-30).

## Unclean things

Uncleanness was *contagious*: “Anything that an unclean person touches becomes unclean, and anyone who touches it becomes unclean till evening” (Numbers 19:22). If people went into a quarantined house, they would be unclean (Leviticus 14:46). If people touched an unclean bed, they would be

unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:4-10). Even if people *accidentally* touched anything that would make them unclean, they were “guilty.” They had to confess their “sin” and make a sin offering (Leviticus 5:3-6).

If an unclean animal died and touched something, the thing would become unclean; it was to be put into water and would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 11:32). But if a dead animal touched a clay pot, the pot and its contents would have to be destroyed (verses 33-35). If a dead animal touched dry seeds, they would be clean, but if the seeds were wet, they would be made unclean (verses 37-38).

If people touched a corpse, they would be unclean for seven days and unable to be in religious activities such as the Passover (Numbers 5:2; 9:6-10; 19:11, 16). If a person died in a tent, all who were in the tent would be unclean for a week (Numbers 19:14).

Priests were allowed to become unclean as a result of the death of close relatives, but not of in-laws (Leviticus 21:1-4). But the high priest could not become unclean for any relative (21:10-12); nor could Nazirites (Numbers 6:7). If a person died in the presence of a Nazirite, the Nazirite had to offer a sin offering and a burnt offering because he “sinned” by accidentally being near a dead body (verses 9-12).

People who were unclean because of a dead person could be cleansed by the water of cleansing, which was made with the ashes of a specially sacrificed red heifer (Numbers 19:9-13, 17-19). Although the ashes could be used to purify people from sin (verse 9), people who made the ashes were unclean, and those who touched the water were unclean until evening (verses 7-10, 21). Those who failed to be cleansed in this way were to be expelled (verses 13, 20).

On the day of Atonement, the high priest atoned for the uncleanness of the Israelites (Leviticus 16:16, 19, 30).

## **Skin diseases**

Various skin diseases could cause a person to be considered unclean. If a sore was more than skin deep and the hair turned white, the person was unclean (Leviticus 13:3, 20, 25, etc.). If the skin problem spread, the priest pronounced the person unclean (verses 8, 22, 27). Such persons had to live outside the camp and warn people that they were unclean (verses 45-46).

When the people could be declared clean, the priest killed a bird, dipped another bird in the blood, sprinkled the person and released the live bird (Leviticus 14:2-7). The person then had to shave and wash twice (verses 8-9), then offer a guilt offering and a sin offering, and the priest was to anoint the person on the right earlobe, the right thumb and the right big toe (verses

10-32). Surprisingly, if the problem covered the entire body, the person was clean (Leviticus 13:12-13). If the sores turned white, the person was clean (verses 16-17).

Mildew was a similar problem. Clothing with spreading mildew was unclean and had to be burned (Leviticus 13:47-55); even if washing helped, the affected material had to be destroyed.

If a building had a spreading mildew, it had to be scraped and repaired. If the mildew did not return, the house was declared clean after a ceremony in which one bird was killed and the other released (Leviticus 14:48-53). If the mildew returned, the entire house had to be dumped outside the town in an “unclean” place (verses 33-45).

## **Purpose of the ceremonies**

The laws of uncleanness are unusual, and the purification ceremonies are unusual, too. Why would a red heifer be more effective than a black one? Was there any public-health reason for dumping sacrificial ashes in a clean place rather than an unclean one?

Does the legislation forbid husbands and wives to sleep in the same bed 25 percent of the time? Why was sexual intercourse defiling? Why were sin offerings required for circumstances beyond a person’s control? Why were pots broken rather than purified in a fire? Were people supposed to avoid uncleanness if they could? Was it somehow sinful to help bury a dead relative?

Why did the water of cleansing make some people clean and others unclean? Why are the rules so concerned about contagious skin diseases, but not any other contagious diseases? Why is a person affected from head to toe considered clean? Why anoint the right big toe instead of the left little toe?

There are many questions we cannot answer. The distinction between clean and unclean, as far as we can understand, was in many cases arbitrary. Above all, the rules reminded the Israelites that they were different from other peoples. Births and deaths reminded the people to be in harmony with God. Daily activities reminded the people that they were not perfectly holy. Various taboos gave the people frequent reminders that God had something to say about how they lived. Sacred things were different from ordinary things, and the Israelite nation, being holy to God, was different from other nations.

Laws about uncleanness might have given the Israelites some public-health benefits, but those benefits seem more incidental than the main goal. The quarantining of skin diseases may have helped prevent their spread, but it would have been better to quarantine other diseases, instead. It would have

been good to wash before childbirth as well as afterward. If mildew was a public-health hazard, it would have been dangerous for anyone to scrape the inside of the house walls.

God did not claim any health benefits for these rules. Therefore, although we might discern, from our 20th-century perspective, some health benefits to *some* practices, we cannot claim that they were *all* principles of health. These laws do not authorize us, as Christians, to examine skin sores and expel people from church services if their sores have gotten larger. (But, as an expression of love for others, we rightly quarantine for contagious diseases that the law of Moses does not mention.)

We do not forbid people to take the Lord's Supper if they touched a dead person the previous day. We do not check to see who has slept on which bed or how long it's been since they had a discharge of some sort. If we kill a mosquito on our arm, for an extreme example, we do not wash our clothes and consider ourselves unclean until evening even though we have touched the body of an unclean animal.

Moreover, we have no scriptural guidelines telling us which customs were arbitrary and which were beneficial. Therefore, we have no biblical reason to reject one rule and retain another. All the procedures for washing are now obsolete (Hebrews 9:10), superseded by the spiritual cleansing that Christ gives. In the new covenant, we do not have any rules for cleansing; they are not relevant to our relationship with God. (We believe in good hygiene and sanitation, but this is not under discussion in the biblical concepts of clean and unclean.)

Jesus' example is instructive. He touched people with leprosy and people with discharges (Matthew 8:3; 9:20). Even though the people were healed, under the old covenant rules, both they and Jesus would technically be unclean until evening. However, Jesus made no effort to avoid this. Nor do we read that Jesus ever participated in a cleansing ceremony. In the new covenant, a nocturnal emission or menstruation does not affect our status with God. It is not wrong to touch a dead person. There is nothing to repent of, to ask forgiveness for or to be cleansed of in the religious sense.

## **Unclean meat**

Now let us look at the distinction between clean and unclean animals. It's the same Hebrew word; there is no indication in the Bible that this uncleanness was different in nature or in purpose to other types of uncleanness.

Noah was told to make a distinction between clean and unclean animals

(Genesis 7:1-9). We are not told *why* Noah was to make the distinction; the only evidence we have in Genesis is that the clean animals were used for sacrifice (Genesis 8:20). After the flood, God said, “Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything” (Genesis 9:3). This indicates that humans did not eat any meat before the flood, and that all types of meat were permissible after the flood.

For Noah, the distinction between clean and unclean animals was for sacrifices, not for food; the passage says nothing about clean and unclean in reference to eating meat. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* says:

It seems that in the mind of this writer the distinction between clean and unclean animals was intended for sacrifices only: for in the following chapter he makes God say: “Everything that moveth shall be food for you” (Genesis ix. 3). (“Clean and Unclean Animals,” vol. 4, p. 110)

After the flood, Noah was allowed to eat “*all* the beasts of the earth and *all* the birds of the air...*every* creature...*all* the fish...*everything* that lives and moves...*everything*” (Genesis 9:2-4). Blood was listed as an exception, but unclean animals were not. The implication is, and the traditional Jewish interpretation is, that Noah could eat any kind of meat he wanted, just as he could eat any kind of green plant he wanted. (Some plants are poisonous, but God did not list the ones that are. He allowed humans to discern which plants are good; this is done by scientific investigation. Likewise, some animals are not good for food. God allowed Noah and his descendants to investigate which were good for food.)

Clean and unclean animals are listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. God makes no claims there regarding health. He does not say that camels have more parasites than cows do, or that fish-eating herons are more hazardous to us than fish-eating ducks. He simply gives some rules without giving reasons. We are not told why honeybees are unclean but honey can be eaten. We are not told why bottom-feeding carp may be eaten but bottom-feeding catfish cannot, or why grasshoppers are OK but crabs are not. Or perhaps we might wonder whether camel’s milk and human milk are equally forbidden.

If people touched a dead unclean animal, they would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 11:24-26). However, the same penalty applied to Israelites who touched a dead *clean* animal or ate any of it (Leviticus 11:39-40; 17:15). Leviticus 5:2-6 prescribes the additional penalty of a sin offering and a guilt

offering even for accidental touching.

Why did God give these rules? Leviticus 11:44-45 gives this reason: Since God is holy (separate), he wanted his people to be holy and distinct from other cultures. He wanted them to make distinctions in what they could do and what they should not. It was a reminder of holiness. Leviticus 20:24-26 gives a similar reason: God set the Israelites apart from the nations, so they must therefore make a distinction between animals:

I am the Lord your God, who has set you apart from the nations. You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals.... You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.

The rules in Deuteronomy 14 begin (verse 2) and end (verse 21) with a similar “setting apart.” If the Israelites found something dead, they were not allowed to eat it, but a Gentile *could* eat it. “Do not eat anything you find already dead. You may give it to an alien living in any of your towns, and he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner. But you are a people holy to the Lord your God.”

The meat was unclean, but it could be given or sold to a Gentile. But God would not encourage something harmful to be sold. This shows that the distinction between clean and unclean was designed for Israelites, not for health. Israelites had different rules than Gentiles; the rules about uncleanness separated the Israelite nation from Gentile nations.

Years later, Ezekiel criticized the priests for their failure to teach the people the difference between the clean and the unclean. They were failing to do their duty under the old covenant — failing to discern leprosy and failing to discriminate against those who had touched corpses and people with discharges. A similar criticism was given by Malachi: The people and priests were giving defective offerings. When the prophets criticized Levitical functions, they were not telling us what *we* are required to do today.

Ezekiel predicted a time when the priests would do their duty, teaching the difference between clean and unclean (44:23). But in these prophecies of correct worship, he also included sacrifices (20:40; 45:17) and a requirement for circumcision (44:9). When the prophets made predictions about worship, they were not telling us what *we* are required to do today.

## Why these rules?

The Bible never indicates that the uncleanness of animals was different from any other sorts of uncleanness. They served similar purposes. The Bible

doesn't make any claims about health benefits in these chapters. Although we can see some health benefits to avoiding certain types of meat, these benefits appear to be coincidental rather than the primary purpose of the list. If the problem was parasites, for example, a simple solution would have been to require thorough cooking. Moreover, clean animals can have parasites, just as unclean animals can.

If health were the primary purpose, then God didn't include enough laws. If God wanted to give us health laws, he would need to spend more time advocating exercise and sleep rather than forbidding seagulls and bats, which few people want to eat anyway. He would need to tell us about which mushrooms are dangerous, and which herbs increase our chances for cancer. He would need to tell us about the more dangerous health hazards.

Using human reason and scientific data, we might be able to discern some health benefits to avoiding certain types of unclean meat, but we cannot with biblical authority say that they are all harmful to health. The rules presumably did not harm the Israelites' health, but neither did God claim that this set of laws would benefit their health. He promised to help their health if they obeyed the entire covenant (Deuteronomy 7:15), but this was described as a supernatural blessing, not simply a natural result of a better diet. The laws were given in terms of holiness, not health. Holiness and health may overlap, but they are not synonymous.

God told the Israelites to make a distinction between the clean and the unclean because he had made a distinction between the Israelites and the Gentiles. Under the new covenant, however, God does *not* make a distinction between Israelites and Gentiles. He dwells in us all. We all have access to God equally — God hears our prayers whether we have touched a dead body or not, whether we have eaten pork or not. He calls on us to be holy, but holiness is in matters of the heart rather than external rules that have no connection with morality. Just as circumcision is now a matter of the heart, so also is the distinction between the clean and the unclean (Hebrews 10:22; James 4:8).

Jews have traditionally considered the dietary rules to be unnecessary for Gentiles. Gentiles need to observe these restrictions only if they want to become proselytes and come under the covenant made at Sinai. Gentiles could be saved, the rabbis taught, by observing laws that go back to Noah, and avoiding unclean meat was not part of their requirements. In this way, the Jews acknowledged that Genesis does not forbid the eating of unclean meat, and that it is a ceremonial matter, not a moral one. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* defines Noachian laws:

laws which were supposed by the Rabbis to have been binding upon mankind at large even before the revelation at Sinai, and which are still binding upon non-Jews.... They declared that the following six commandments were enjoined upon Adam: (1) not to worship idols; (2) not to blaspheme the name of God; (3) to establish courts of justice; (4) not to kill; (5) not to commit adultery; and (6) not to rob.... A seventh commandment was added after the Flood — not to eat flesh that had been cut from a living animal.... He who observed the seven Noachian laws was regarded as a domiciled alien...as one of the pious of the Gentiles, and was assured of a portion in the world to come. (“Laws, Noachian,” vol. 7, pp. 648-9)

Talmudic references are *Aboda Zara* 64b and *Sanhedrin* 56ab; see also *Sibylline Oracles* 4:24-34.

Christians today have a relationship with God based on the covenant of faith and promise made with Abraham (Galatians 3:6-9). Faith leads us to worship and obey our Lord and Savior, but ceremonial laws are no longer required. Laws that were added at Sinai do not set aside or add requirements to the Abrahamic covenant (verses 15-17). Circumcision is an example: it was added *after* the promise was given to Abraham, and is not necessary for Christians today. It may or may not have health benefits, but they are incidental and not a basis for religious requirement.

Although the distinction between clean and unclean animals existed before Abraham for sacrificial purposes, the meat of unclean animals was not a prohibited food until after the old covenant had been made. Under the old covenant, unclean meats were a matter of ethnic separation and worship regulation, and the rules are therefore not a matter of sin today — just as it is not a sin to touch a dead body or to have a skin disease or sleep in the same bed as your wife.

## Mark 7:15-19

In Mark 7:15-19, Jesus said, “Nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’... For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.”

Jesus was addressing the Pharisees’ practice of handwashing before every meal (verse 3). This washing was not because of their concern for personal hygiene, but because they did not want their eating to make them ceremonially unclean. Jesus phrased his analysis of their practice with a general statement that applies to foods as well as hands and utensils.

In the Old Testament, uncleanness was a matter of external matters. Even

touching an unclean thing, let alone eating it, could defile a person. Therefore, when Jesus said that nothing entering people defiled them or made them unclean, he overthrew a basic principle of that whole system. People are defiled by things that are in their heart, not by what physically touches their bodies. God looks on the heart, not the stomach; he judges our attitudes, not our diets.

The Greek text of verse 19b is disputed. In the version used by the King James translators, the participle “cleansing” seems to be part of the words of Jesus. In this version, Jesus says, “Foods cannot make people unclean, since they go through the body, thus purifying all foods.” In this version, Jesus is talking about the digestive system and elimination.

There are two problems with this textual version and interpretation. First, the New Testament does not use the word *katharizo* with the meaning of “purge” in any other passage. It normally refers to cleansing in a religious sense, either through ceremonies or by a cleansing of the conscience through forgiveness. The context in this passage is ceremonial cleansing.

Second, the digestive process and bowel movements can get rid of dirt, but soil particles were not the concern of the Pharisees. The context is ceremonial cleanness, and the digestive process cannot make anyone or anything religiously or ceremonially clean.

The Greek text used by most translations differs by only one Greek letter from that used by the King James translators. One version has the letter omicron; the other has an omega. The different letter links the participle “cleansing” with the “he” in verse 18. The thought is this: “He said [most of verses 18-19], cleansing all foods.” Verse 19b is not Jesus’ words but Mark’s comment about the significance of what Jesus had said. That is why many translations place verse 19b outside the quotation marks. The Greek text they are basing their translation on requires this. Mark explains that Jesus’ principle can be applied to all foods, including meats.

The text of verse 19b is debatable, but our understanding of clean and unclean meats does not depend on this one word. Our understanding is not based on debatable points of textual criticism. Rather, it is founded on Jesus’ teaching: contrary to the old covenant, nothing entering a person can defile that person. Foods do not defile people. Under the new covenant, pork does not cut anyone off from God.

Our understanding is based on the broader context of the entire new covenant revelation. Paul echoed Jesus’ words when he wrote that all foods are clean, as we will see below.

Many Christians accept Mark 7:15-19 (in either textual version) as clear

evidence that all meats may be eaten. This is a reasonable interpretation, and we should not condemn or ostracize those who hold this view.

## Peter's vision

As we move forward in the New Testament, we come to Acts 10. Peter was given a vision of all sorts of animals and told to kill and eat (verse 13). He protested, saying that he had never eaten anything common or unclean, but the command was given again and again.

The vision was then explained: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (verse 15). Peter also explained the vision: “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean” (verse 28). Even if Cornelius had been eating pork, he was neither common nor unclean. Those distinctions were no longer valid. His food could not make him unclean.

Why did Peter use both “unclean” (*akathartos*) and “common” (*koinos*)? Some have suggested that *koinos* refers to clean animals made temporarily unclean by proximity to unclean animals. The two words have different root words, but their meanings overlap. *Koinos* was the uncleanness that the Pharisees were concerned about in Mark 7. The verb form of the word, *koinoo* (to make something common), is used in Hebrews 9:13 to refer to the ceremonial uncleanness that had to be cleansed by the water made with the ashes of a red heifer, and the Hebrew word for that is the same word as used for unclean animals. *Koinos* and *akathartos* have roughly the same meaning.

The Louw and Nida lexicon lists *koinos* as a synonym of *akathartos*, saying: “It is possible that there is some subtle distinction in meaning, particularly on a connotative level, between *koinos* and *akathartos* in Ac 10.14, but it is difficult to determine the precise differences of meaning on the basis of existing contexts. The two terms are probably used in Ac 10.14 primarily for the sake of emphasis.” Such repetition, using similar words or phrases, was a common Jewish form of emphasis.

In the vision, the unclean animals represented Gentiles. In vision, the animals were called cleansed. Peter understood from this that Gentiles were cleansed. But would Peter understand this conclusion if unclean animals were not in fact declared clean? If the animal remained unclean, wouldn't the person it represented also remain unclean? God was showing Peter that Christians were no longer separate from Gentiles — his people included Gentiles. The laws of separation no longer applied. The meats that were commonly eaten among the Gentiles did not make them religiously unacceptable.

This passage does not directly say that God cleansed all foods, but many

readers have seen that implication. There is certainly nothing in Acts 10 to counteract that implication — nor is there any discussion of unclean meat in Acts 15, when the Jerusalem council decided that Gentile converts did not have to keep the law of Moses. Since the Jewish rabbis did not think that Gentiles were required to avoid pork unless they became circumcised proselytes, and the council (composed of Jewish Christians) was inspired to conclude that circumcision was not required, the implication in this historical context is that the council did not require Gentiles to quit eating unclean meats.

In the vision, why did Peter refuse to eat the unclean animals? Because he did not yet understand that they could be considered clean. He did not understand the implications of Jesus' comment. He did not yet understand that common meat (by anyone's definition) could be eaten. In his own experience as a Jew and as a Jewish Christian, he had "never eaten anything impure or unclean" (Acts 10:14).

Peter's understanding was incomplete; he learned a bit at a time. Moreover, he did not perfectly live up to what he understood, as Paul points out in Galatians 2. Peter withdrew from Gentile tables when legalistic Jewish Christians came to Antioch, and Paul rightly criticized Peter's hypocrisy. Those legalistic believers should have known from Jesus' teachings that handwashing and other nonbiblical rules were wrong. Yet they were still making separations between Jews and Gentiles.

Paul notes that Peter normally ate with Gentiles, not considering them unclean (Galatians 2:12). Peter lived "like a Gentile and not like a Jew." What would it mean, from a Jewish perspective, for a person to live like a Gentile? It would not mean that idolatry was permissible, but it would mean that it was permissible for the person to eat pork and other previously forbidden meats. Peter concluded that the church should not "force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs" (verse 14).

## Romans 14

We turn next to Romans 14, which tells us that all foods are clean, and it discusses the delicate matter of handling people in the same congregation who disagree as to what foods are permissible.

One of the issues in Romans 14 is vegetarianism, but Paul's explanation of the subject applies to meats, too, especially when he says, "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that *no food is unclean [koinos] in itself*. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean" (verse 14). He says something similar in verse 20: "*All food is clean [katharos]*, but it is

wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.”

The Roman church included both Jews and Gentiles, and some of the Jewish Christians may have been vegetarians because they distrusted the cleanness of all meats. Regardless of the reason for their vegetarianism, Paul’s statements are principles that may be applied to all matters of clean and unclean foods. When Paul said that no food is unclean, he used the Greek word *koimos*, which means common or ordinary, unclean or defiled. He said that all foods are clean, using *katharos*, the same word Jews used for cleanness and clean animals.

Paul did not restrict his statements or their application, even for a church area he had not been in before, even though it contained both Jews and Gentiles. Paul’s Gentile readers in Rome would have understood that pork was a food, and from Paul’s letter, they would have concluded that it was clean or OK to eat.

But Paul knew that some of his readers would not accept his analysis. He did not demand that they agree. Instead, he encouraged them to remain true to their convictions, and he cautioned others to avoid offending them.

Paul wrote to the strong in faith: “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters” (verse 1). Is the matter of unclean meat a disputable matter? Yes. Some people may believe that they can eat all meats, but others may believe that they ought to abstain from pork and shrimp. “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does” (verse 3). It is not wrong to abstain, but it is wrong to condemn someone else.

“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. . . . We will all stand before God’s judgment seat,” Paul advised in verses 4 and 10. “He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God” (verse 6). Whether we eat or whether we abstain, we should do it in an attitude of submission to Christ.

If people think that eating pork is a sin, then they should avoid pork — just as those who believe that drinking alcohol is a sin ought to avoid alcohol. “The man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (verse 23). Everyone must be fully convinced about the way in which they serve the Lord (verse 5). It’s not that all ways are equally acceptable, but that each person should be fully convinced. The attitude is more important than the action itself. It’s the inside of a person that counts most.

Paul also cautions that the strong should not flaunt their liberty. “It is

wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble” (verse 20). “If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil” (verses 15-16). “Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way” (verse 13).

Some have taught (without biblical proof) that meats are a matter of health, and that it is a sin to desire the forbidden foods. However, in the world today, alcohol is a *much* greater health problem than pork and shrimp, and yet the Bible does not forbid alcohol.

Many people believe that it is wrong to eat pork. Their experience would be similar to Peter’s. They have not eaten pork or shrimp. It would be wrong for anyone to pressure such people into eating pork. “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall” (verse 21).

“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food,” Paul says to everyone (verse 20). Do not let disputable matters lead to dissention and judging within the church. “Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (verse 22). That does not mean that you have to keep your beliefs secret, of course (Paul did not) — it means that your belief affects your own relationship with God; it should not intrude into other peoples’ relationships with God.

Paul closes with a warning for the strong, lest they take their liberty too far: “Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves” (verse 22). Do not sin by flaunting your belief in such a way that you cause others to sin.

When Paul wrote that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that we should honor God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), he was talking about sexual sins, not about physical health. The holiness that God wants is in our morality, not in our diets. We are sanctified in our hearts, not in dietary customs. If we are discerning good from evil in our morality, then we are automatically obedient to the *purpose* of the clean/unclean rules about discharges and sores and meats.

The last relevant scripture is 1 Timothy 4:3-5, which says that all food may be eaten if it is “consecrated by the word of God.” Does the Bible consecrate all meats? Romans 14:20 says yes — all are clean. Everything that God has created is good (1 Timothy 4:4). This passage does not comment on whether all meats are good for our health, just as it does not say that all vegetables are good for food. Whether it is good for food is up to people to discern, just as it was in the days after Noah’s flood. The distinctions given in Leviticus 11

and Deuteronomy 14 do not tell us.

## Conclusion

Are any meats unclean? The New Testament says “no” — the category of uncleanness was a religious, ceremonial category that ended with the old covenant. God’s people were commanded not to eat unclean animals only in the old covenant. The law began with the old covenant and ended when the old covenant was made obsolete by the death of Christ. The New Testament specifically says that all foods are, for religious purposes, clean.

Are any meats unhealthful? Yes, but that category is not exactly the same group of animals forbidden under the old covenant. Whether a meat is good for food is determined not by a ceremonial category, but by scientific research. The church does not make such decisions, and does not forbid its members to eat any particular kind of meat.

Some people may avoid pork just in case it *might* be harmful to health. That is certainly permissible, but we cannot make that a religious requirement for those who do not have such beliefs. The Bible does not say that those rules had anything to do with health, so we cannot preach that they do. Some meats are harmful to health, but the church is not in the business of enforcing dietary rules, whether they concern meat or vegetables or minerals.

Some will continue to abstain from pork and shrimp because eating such foods would violate their conscience. The church is not insisting that Christians eat any such foods. They should obey according to their understanding.

The distinction between clean and unclean animals was for sacrificial and ceremonial purposes and, later, to separate Israelites from Gentiles. The rules affected participation in the sacrificial system — and that context is now obsolete. The rules are not requirements today. The New Testament tells us that food cannot make us spiritually or physically unclean. All food is clean. It is not a sin to eat pork or shrimp or beef.

God’s church can peacefully contain people who have different opinions on this subject, just as the Roman church included people of different convictions. The kingdom of God is not based on food or drink, but on “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (verse 19).

## CLEAN AND UNCLEAN

In the early days of our church's transition from legalism to grace, I think one of the most dramatic changes was the way we regarded the "food laws" listed in Leviticus 11. It was not the most important change spiritually, but this "upgrade" in our understanding did impact most of us in practical, down-to-earth ways.

I remember now, with some amusement, how some regarded this change as a kind of litmus test to see if we had really "accepted the new covenant." Thankfully, we have matured, though some people continue to think that it is somehow "unrighteous" to eat what Leviticus 11 labels as "unclean." Perhaps this article will provide a more accurate perspective.

I recall talking with some teenagers years ago about their extra-curricular activities following one of our youth activities. They were all under age, drank beer to a moderate level of excess. Then they ordered pizza. Some of the pizzas came with pepperoni. As I discussed with them the illegality and dangers of underage drinking, they were quick to point out that they did not eat the pepperoni. In their minds, it appeared that drunkenness was minor compared to the "sin" of eating pork.

Because we are ministers, not nutritionists or dieticians, it is not our responsibility to tell people what they should or should not eat. What a person decides to put in their stomach might be a matter of wisdom and common sense, but according to the New Testament, it is not a matter of righteousness. But some old habits die hard. If someone decides to follow Old Testament dietary rules, be a vegetarian or even a vegan, they are free to do so. The problem comes when they decide that in doing so they are being more righteous than those who do not follow their preferences.

It is sometimes argued that "clean" food is better for you. Maybe it is in some cases, but it is important not to read health advice into the Bible's food laws. Some of the great Jewish sages made that mistake. For example, Maimonides thought that unclean animals were disease carriers. Apparently, he did not know about deer ticks, salmonella bacteria in poultry, or E. coli in beef and lamb. Some saw significance in the fact that some unclean animals are scavengers and clean animals are not. Whoever came up with that one apparently did not know how close the "clean" fish, sole, is to being a bottom-feeder. Nor, apparently, had they observed that chickens eat disgusting things. I won't go into detail!

God gave Israel the list of clean and unclean animals as yet another way

to keep them separate from the other nations (Gentiles). Some of those nations ate almost anything. An archaeological excavation at the ancient city of Gath discovered that Philistines ate dogs. That doesn't surprise me, given some of the things I am invited to "enjoy" on my travels around the world. I feel that some foods should be off-limits to anyone! I still can't bring myself to eat certain seafood. But that's my personal dietary preference, not a matter of righteousness.

The real issue in Israel's food laws was social order. God wanted his people to have a distinct culture, so they would stand out from other nations. The detailed rules of the old covenant effectively accomplished that separation—addressing every aspect of life, including diet. The food laws of Leviticus 11, which were part of the old covenant's purity laws regulating Israel's worship and social interactions, limited God's people to the consumption of certain meats. Eating these meats symbolized communion with God while eating other meats symbolized distrust and separation from God.

Thus, in new covenant times, when Peter was struggling with the question of taking the gospel to the Gentiles, God gave Peter a vision of both clean and unclean animals and then commanded him to "kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). Peter protested: "'Surely not, Lord!...I have never eaten anything impure or unclean'" (Acts 10:14). In reply, God declared: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15).

Through this vision, God was teaching Peter that Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension had ended distinctions between clean and unclean people, symbolized by the end of distinctions between clean and unclean animals. The previously "unclean" Gentiles, like the previously "unclean" animals, were now declared clean in God's sight. In Jesus, Israel and the Gentiles were brought together as the one people of God, filled with the Spirit.

Our calling is to participate with Jesus in what he is doing to take the gospel into all the world—unto all people. As we do, we are free to have fellowship (including table fellowship) with everyone. Paul corrected those who passed judgment on others concerning food preferences: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean" (Romans 14:14, ESV). Paul also declared that "Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats" (verse 20, ESV).

Paul's point was that we should not insist that others avoid what we regard as unacceptable. Eating or not eating does not define a right relationship with

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God. In the multicultural setting of the city of Rome, Paul urged that dietary differences between Jews and Gentile Christians be accommodated, declaring that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17, ESV).

The new covenant gives us new direction related to a new kind of fellowship that is centered around Jesus Christ. Let’s help our people follow that direction.

*Joseph Tkach*

## **IS TITHING REQUIRED IN THE NEW COVENANT?**

By Michael Morrison

Does the Bible tell us to pay at least 10 percent of our incomes to the church? This paper examines the biblical evidence.

### **Abraham and Jacob**

The first biblical mention of tithing is in Genesis 14. After four Mesopotamian kings had taken Lot captive, Abraham attacked them and recovered all the booty. After his victory, the king of Sodom came out to meet him, and so did Melchizedek, a priest of God. Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and then Abraham “gave him a tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:20).

The text does not tell us whether Abraham had ever tithed before, or ever tithed afterwards. Perhaps it was a custom of his culture. Abraham was generous, and gave the rest of his booty to the king of Sodom (verses 23-24). Abraham kept all of God’s laws that were relevant in his day (Genesis 26:5), but Genesis does not tell us whether tithing was a law in Abraham’s day. Many of God’s decrees and requirements were built around the nation of Israel and the Levitical priesthood and tabernacle. Abraham could not have kept such decrees and laws. He may have tithed regularly, but we cannot prove it.

The next mention of tithing is in Genesis 28:20-22. Jacob had a miraculous dream at Bethel. In the morning, Jacob vowed to tithe if God helped him during his journey. He was trying to make a bargain with God. He wanted special help, and in return for that help, he was willing to worship God, and to tithe as a part of that worship. Tithing may have been part of the common worship practices of that time and culture, or it may have been an extra-special vow for those who desperately desired divine help.

### **Firstlings**

Biblical commands about tithing are generally about grain, wine and oil.<sup>1</sup> A different system of giving was required for some animals. In the last plague on Egypt, God killed the firstborn male of every animal and human, but he spared the Israelites and their animals. Therefore, God claimed ownership of

every Israelite firstborn and firstling male animal (Exodus 13:2; Numbers 3:13).

This applied not only to the generation that left Egypt,<sup>2</sup> but every future generation as well. Firstlings of clean animals were to be given to the priests and sacrificed (Numbers 18:15-17); priests and people ate them during the festivals (Deuteronomy 15:19-20; 12:6, 17; 14:23). Unclean animals and humans were to be redeemed (Exodus 13:12-15; 34:19-20). This continued to be the law in Nehemiah's day (Nehemiah 10:36) and in Jesus' day (Luke 2:23).

The people also gave firstfruits of their harvest (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Leviticus 2:14), but these firstfruits do not seem to be a fixed percentage.

## Tithes

Tithing was required on flocks: "every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod"<sup>3</sup> (Leviticus 27:32). Was this in addition to the firstlings, or was it instead of firstlings? We do not know exactly how these laws would be administered. It is not necessary for us to take a position on these details.

"A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord" (Leviticus 27:30).<sup>4</sup> The tithes and firstfruits belonged to God, and he assigned the Levites to receive them on his behalf (Numbers 18:12-13, 21, 24). They could keep 90 percent of what they were given, but had to give 10 percent as an offering (verses 26-32).

Tithing was done in the days of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 31:5-6), Nehemiah (Nehemiah 10:35-39; 12:44) and Jesus (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42). In Malachi's day, tithing was required (Malachi 3:8-10), and physical blessings were promised for obedience, just as physical blessings were promised for obedience to the old covenant.

## Additional tithes?

God gave the tithes to the Levites, but the people could eat their tithes during festivals (Deuteronomy 12:5-7, 17-19; 14:23). Some have concluded that Deuteronomy is talking about an additional tithe, a festival tithe. It is possible to have two tithes, but it is not possible to have two sets of firstborn animals. The firstlings were holy to the Lord, and given to the Levites (Numbers 18:15-17), but Deuteronomy 15:19-20 says that they were eaten by the people. Apparently the firstlings were shared between the original owners and the Levites. It is possible that the same is true of the tithe.<sup>5</sup>

The people needed a tithe for the festivals, since the festivals constituted

about 5 percent of the year, plus travel time. During sabbatical years, farmers would not have their regular income, so they may not have been able to go to every festival in every year. Or perhaps they saved the festival tithe from year to year.

At the end of every three years of farming, the Israelites were to set aside a tithe for the Levites, resident aliens, orphans and widows (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12-15). It is not clear whether this was an alternative use of a previous tithe, or an additional tithe.<sup>6</sup>

## **Tithing in the new covenant**

Now let us consider whether tithing is required in the new covenant. Tithing is mentioned only three or four times in the New Testament. Jesus acknowledged that the Pharisees were very careful about tithing (Luke 18:12), and he said that they should not leave it undone (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42). Tithing, like other old covenant rules and rituals, was a law at the time Jesus spoke. Jesus criticized the Pharisees not for tithing, but for treating tithing as more important than mercy, love, justice and faithfulness.

The only other New Testament mention of tithing is in Hebrews. The fact that Abraham was blessed by and paid tithes to Melchizedek illustrates the superiority of Melchizedek and Jesus Christ over the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 7:1-10). The passage then goes on to note that “when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also” (verse 12).

There was a change of the priesthood from the Levites to Jesus Christ, and this implies a change in the law that assigned the Levites to be priests. How much has been changed? Hebrews says that the old covenant is obsolete. The package of laws that commanded tithes to be given to the Levites is obsolete.

Humans should honor God by voluntarily returning some of the blessings he gives them — this is still a valid principle. The only place that a percentage is required is within the old covenant. There is good *precedent* for tithing before Sinai, but no proof that it was *required*.

## **Responding to the better covenant**

Under the old covenant, tithing was required for the support of the old covenant ministers. The Israelites were required to give 10 percent — and their blessing was only a physical one! Christians in the new covenant have much better blessings — spiritual ones. How much more willingly ought we to give in thankfulness for the eternal blessings we have in Christ Jesus?

The Israelites were commanded to give 10 percent under a covenant that

could not make them perfect (Hebrews 7:19; 9:9). How much more joyfully should we give to God under the new covenant? We have the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which *does* cleanse our conscience (9:14). And yet it seems that in America today, even though we have so much more than the Israelites did, people give on average a much smaller percentage. Many people give less to the church than they spend on luxury items. Some people cannot give very much, but many people could if they wanted to. God calls on us to examine ourselves, to examine our priorities, and to be generous.

The old covenant gave us condemnation; the new covenant gives us justification and peace with God. How much more should we be willing to give freely and generously so God's work can be done in the world — to proclaim the gospel, to declare the new covenant ministry that gives us true life, and gives that message of life to others?

People who entrust their lives to Jesus Christ do not worry about whether tithing is commanded in the New Testament. People who are being transformed by Christ to be more like Christ are *generous*. They want to give as much as possible to support the gospel and to support the poor. Christians should give generously — but giving is a *result* of their relationship with God, not a way to earn it. We are given grace through *faith*, not through tithing.

Some people act as if Christ liberates us from the law so that we can keep more physical blessings for ourselves. That is false — Christ liberates us so that we can be free to serve him *more*, as loving children and not merely as slaves. He frees us so we can have faith instead of selfishness.

When it comes to money, the real question is, Is our heart in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Are we putting our money where our heart is? We can tell where our heart is by seeing where we are putting our money. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” Jesus said (Matthew 6:21).

## Needs in the new covenant ministry

In the new covenant church, there are financial needs — to support the poor, and to support the gospel by supporting those who preach it. Christians are obligated to give financial support for these needs. Let's see how Paul explained this obligation in his second letter to the Corinthians.

Paul describes himself as a minister of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6), which has much greater glory than the old (verse 8). Because of what Christ did for him in the new covenant, Christ's love compelled Paul to preach the gospel, the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Paul exhorted the Corinthians “not to receive God's grace in vain” (6:1). How were they in danger of doing this? Paul had gone out of his way to serve

them, but they were withholding their affections from him (6:3-12). He asked them for a fair exchange, for them to open their hearts to him (6:13).

Paul told the Corinthians that they had a duty to give something in response to what they had been given. This response comes in terms of morality (6:14-7:1), which the Corinthians had done (7:8-13), and in terms of affection, which the Corinthians had also done (7:2-7), and in financial generosity, which Paul addresses in chapter 8. This is the way in which the Corinthians had closed their hearts to Paul and withheld their affections.

Paul cited the example of the Macedonian churches, who had given generously, even to the point of self-sacrifice (8:1-5). The example is powerful; the implications are strong that the Corinthians needed to respond to Paul's sacrifices by making sacrifices themselves. But Paul did not make a command (8:8). Instead, he asked first for a turning of the heart. He wanted the Corinthians to give themselves to the Lord first, and then to support Paul. He wanted their gift to be done in sincere love, not from compulsion (8:5, 8). Paul reminded them that Christ had become poor for their sakes; the implication is that the Corinthians should make financial sacrifices in return.

But then Paul reminded the Corinthians that they could not give more than they had (8:12). Nor did they have to impoverish themselves to enrich others; Paul was only aiming for equity (8:13-14). Paul again expressed confidence in their willingness to give, and added the peer pressure of the Macedonian example and the boasting he had done in Macedonia about the generosity of the Corinthians (8:24-9:5).

Paul again noted that the offering must be done willingly, not from compulsion or given grudgingly (9:5, 7). He reminded them that God rewards generosity (9:6-11) and that a good example causes people to praise God and puts the gospel in a favorable setting (9:12-14).

This was a collection for the poor in Judea. But Paul said nothing about tithing. Rather, he appealed to the new covenant environment: Christ had made many sacrifices for them, so they ought to be willing to make a few sacrifices to help one another.

In asking for this offering, Paul was also making a financial sacrifice. He had a right to receive financial support himself, but instead of that, he was asking that the offering be given to others. Paul had not asked for *any* financial support from Corinth (11:7-11; 12:13-16). Instead, he had been supported by Macedonians (11:9).

Paul had a right to be supported by the Corinthians, but he did not use it (1 Corinthians 9:3-15). This passage tells us more about our Christian duty to give financial support to the gospel. Workers should be able to receive

benefits of their work (9:7). The old covenant even made provision for oxen to be given benefits of their work (9:9).

Throughout his appeal, Paul does not cite any laws of tithing. He says that priests received benefits from their work in the temple (9:13), but he does not cite any percentage. Their example is cited in the same way as the example of soldiers, vineyard workers, herdsmen, oxen, plowers and threshers. It is simply a general principle. As Jesus said, “The worker deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7). Paul cited the oxen and wages scriptures again in 1 Timothy 5:17-18. Elders, especially those who preach and teach, should be honored financially as well as with respect.

Jesus also commanded, “those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14). This implies that those who *believe* should provide a living for some who preach. There is a financial duty, and there is a promised reward for generosity (though that reward may not necessarily be physical or financial).

## **A need to be generous**

Christians have received riches of God’s grace, and are to respond with generosity and giving. Christians are called to a life of service, sharing and stewardship. We have an obligation to do good. When we give ourselves to the Lord, we will give generously.

Jesus often taught about money. “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me,” said Jesus to a rich man (Luke 18:22). He said the same thing to his disciples (12:33). The new covenant demands all that we have, and that is fair, since Jesus gave all he had for us. He praised a widow who put two coins into the temple treasury, because she gave “all she had” (21:4).

Wealth is often an enemy of faith. It can “choke” people and cause them to be spiritually unfruitful (8:14). “Woe to you who are rich,” Jesus warned (6:24). He warned us about the dangers of greed (12:15) and warned about the danger of storing up wealth for self without being “rich toward God” (12:16-21). When we use wealth to help others, we gain “treasure in heaven” (12:33). This helps us have our heart in heavenly things instead of earthly, temporary things (12:34).

“No servant can serve two masters.... You cannot serve both God and money” (16:13). But money competes for our allegiance; it tempts us to seek our own desires rather than the needs of the kingdom. After the rich man went away sad, Jesus exclaimed: “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a

needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (18:24-25).

## Conclusion

Christians need to give, to share their resources and blessings with others. They have a duty to support the preaching of the gospel, to give financial support to their spiritual leaders, and the church needs this support. If disciples of Jesus Christ can give, but do not, they are falling short.

The old covenant required 10 percent. The new covenant does not specify a percentage, nor do we. However, the new covenant admonishes people to give what they can, and tithing still provides an instructive point of comparison. For some people, 10 percent may be too much. But some will be able to give more, and some are doing so. Christians should examine their own circumstances and the better blessings they have been given in the new covenant through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us and the gift of the Holy Spirit to us. Contributions should be given to the church for its collective work of preaching the gospel and the expenses involved in the local ministry and congregational needs.

Likewise, the new covenant does not specify any particular percentage for assisting the poor. Instead, it asks for equity — and we certainly have room for improvement in this.

The old covenant required simple percentages. Everyone knew how much was required. The new covenant has no set percentages. Instead, it requires more soul-searching, more training for the conscience, more selfless love for others, more faith, more voluntary sacrifice and less compulsion. It tests our values, what we treasure most, and where our hearts are.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Bible describes tithing in an agricultural economy. It does not tell us whether, or how, potters, carpenters, merchants, etc. calculated tithes.

<sup>2</sup> For the generation that left Egypt, God made a grand substitution: Instead of the firstborn male of each family and flock, God accepted the tribe of Levi and all its animals (Numbers 3:40-50; 8:16-18).

<sup>3</sup> It is not clear how this worked. Was the entire flock counted, or only the lambs? In bad years, the flock would come back no larger than it had been the previous year, so it wouldn't make sense to tithe on all the adults again, since there would have been no increase. Perhaps the “rod” served in some way to separate lambs from adults.

<sup>4</sup> It might be argued that the tithes were holy and therefore had always been holy, even before the old covenant was made. That is possible, but it cannot be proven. The firstlings were also holy to the Lord, but this was based on events of the Exodus,

not on creation. “Once holy, always holy” is not a valid principle.

<sup>5</sup> A separate tithe for festival use is described in the apocryphal book of Tobit 1:6-8, Josephus’ *Antiquities* 4.4.3; 4.8.8; 4.8.22, and the second-century B.C. book *Jubilees* 32:10-14. Some sources suggest that this second tithe was calculated on the basis of the 90 percent left after the first tithe, not the original 100 percent (Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE*, p. 167; *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, “Tithe,” vol. 4, p. 863, citing the Mishna *Maaser sheni* 2.1.)

<sup>6</sup> As noted above, Tobit, Josephus and Jubilees give evidence for three tithes. The Mishnah, however, combines the festival tithe and the poor tithe: the second tithe being used for the festival in years 1, 2, 4 and 5, and being used for the poor in years 3 and 6 out of the seven-year farming cycle (Sanders, p. 149). Since farmers had an increase in only six out of every seven years, they gave on average 3.3 percent of their increase to the poor. If tradesmen tithed (and no biblical law required them to) they would give about 2.8 percent on average, since they had income even during sabbatical and jubilee years.

## THE ANNUAL FESTIVALS

A series by Michael Morrison

### PART 1: THE OLD TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

As part of his covenant with the Israelites, God commanded them to observe various annual festivals. These festivals symbolized facets of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Now that Christ has redeemed us, are these festivals still required under the new covenant? Let us examine the Old and New Testament evidence.

#### Passover

Just before the Israelites left Egypt, God revised the Israelites' calendar and commanded a festival. On the 10th day of the month Abib (in the spring), the Israelites were to select lambs. On the 14th day, they were to kill the lambs and put some of the blood on their doorframes. They were to roast them and eat them with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, with their cloaks and sandals on, with staffs in their hands, ready to depart Egypt, and all leftovers were to be burned (Exodus 12:1-10). If Gentiles wished to participate, the men had to be circumcised (verses 43-49). The day was commanded as a lasting ordinance for future generations; it was to be a commemorative celebration, a festival (verses 14, 24-25).

Three festival seasons are mentioned in the Sinaitic covenant (Exodus 23:14-17), but Passover is not mentioned by name. However, it is mentioned in the summary of the Sinaitic covenant given to Moses later (Exodus 34:25b). In Leviticus 23:4-5, the Passover is called a sacred assembly. Although work was forbidden on other festivals, there was no such requirement for the 14th.

In Numbers 9:2-5, the Passover was again commanded, but no details were given, other than referring to previously given "rules and regulations." Provision was made for an observance of Passover in the second month for people who were unable to participate in the month Abib (verses 6-14). Requirements were that it must be done at evening, that it must be eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, that no meat be left until morning, and that no bones should be broken.

As part of the sacrificial system, various offerings were prescribed for

every morning and evening, Sabbath, new moons and annual festivals (Numbers 28-29). The Passover is mentioned in Numbers 28:16, but no additional sacrifice was required for the 14th of Abib.

Deuteronomy 16:1-7 established the tabernacle as the site for Passover observances, rather than at the homes of the people. In the morning after the Passover, they were to return to their tents (verse 7b). Otherwise the regulations were the same as before.

Soon after this, the Israelites celebrated the Passover on the plains of Jericho (Joshua 5:10). The people had recently been circumcised (verses 2-8), so they could participate. This implies that most of these Israelites had never before participated in a Passover.

The Passover was often neglected, at least by most Israelites. Hezekiah led a restoration, inviting Israelites and Jews to celebrate the Passover in the second month (2 Chronicles 30:1-3). The Passover “had not been celebrated in large numbers according to what was written” (verse 5). Although most Israelites refused to go to Jerusalem, some came (verse 11). Many were ceremonially unclean, but they were allowed to participate anyway (verses 17-20). It was the greatest reunion of Jews and Israelites since the time of Solomon (verse 26).

But the Passover was neglected again, and it was restored again after Josiah’s workmen discovered the book of the covenant (2 Kings 23:21-23; 2 Chronicles 35:1-19). “The Passover had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel; and none of the kings of Israel had ever celebrated such a Passover as did Josiah, with the priests, the Levites and all Judah and Israel who were there with the people of Jerusalem.”

Ezra also restored the Passover observance (Ezra 6:19-21).

## **Unleavened Bread**

The week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread was closely associated with the Passover, since it started on the 15th, right after the Passover lambs were killed. It was instituted in Egypt (Exodus 12:15-20). Leaven (yeast) was to be removed on the first day (verse 15), and no leaven was to be in the homes for seven days (verse 19). Sacred assemblies were held on the first and seventh days, and ordinary work was forbidden on those days, except for food preparation. It was “a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.” Even foreigners had to abide by the rules (verse 19). Flat, unleavened bread (matzos) was the only bread allowed for this week.

The night of the 15th became a commemoration of the escape from

Egypt (verses 17, 42; 13:3). “This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of the Lord is to be on your lips. For the Lord brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand” (Exodus 13:9). The Israelites were to observe the festival after they entered the Promised Land (verse 5). In the wilderness, the Israelites had no grains and no bread, so they did not need to change their diets during this festival while they were in the wilderness.

The festival was commanded within the Sinaitic covenant as a memorial of the Exodus (Exodus 23:15), and the festival was repeated in the covenant made with Moses and Israel (Exodus 34:18). It was described again in Leviticus 23:6-8, but no new regulations were added. Numbers 28:17-25 prescribed extra sacrifices for the entire week.

Deuteronomy 16:3-8 repeated the regulations and indicated that the Passover lamb was sacrificed on the evening of the first day of unleavened bread (verse 4b). The unleavened bread was a reminder that the Israelites left Egypt in haste (verse 3); they did not have time to put yeast in their dough and let it rise (Exodus 12:34, 39).

When the Israelites entered the land of Canaan after the Passover, they ate unleavened bread (Joshua 5:11). Solomon offered sacrifices as required in the book of Moses (2 Chronicles 8:12-13). In Hezekiah’s day, the people celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread in the second month (2 Chronicles 30:13, 21), even though that wasn’t the official date for it. Then they celebrated it another seven days (verse 23). The festival was restored again by Josiah and Ezra (2 Chronicles 35:17; Ezra 6:22).

In Ezekiel’s vision of the restored temple and sacrificial system, the Festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread were included (Ezekiel 45:21-24).

## Grain harvest festivals

Associated with the Festival of Unleavened Bread was the ceremony of waving the firstfruits, the first part of the spring grain harvest. Before any new grain could be eaten, some grain had to be waved before God, with lamb, grain, oil and wine offerings (Leviticus 23:10-14). This ceremony involved the priests, and there was little for the people to do. It was not a Sabbath or a sacred assembly. The ceremony could not apply in the wilderness; it was to be in force only after the Israelites entered the land (verse 10), and then it was to be a lasting ordinance wherever they lived (verse 14b).

Fifty days after the wavesheaf offering, at the end of the grain harvest, was the festival now known as Pentecost (a Greek word meaning *fiftieth*), which was a sacred assembly, a day on which regular work was forbidden

(verses 15-21). Leavened loaves were to be offered with animals, grain and drink offerings — “a lasting ordinance for generations to come, wherever you live.”

This festival was included in the Sinaitic covenant (Exodus 23:16) and in the restatement of that covenant (Exodus 34:22). Additional offerings were commanded in Numbers 28:26-31. The festival was commanded again in Deuteronomy 16:9-11, with the theme of rejoicing at the central tabernacle site.

The only Old Testament passage that mentions an observance is 2 Chronicles 8:12-13, which says that Solomon offered the commanded offerings for this festival.

## Autumn festival season

*Trumpets:* On the first day of Tishri, the seventh month, was a festival of blowing trumpets. It was a day of rest and a sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:23-25; Numbers 29:1). Ezra read from the law on this day; he told the people that “this day is sacred to our Lord,” but nothing is said about trumpets or sacrifices (Nehemiah 8:1-10).<sup>1</sup>

*Atonement:* On the 10th of Tishri was the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). No work at all was to be done on this “sabbath of rest,” and there was a sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7). Fasting was required; anyone who worked or did not fast was cut off from the people. Sacrificial rituals for this day are in Leviticus 16. That chapter also repeated the requirements for the people — even Gentiles — to fast and avoid work (verse 29). The purpose of the fasting is given in verse 30: “because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you.”

*Tabernacles:* The autumn harvest festival was the third main festival season (Exodus 23:17; 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:16; 2 Chronicles 8:12-13). The first day of the seven-day festival was a sacred assembly on which regular work was forbidden (Leviticus 23:33-36a; Numbers 29:12). The people were to collect fruit, palm fronds and leafy branches, and live in crude shelters for seven days. It was a lasting ordinance for all “native-born Israelites,” reminding them of the Exodus from Egypt (Leviticus 23:39-43).

The festival was to be kept at a central site, and it was a time for joy and celebration that included Gentiles who lived among the Israelites (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). Every seventh year, in the sabbatical year in which crops were not harvested and slaves were released, the law was to be read publicly during this festival (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). In those years, it would have been a festival of liberation rather than a harvest festival.

Solomon's temple was dedicated at the Festival of Tabernacles (2 Chronicles 5:2-3; 7:8). Ezra and Nehemiah kept this festival (Ezra 3:4; Nehemiah 8:14-18). "From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this" (verse 17).

Ezekiel predicted a restoration of this festival (Ezekiel 45:25); Hosea also mentioned it in a prophecy (Hosea 12:9). The most specific prophecy about this festival is in Zechariah 14:16-19 — even Gentile nations would be required to go to Jerusalem to keep the festival, or else they would suffer drought.

*The eighth day:* The Festival of Tabernacles lasted seven days, but the eighth day was also a sacred assembly and a day of rest (Leviticus 23:36b, 39b; Numbers 29:35). This day was called "the closing assembly" (*'atsarah*) (Leviticus 23:36b). Solomon held an assembly on the eighth day and dismissed the people on the ninth (2 Chronicles 7:9-10). Ezra also held an assembly on the eighth day (Nehemiah 8:18).

## Sabbatical years

The old covenant stipulated that the land was not to be cultivated every seventh year (Exodus 23:10-11). The land was to lie fallow, and vineyards and olive trees were to be left untended so poor people and wild animals could eat the fruit. The land was to observe a sabbath year (Leviticus 25:1-7). God warned the people that if they were persistently rebellious, he would ensure that the land had its sabbaths (Leviticus 26:34). And it came to pass — the land was given its sabbath rests (2 Chronicles 36:21).

Nehemiah, in pledging allegiance to God's laws, restored the land sabbath (Nehemiah 10:31). He also indicated that the seventh year was a time for canceling debts, in keeping with Deuteronomy 15:1-11. It was also the time for freeing Hebrew slaves (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 31:10-13; Jeremiah 34:14).

*The jubilee year:* Similarly, every 50th year was to be a festive year, a jubilee year. Liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land, and farmlands were to be returned to the families originally having them (Leviticus 25:8-10). It was also a sabbatical year for the land, since the people were not to sow or reap or harvest (verses 11-12). When Jesus proclaimed freedom for prisoners (Luke 4:18), he may have been alluding to the jubilee year.

*Purim:* Another biblical festival was begun by Mordecai — he told all the Jews in the Persian Empire to celebrate the 14th and 15th days of the month Adar (Esther 9:21).

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> On the second day, Ezra again read from the law, and the people then learned about the Festival of Tabernacles (verses 13-14). If they did not know about Tabernacles, they probably did not know about Trumpets, either. Ezra may have considered the first day sacred because it was a new moon. Although new moons were not commanded assemblies or Sabbaths, they were often mentioned in association with other religious days (e.g., Numbers 28:11; Ezekiel 45:17; 46:3). Trumpets were blown on every new moon (Numbers 10:10). Psalm 81:3-5 may refer to the Festival of Trumpets.

## HARVEST SEASONS OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

Various biblical laws and stories refer to ancient Israelite crops and harvests. It may therefore be helpful to have some general information about the harvests and their seasons. Major crops of the land are listed in Deuteronomy 8:8: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and honey.

### The spring harvest

Various herbs and legumes were harvested in spring, but the most important spring crops were cereals: barley and wheat. A spring ritual took particular note of the cereals: Newly harvested grain could not be eaten until the firstfruits of grain had been offered on the “day after the Sabbath” of the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:9-1, 14). Pentecost, near the end of the grain harvest, included grain and loaf offerings (verses 16-17). Pentecost was also called “the Feast of Harvest” (Exodus 23:16).

Barley and wheat were planted in the autumn and ripened in spring. Barley matured faster and would be harvested sooner. The firstfruits of grain offered during the Festival of Unleavened Bread would have been barley. “In the early stages of the Israelite settlement the most important cereal was barley...because of the necessity to settle fringe areas and barley’s tolerance of harsh conditions” (Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, 1987, page 7).

“The amount and distribution of rainfall together with soil conditions limit the area in Eretz-Israel where wheat is cultivated to the coastal valleys, the Valley of Jezreel, the Upper Jordan Valley, and the Beth-shan Valley. [The Israelites did not conquer these areas at first (Judges 1:19).] In the northern Negev, wheat does well only in rainy years, which are not frequent” (page 89).

“Wheat ripens later than barley and, according to the Gezer Manual, was harvested during the sixth agricultural season, *yrb qsr n’el* (end of April to end of May)” (page 88; also see the chart on page 37 of Borowski’s book, reproduced below).

“Where the climate is warmer, as in the Shephelah and the Jordan Valley, crops mature earlier than in regions where the climate is cool, as in the Judean hill-country and the Galilee” (page 57). In Galilee, for example, part of the grain harvest would be completed after Pentecost, especially in years in which Pentecost came as early as mid-May. Even though all the crop might not be harvested by Pentecost, Pentecost celebrated the entire grain harvest, including the small amount of grain to be harvested shortly after the festival.

**Harvesting and ingathering,  
based on modern agricultural practices in Israel**

	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov
Wheat			x						
Barley		x							
Oats			x						
Peas		x	x						
Chickpeas				x					
Lentils		x	x						
Vetch		x	x						
Sesame					x				
Flax					x				
Millet					x	x			
Grapes				x	x	x	x		
Figs						x	x		
Pomegranates						x	x		
Olives							x	x	x

## The summer harvest

After Pentecost, most of the harvest was fruit: grapes, olives, dates, figs, pomegranates and numerous fruits, seeds and vegetables of lesser importance.

Deuteronomy 11:10-11 contrasts Egypt's irrigated vegetable gardens with Canaan's hilly terrain and seasonal rains, implying that vegetables were less common in Canaan. Proverbs 15:17 indicates that vegetables were among the least-esteemed foods. The Bible has few references to gardens, cultivated vegetables and wild plants. "The small number of references to vegetables and the low regard in which vegetables were held suggest very strongly that vegetables...did not constitute an important part of the Iron Age diet in Eretz-Israel" (page 139).

Now let's look at the major crops after Pentecost. Grapes were the first major crop to ripen: "In a good year, when the [grain] yield was great, threshing and grape picking overlapped" (page 62). That would be in June, technically in spring, since summer doesn't officially start until the solstice, June 22.

The importance of grapes and olives is illustrated by the fact that the Essenes had wine and oil firstfruits festivals similar to the biblical firstfruits offering for grain. These festivals also indicate the relative timing of these crops. The new wine festival came 50 days or seven weeks after Pentecost. Until new wine was offered, no one could drink any of the new juice (Temple Scroll, columns 19-21). Fourteen weeks after Pentecost, shortly before the Feast of Trumpets, was the new olive oil festival. No one could use new

olives until some oil had been offered (columns 21-22).

The grape harvest was usually completed before Tabernacles, but most of the olive harvest came after the autumn festivals.

In ancient Israel the primary harvest season extended from April to November. This harvest period might be subdivided into three seasons and three major crops: the spring grain harvest, the summer grape harvest and the autumn olive harvest. These harvests have a general correspondence with the festivals. Some grain might be harvested after Pentecost, threshing and grape-picking might overlap, and the olive harvest came both before and after the Festival of Tabernacles.

## Relative importance

Which harvest was larger and more important? In terms of dietary calories, the spring grain harvest was most important. Borowski calls barley and wheat “the main food staple of the ancient Israelite” (page 57). E.P. Sanders offers a more detailed estimate: “Grain constituted over fifty percent of the average person’s total caloric intake, followed by legumes (e.g. lentils), olive oil, and fruit, especially dried figs” (*Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66 CE*, 1992, page 129).

Since fruit has a higher moisture content than grain does, the fruit harvests may have been larger in bulk and weight. Most of the dietary importance of the fruit harvest came after Tabernacles, when olive oil was produced.

The autumn festivals came after the summer harvest, a less-important harvest. But the fall festivals were associated with greater rejoicing (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). Why the theme of rejoicing? The conclusion of a wine harvest is an appropriate time for festivities. But another reason may be that Tabernacles celebrated both the spring harvest and the summer harvest. Note the mention of both grain and grapes in verse 13: “Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress.”

## **THE ANNUAL FESTIVALS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

The ancient Israelites did not keep the festivals very well. Some aspects of the festivals were not required during the wilderness wanderings. Many festivals were ignored for decades and restored briefly by a zealous leader, only to be abandoned by the next generation. It was impractical for most Israelites to attend every sacred assembly, since the Sabbath occurred weekly, and there was only one authorized meeting place for the entire nation. Most Israelites would have stayed home for most of those assemblies. The agricultural festivals would have less meaning in sabbatical years, when there was no cultivation. And if the law was read only on sabbatical years at Tabernacles, it would be easy for people to forget what it said.

But by the time of Jesus, the festivals were being observed regularly at Herod's temple. Although some Jews may have been lax about festival observance, others were faithful to the covenant. Scribes and Pharisees helped keep people aware of the festivals. Synagogues had been built, and the law was taught weekly.

Jesus went to the festivals, although there is no evidence that he journeyed to Jerusalem for every festival in every year. When he was an infant in Egypt, for example, he probably did not — nor was it expected of Jews who lived outside of the Promised Land. After he moved back to Nazareth, his family went to Jerusalem every Passover season (Luke 2:41), so Jesus would have been familiar with the sacrificial rituals. Assuming that Joseph died and Jesus became head of the family, he would have brought Passover lambs to be sacrificed in Jerusalem.

Jesus taught during Passover seasons (John 2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55). His most famous Passover was his last; he instituted a new commemoration (Matthew 26:26-29) and then he was sacrificed as our Passover lamb (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

Jesus taught during the Festival of Tabernacles (John 7:2-14), including its last day (verse 37). Although he taught during the festivals, he did not specifically comment on their meaning. He taught about living waters, for example, but he did not directly say that his message had anything to do with the festivals. Rather, it was about the Holy Spirit and faith in Jesus (verses 38-39). Jesus also kept Hanukkah, the Festival of Dedication (John 10:22).

There is only one festival that the Lord commanded Christians to observe. "Do this in remembrance of me," he said at his last meal (Luke 22:19; 1

Corinthians 11:24). He told his disciples to commemorate his suffering and death by sharing bread and wine. This is a clear command, and we will return to this commanded observance a bit later. First, we will examine some scriptures relevant to other festivals.

## **Festivals in the early church**

The early church, composed entirely of Jewish Christians, continued to keep the festivals. They were assembled in one place on Pentecost (Acts 2:1) — but that is not unusual, since they often met together for prayer (Luke 24:53; Acts 1:14). On Pentecost, they were sitting in a “house,” not necessarily in the temple (Acts 2:2).

The next mention of a festival is in Acts 12:3-4. Herod arrested Peter during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, intending to prosecute him after the Passover season. Although the early church probably kept these festivals, these verses do not tell us that; the festivals are mentioned simply to tell us what time of year this happened. This passage is neither a command nor an example. The mere mention of a festival does not imply a command for its observance (cf. John 10:22).

The next mention is Acts 18:21 (in the Majority or Byzantine texts; other Greek texts do not have this passage). Paul was debating with Jews in the synagogue at Ephesus (verse 19). They wanted him to stay longer, but he refused, saying, “I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem” (NKJ). Paul probably kept some of the festivals, just as he kept Jewish customs such as cutting his hair after a vow (Acts 18:18) and participating in purification rituals at the temple (Acts 21:26). Just because he did something does not mean that we have to follow his specific example.

Paul could have kept the festival in Ephesus if he wanted to (1 Corinthians 16:8; Acts 16:13). Although the Old Testament required festivals to be kept in Jerusalem, Paul didn’t have to go there; the requirement was not deemed applicable to Jews who lived outside of the Promised Land. However, he may have wanted to be in Jerusalem because there would be a large crowd of people to preach to. The text doesn’t tell us his motive.

Paul sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Acts 20:6). This verse, like 12:3-4, simply tells us when this happened; it does not say that Christians kept the festival, nor does it command us to. Similarly, Acts 20:16 tells us that Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. Although Paul probably planned to keep the festival in Jerusalem, the text does not tell us that he did; it simply tells us when he wanted to arrive. He could just as easily have kept the festival with the Ephesian church.

Acts 27:9 tells us that sailing was dangerous after “the Fast,” referring to

the Day of Atonement. This text does not say anything about Christians observing this day (although they may have); it is simply a calendar marker in the story. Would Luke's Gentile readers have understood this terminology? Does it imply that the readers were observing the Fast? Not necessarily. Since Gentile churches were often associated with synagogues, the readers could have known when the Fast was because they knew when the Jewish festivals were.<sup>2</sup>

Paul praised the Thessalonians for becoming imitators of the churches in Judea (1 Thessalonians 2:14). Did this involve festival-keeping? Not necessarily. The churches in Judea observed various Jewish customs, and we see in Acts 15 and Galatians 2 that they had many traditions that weren't binding on Gentiles. If the Thessalonians were imitating *everything* the Judean churches did, their example isn't authoritative for us today. The context of 1 Thessalonians 2:14 tells us the way in which the Thessalonians were imitating the Judeans: They accepted the gospel as the word of God (verse 13) and were willing to accept persecution from their compatriots (verse 14b).

## 1 Corinthians 5:7-8

“Let us keep the Festival,” Paul told the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 5:8). Some have taken this to be a command to observe the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and at first glance it does appear to be a command for festival observance, but this is not what the passage teaches. First, let us note the context: In verses 1-5, Paul tells the Corinthians to put a sinful person out of their fellowship. Then in verse 6, he writes, “Don't you know that a little leaven works through the whole batch of dough?” This proverb is similar to a modern one: “One rotten apple can ruin the whole bunch.” If Paul had written that, he would have been comparing rot to sin, indicating that rot must be removed before it spreads. In a similar metaphor in verse 6, Paul is comparing yeast to sin — and sin, if it's not corrected, can spread through the whole community.

When Paul says, “Get rid of the old yeast” (1 Corinthians 5:7), he is still speaking figuratively about disfellowshipping the sinful brother — he is not telling them to get rid of physical leaven. “Yeast” is still being used as a figure of speech for the sinful person. It would be like writing, Get rid of the rot.

When Paul says that the Corinthian believers are already unleavened — that they are a “new batch without yeast” — he is comparing the people to a lump of dough. He is not saying that their homes have all leaven removed, or that yeast has been removed from their diets. It is the Christian community itself that is, figuratively speaking, the new batch of dough.<sup>3</sup> Evidence in the text tells us that Paul is speaking metaphorically.

Further evidence that Paul is speaking spiritually is the last part of verse 7: The Corinthians are to put out spiritual leaven, and they are already unleavened, because Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed. They are spiritually cleansed by the atoning death of Jesus Christ, and they therefore ought to eliminate sin from their community. Christ's sacrifice on the cross is not a logical reason to put leaven out of our homes for one week, but it *is* a logical reason to put sin out throughout the year.

Paul was not addressing the topic of physical leaven. If he had wanted to forbid physical leaven, he would have said, "Put the leaven out, for the law has commanded us to." Christ's crucifixion did not have anything to do with physical leaven, but it does remove spiritual leaven. It is the Corinthian Christian community, not their homes or their diets, that is said to be unleavened. Christ has declared them to be holy (1 Corinthians 1:2; Hebrews 10:10), so they ought to act like it. Sanctification is a process as well as an initial event (Hebrews 10:14).

Paul is telling them to put blatant sin out of their fellowship so they can be a group of people who live in holiness, since they have been sanctified or declared holy by the sacrifice of Christ. They had leaven (i.e., the sinful member) in their midst, but Christ had made them unleavened (forgiven), so they had the logical duty to put the sinful member out of their fellowship. Paul is teaching the Corinthians to live up to what they already were. They were already cleansed; now they needed to continue to remain free from sin and corruption.

Paul says that Christ is our Passover. However, Jesus' sacrifice has dramatically changed our understanding of the Passover; it has also changed the way we strive to be unleavened, as Paul brings out in verse 8.

## **A better way to keep the festival**

"Therefore" — because Christ has been sacrificed for us — "let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast..." Does this imply that we can keep the festival with new yeast? Of course not. Paul isn't talking about physical leaven, or else he wouldn't need the word "old." Paul is contrasting the old lifestyle of sin with the new Christian lifestyle of holiness. Paul is telling the Corinthians to keep the festival in a new way, concerned about sincerity and truth. The old leaven he's talking about is clearly identified as "malice and wickedness" — that's the sort of thing we must put out. That's what the festival had pictured all along.

Now, Christians are to keep<sup>4</sup> the festival with unleavenness (the word "bread" is not in the Greek). Again, Paul is not talking about being physically

free of leavening — he says that the unleaveness he is talking about is “sincerity and truth.” We are to keep the festival in the new spiritual way, by eliminating sin.

Christianity is a continuous festival, a celebration of the salvation we have in Christ. The festival symbolism, eliminating leaven, is fulfilled by the elimination of guilt and sin through the atoning work of Christ and his sanctifying work in our lives. For Christians, sincerity and truth characterize our complete devotion to and worship of our Lord and Savior. If we are circumcised in heart, we are not required to submit to the physical rite of circumcision, since we have fulfilled the spiritual principle that the physical rite pictured. Likewise, when we live in sincerity, truth and holiness, we are not required to remove yeast from our homes, since we have already fulfilled the spiritual meaning that the physical ritual pictured.

Could the Corinthians understand Paul’s symbolism if they were not observing the festivals? Yes. They could understand Jesus’ role as a Lamb of God without killing Passover lambs, and they could understand the spiritual fulfillment of sacrifices without killing any animals. Since the church in Corinth began in a synagogue, and there were Jews in Corinth, even the Gentile Christians could have understood the allusions without actually keeping the festival in the old covenant way. Some of the Christians in Corinth may have kept the festivals in an old covenant way, but that in itself does not indicate that the festivals are required for all Christians.

## **Don’t let others pressure you**

Colossians 2:16 says, “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.” First, we should note the connecting word “therefore” — it links verse 16 with the previous verses. Because Christ has circumcised us spiritually, forgiven us and given us new life, *for that reason* we should not allow anyone to judge us regarding various rituals.

Apparently the Colossian heretics taught that certain customs were required, and Paul is telling the Christians that they should ignore the heretics’ criticisms because of what Christ had done for them. The false teachings were probably a combination of Jewish customs and ascetic restrictions. The Christians were eating and drinking things that the heretics disapproved of (perhaps meat and wine), and the Christians’ behavior on festivals wasn’t what the heretics said was necessary. Perhaps the Christians were observing these days with less rigor than the heretics demanded, or perhaps they were not observing these days at all.<sup>5</sup>

Does Paul imply that the Christians were doing everything mentioned in verse 16 (eating, drinking *and* observing days)? No. By including the words “or with regard to” in the midst of his list, Paul grammatically separates food and drink from the observance of days; he may be indicating a difference in the way the Christians were being criticized for food and drink as opposed to the way they were criticized for something in respect to new moons, festivals and Sabbaths. They may have been participating in the former, but not the latter.

The Greek words translated “with regard to” literally mean “in part,” but there is no evidence that the Christians were observing only part of the festivals (such as everything but the sacrifices). The words are a Greek idiom meaning with regard to, with respect to, in connection with, concerning, etc. The Christians were not to allow others to judge them in connection with or regarding what they did on a Jewish festival. But how could they stop other people’s attitudes? They could not; all they could do is make sure that the criticisms did not cause them to change their behavior as if it were necessary for salvation. That is probably what Paul meant. Christian behavior should not be determined by external pressures.

The clearest point in the whole passage is that we shouldn’t let people judge us regarding these things — not other Christians, not even people in our own fellowship. Salvation doesn’t depend on our observance of dietary rules or specific festivals. Christ is the judge, and we are to obey him rather than human traditions.

Does this verse imply that we can be saved whether we keep these days or not? Yes. That harmonizes well with the principle Paul gave in another situation (Romans 14:4-6). Some people regard the day as special to the Lord, and others regard it as optional, also basing their belief on their desire to obey the Lord. Each should be fully convinced, bringing every thought into submission to the Lord, but we are not to judge each other, since Christ is our Lord and our Judge. We are not to let others judge us (that is, pressure us to change our behavior because of their opinions), and we are not to judge others regarding food and drink and festivals.

## **Shadows pointing to Christ**

Festivals, new moons and Sabbaths are shadows pointing to the reality, which is Christ (Colossians 2:17).<sup>6</sup> The tabernacle and laws of sacrifices were also shadows (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). All these things had symbolic significance, but Christ fulfilled the symbolism of the old covenant rites.<sup>7</sup> The old covenant specified holy places and holy times, but the New Testament does

not label any time as “holy.” Just as in the case of circumcision, when we have been given the spiritual reality, we are not bound by physical worship rules.

Although Christians may observe the festivals as celebrations of various aspects of salvation, nothing in the New Testament says that they are required. In Colossians 2:16, the old covenant festivals are placed in the same category as new moon observances. Christ does not require us to observe them, nor does he forbid us to observe them. Festivals can be helpful if they emphasize what Christ has done for us, but they can also take our attention away from Christ.

## Endnotes

<sup>2</sup> If we consider what readers knew and didn’t know, we would also have to consider why Mark had to explain to his readers that the Preparation Day was the day before a Sabbath (Mark 15:42). Does this mean that his readers didn’t observe a preparation day? Why does John 7:2 say that Tabernacles (not just the ceremonies, but the festival itself) was a Jewish festival, as if Christians didn’t keep it? These verses are not proof, but they are substantiating evidence that some Christians were not familiar with these festivals.

<sup>3</sup> Paul is also making a contrast between “old” and “new,” just as he does in Ephesians 4:22-25 and Colossians 3:8-14. Paul can say that the Christians have already put off the old self and put on the new self, and he can also exhort them to continue to put off old behavior and put on new. They have been declared to be new, so they should act accordingly. Because they are created anew in Christ, they are to put off lying and anger, malice and wrath, and they are to put on truth, kindness and love. Likewise in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul can say that the Christians are already spiritually unleavened, and yet should put out spiritual leaven. They should act in accordance with what they have been declared to be.

<sup>4</sup> The verb “keep” is in the present tense, which in Greek generally denotes a continuing action. Keeping the festival, in the manner Paul described, is an ongoing responsibility.

<sup>5</sup> It isn’t likely that the heretics would advocate animal sacrifices, because Diaspora Jews did not require them, and vegetarian ascetics wouldn’t, either. Perhaps the Christians were being criticized for observing days the heretics thought were unnecessary, but it isn’t likely that the heretics would criticize the addition of requirements. This suggests that the Colossian Christians were *not* observing festivals, and the heretics were claiming that they ought to, and Paul was telling the Christians to ignore the criticisms. It is a spurious argument to ask, How could they be criticized with regard to days they were not keeping? — as seen by the fact that some people today *do* criticize people for not keeping these festivals.

<sup>6</sup> Not just part of the festival, but the entire festival is a shadow pointing to Christ. From this sentence, it is not clear whether the foods and drinks are also considered

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shadows.

<sup>7</sup> Some of Christ's work is still future, and the festivals foreshadow some future events, too, but Paul's conclusion is still that we should not let anyone judge us with respect to these days. Nor should we judge others regarding these days.

## **FESTIVALS: THE CONCLUSION**

The festivals were instituted by God himself, but so were the sacrifices and the tabernacle. The festivals are “feasts of the Lord,” but the tabernacle and sacrifices were also “of the Lord.” The festivals were commanded forever, but so were some of the sacrifices and so was circumcision. None of these are requirements for Christians today. The new covenant is significantly different from the old; worship requirements have been greatly transformed. The festivals are not signs or proofs of true Christianity and are not a basis for judging whether someone is in the faith.

Two festivals were instituted before Sinai, but circumcision was also instituted before Sinai, and it is not a requirement. Christians are inheritors of the covenant of promise that God made with Abraham because of his faith, and laws that were added afterwards cannot change the promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Even the festivals commanded before Sinai were given through Moses and are part of “the Law of Moses.”<sup>8</sup> They were historically conditioned, linked to the agricultural seasons of a specific nation in a specific land, linked to physical salvation and physical promises.

The festivals were commanded within the old covenant, and *only* within the old covenant. The terms of that covenant are not binding on Christians today. Observances instituted in the old covenant are obsolete unless we have evidence that they are also part of the new covenant. If we are to teach something as a requirement for people in a new covenant relationship with God, it must be based on the new covenant, not the old.

The prophets predicted a restoration of the festivals, but they also predicted sacrifices (e.g., Zechariah 14:20-21) and circumcision (Ezekiel 44:9). Their prophecies cannot be used to make requirements for the church in this age.

### **Faulty arguments**

Jesus observed the weekly and annual Sabbaths because he was born under the law, while the old covenant was still in force (Galatians 4:4). He observed old covenant customs such as participating in the sacrifice of Passover lambs, tithing to the Levites, telling cleansed people to make offerings as prescribed by Moses, etc. He also observed Hanukkah. Such examples help Christians focus on Jesus’ teaching and the meaning of what

he did for us.

By comparison, Christians should be careful about using his example in cultural, time-bound circumstances. We should instead focus on what he actually taught, and the meaning of what he *did* for us. If we were to teach circumcision as a requirement, for example, then we would be denying the significance of what Jesus did, even though Jesus never said anything against circumcision itself. We would be failing to recognize the new covenant that he brought; the same is true if we require other obsolete laws.

The early church observed the festivals, since the first Christians were Jewish. They also observed circumcision and other customs that were not binding on Gentile believers. It was certainly permissible for Jewish believers to continue observing their traditions, but their example is not authoritative, and we have no evidence that Gentiles were required to observe these festivals. God gave the Holy Spirit on one festival, but he never told us to commemorate that event with a required assembly (although many Christian churches observe Pentecost, it is by tradition rather than command); he gave the Spirit on other days, too. Later history shows a few Christians keeping the festivals, but some kept circumcision, too. Their example isn't authoritative. Our standard must be the Bible, particularly the new covenant.

Paul kept some festivals in Jerusalem, but he was away for most of them. He also kept other Jewish customs, so his example isn't automatically authoritative. We can't assume that we have to do everything he did. We need to discern which details of his life were based on the culture he lived in, and which were based on the new life in Christ. Paul considered himself under the law of Christ, not under the law of the old covenant (1 Corinthians 9:19-21). Today, we are to obey the commands of Jesus (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus commanded a commemoration of his death, but he otherwise did not command Christians to observe any festivals. Likewise, Paul did not command Gentiles to keep the festivals. In referring to the Festival of Unleavened Bread, he spiritualized it, saying that Christians were to rejoice in sincerity and truth. And he told the Colossians to ignore what others might say regarding Jewish festivals. They were symbolic shadows, so they did not matter. The reality to which they had pointed had come. They had symbolic significance, but so did circumcision and the sacrifices. They are meaningful, but that in itself does not mean that observance is required.

## **How many details are needed?**

Moreover, if the festivals were required, we would have to ask how many of the customs are required. Can we say that one physical custom (unleavened

bread) is still required but another physical custom (bitter herbs) is not? Or we might consider that the old covenant required not only temporary dwellings, but also homemade, substandard dwellings. Can we say that one aspect of the shelters is important, but the others are not? If we say that tree-branch booths are not practical in our climate, are we using convenience to limit our obedience?

The Israelites were told to celebrate the Feast of Ingathering with fruit, “palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars” (Leviticus 23:40). This passage tells us when the Feast should be observed. It tells us how to celebrate: with sacrifices, palm fronds, etc. It tells us who the festival is for: “native-born Israelites” (verse 42). It tells us why: the festival commemorates the beginning of the nation. It is arbitrary to insist on the dates for the festival (which appear to be based on climate in one part of the world), but ignore other details.

The Bible doesn’t tell us that one part of the passage is to be obeyed forever and the next part is temporary. If we are to accept one verse as authoritative, shouldn’t we accept the next verse, too?

*None* of these are requirements under the new covenant. They are part of “the Law of Moses” that is not a requirement for membership in the Christian community (Acts 15). We may not understand precisely how Jesus fulfilled the symbolism of leavened loaves and other festival rituals, but we do know that in the New Testament, our relationship with God is based on faith in Christ. He is our atoning sacrifice, so there is no reason to fast on the Day of Atonement, since we do not believe that atonement is made for us on that particular day. Since we have been given salvation in Christ, we are already abiding by the purpose of the festivals; we have begun to experience the reality that the festivals only pointed to. The New Testament does not command them.

Although the festivals are not requirements, they can be used as opportunities to preach the gospel and worship our Savior. But we cannot make them requirements and say that people ought to risk their jobs and alienate their families in order to keep them.

## **Optional observances**

Those who wish to abstain from leavened bread during that festival are free to do so, but there is no requirement to do so. We are spiritually unleavened through faith in the sacrificed Lamb of God, and there is therefore no need to physically perform something that was only a shadow of the reality. However, there is a danger in doing such optional things: they tempt us to think that we are more obedient and better than others. They

tempt us to look to ourselves instead of to Christ for our salvation.

Similarly, those who want to fast on the Day of Atonement are free to do so, but they do not have to. It is not more righteous or holy to do so. Through his sacrificial death, Jesus Christ has already made us “at one” with God. At its best, the Day of Atonement is a celebration both of Christ’s atoning work and of the reconciliation with God that we have been given because of his work. Although fasting can be a spiritually valuable discipline, there is no new covenant requirement to continue the old covenant practice of fasting on this particular day to acknowledge one’s spiritual alienation from God. Our fast days and worship days are not determined by the Hebrew calendar, which was given to Israel alone as part of the old covenant.

Paul did not require Jewish Christians to stop practicing their customs, but he did require them not to impose those customs on Gentile converts (Galatians 2:14-15). The law was a guardian that could lead us to Christ (Galatians 3:24), and if the festivals lead us to Christ, they are good. But they are not a substitute for Christ; they cannot save us. Nor are they a required addition to faith in Christ. People who keep the festivals are not better Christians than those who do not. The important thing is whether people have faith in Christ and obey him. If we have faith, we are already fulfilling the purpose of Israel’s worship rules. We are saved by grace through faith, not by performance of specific old covenant customs.

### Review

- The Israelite annual festivals were designed for the agricultural seasons of the land of Canaan.
- Jesus kept the festivals and other obsolete laws.
- Paul used the festival as a metaphor of morality — when we live in sincerity and truth, we have already fulfilled the symbolism.
- The symbolism of Atonement has been fulfilled in Christ.

### Endnote

<sup>8</sup> Scripture does not compartmentalize Moses’ writings into temporary and permanent, or core and periphery, or ethical and ritual; they are all equally part of the law of Moses, and Christians are not under obligation to that law (Acts 15). Although the rituals continue to be in inspired Scripture, their spiritual symbolism has been fulfilled, and they do not need to be physically reenacted by God’s people today. Their validity has been confirmed at the same time as it has become unnecessary to perform them.

Many of the ethical rules continue to be valid, but their validity rests on the new

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covenant rather than the old. When French citizens move to England, they find that many of the laws are the same. They obey them because they are under a new jurisdiction, not because they were enforced in the old. And they will need to drive on a different side of the road.

## **IS THE LORD'S SUPPER AN ANNUAL FESTIVAL?**

The Lord's Supper is commanded as part of the new covenant, and Christians observe it. We observe it at various times throughout the year, and we sometimes observe it near the Jewish Passover, reminding us that Jesus instituted this new covenant ceremony on the evening before he was betrayed, the evening before he was killed as our Passover fulfillment. Jesus did not specify how often we should do it. To explore the topic of frequency, we need to take a closer look at what he told his disciples to do.

Shortly before his death, he shared a meal with his disciples. He shared a cup of wine with them, and then some bread. "He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'" (Luke 22:19).

When Jesus told his disciples to do "this" in remembrance of him, what were they to "do"? They were to take bread, give thanks, break bread and share it. Jesus' command also included sharing the cup (verse 17; 1 Corinthians 11:25). Although the Last Supper may have been special due to the festival season, the elements of commemoration were more ordinary. The disciples were to "do" what they had probably done many times before: share bread and wine. Now, however, they were to do it in remembrance of Jesus giving his body and blood on behalf of others so that we could have a new relationship with God. By sharing in bread and wine, they symbolized their participation in Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life himself and their communion with one another (cf. 1 John 1:3, 7).

When two disciples were on the road to Emmaus, they did not recognize the resurrected Jesus until "he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them" (Luke 24:30). Then they remembered. When the disciples came together to break bread and pray (Acts 2:42), they would likely remember their last meal with their Savior. Whenever they shared an evening meal with other disciples, they would probably remember their experience with their Master.

Commemorating the body and blood of our Savior by sharing bread and wine does not have to be limited to once a year. Jesus indicated flexibility in the timing when he said, "Do this, *whenever you drink it*, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25). "When" could indicate a set time, but "whenever" (reflecting the Greek conditional particle *ean*) indicates flexibility.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians also gives evidence that the Lord's Supper was being observed frequently. He corrected them for their behavior at meetings in which they commemorated the Lord's death, and it sounds like these meetings were a frequent occurrence (verses 17, 20, 33). It was done when they came together "as a church" (verse 18).

Some events are commemorated annually, but others are commemorated more often, such as weekly. There is no command about how often we should commemorate the Lord's death, just as there is no command about how often we should fast.

Some people observe the Lord's Supper on its anniversary, associated with Passover, and some even call it "the New Testament Passover." But the commemoration has little in common with the Old Testament Passover. Bread, wine and footwashing have only a little overlap with lamb, bread and bitter herbs. Jesus told his disciples to prepare for the Passover, but he did not call the bread and wine a Passover.

In New Testament symbolism, the Passover is Jesus Christ himself, and the symbolism of the old covenant Passover was fulfilled and does not need to be repeated. Jesus never said that the bread and wine replaced the old covenant Passover practices. Rather, he instituted a *new* observance and then fulfilled the old and made the old physical details obsolete. The body and blood of Jesus fulfilled not only the Passover sacrifice, but also the sin offerings, fellowship offerings, grain offerings, etc. Just as those offerings were not limited to once a year, the bread and wine commemoration need not be limited.

We do not need to be limited by old covenant rules about the Passover regarding when we observe a different ritual under a different covenant. The observance of the Lord's Supper is not mandated by the old covenant or the Hebrew calendar. It is mandated by Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

For those who are under the new covenant blood of Christ, frequency and the date of commemoration are church decisions, not biblical commands.

## Conclusion

The old covenant festivals are not commanded in the new covenant. The old covenant Passover has been fulfilled, and Jesus instituted a different observance. Our Christian lives should be continual fulfillments of the spiritual meaning of the festivals. We should always be walking in righteousness, filled with the Spirit, looking forward to the return of our Savior, rejoicing that he has atoned for our sins, celebrating his kingdom and

the salvation it brings. Through faith in Christ and Christ living in us, we are abiding by the spiritual purpose of the festivals.

The new covenant gives us two clear commands regarding festivals: 1) Observe the Lord's Supper in commemoration of the new covenant made in Jesus' blood. 2) Do not let others judge us in connection with the festivals, with the implication that we should not judge others regarding these days, either.

The festivals are typologically meaningful, but they are optional — traditions that may be used in worship, but not as requirements for salvation or membership. They must never distract us from the true focus of the festivals: the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is pivotal and of supreme importance in the plan of God.

## **DOES ZECHARIAH 14:16-21 COMMAND CHRISTIANS TO KEEP FESTIVALS?**

Editor's note: We have two answers to this question. The short answer is first; the second answer has additional detail.

**Question:** Prophecies indicate that the Sabbath and annual festivals will be kept in God's ideal age (e.g., Isaiah 66:23; Zechariah 14:16-19). Does this prove that the Sabbath and annual festivals must be kept by his people today?

**Answer:** The prophets described an ideal time in which all peoples worship God. To effectively convey this to old covenant peoples, the prophets described old covenant forms of worship, including new moon observances (Isaiah 66:23), sacrifices in the temple (Zechariah 14:20-21; Ezekiel 45:17) and physical circumcision (Ezekiel 44:9; Isaiah 52:1-2). But neither physical circumcision nor animal sacrifices are religious requirements for Christians.

Will sacrifices be part of worship in the future? Opinions vary, but regardless, it is clear that these prophecies cannot be used to prove the validity of all these forms of worship for people under the new covenant, who have accepted and believe in Jesus Christ. Prophecies should be read for their purpose, not as a source from which we can infer standards and requirements for Christians. Our doctrines must be based on scriptures that are applicable to this age, the age of the new covenant.

*By Michael Morrison*

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Some have seen Zechariah 14:16-21 as a prophecy of a future millennial reign of Christ on earth during which the Festival of Tabernacles will be observed. This passage of Scripture speaks of survivors from all the nations that made war against Jerusalem going up "year after year" to worship God and to celebrate this festival at Jerusalem.

Some interpret this to mean that Christians today should keep the festival as holy time. The thought is that, since God told his people in ancient Israel to observe this festival, and since his people in the future will also observe it, is it not reasonable that his people today should keep the festival? That would be consistent with the idea that this time is designated as holy, permanently.

Is this a correct interpretation? Let's answer the question by first looking at the circumstances under which the book was written. Zechariah was a

prophet who began witnessing to Judah during the time of the rebuilding of the temple (about 520 B.C.) after the Jews returned from their Babylonian captivity. Zechariah called on the Jews to finish the task of reconstruction by encouraging them about the important future role of the temple. His was an old covenant ministry, so we shouldn't be surprised that his book is full of images pertaining to that covenant.

Zechariah was particularly interested in describing Jerusalem and the temple as the apple of God's eye. He emphasizes that the Jews worshipping at the house of God would gain the victory over their enemies through the power of the Lord (1:14-17; 8:3-22; 12:13, 10; 13:1; 14:1-18). This theme fits the circumstances well. The small number of exiles who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild the temple were besieged on every side by enemies. It was in such trying times that Zechariah brought the word of comfort to the people about Jerusalem's and the temple's wonderful future (Ezra 5:1-2).

Zechariah's basic message was that after the past and present periods of trouble there would be a glorious restoration. Jerusalem — which was a downtrodden and destroyed city in Zechariah's time — would become the focus of God's blessings. For the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem, the Festival of Tabernacles symbolized the promise of this glorious future time. We see this in a festival celebration in the time of Nehemiah, some years after Zechariah's preaching (Nehemiah 8:9-18).

The book of Zechariah contains symbolic imagery. Here are some examples: 1:18-21; 3:1-10; 4:1-14; 5:1-4; 5:11; 6:1-8; 11:4-17. This means we must be careful in how we interpret what the book says, because at least some of it is not intended to be taken literally. This seems to be true of Zechariah 14:16-21. If we were to interpret this passage literally, and say that it teaches all people everywhere and at all times must observe the Festival of Tabernacles, we are faced with exegetical difficulties and logical contradictions.

For example, Zechariah speaks of the survivors of all nations going to Jerusalem to keep the feast (14:16). But this can't mean all people on earth will observe the festival in Jerusalem. It is not possible for everyone to fit into Jerusalem for the festival, even if we consider the size of the city's expanded modern boundaries. Only a tiny percentage of the earth's people could gather there — even if one assumes a much smaller population at the beginning of some future age.

Some have responded that only *representatives* of all the nations would have to travel to Jerusalem. But this interpretation denies the literalness of

Zechariah 14, which would be essential to prove that people everywhere and at all times are required to observe the festival. The account does not speak of representatives, but simply says “the peoples of the earth” must go to Jerusalem to observe the festival (14:17). To say only “representatives” will go is to not take the account literally. But one cannot logically hold that the prophecy is literal in all aspects except those that we think are impossible!

Conversely, the text does not speak of people observing the Festival of Tabernacles in all parts of the earth. The passage speaks of the festival as being observed *only* in Jerusalem. This accords well with the Mosaic command that the festivals were to be celebrated only at the place God chose, which ultimately was at the temple in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 12:4-6, 11, 17-18; 16:5-6, 11, 15-16). To celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles or any other of the Mosaic festivals outside of Jerusalem was not allowed by the Law.

If we see Zechariah’s reference to the Festival of Tabernacles as *symbolic* of an important theological point (in a non-Mosaic, Christian context), these kinds of problems and inconsistencies disappear. Let’s look at this understanding. Zechariah sees the nations who once hated God’s way now acknowledging the Messiah and his way as being just and true. Jerusalem and the temple were considered the focal point of God’s presence under the old covenant.

This picture echoes Isaiah 2:2-4 and 11:1-9, which shows the Messiah’s way of holiness going forth to all the earth from Jerusalem. Isaiah uses various symbols to show the way of God spreading out across the earth, including waters covering the sea, formerly dangerous animals playing with docile animals and children, the rod of God’s mouth striking the earth, swords being beaten into plowshares.

Zechariah uses different imagery to make the same point, including the picture of all the world coming to Jerusalem during the Festival of Tabernacles to worship the Lord. But just as we do not interpret the image of a rod striking the earth in a literal manner, neither do we need to take the image of the world coming to Jerusalem in a literal way. A much better understanding is that this is a symbolic picture, given in an old covenant context to Israel, which makes a crucial point: The Lord will one day be king of *all* the earth, and *all people* will worship him. To convey this to an old covenant audience, old covenant imagery was used.

Let’s look at other aspects of Zechariah’s use of imagery to further help us understand why his statement regarding the Festival of Tabernacles should not be taken in a literal fashion. In his description of the future age, Zechariah speaks of sacrifices and of the pots in Jerusalem being holy (14:21). Sacrifices

were commanded in the past, and prophesied for the future in this passage. But no one is suggesting that we should have “holy pots” or offer physical sacrifices in our worship today. The logic that says Christians have to observe everything commanded in the past and prophesied for the future (the Law and the Prophets) is inaccurate.

If we take Zechariah 14’s comments about the nations of the world celebrating the Festival of Tabernacles as a literal command for all people today, we would not be at liberty to eliminate “holy pots” or sacrifices from present-day worship. Logic says that if one worship method is compelling for our time (Tabernacles observance), the other should be, too (having holy pots and sacrificing animals). But in truth, none of these are required today.

Zechariah 14:20 says the horses are to have bells with the inscription, “Holy to the Lord.” If we are to apply this section of Scripture literally to worship today, then we would need to have horses with inscribed bells as part of a Tabernacles celebration. It is obvious that if one interprets Zechariah 14 in a literal manner as requirement for our worship today, we find ourselves entangled in anachronisms.

What do we see in Zechariah 14:16-21, then? The imagery is drawn from worship under the old covenant and from Jewish apocalyptic thought. What is pictured is an old covenant scenario of the ideal world where the enemies of God and Israel bow to the Messiah’s rule. It was the right message for Israel under the old covenant, especially for the few Jewish stragglers who had returned to Jerusalem after the captivity. They could picture themselves and their enemies in fellowship with God in familiar physical terms — as worshipping at a restored temple in an uplifted Jerusalem that would one day hold sway over the nations under the power of the Messiah.

The New Testament interprets old covenant details in terms of new covenant spiritual realities. For example, Jesus revealed that true fellowship and worship are not restricted to a holy place in Jerusalem (John 4:21-24), and Paul showed that God extends his hand to all nations. Under the new covenant, the temple of God is the church, not a building in Jerusalem. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices, not physical ones at an altar in Jerusalem. Circumcision is of the heart, not the cutting of the foreskin.

God seeks all who are willing to worship him in spirit and truth. They do so in their hearts, not by going to the temple in Jerusalem. For Christians, there is no “holy place,” and there is no “holy time.” Christians can worship at all times and places because they do it through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This is illustrated by the later chapters of Ezekiel, where intricate and complex details of a restored temple in Jerusalem are given. Levites and sacrifices are mentioned as a part of the worship in this restored temple,

which is pictured as a physical building. This was an old covenant message, and it must be given a new covenant interpretation for Christians. That is why the book of Revelation radically reinterprets Ezekiel's temple in terms of Christ's redemptive work and salvation, as it does its many dozens of references to the Old Testament. See Revelation 21:22-22:5 to see how Revelation interprets the meaning of the temple.

The conclusion is that we should not interpret Zechariah 14 in a literal way nor as a command to Christians to keep the Festival of Tabernacles as "holy time." None of the New Testament writings cite Zechariah 14:16-19 as applying to Christians. The apostles did not urge anyone — certainly not those who weren't Jews — to go to Jerusalem for the Festival of Tabernacles. There is not a single instance in the letters of Paul, Peter or John of a command to keep the annual festivals of ancient Israel.

The church does not interpret Zechariah 14 as a command for Christians today to observe the annual festivals of ancient Israel. If we are patient and explore these issues with an open mind, we can understand them in a spiritual manner in light of Christ's redemptive work. Under the new covenant, we are not commanded to keep the Festival of Tabernacles. Christ has fulfilled the old covenant law. The spiritual reality is that Christ has made his tabernacle with us (in a literal translation, John 1:14 says that he tabernacled among us) and the people of God have become the tabernacle or temple of God in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

*Paul Kroll*

## CHRISTIAN CELEBRATIONS

Do you remember the song *I Love a Parade*? It celebrates our love for celebrations! Our calendars are filled with them—some national, some religious, some just bizarre. Did you know that January 6 is Sherlock Holmes' birthday, that January 20 is Penguin Awareness day and that April 26 is Hug an Australian day? September has Video Game Day, Preserve the Ozone Day and Elephant Appreciation Day. Marking time with celebrations is as old as civilization itself.

Ancient pagans scheduled celebrations using various calendars. Perhaps the earliest is found in the cave paintings at Lascaux, France, where time was marked using the phases of the moon. Ancient monuments in Central and South America and at Stonehenge in England marked time by observing the cycles of the sun and moon.

When God brought Israel out of Egyptian captivity and settled them in the Promised Land, he gave them a lunar-solar calendar with annual festivals to remind them of the great events in which he intervened in their history and of the natural cycle of events that showed he alone was Creator. Since Israel was principally engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, the festivals centered on the harvests.

Israel's sacred year with its festivals and holy days was determined by observing the phases of the moon, with Israel's high priest serving as chief observer and calendar custodian. The exact method for determining new moons, the beginning of the new year and other days is not detailed in Scripture. It was passed down through the priests. Even though the temple in Jerusalem was not designed as an astronomical observatory, as were some pagan temples, it served as the base from where the Levitical priesthood decided, by observation, when new months and years began. Numbers chapters 28 and 29 detail the priest's responsibility to perform sacrifices on new moons and annual festivals.

The Hebrew calendar was not intended to calibrate time for all people in all locations at all times. It was temporary, even as the tabernacle and temple from where it was issued were temporary. Jesus prophesied that the temple standing in his day would be destroyed. Earlier, Israel's prophets foretold the same thing: "Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets" (Micah 3:12).

When the temple was destroyed by the armies of Rome, the calendar went

with it. However, even before that destruction, the rules for deciding calendar dates had become mired in political wrangling between the Sadducees and Pharisees. Those who rejected Jesus decided the calendar should be determined by calculation rather than by the observation of the high priest. This may seem quaint in our “sophisticated” modern age, when we mark the year by the dates of seasonal sales at the mall!

It is not a sin to celebrate ancient events in Israel’s history, but in doing so—fair warning—you may become enmeshed in a contentious debate concerning how to schedule those celebrations. In any case, such celebrations most definitely are not required of Christians, nor do they have salvific value. Observing days does not make anyone righteous.

While some aspects of Israel’s festivals pointed to Jesus and his coming, their worship calendar was not intended to accommodate the dates for celebrating God’s pivotal intervention to save all humanity from its sins in the atoning ministry of Jesus. The Hebrew calendar is no longer used to mark “holy time,” especially since Jesus now lives in us, making all our time holy. On the day of Pentecost, the symbol of God’s presence, the *shekinah*, bypassed the temple to alight on *individuals*.

Today, the people of God have a new calendar of events that centers on Jesus’ birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and promised return. Christians celebrate these events at different times and in different ways.

Exactly when these events in the life and ministry of Jesus are celebrated is not what is most important. Calendars come and go, but Jesus and his saving acts remain forever. As Christians, we celebrate these acts and respond in joyful obedience to our Lord’s command to go into the world as salt and light, pointing to Jesus, the Living Water who alone quenches our thirst.

*Joseph Tkach*

## WHAT THE FESTIVALS PICTURE

By Michael Morrison

The old covenant included a wide variety of religious rituals and duties. There were special garments, special incense, special offerings, special utensils and special times. Each of these had significance in Israel's worship. In some cases we are not sure why the ritual had to be performed in a particular way. In other cases the Bible tells us the meaning of the symbolism. Let us look at the annual festivals to see what they pictured.

1. The Passover sacrifice was commanded when Israel was in Egypt. What were the Israelites told to do? Exodus 12:3-11. Were they told why they should select a lamb on the 10th rather than the 11th? Verse 3. Was a young goat just as acceptable as a lamb? Verse 5. Was the significance of bitter herbs explained? Verse 8.

2. Why were they to put blood around the door? Verses 12-13, 23. Why was hyssop (not some other plant) used for the blood? Verse 22. Was this to be done every year? Verses 14, 24-25. Since the original purpose did not apply in later years, why was this to be repeated? Verses 26-27.

**Comment:** Scripture tells us the overall purpose of the ritual, but it does not comment on all the details. We are not told the symbolism of twilight, roasting, eating, not breaking bones or burning leftovers. Commentators offer various ideas, some of them good and some rather farfetched. These ideas may be right, but they cannot be proven, since the Bible does not tell us. For most details, we cannot be dogmatic.

The overall symbolic picture given to the Israelites for the Passover is this: God passed over the Israelites when he killed the Egyptian firstborn. The entire ritual — lamb, herbs, bread — was a memorial of escape from death. It was also a memorial of escape from Egypt: “Celebrate the Passover of the Lord your God, because...he brought you out of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 16:1, 6). Were the Israelites told that the lamb pictured a future sacrifice and a spiritual escape from death and slavery? No, the only sure word they had about the Passover is that it looked backward to the Exodus, to a physical rescue.

3. Right after the Passover, came the week of unleavened bread. When was leaven to be removed? Exodus 12:15. What reason is given for this festival? Exodus 12:17; 13:8. Historically, why was their bread unleavened? Exodus 12:34, 39. Why was the bread unleavened in the yearly festival? Deuteronomy 16:3. What symbolism was given to the other rituals that were

part of this festival? Numbers 28:17-25.

**Comment:** This festival included several rituals. Everyone was to 1) remove leaven, 2) not have or eat any leaven for seven days, and 3) not work on the first and last days. Every day, the priests were to 4) sacrifice two bulls, a ram and seven lambs, 5) give 10 grain offerings mixed with oil and 6) kill a goat as a sin offering.

All of these were part of the festival — but which had symbolic significance? Why two bulls and not three? Why only one ram? Why seven days? We are not told. All we know for sure is this: 1) the goat was offered to make atonement for the people, 2) the unleavened bread was a reminder of their haste in leaving Egypt and 3) the entire festival was a memorial of the Exodus.

4. The festival was connected not only with the Exodus, but also the yearly harvest. What additional ritual was done during the spring festival? Leviticus 23:9-11. When was it done? Verse 11. What three offerings were the priests to make? Verses 12-13. How did all the people participate in the ritual? Verse 14. Were the symbols explained?

5. Fifty days later, another harvest festival was conducted. How was it celebrated? Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:10-11. What unusual grain offering characterized this festival? Leviticus 23:17. How many bulls, rams and lambs were offered? Verse 18. What additional ritual was done? Verses 19-20.

**Comment:** Again, we are told many ritual details, but not many meanings. We are not told the significance of 50 days or the variety of sacrifices. This was the only time in the year that leaven was used in an offering. We might speculate on the meaning, but we do not have any proof.

6. Several months later came the last set of festivals. What was done on the first day of the seventh month? Leviticus 23:24-25. What was the unusual feature, and what meaning was given to it?

**Comment:** This festival was given no historical meaning, no agricultural significance and no future meaning. It was revealed simply as a day for blowing trumpets. But trumpets were blown on every new moon and festival (Numbers 10:10). They were used both for war and for celebration. We are not told which meaning was significant for this festival. And we do not know if the monthly trumpet blasts had the same symbolism.

7. Ten days later, what did the people do? Leviticus 23:27-32. What was the purpose of this day? Verse 28; Leviticus 16:30. Was its meaning historical, agricultural, prophetic or religious? What unusual rituals characterized this day? Leviticus 16:2-28.

**Comment:** The Torah says that this day is effective in providing atonement for the people. It does not say that a more effective atonement would be needed in the future. But atonement was made on other festivals, too. Why was this day so different as to require fasting? Why was one goat released alive — was it for the same reason that animals were released alive in a few other rituals? Why were the bull and goat burned outside the camp, not on the altar? Why did the man who burned them have to be cleansed? These are areas for speculation, not dogmatism.

8. What agricultural significance did the next festival have? Exodus 23:17; Leviticus 23:39; Deuteronomy 16:13. What unusual rituals did the people do for this festival? Leviticus 23:40-42. How many bulls were sacrificed each day? Numbers 29:13, 17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32. Why this unique sequence? What was the primary symbolism of this festival? Leviticus 23:43.

9. On the eighth day, what were the people to do? Leviticus 23:36, 39. What did the priests do? Numbers 29:35-38. Was anything unique about this day?

**Comment:** Nothing unusual happened on the eighth day, so it is difficult to prove any symbolic meaning to it. It just came right after Tabernacles.

## Summary of festival details

1. Passover pictured escape from death and slavery, memorializing the Exodus.
2. Unleavened Bread was a reminder of the Exodus.
3. The wavesheaf was not assigned a symbolism.
4. Pentecost was not assigned a symbolism.
5. Trumpets memorialized trumpet-blowing.
6. Atonement focused on atoning for sin.
7. Tabernacles was a reminder of the Exodus.
8. The eighth day was not assigned a symbolism.

The Old Testament shows us that the most common theme for the annual festivals is the Exodus. That was the defining event in the nation's history, the time when the Israelites became one nation under God.

But if an ancient Israelite looked at all the annual festivals, as well as the rules about washings, offerings and various other rituals, it would be difficult to see a unified theme. Let's now look at the New Testament.

10. Did Jesus come to fulfill the Torah and the Prophets, the entire Old Testament? Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:44; John 5:39. Was the old covenant a shadow of things fulfilled in Christ? Hebrews 10:1-9. Were the annual festivals also a shadow of Christ? Colossians 2:16-17.

**Comment:** After Jesus Christ came, was crucified and resurrected, it became easier to find ways in which old covenant rituals pictured certain aspects of his work. He was the lamb without blemish, killed without any bones being broken, so that we might escape slavery and death. He was the firstfruit who rose toward God on the day after the Sabbath. He was the lamb who made atonement for our sins, who allows us to enter the heavenly Holy Place. But there are many festival details of uncertain significance.

Moreover, Jesus is much more than what the festivals could picture — he is our Rock, our Light, our Shelter, the fulfillment of the snake lifted up high (Numbers 21:8-9). He is our bread, our water of life, the water of washing, the captain of our salvation. He fulfilled the bull sacrifices, the dove sacrifices, the daily grain offerings and the priestly garments. He is everything the old covenant pictured and much more.

It was difficult enough to understand the Old Testament prophecies about the Savior-Messiah. It was harder to get a clear picture of the Savior from the enormous variety of old covenant rituals. The festivals were only a small part of the picture, so it is harder still to get a picture from the festivals alone.

The New Testament says they are a shadow of Christ. But how much detail can a shadow reveal? Can we see the character of a person from the shadow alone? Can we describe what a person looks like from a silhouette? Only in a very limited way.

It is clear that the Passover was fulfilled by Jesus Christ (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7). But commentators differ as to how Christ fulfills many of the details. Most of the ideas are speculative, not proven, because the Bible does not assign any particular meaning to most of the rituals.

The festivals were shadows of Christ — but new moons were, too (Colossians 2:16-17). Ritual washings and grain offerings were shadows of Christ, too, each in a different way, each in a fragmentary way.

When we look back, we can see how a few aspects of the festivals pictured Christ. But we also see many details of uncertain significance. Even after Christ has come, the festivals are only a shadowy representation of Christ. They require detailed explanation because they are not clear in themselves.

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## **WHICH OLD TESTAMENT LAWS APPLY TO CHRISTIANS?**

### **Introduction**

When Christians read the Old Testament, they are often puzzled. They find many laws that seem to be part of Christianity, and yet they also find many laws that no one obeys. Laws of sacrifice, rituals and civil laws are mixed together with laws that tell people how to get along with others.

How can a Christian know which laws to keep? Does the Bible tell us? This series of Bible studies explores this topic in detail. You will need to look up each of the scriptures you find listed, because we have not taken the space to quote them. But it is worth the time to learn about how we ought to obey our Creator and Savior. We'll begin with some general principles so that we lay a good foundation for discussing specific laws later in this study.

First, we will establish from Scripture that Christians are expected to obey God. Then we will look at God's laws — starting in the time before Moses, then a closer look at the covenant made at Mt. Sinai. We will see how Jesus, Paul and the early church deal with the difference between old and new, then explore that difference with a few examples of laws that almost all Christians agree are obsolete.

We then apply those principles to the seven annual Sabbaths, dietary laws, and the weekly Sabbath. We close by noting some of the commands the New Testament gives us, and end by emphasizing that, although Christians should obey God, our salvation is received on the basis of faith, not on the basis of our obedience.

## **FOREWORD**

By Joseph Tkach

Many booklets and articles are published each year about the weekly Sabbath, the annual festivals and Old Testament dietary laws. Unfortunately, most of this literature does not take into account the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant.

The people who write this literature are usually eager to keep God's law, but they rarely understand which laws were given to Christians and which were not. In some cases, they are concerned about sabbatical years, hybrid animals, hybrid seeds, mixed fabrics and other peripheral issues. They try to determine whether certain laws were ceremonial, civil, moral, economic or for health. They also struggle to understand and explain various New Testament verses that seemed to contradict their conclusions.

Through it all, they rarely attempt to deal with the concept of covenants, even though this is the framework in which God gave his laws to ancient Israel. Often, they act as if they were still under the old covenant. Some acknowledge that the old covenant had ended and that Christians should live by the principles of the new covenant, but they still do not clarify how to tell which old covenant laws are also in the new covenant.

Many Bible-believing people have found it difficult to reconcile biblical laws with Christian practice. They struggle with the tension between Old Testament law and the New Testament emphasis on grace. They struggle with the interpretation of certain verses.

This series of studies, written by Michael Morrison, is published with the hope and prayer that it will help everyone who wants to understand this subject better. We believe that our studies on this subject have helped us ask the right questions, and to examine the foundation and framework of God's laws. We believe that this approach will help many people understand which Old Testament laws apply to Christians today regardless of whether they have ever kept any of these laws.

Equally sincere Christians sometimes come to different conclusions on these matters. Thankfully, our salvation does not depend on us having a perfect understanding of these laws. We should not condemn those who understand them differently. But it is helpful for us to understand how conclusions are drawn from the biblical revelation. This series of studies will help Christians not only in their relationship with God but also with one

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another as we all strive to respond with love to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be all praise and allegiance.

## CHRISTIANS OBEY GOD

### **1. What did Jesus tell his disciples to preach? Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-47.**

Jesus told his disciples to preach the gospel throughout the world. This gospel focuses on repentance, forgiveness of sins and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Those who believe the gospel turn toward God in faith, their sins are forgiven and they will be saved.

Belief and repentance go together, because people who believe also change their attitudes toward God, and this results in changes in the way they live. The belief or faith is the internal state of mind; repentance shows the results.

Those who believe the gospel have faith in Jesus Christ. They not only believe he exists and is the Son of God, they also believe he died on the cross to pay for their sins. They trust him for their salvation, and they willingly serve him throughout their lives.

Those who believe the gospel should be baptized, and as Matthew 28 indicates, they should be taught to obey everything Jesus commanded.

### **2. How did Jesus emphasize the importance of obeying him as Lord and Master? Matthew 7:24; Luke 6:46-48; John 14:23; 15:14.**

Jesus insists that we must put his words into practice. If we call him “Lord,” we ought to obey him, because a “Lord” is not only a protector, but is also someone who has the authority to tell us what to do. If we love him, we will do what he tells us. We trust that his instructions are for our own good.

### **3. Which commandment did Jesus emphasize most? Matthew 22:36-40; John 13:34-35; 15:17; 1 John 3:21-24. But does love do away with the need to obey our Savior? John 14:15; 1 John 3:18; 5:2-3; 2 John 6.**

Love summarizes the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14). Everything the Bible says about good behavior is built on that foundation. Even our love for God is expressed largely by the way we treat one another (Matthew 25:37-40; Hebrews 6:10; 1 John 4:11-12, 20-21). But love is not an excuse to ignore the other commands that our Lord has given us. Rather, it is a reason to more eagerly strive to obey him.

Our obedience cannot save us. Even if it could, we never obey perfectly. We all fall short, and we rely entirely on the mercy of our Savior (1 John 1:8-2:4). We love him and obey him not to earn salvation, but because he freely

saved us — as a gift — by grace (Ephesians 2:8-10).

**4. Does grace do away with the need to avoid sin? Romans 6:1-2. Does grace teach us to live holy lives? Titus 2:11-12.**

Jesus paid a tremendous price to redeem us from sin. From his sacrifice, we realize what a serious enemy sin is — an enemy of our Savior, an enemy of salvation, and an enemy to our life with God. Jesus paid a tremendous price to give us the gift of forgiveness. We do not take the gift lightly, but we realize how profoundly it urges us to obey the One who gave himself for us (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). The better we understand God's grace, the more we learn to say "no" to all sin, and the more we want to serve and honor our Lord and Master by the way we live.

**5. Does faith work with obedience? Romans 1:5; 3:31; 16:26; James 2:14-24.**

Paul wrote about the obedience that comes as a result of faith. He preached the gospel so people might not only believe in Jesus Christ, but also follow him.

Faith does not do away with God's law. Rather, it works with the law, since those who believe that Jesus is Lord will also want to obey him. A faith that doesn't come with obedience is not a biblical faith. Faith and actions work together, reinforcing each other — the faith leading to obedience, and the resulting actions giving visible evidence that the faith is real.

**6. Did the apostles preach repentance and forgiveness? Acts 3:19; 5:29, 31; 17:30; 20:21. Are Christians supposed to live righteously? Romans 6:12-19. Should they obey God's commandments? 1 Corinthians 7:19; Revelation 12:17; 14:12.**

We cannot logically ask God to forgive us while we deliberately continue in the behaviors that resulted in our Savior's death! Faith, repentance and salvation are linked throughout the Bible. Jesus, Peter and Paul preached the same message. Christians are God's servants, doing his will, striving to live in the way he has revealed to us in the Scriptures.

As Peter said, we should obey God. He said it in the context of God's command to preach the gospel, but the principle is true in all aspects of life. The saints not only have faith in Jesus Christ but also obey God.

But exactly which commandments should we keep? It will take quite a bit of study to answer this question. There are some Old Testament laws we do not need to keep; there are others we should. That's the topic of this series.

Throughout our study, we approach the Scriptures from the standpoint of faith and obedience. We want to do what God says. We want to understand which of his commands apply to us today, and which do not. The

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reason for our study is that we want to obey. If we didn't want to obey, if we didn't believe the Scriptures, there would be no need for this study at all! Faith and obedience work together, and that is the foundation for the rest of this study. We can now begin to get more specific.

## OLD TESTAMENT LAWS BEFORE MOSES

Although the laws of Moses are the focus of this series, the story doesn't begin with Moses. It begins in the Garden of Eden. We will start by looking at laws that existed *before* Moses.

**1. Did sin exist before the law was given through Moses? Romans 5:13. Since sin implies the existence of a law, does the existence of sin before Moses imply there was a law before Moses? Same verse.**

In verses 12-14, Paul is discussing the time period between Adam and Moses. Sin entered the world through one man — Adam. The penalty of sin is death, and Paul tells us that death entered humanity through Adam. All humans, except for Jesus Christ, have sinned (Romans 3:23), and death, therefore, has power over everyone.

In verse 13, Paul uses the word *law* in two different senses. One law was given through Moses, but before that law code was given, a more fundamental law existed.

Between the time of Adam and Moses, everyone sinned. They were ignoring God, going their own ways, doing things God did not want them to do. God's law existed, even though it had not been written down, and everyone was transgressing it. Therefore, death ruled over them all, even if they did not break a specific command in the way that Adam did.

**2. What specific command did God give Adam and Eve? Genesis 2:16-17. What other commands did he give them? Genesis 1:26-30.**

As Creator, God had the right to tell Adam and Eve what to do. He also had the wisdom to know what they needed. Adam and Eve should have obeyed, but they acted selfishly, and they sinned. They wanted wisdom, but they tried to take it for themselves instead of receiving it legitimately. The result was death for them and all their descendants. All human beings have a selfishness that predisposes them to sin. Everyone sins, and everyone needs the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, as Paul explains in Romans 5.

**3. How did God warn Cain about the temptation to sin? Genesis 4:6-7. What sin did Cain commit? Verses 8-11.**

Cain had a built-in sense of right and wrong. He knew that his attitude toward his brother was wrong. God told Cain to resist the sinful nature, but instead Cain allowed it to rule over him, and he murdered his brother. This was a sin, even though no written law said it was.

All normal humans have a conscience, a natural inbuilt sense of right and wrong. This is what Paul refers to in Romans 2:14-15. By nature, God has

written a moral sense, a law, into human hearts. Their understanding of right and wrong is not perfect, but every sane person has at least a basic concept of right and wrong, of love and selfishness. Although everyone falls short, some people have better behavior as compared to others. By nature, they do things that are required in God's law — not the rituals of Moses, but the more general requirements of the law that existed before Moses.

Although many people try to do what they think to be right, none is perfect. Many others choose to live selfishly, violating the standards of their societies. The biblical story tells us that people became more and more violent, and God destroyed them with a flood (Genesis 6:11-13). After the flood, he gave an additional warning about murder (Genesis 9:5-6). He also established a covenant or agreement with Noah, promising that he would not destroy the earth with a flood (verses 8-11).

**4. Before the time of Moses, was adultery a sin? Genesis 20:1-7; 39:9. Was it also wrong for Abraham to deceive Abimelech? Genesis 20:9. Did people consider honesty good and stealing evil? Genesis 30:33.**

**5. What additional commands did God give to Abraham? Genesis 12:1. What blessings did God promise if Abraham obeyed? Verses 2-3. Did Abraham obey? Verse 4. Later, what additional promises did God make to Abraham? Genesis 15:5. What was Abraham's response to these promises? Verse 6. What was the result of Abraham's faith? Same verse.**

Abraham believed God, and he was therefore judged to be in a right relationship with God even though he was not perfect. If Abraham believed God's astounding promise, then he also had enough faith to do whatever God asked. Even when God's command seemed to threaten God's promise to him, Abraham was willing to obey God. But it was the faith, not the obedience, that was counted for righteousness. The attitude of heart was more important than the result.

We see this in the story of Abimelech, too — Abimelech appealed to his conscience (Genesis 20:5). He was innocent not so much because his action was innocent, but because his motives were. He had acted in good faith, according to his conscience, and God honored that attitude (verse 6).

In Genesis 15, after Abraham's faith was counted for righteousness, God made a special covenant with Abraham emphasizing the certainty of his promise to bless him with many descendants (verses 8-20). No conditions were put on this covenant. It was simply given to Abraham as a promise. God already knew that Abraham would be faithful.

**6. Several years later, God reaffirmed his covenant with Abraham**

**(Genesis 17:1-8). From then on, what custom was to serve as a sign of the covenant? Verses 9-14. Was Abraham obedient? Verse 23.**

**7. After many more years, God again gave a special commandment to Abraham. What was it? Genesis 22:1-2. Did Abraham obey? Verses 3-10. Did Abraham continue to obey God throughout his life? Genesis 26:5.**

Abraham obeyed all of God's commands. But he wasn't perfect. He laughed at God's promise (Genesis 17:17). He deceived Abimelech, putting his wife at risk. Abraham wasn't sexually faithful to his wife, because at her urging he had sex with Hagar, her servant girl (Genesis 16:1-4), which soon led to jealousy and other family strife. Abraham was sometimes weak in faith, but he did believe God, and his belief was imputed or counted to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

Abraham's faithfulness was dramatically illustrated when God told him to sacrifice his son. Abraham obeyed, even though it looked like the sacrifice would prevent God's promise from being fulfilled. He had faith that God would work it out in some way — and God did. The sacrifice that God told Abraham to perform would not have been allowed under the law of Moses. Abraham was counted as righteous through faith, not through what is now called the law of Moses.

God's specific commandments for one person or people at one particular time are not always exactly the same as for others. We are not required to obey the commands God gave Adam. The commandment God gave Noah, to build an ark, also does not apply. The commandment he gave Abraham, to kill his son as a human sacrifice, is expressly forbidden today. Specific commandments may change from time to time, even though the underlying, fundamental principle behind them, allegiance to God, remains the same. Everyone should obey God according to the commandments God gives *them*. Abraham kept all the laws, requirements, decrees and commands God gave him.

If Abraham obeyed the law of Moses, he would have been unfaithful, because he would have refused to sacrifice his son. And on the other hand, if Moses had tried to obey the command given to Abraham, then he would have also been unfaithful. The specific forms of obedience change, but the thing that remains constant is that God requires a heart of faith and a willingness to obey.

This can be illustrated in a modern setting: If a person thinks it's a sin to dance, then he or she should not dance. Why? Not because the law says so, but because the person's faith says so. Whatever is not of faith is sin (Romans

14:23). If people danced while believing that God did not want them to, then they would be disloyal and rebellious — not falling short in the letter of the law, but in a more fundamental law: allegiance to God. Everyone has to act according to their understanding of God's commands and according to their conscience. This is the law of faith.

But faith does not mean foolishness. It does not mean we have to obey rules God gave to someone else. It does not mean we have to avoid dancing when the Bible makes no such restriction. Rather, faith means we obey the rules God has given us. That's why it is important for us to discern which rules apply to us and which do not. That is the topic of this series of studies.

As we will soon see, many biblical laws were given only to ancient Israel, and do not apply to us today. If we want to be faithful, we need to understand *why* these laws do not apply, and we need to understand which laws do apply to Christians today.

## **MOSES AND THE OLD COVENANT**

**1. God promised to bless Abraham's descendants and give them the land of Canaan. But first, they had to move into Egypt, and then become enslaved. About how many years would they be in Egypt? Exodus 12:40.**

Abraham's descendants moved to Egypt. Although the stories of what they did there and how they escaped are interesting, they are not directly related to our topic of interest, so we will skip them and pick up the story at Mt. Sinai.

**2. What kind of covenant did God offer to make with the Israelites? Exodus 19:3-6. Did the blessings depend on obedience? Verse 5. Did the people agree to make the covenant? Verse 8.**

In this covenant, the promises would be given *if* the people obeyed. God had already rescued the people from slavery, but further blessings depended on their obedience. The people promised to obey, but their promise seems to have been based more on fear than on faith. They did not understand what God would require of them, and they did not understand their own inability to do all that the Lord said. During the journey from Egypt to Sinai, the people had already disobeyed God several times, and they would disobey again soon after Sinai and repeatedly in the years to come.

In this covenant, Moses was the mediator. God spoke the words to Moses, and the people were able to listen to God talking to Moses (verse 9). Moses spoke on behalf of the people, and he told them what God said (verse 25).

**3. What did God command? Exodus 20:1-17. How did the people respond?**

God spoke the Ten Commandments, and the people were afraid. They wanted God to speak to Moses only, rather than hear God directly. As mediator, Moses would thereafter tell them the words of God and they would not have to hear God's voice.

**4. Did God command altars for worship? Verses 24-26. Did he prescribe rules for Israelite slaves? Exodus 21:1-11. Did the covenant also include rules about death penalties and other punishments for crimes against human life and limb? Verses 12-32.**

**5. Were there regulations for crimes against a person's property? Exodus 21:33-22:15. Were more penalties prescribed for mistreating other people? Verses 16-27.**

**6. Did God claim ownership of certain people and animals? Verses**

**29-30. Did he make restrictions on agriculture? Exodus 23:10-11. Did he restrict the workweek? Verse 12. Did he require annual festivals? Verses 14-17.**

**7. Did Moses then report all these words to the people? Exodus 24:3. Did the people agree to obey? Same verse. Did Moses repeat all the commands, and the people repeat their agreement? Verse 7. How did Moses signify that the covenant had been formally ratified? Verse 8.**

The covenant included laws about worship, economics and civil courts. It included general principles of human relationship with God and with neighbor, and it included some specific details of how those principles should be applied in specific situations. All these different types of laws were mixed together in the covenant.

The covenant was completed by a ceremony of sprinkling blood. Moses said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you.” God then promised to give Moses some tablets of stone on which the laws were written (verse 12).

**8. Did God continue to add commands to the covenant that had been made? Exodus 25:1-22. What did the Israelites do while God was speaking to Moses? Exodus 32:1-6.**

God gave very detailed instructions for the tabernacle and the way the Israelites were to worship him. These details fill several chapters of Exodus and contrast sharply with the Israelites’ impatience and idolatry. As God said, they were a stiff-necked people, stubbornly disobedient (verse 9). God was willing to destroy them all, but Moses, acting as a mediator, asked for mercy (verses 10-11, 31-32). When Moses saw the idolatry and revelry, he became angry, too. He broke the tablets (verse 19) and destroyed the idol (verse 20).

**9. Since Moses had broken the tablets of the covenant, what did God command him to do? Exodus 34:1. Did God again make a covenant with Moses? Verse 10. Did he use the exact same words as before? Verses 10-26. What did he write on the tablets of stone? Verse 28.**

The words of the covenant — the Ten Commandments — were written on the stone tablets. Exodus 20:1-17 (the Ten Commandments) formed the beginning of the covenant, and Exodus 20:24–23:33 was also included in the covenant. When God restated the covenant in chapter 34, he mixed some of the Ten Commandments in with other regulations from chapters 21-23. The Bible does not put any stress on the precise order and structure of the covenant. *All* of God’s commands were to be kept, for all were given with divine authority.

The worship regulations in Exodus 25–30, even though they were given

after the covenant had been ratified, were also part of Israel's covenant with God. So were the additional rules found in other writings of Moses, such as the book of Leviticus. Deuteronomy is a restatement and expansion of the same covenant. Some regulations expand on the concept of worshiping God; other regulations expand on the concept of holy time; and others give details on how people should treat their neighbors. They were all part of the same covenant.

The rituals and sacrifices in Leviticus do not apply to Christians today. Christians do not have to enforce the civil laws and punishments commanded in Exodus. But why? Why is it that Christians, who should obey God, do not observe these laws that were clearly given by God? To understand, let's move forward in our study — from the covenant mediated by Moses to the covenant mediated by Jesus Christ.

## **JESUS AND THE NEW COVENANT**

**1. Did Old Testament prophets predict that God would make a new covenant with his people? Jeremiah 31:31-34. Would this be an everlasting covenant? Jeremiah 32:38-40; Ezekiel 16:60-62; 37:26; Isaiah 55:3.**

The prophets predicted a new covenant between God and humans — a new basis of relationship. The fact that a new covenant would be made implies two things about the covenant made at Sinai: 1) The Sinai covenant was temporary, serving a temporary purpose, and 2) it was not complete for God's ultimate plan and purpose. The new covenant, unlike the one made at Sinai, will last forever. It is designed for eternal life. "If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another" (Hebrews 8:7).

What was wrong with the first covenant? "God found fault with the people" (verse 8). God foretold this to Moses: "These people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. And in that day I will become angry with them and forsake them" (Deuteronomy 31:16-18). The people were unable to obey the laws — and since the blessings were conditioned on the Israelites' obedience, the covenant was limited.

Later, we will learn why God made a temporary covenant when he knew the people would not obey it. For now, we need to focus on the new covenant.

**2. Will God make his special servant to be a covenant for his people? Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:7-9.**

Isaiah used poetry and symbolism to describe a special servant of God. This symbolism was fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Matthew 12:17-21 says that Jesus fulfilled Isaiah 42:1-4, and in Luke 4:18-21, Jesus says that he was fulfilling Isaiah 42:7. Acts 13:47 says that Jesus is the "light for the Gentiles."

The Messiah-Servant was the covenant — he was the basis of the relationship between God and his people. It is only through Jesus Christ that we can have an eternal relationship with God. "The Redeemer will come to Zion," Isaiah 59:20 predicts, "to those in Jacob who repent of their sins." God will make a covenant with these repentant people. His Spirit will be upon them, and his words will remain in them (verse 21). This is the new covenant.

**3. Who is the mediator of the new covenant? Hebrews 9:15; 12:24.**

**Has the new covenant been established? Hebrews 8:6. Is it already being administered? 2 Corinthians 3:6.**

**4. The old covenant was ratified with blood. What is the blood of the new covenant? Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Hebrews 10:29. How do we show that we accept the new covenant? Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25.**

Christians have a relationship with God, and our relationship is on the basis of the new covenant, not the old. In the new covenant, God gives some commands and makes some promises, and those promises have already begun to be fulfilled. The Holy Spirit is given to us not only to transform our hearts but also as a down payment of greater blessings to come (2 Corinthians 1:22). Just as the old covenant was made before all the promises were delivered, so also the new covenant has been established before all its promises are completely given.

The new covenant was ratified through the blood of Jesus Christ. Not only did his death pay for our sins, it also ended the old covenant and began the new. When we drink the wine in commemoration of Jesus' death, we show our acceptance of the new covenant, including the forgiveness that is given because of his shed blood.

**5. When Jesus established the new covenant, did he set aside the first covenant? Hebrews 8:13. Is the old covenant now obsolete? Same verse.**

Here we see the reason that Christians are not required to keep some of God's laws — because God has declared some of them obsolete. Since God has grouped his laws into covenants, it is essential that we understand the covenants if we want to understand why some Old Testament laws no longer need to be kept. Much of the Old Testament is built on the old covenant, and much of the New Testament is about the new covenant. Although a covenant is not exactly the same as a testament, the concepts are so closely related that a single Greek word is used for both.

**6. What kind of regulations did the old covenant have? Hebrews 9:1-4. Were the stone tablets part of the covenant regulations? Verse 4. How often did the high priest enter the holiest place in the tabernacle? Verse 7. What did he have to do before he entered? Same verse.**

The high priest entered only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Before he entered, he had to offer special sacrifices and perform ritual washings. These are described in Leviticus 16.

**7. What did the rituals indicate? Hebrews 9:9. Were the external regulations temporary? Verse 10. Is Jesus Christ the high priest of**

**better things? Verse 11. Are those better things already here? Same verse.**

In the old covenant, the presence of God was symbolized by the Most Holy Place, the innermost room of the tabernacle. Only one person could go there, only once a year, symbolizing the fact that the old covenant did not disclose the way for everyone to live in God's presence. The special sacrifices and rituals had to be regularly repeated, corresponding to the fact that the people's hearts were not being cleansed.

Those external regulations were temporary, required only until Jesus Christ brought "the new order." That's because with Christ's new covenant, people's hearts are being cleansed, consciences are being cleared, sins are forgiven, and people have access to God through Jesus Christ (verses 14-15). There is a new basis for relationship with God.

**8. Are the sacrifices and rituals a shadow of the good things that Christ brought? Hebrews 10:1. Could they make anyone perfect? Same verse.**

The rituals are not the realities. They symbolized what Christ would do, but the rituals themselves were not effective in doing what only Christ could do. The laws could not make anyone perfect, but Jesus Christ can (verse 14). He can change the heart. Now that these realities are here, there is no longer a need for them to be symbolized through external rituals. We do not need the signpost after we have arrived at our destination.

**9. Does the new covenant include forgiveness of sins? Hebrews 10:15-17. Now that sins have been forgiven, is there any need for animal sacrifices? Verse 18. Because of that, can God's people enter the presence of God? Verse 19. Why are we allowed to do that?**

The room in the tabernacle was only a copy that imitated the heavenly reality (Hebrews 8:5). Through faith in Jesus Christ, we do not enter the earthly imitation, but the heavenly reality. We may enter God's presence by the blood of Jesus Christ. Because he died for us, because he made a real relationship possible with God through the new covenant, we can confidently come into God's presence knowing that our sins are forgiven.

The old covenant assigned Levites to be priests. In the new covenant, Jesus Christ is our high priest — and the fact that Jesus was not a Levite, yet is now a priest, gives further evidence that the old covenant has been set aside (Hebrews 7:12). Because he is our perfect high priest, we are encouraged to "draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience" (Hebrews 10:22).

**10. Have we come to a place like Mt. Sinai? Hebrews 12:18-19.  
Where have we come? Verses 22-24.**

We have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the church that approaches God through the new covenant. Paul uses similar word imagery when he says that the new covenant is “the Jerusalem that is above” (Galatians 4:24-26). This is where God’s presence really is, and we can boldly come into God’s presence through Jesus Christ our mediator (Hebrews 4:14-15). “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (verse 16).

## **THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE LAW OF MOSES**

Many early Christians did not completely understand the significance of what Jesus did. Even several decades after Jesus' death, many Christians did not understand what a dramatic difference Jesus had made in our relationship with God. Many Jewish Christians did not seem to understand that the new covenant had *replaced* the old. Perhaps they thought the teachings of Jesus had simply been added on top of the teachings of Moses.

As far as we can tell in the Gospels, Jesus did not tell his disciples that Passover lambs and sacrifices would no longer be needed. He did not tell them the old covenant was obsolete. He simply proclaimed that his blood was the blood of a new covenant, and it took the church many years to learn how significant this was. Luke records part of the story in the book of Acts. Let's turn there to see what the Holy Spirit revealed to the church about the old covenant laws.

**1. Cornelius was a Roman soldier who worshiped God. Did God accept his worship? Acts 10:1-4. Was he respected as righteous by the Jewish people? Verse 22. Does God accept Gentiles who worship him and live righteous lives? Verses 34-35. Did God give the Holy Spirit to Cornelius? Verse 44. Was Cornelius then baptized? Verse 47.**

**2. Did all the Christians joyfully accept what Peter had done? Acts 11:2-3. After Peter told the story, did they accept the idea that Gentiles could be saved? Verses 14, 18. Did the Jewish Christians then begin preaching the gospel to Gentiles? Verses 19-20.**

**3. As Paul and Barnabas traveled, did they begin by preaching to Gentiles? Acts 13:13-14. Were both Jews and Gentiles included? Verse 16. Was Paul's message well received? Verses 42-44. Were the Jews more receptive than the Gentiles? Acts 13:45-48; 14:1-2. Was the "door of faith" open to Gentiles? Verse 27.**

**4. What did some Jewish Christians teach the Gentile Christians in Antioch? Acts 15:1. Did Paul and Barnabas agree with this teaching? Verse 2. How did they decide to resolve the question? Same verse. In Jerusalem, how was the question phrased? Verse 5.**

A small group of Jewish Christians thought the Gentile believers ought to 1) be circumcised and 2) be told to obey the law of Moses. In other words, they thought the Gentiles, in addition to believing in Jesus Christ, should also

become proselytes — converts to Judaism. They thought the Gentiles should obey all the laws God had given the Israelites — circumcision and everything else.

**5. The phrase “law of Moses” is used in six other places in the New Testament. What kinds of laws are included in the law of Moses? Luke 2:22; 24:44; John 7:22-23; Acts 28:23; 1 Corinthians 9:9; Hebrews 10:28.**

The law of Moses included laws of ritual purification, prophecies about the Messiah, rules about treating livestock, and civil laws about penalties for religious crimes. Apparently the “law of Moses” included everything Moses wrote, what we now call the books of Moses. Jews call it the Torah, the Law, one of the three main sections of the Old Testament.

In Jewish thought, the law of Moses also included the requirement for circumcision. Although that custom began with Abraham, it was included in the regulations of Moses (Leviticus 12:2-3). This is shown in Acts 15:1, where circumcision is one of the customs of Moses. The early church met to discuss whether Gentile Christians ought to keep all the law of Moses, including the purification rituals and circumcision.

**6. Years later, some Jewish Christians became concerned about what Paul was teaching. What was the attitude of these Jewish Christians toward the Torah? Acts 21:20. What kind of requirements were included in the law they were concerned about? Verses 21, 24. Were they concerned about what Paul was teaching Gentiles? Verses 21, 25.**

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem continued to keep the customs of Judaism. They continued to circumcise their children, continued to participate in temple rituals and continued in the law of Moses. Those things were part of their culture. It was not wrong to do them, but it would have been wrong to think that they were required for all Christians. God had not commanded such things for Gentiles, and Gentiles were being saved without any need to keep old covenant laws. That question had already been settled at the Jerusalem conference, and the Jewish Christians were not worried about what Paul was teaching Gentiles. They were concerned only with Jewish Christians.

The leaders of the Jerusalem church devised a plan to show that Paul had nothing against the customs taught by Moses — Paul participated in a temple ritual. Christianity did not require Jewish believers to abandon all their worship traditions. But neither did it require them to continue. Paul had the freedom to participate when he was among Jews; he also had the freedom to act as if he were not under the Torah (1 Corinthians 9:21). He had the

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freedom to live like a Gentile. Peter had that freedom, too (Galatians 2:14).

Some people in the early Jerusalem church apparently did not understand this, and Paul did not attempt to correct them at that particular time. Later, the book of Hebrews explained that the old covenant was obsolete and no longer binding — even for Jewish Christians. No one has to participate in temple rituals or observe other laws that God gave only under the old covenant system.

Jewish Christians do not have to keep the law of Moses. Although in some situations (such as in Jerusalem) it might be wise to observe the customs, it is not required. When we live among people who do not have the Torah in their tradition, we can live like them, since we are not under the Torah (1 Corinthians 9:20-21). Rather, we live under the law of Christ. We obey him, and his teachings do not require us to obey all the laws of Moses. In the following studies, we will learn more about the difference between the law of Christ and the law of Moses.

## **PAUL AND THE OLD COVENANT**

**1. Paul dealt with questions about the covenants in several letters. Did he consider himself a minister of the old covenant or of the new? 2 Corinthians 3:6. How did he contrast the new covenant with the old covenant that was written on stone? Verses 3, 7. What did the old covenant bring, and what does the new covenant bring? Verses 6-9.**

The stone tablets mentioned here are the tablets Moses carried when his face shown in glory. The tablets contained “the words of the [old] covenant — the Ten Commandments” (Exodus 34:28). This is the ministry that brought death and condemnation.

The law, written in stone, required death for transgression. It did not give righteousness or salvation (Galatians 2:21). But the new covenant brings the Holy Spirit and life and righteousness. The old covenant could not cleanse the conscience, but the new covenant is written on the heart. It changes our hearts in a way that an external law cannot. The old covenant was temporary. It was glorious in its time, but its glory has faded because a greater glory is now here.

**2. Does everyone understand the glory of the new covenant? Verses 13-15. How can the covering be taken away from their hearts and minds? Verse 14, last part, and verse 16. Does the veil prevent people from understanding the gospel? 2 Corinthians 4:3. Who creates this veil that blinds the people who don’t believe the gospel? Verse 4.**

In this passage, Paul uses the new covenant and the gospel as similar terms. When we see one clearly, we also see the other. Through the new covenant, the veil has been removed from us so we can see the Lord’s glory. The gospel is no longer veiled to us.

The god of this age is Satan, who prevents people from seeing the ministry that brings righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Only in Christ can the veil be removed. Only when we turn to him can we see “the gospel that displays the glory of Christ.” Since Jesus Christ is the image of God, the gospel gives us “the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ” (verse 6). This is the glory of the new covenant, the message that gives us hope and boldness.

Paul discusses the covenants in his letter to the Galatians, too. In that letter, let’s pick up the discussion in chapter 3. There, Paul tells us that Christ redeemed us so we might be given the blessing of Abraham, the promise of the Spirit (Galatians 3:14).

**3. To whom were the promises given? Galatians 3:16, 18. Through**

**Christ, are we heirs of the promises given to Abraham? Verses 29, 14. Once the promise was given to Abraham by a covenant, could it be taken away? Verse 15. Could the law set aside God’s promise to Abraham? Verse 17.**

Paul is contrasting the promise given to Abraham with the law of Moses, which was given 430 years later. Both were covenants, but one was characterized by God’s promise, and the other was dominated by laws. Christians are, through Christ, inheritors of the promise given through the covenant with Abraham.

Paul’s point in this passage is that what God gave through a promise, he cannot take away by adding extra requirements later on. The law of Moses cannot set aside the promise given to Abraham. The old covenant cannot add extra requirements that thwart the promise God gave through Abraham to everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ. The law of Moses cannot take away the promise; the laws of the old covenant cannot limit or restrict salvation, which is by faith.

**4. What was the purpose of the law? Galatians 3:19, 24. Now that faith has come, are we still under the law? Verses 23-25.**

In this passage, “the law” refers to the law of Moses or the old covenant, which was the law added 430 years after the promise was given to Abraham. This law was designed to be temporary “until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (verse 19). The “Seed” referred to by the promise was Jesus Christ (verse 16), so verse 19 means the law was added until Christ came, and it ceased to be in force after that. The law of Moses served to confine the Jews until the promise was given by faith (verse 23).

In verse 24, Paul compares the law to a *paidagogos* — a type of slave that was part of ancient Greek society. Wealthy Greeks used a *paidagogos* slave to supervise their children’s education. The *paidagogos* did not teach, but made sure the children went to school and did their homework. The *paidagogos* also taught manners and social customs, and disciplined the children. There is no modern equivalent of a *paidagogos*, so many different translations have been used: schoolmaster, tutor, custodian, disciplinarian. The NIV tries to convey the thought by using the word “guardian.” Paul was indicating that the law of Moses was put in a supervisory function only until Christ came.

Our spiritual problem is sin. We are sinful, and our sin needs to be removed from our record. We need to be declared righteous or justified. The law cannot do that — only the Judge can declare us righteous. We are justified by faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:26). So the law served a purpose until “justification by faith” was revealed through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before that kind of faith came, the law had authority over us. But now that we are in the era of faith, the law no longer has that authority.

This is another way of saying that Christians do not have to keep the law of Moses; it is another way of saying that the old covenant is obsolete. The message of Acts and Hebrews and Galatians is similar. The law of Moses, with its worship rituals, civil laws and other customs, was temporary.

Many Old Testament rituals symbolized the work of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 9 explains that the Day of Atonement ceremonies, for example, pictured what Christ has done for us. Hebrews 10:1 says that the law was a “shadow” of the spiritual realities that had been promised. The law of Moses contains analogies that show in advance, in silhouette form, what Christ does for us.

The law shows that it is impossible for us to earn our salvation. No amount of law-keeping can make us righteous. It cannot cleanse our consciences or change our hearts. All it can do is condemn us for falling short. So the law helps people see their need for a Savior.

The old covenant helped people see how common sin is. Paul said: “I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” (Romans 7:7).

Human societies rarely have rules about internal desires such as coveting. The old covenant revealed that sin starts in the heart. In this way, the old covenant showed how pervasive sin is — it permeates us — it is found throughout us. Through the law, sin became revealed as “utterly sinful” (verse 13). No matter how many good laws people are given, no matter how hard they try to be good, they always fall short. This sinful fruit reveals the kind of tree we are: We are sinful, and we need the cleansing sacrifice of Jesus.

The old covenant served other purposes, too. It gave the ancient Israelites a framework for national laws. It helped the people understand God’s holiness and their own lack of holiness. It gave practical guidelines for avoiding sin and expressing love toward neighbors. It gave a social context in which Jesus could teach and provide a sacrifice for sin. The main point in this study is that “the law” of the old covenant was temporary. Although it continues to be useful for instructing us in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16), it is not required for Christians today. We do not have to perform the sacrifices, rituals and ceremonies the law commanded.

**5. Were some of the Galatian Christians being tempted to come under the law? Galatians 4:21. What illustration from the law did Paul use? Galatians 4:22-31. Which woman represented the old covenant? Verse 24. What is the result of this covenant? Verses 24-25. Are we**

**Christians children of the slave woman, or of the free? Verses 26, 28, 31.**

Although the Galatians had faith in Christ, false teachers were trying to get them to add the old covenant to their faith. The false teachers were teaching circumcision, which in Jewish thought was the sign of entering the old covenant. Paul warned them that if they became circumcised, they would have to keep the entire Torah (Galatians 5:3). The implication of Paul's statement is that Christians do *not* have to keep the entire Torah, the entire old covenant. We are not children of the slave woman; we were not born under the old covenant. We are not in slavery or in captivity — rather, Christ has set us free (verse 1).

The laws we keep today *may* be in the old covenant, but if so, we keep them not because they are in the *old* covenant, but because they are also in the *new*. If all we know about a law is that it is in the old covenant, that in itself does not tell us whether it is still in force, for some old covenant laws are obsolete. We must evaluate the law by new covenant standards — which shows that the Old Testament has no legal authority of its own. The New Testament is the higher legal authority, and it declares the old covenant obsolete.

The old covenant stands or falls as a unit, as a group, and the fact that some of the laws are obsolete tells us that the entire covenant is obsolete. It is not a moral authority for Christians. Although it is not a legal authority, it is still authoritative as a revelation of how God dealt with his people in that specific time and culture. It continues to give us insights into God's will. Even the laws of sacrifice are “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). But that does not mean those laws still have authority as laws.

**6. Were Gentiles once separated from Christ? Ephesians 2:11-12. How have they now been brought near? Verse 13. Has Christ made one new humanity out of two? Verse 15. Has he made the two one? Verse 14. Are both of them reconciled to God through Christ? Verse 16.**

The “two” people Paul is talking about in this passage are Jews and Gentiles. Christ preached peace not only to those who were near (the Jews) but also to those who were far away, who had been separated from him (the Gentiles). Through Christ both Jews and non-Jews have access to God (verses 16-17). Through him the two have been joined into one. Through the blood of Christ the Gentiles have been brought near. Through his cross all people have been reconciled to God. Paul's focus in this passage is the spiritual union of everyone in Christ.

**7. In order for the two peoples to be made one, what had to be**

**destroyed? Ephesians 2:14. How was it done? Verses 15-16.**

Although Jews and Gentiles had been spiritual competitors, separated from one another, Jesus has made them one. He saves them both in the same way. How did he make them one? By breaking down “the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” that had separated Jews and Gentiles. What was the wall of division, the cause of the hostility or enmity between Jews and Gentiles?

What barrier did Jesus destroy? It was “the law with its commandments and regulations.” These were the laws that separated Jews from Gentiles — ordinances in the law of Moses, the old covenant — ordinances that were given to Jews but were not commanded for Gentiles. Jesus abolished these laws. He did not die on the cross to eliminate human rules and regulations — he died to abolish old covenant regulations. All the rules in the law of Moses concerning ritual purification and sacrifices are now obsolete. So are the civil laws and other rituals — all the laws that Jews had to keep to make them different from Gentiles.

These laws separated Jews from Gentiles. The Bible says that some of these laws served that very purpose, to set the Israelites apart from other peoples (Leviticus 20:24). Many other laws did that, too, because God commanded the Israelites to keep certain rules that he did not command the Gentiles to keep. Jewish rabbis understood that God gave many laws only to the Jews, and that Gentiles could be considered righteous without keeping those particular laws. They did not apply to the Gentiles.

In his death, Jesus abolished the old covenant rules that separated Jews and Gentiles, the rules that required Jews to be different. This is the way he made peace between Jew and Gentile, making one people out of two (Ephesians 2:15). Jesus reconciled both groups to God, making them one body by his death on the cross, “by which he put to death their hostility” (verse 16).

Jesus killed the hostility, figuratively speaking, when he was crucified. He put an end to the rules that separated Jew from Gentile. Just as we have seen in Acts, Galatians and Hebrews, Jesus put an end to the old covenant, the law of Moses. The laws that were given only to the Jews came to an end.

Christ did not unite Jews and Gentiles by requiring Gentiles to come under the old covenant. Rather, he united them by removing the old covenant and forgiving the sins of both. No one has to keep the obsolete laws. Jews do not have to keep the laws that divided them from Gentiles. Peter was able to live like a Gentile (Galatians 2:14). Paul could, too, because he was not under the Torah (1 Corinthians 9:20-21). Christians are not under the law of Moses. We will now begin to explore in more detail what that

means.

## **A FEW EXAMPLES OF OBSOLETE LAWS**

**1. Were the old covenant sacrifices and rituals a “shadow” of better things? Hebrews 10:1. Were these symbolic rituals spiritually effective? Verses 1, 4.**

**2. When Christ came, what did he say about sacrifices? Verses 5-7. In saying this, did he set aside the rules required by the first covenant? Verses 8-9. What sacrifice is spiritually effective for us? Verses 10, 14. Are sacrifices for sin still necessary? Verse 18.**

Animal sacrifices served as reminders of sin, but they could not forgive sin or cleanse hearts. Spiritual cleansing comes only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. No one needs to offer animals as sacrifices for sin.

However, the old covenant system had not just sin offerings, but also many other sacrifices, such as fellowship offerings, grain offerings and thank offerings. Christ fulfilled the symbolism of these offerings, too, and they are no longer necessary. The food and drink offerings and ceremonial washings were “external regulations applying until the time of the new order” (Hebrews 9:10). Jesus Christ brought that “new order” — the new covenant, the new agreement we have with God.

The first Christians continued to participate in temple rituals for several decades, as long as the temple existed, but the point made in Hebrews is that these rituals were not necessary even when the temple stood and the Levitical priests were offering sacrifices. By his death on the cross, Jesus Christ had abolished those ritual commands.

**3. What did God command the Israelites to wear on their garments? Numbers 15:38. What was the purpose of this law? Verse 39.**

God required the Israelites to wear distinctive clothing, garments that (at least in this detail) were not like the garments worn by Gentiles. Every time the Israelites put on their clothes, they would be reminded of their relationship to God. They were saying, in effect, “We do this because God has commanded us to, and we obey God’s commands.”

All the people were required to observe this custom showing their devotion to God. This command was not directly related to the priests, Levites, tabernacle or sacrifices. It was a helpful worship custom for daily life.

However, this custom is no longer required, even though the New Testament says nothing about this particular command. It does not declare it unnecessary. So why do Christians consider it obsolete today? The only biblical reason we have for ignoring this command is that the New Testament

declares the entire old covenant obsolete.

The principle is still good: we should remember to obey God. The purpose of the tassels is still valid, but the tassels themselves are not required. Christians obey God not according to the old covenant law, but according to the new covenant. The old package of laws is obsolete. Some of its laws are still valid, but others are not. Therefore, when Christians use the Old Testament for instruction about godly living, they must understand all laws in the light of the New Testament.

Christian conduct should be based on the new covenant. Although the new covenant gives us many commands concerning our behavior, the focus throughout the new covenant is on the spirit of the law, the purpose of the law, and obedience from the heart. It gives us the general rule to love God with all our heart, but it gives fewer rules as to exactly how that love should be expressed.

Some people try to interpret biblical laws with this rule: “Old Testament laws are valid unless the New Testament specifically says they are not.” But this rule is not true, as we can see with the example of tassels, and it is proven false by Hebrews 8:13.

The old covenant is obsolete. This does not mean the covenant is mostly valid, except for those laws specifically rescinded. No, it means the covenant itself is obsolete. It is like a law code that the government has declared invalid. It is not a valid source for rules about Christian behavior. Of course, some individual laws, such as the prohibition of adultery, are still valid, but their validity is based on something more permanent than the old covenant — the more basic law that existed before the old covenant was given and still exists after the old covenant became obsolete.

**4. Did God command the Israelites to kill Passover lambs? Exodus 12:1-8. Was this ritual to be repeated every year? Verses 24-27. Could Gentiles participate in this worship festival? Verse 48.**

Jesus told his disciples to break bread and drink wine in commemoration of his death, but he apparently did not tell his disciples that the bread and wine were substitutes for the Passover lambs. The early Christians in Jerusalem, being zealous for the law, would have continued to sacrifice Passover lambs in addition to partaking of the bread and wine. The New Testament does not directly say that lambs are unnecessary.

So how do we know that Passover lambs are not required? Because the old covenant is obsolete. The Passover was instituted two months before the covenant was made at Mt. Sinai, but it was part of the old covenant system. This was one of the laws added 430 years after Abraham.

The law of Moses required Gentiles to be circumcised in order to participate in the Passover lamb festival. However, the early church did not require Gentiles to be circumcised. This means that they did not require Gentiles to participate in the old covenant Passover. Although Gentiles could participate in the old covenant Passover if they wished to (if they became circumcised), they were not required to. God did not require that they keep this festival in order to be among the people of God, and he did not require that they be circumcised. Those commands were given to the Israelites, but they were not commanded for the Gentiles. Gentiles did not have to celebrate the escape of the Israelites from Egypt.

This applies to many other old covenant laws, too — the laws that separated Jews from Gentiles, the laws that Christ abolished by his death on the cross (Ephesians 2:14-15). Gentiles did not have to keep laws that applied only to Israelites.

**5. Did God claim ownership of every firstborn male, both human and animal? Exodus 13:1-2. Were the firstborn animals to be given to the Lord, and every firstborn son redeemed? Verses 11-15.**

God does not require that firstborn animals be given to him today. Farmers do not have to donate cows, sheep, chickens or other animals. Nor do firstborn sons have to be redeemed or bought back from the Lord. These old covenant laws are obsolete, because the covenant itself is obsolete.

**6. As God was speaking the old covenant from Mt. Sinai, what did he command regarding agricultural years? Exodus 23:10-11. Later, did he also set aside every 50th year? Leviticus 25:1-12. Was the entire year holy to the Lord? Verse 12.**

The New Testament does not comment on the validity of these laws. It simply declares the covenant obsolete, and there is nothing in the new covenant that would cause us to conclude that sabbatical and jubilee years are still required. These laws were given only to Israelites, only for the land of Canaan, only for the time period of the old covenant.

Although we might expect that the law had agricultural benefits, the Bible does not make that claim. Some farmland needs to be left fallow more often, and some less often. The Bible does not give us authority to command these same customs for other people in other lands.

Similarly, the Jubilee year had valuable economic results, but it was a civil law that Christians cannot require today. The economic situation (such as slavery) has changed considerably, and the covenant containing this law has been declared no longer authoritative.

**7. Did God command three annual festivals? Exodus 23:14. Did he**

**command all Israelite men to appear before him at a designated site? Deuteronomy 16:16. For the Feast of Tabernacles, to whom was the command given? Leviticus 23:33-34, 42. Were offerings a commanded part of the festival? Verse 36.**

**8. Was this festival designed to coordinate with the harvest season in the land of Canaan? Verse 39. What were the Israelites commanded to gather for this festival? Verse 40. What were they commanded to live in? Verse 42. What did the festival commemorate? Verse 43.**

The old covenant required annual worship festivals. It specified the date and the place, the manner and the people to whom the commands applied. God did not command Gentiles to keep this festival. It was one of the ordinances that separated Jews from Gentiles, and the early church did not require Gentile believers to travel to Jerusalem, to make offerings, to gather palm branches or to live in booths. Those things were part of the old covenant, which God made with ancient Israel. They are not part of the new covenant.

**9. Did God command Abraham to circumcise himself? Genesis 17:11. Did this command apply to anyone else? Verses 9, 12. Was this command included in the old covenant? Leviticus 12:2-3. To what ethnic group did the command apply? Verse 2.**

God did not command Gentiles to be circumcised or to circumcise their children. Nor has he ever authorized his church to make such a command. The early church decided that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised (Acts 15). Although they were later concerned about whether Jewish believers were being taught to circumcise their children, they had no such concerns regarding the Gentile believers (Acts 21). They knew that the command did not apply to Gentiles.

Paul explained that physical circumcision was not necessary (Romans 2:28-29). Uncircumcised people can be declared righteous in God's sight (Romans 3:30). He warned Gentiles that they should not feel compelled to be circumcised (1 Corinthians 7:18; Galatians 5:2).

However, some people were teaching a false doctrine that Gentiles had to come under the old covenant in order to be saved, and in their thinking, circumcision was the key step in submitting to the Torah (Acts 15:5; Galatians 5:3). Paul had to argue against circumcision advocates in several of his letters. God never commanded Gentiles to be circumcised. It would be a mistake to make this a requirement — or even to imply that it is spiritually better.

Gentile believers inherit the promises of Abraham, which were given to

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him before he was circumcised (Romans 4:9-11). Laws that were added later cannot take away the blessing that God had already sworn to give.

## SEVEN ANNUAL SABBATHS

1. As God was speaking the old covenant from Mt. Sinai, what kind of annual festivals did he command? Exodus 23:14-17. What other names were given to these festivals? Deuteronomy 16:16.

2. What customs were included in the Passover festival? Exodus 12:1-14; Leviticus 23:5; Deuteronomy 16:1-2. Were these customs commanded for future generations? Exodus 12:14, 17. Were the lambs and the blood also commanded for all future generations? Verses 21-24. What was required for participation? Verses 43-44, 48.

3. What commands were given for the Festival of Unleavened Bread? Exodus 12:15-20; 13:3-10; Leviticus 23:6-8; Deuteronomy 16:3-8. What did this observance commemorate? Exodus 12:17; 13:3, 8-9; 23:15; 34:18; Deuteronomy 16:3.

God commanded the Israelites to observe these festivals. He did not command Gentiles to keep these festivals — he did not expect Hittites, for example, to commemorate the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The early church recognized this when it agreed that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised (Acts 15).

Because circumcision was a requirement for participation in the Passover celebrations, and Gentiles did not have to be circumcised, the early church recognized that Gentiles were not required to participate in the Passover commanded in the law of Moses.

The early church was not making an exception to the law, and it was not saying that Gentiles did not have to obey God. It was recognizing that Gentiles never did have to keep the Passover. God never required such a thing. This law, like many laws of Moses, simply did not apply to them.

And if Gentiles were not required to keep the old covenant Passover, they were not required to keep the Festival of Unleavened Bread, either. The two festivals were commanded at the same time, for the same people, to commemorate the same event. Although Gentiles were permitted to participate if they wished to, God never required them to.

Nevertheless, the Passover and Unleavened Bread festivals are educational customs. They were symbols that pointed to Jesus Christ, just as the sacrifices were. Hebrews 10:1 says that the sacrificial laws were shadows of "things that are coming." The sacrifices symbolized various aspects of the work of Jesus Christ. Colossians 2:16-17 uses the same Greek words to say that the food and drink regulations, festivals and Sabbath were also shadows

of things to come. These customs symbolized what Christ would do.

Now that the reality has come, the shadows or imitations are not necessary, even though they still provide good illustrations for the Christian life. Paul exhorted the Roman Christians to be living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), but he did not expect them to maintain the practice of animal sacrifices in order to understand what he meant. Similarly, he called Jesus Christ our Passover lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7), but he did not suggest that the Corinthians should kill lambs every year in order to remember the symbolism that Jesus fulfilled.

When Paul exhorted the Corinthians to “keep the festival” (verse 8), he was not commanding Gentiles to keep an old covenant festival commemorating Israelite history. Rather, he was using the festival as an illustration of Christian living, just as he used circumcision as a metaphor for conversion, without implying that people should be circumcised (Colossians 2:11).

Paul did not command the Corinthians to put yeast out of their homes — he commanded them to put a sinful person out. Throughout this passage, Paul uses “yeast” in a figurative way to refer to sin. Paul talks about how the sinful man in the congregation is like leaven. In verse 6, he urges them to put out that leaven.

We should put malice and wickedness out of our lives throughout the year, not just for one week, and we should have sincerity and truth instead. Paul urges us to keep the festival figuratively, with bread of sincerity and truth (he’s not talking about real bread). We should do this throughout the year, not just for one week.

When we put out malice and wickedness and live in sincerity and truth, then we are obeying the command Paul gave. In this way, Christians fulfill the symbolism of the Festival of Unleavened Bread. There is no need for Gentiles to begin obeying an old covenant command that never applied to them before.

**4. How was the Feast of Harvest (also called the Feast of Weeks) to be celebrated? Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Leviticus 23:15-21. What does the New Testament say about this festival? Acts 2:1; 20:16.**

This was a harvest festival celebrating the end of the grain harvest in Canaan. The date was calculated from the beginning of the harvest (Leviticus 23:10-16). The timing of the festival would not make sense in other regions, and people in other regions would be unable to observe the festival as it was commanded, because they would not have any grain ripe at the appointed time. Nor would they need to keep this festival, because God did not

command them to. The calendar by which the festivals were calculated was given to the ancient Israelites as part of the law of Moses (Exodus 12:1-2).

The early church, especially in Jerusalem, continued observing many of the old covenant customs. However, this does not imply a command for the church today to continue these same customs.

God performed a significant miracle on the Day of Pentecost, pouring out the Holy Spirit on the beginning of the New Testament church, but the Bible does not command us to commemorate this event, although we are free to celebrate it annually if we want to. (As a comparison, God also did something significant when he allowed his Son to die for our sins at the same time as Passover lambs were being killed in the temple. Although we commemorate the death of Christ, we are not required to do it at the same time of day Jesus died, or in the same manner as the old covenant festival.)

If we want to obey the old covenant command, we would have to keep the Festival of Pentecost “with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field” (Exodus 23:16). The New Testament does not authorize a change in the way this festival is to be celebrated. God commanded both the date and the manner, and we cannot of our own authority choose to require the date but not the manner. Either we keep it the way it was commanded, or we do not.

Christians do not have to keep the festival of Pentecost at all. The only commands for it are in a covenant that is now obsolete. It is one of those laws commanded for Israelites in the land of Canaan, but not for Gentiles in other countries. The early church did not require Gentiles to observe this day. Although many Christian churches commemorate the Day of Pentecost (sometimes called Whitsunday), it is an optional observance.

**5. What was the next festival God commanded the Israelites? Leviticus 23:23-25. And what came next? Verses 26-32. Were the people required to deny or afflict themselves? Verses 27, 32. What was the purpose of this self-denial? Leviticus 16:29-30. Has Christ now provided atonement and cleansing? Romans 3:29; Hebrews 2:17; 9:14; 10:22.**

Gentiles who lived among the Israelites were once required to fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29), but Gentiles who lived elsewhere were not commanded to. But today, not even Israelites are required to fast on this day.

The Bible gives only one purpose for fasting on the Day of Atonement, and for Christians, this purpose has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In his death, Jesus fulfilled the spiritual meaning of the fast of Atonement, just as he also

fulfilled the spiritual meaning of the Passover lambs. There is no longer any biblical reason to fast on this day.

Gentiles have never been under the old covenant, and Israelites are no longer obligated to it, either, because it is obsolete. It has been replaced by the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ, and the new covenant does not require fasting on the Day of Atonement — it doesn't require the Day of Atonement at all.

Of course, Christians may observe the Day of Atonement if they wish. Some early Jewish Christians did. Luke referred to it in Acts 27:9, but that verse is not a command, just as John 10:22 is not. The New Testament gives no ground for retaining the Day of Atonement in the new covenant.

**6. In the old covenant, what was the autumn harvest festival? Leviticus 23:33-42. Who was commanded to keep it? Verses 34, 42. Was the festival to be observed after the harvest? Verse 39. What customs were required? Verses 40, 42. What was the purpose? Verse 43.**

Again, God tells us who the festival is for, how it should be observed, when it should be, and what the reason is. The festival did not apply to Gentiles in other regions. It was designed to commemorate Israelite history and the timing of the harvest in the land of Canaan. God does not authorize us to select one part of the festival, such as the date, and ignore all the other details. They are all equally part of a covenant that has been declared obsolete. (We can observe the date if we wish, but we cannot teach it as a requirement for others.)

**7. Did Zechariah predict that Gentiles would keep the Feast of Tabernacles after Christ returns? Zechariah 14:16-19. What else did he predict? Verses 20-21. What other worship customs were predicted? Isaiah 52:1-2; Ezekiel 20:40; 44:9, 25-27; 45:17; 46:1-4.**

The prophets described an ideal time in which all peoples worship God. To communicate this concept to an old covenant nation, the prophets described old covenant forms of worship, including new moon observances, sacrifices in the temple, discrimination against uncircumcised peoples and avoidance of ritual uncleanness. But these are not religious requirements now.

Will sacrifices be part of worship after Christ returns? Some people think so, but whether or not, these prophecies cannot be used to prove the *current* validity of these commandments. Prophecies are not a reliable source of commands regarding Christian practice. *Our doctrines must be based on scriptures that are applicable to this age*, in which our relationship with God is based on the new covenant.

## CHRISTIANS AND OLD TESTAMENT LAWS

In our next study, we will examine some of the laws of ritual purity.

## **DIETARY LAWS AND UNCLEANNESS**

In this study, we will examine what the Bible says about being “clean” and “unclean,” but we must explain that these terms are not talking about sanitation or the kind of dirt that can be washed away by soap and water. Rather, it was a matter of being religiously acceptable. Unclean people, for example, were not allowed to eat animals that had been sacrificed in the temple (Leviticus 7:19-21). High priests had to take special precautions to remain “clean” and able to perform their duties (Leviticus 21:10-12).

**1. What was a common source of uncleanness? Leviticus 15:2-3, 16-24. Did the uncleanness spread to everything and everyone it touched? Verses 4-12.**

**2. How long were women considered unclean after giving birth? Leviticus 12:1-8. Did Jesus’ parents keep this law? Luke 2:22-24.**

**3. How long would a person be unclean after touching a corpse? Numbers 19:11-13. Was it permissible to be near a corpse but not touch it? Verses 14-15. Could such an unclean person participate in the Passover? Numbers 9:6.**

**4. How was a person to be cleansed or become acceptable again? Numbers 19:12, 17-19. What was the penalty for failing to do this? Verses 13, 20. How was the special water made? Verses 2-9, 17-18. Did this sprinkling cleanse the people on the outside, or the inside? Hebrews 9:13.**

**5. Was Jesus careful to avoid ritual uncleanness? Matthew 8:2-3; 9:20; Luke 7:12-14. Did he encourage others to observe purification rules? Matthew 8:4. What did he say about the importance of uncleanness? Matthew 15:11. What did the religious leaders think of Jesus’ attitude? Verse 12.**

The Pharisees were very careful about maintaining religious purity, but Jesus did not seem particularly concerned about it. He felt free to touch people and things that were unclean. According to the rules of the old covenant, this would have made Jesus unclean, too. But instead of becoming contaminated by the uncleanness, Jesus cleansed the person of the problem.

Jesus did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). It was not a sin to touch a dead person or to have a discharge of bodily fluids. These rules of cleanness were for ritual purity, not moral guidance.

**6. What rules did God give regarding clean and unclean animals? Leviticus 11:1-43; Deuteronomy 14:1-20. Why did God give the Israelites these rules? Leviticus 11:44-45; 20:24-25; Deuteronomy 14:2,**

**21. Did these laws apply to Gentiles? Verse 21.**

God is holy (which means separate), and he set his people apart from other nations. He told them to make a distinction between animals, and by this to be distinct from other nations. In this way, the nation of Israel symbolized holiness. Just as they were set apart from other nations, God was set apart from humanity. The Israelites' holiness rules pictured God's holiness.

Some people say that the rules were given for health reasons, but there is no biblical evidence for that, and scientific studies have not proven it. There is no evidence, for example, that beef is better for our health than camel meat, or that fish-eating ducks are better than fish-eating herons. The Old Testament does not tell us why it permits grasshoppers but not ants, or why it permits honey but not honeybees. The claim about health is not a biblical claim, and it cannot be taught as doctrine.

**7. Was the distinction between clean and unclean animals known long before Abraham? Genesis 7:1-9. Was Noah allowed to eat clean animals, or was he permitted to eat any kind of animal? Genesis 9:2-4.**

The concept of clean and unclean was a religious distinction, with no claims about health. God permitted people to eat animals that were not permissible for sacrifice. Noah was allowed to eat any kind of animal, any kind of bird and any kind of fish. This is the way Jews have traditionally understood this instruction to Noah.

Jewish rabbis said that Gentiles were righteous if they observed laws that went back to their ancestor Noah — and avoiding unclean meat was not part of the requirements. The rabbis listed seven rules that go back to the time of Noah:

- not to worship idols,
- not to blaspheme God's name,
- to establish courts of justice,
- not to kill,
- not to commit adultery,
- not to steal and
- not to eat meat that had been cut from a living animal (Talmud, Sanhedrin 56; see the article "Laws, Noachian," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* or the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*).

The Talmud also mentions that the Israelite patriarchs were allowed to eat unclean meat (*Hullin* 7:6). These sections of the Talmud acknowledge that Genesis does not forbid the eating of unclean meat. The prohibition was one

of the laws that were added 430 years after Abraham, as part of the law of Moses, given to Israelites only. Gentiles did not need to observe these restrictions unless they wanted to become proselytes and come under the covenant made at Sinai.

When the early church decided that Gentiles did not need to become proselytes (Acts 15), this would have been one of the laws they understood to be part of “the law of Moses.” When Paul said that Jesus abolished the laws that separated Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15), the distinction between clean and unclean meats would have been included.

Both Jews and Gentiles knew that Jews kept dietary rules that Gentiles did not; meats were one of the primary customs that separated them. Therefore, when the early church allowed people to live like Gentiles (1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 2:14), they were saying, in effect, that they could eat the foods that Gentiles normally ate. The Levitical instructions about clean and unclean were rules for ritual and ceremony, not for defining sin and morality.

#### **8. Did Paul consider certain types of food unclean? Romans 14:14, 20.**

Paul’s letter to the Romans deals extensively with Jewish and Gentile concerns. In chapter 16, he greets many people with Jewish names and many with Gentile names. The Roman church was composed of both Jews and Gentiles, and there seems to have been some tension between them, and Paul addressed this carefully.

In chapter 14, Paul addresses the matter of vegetarianism, but his comments go further than that. When he says “no food is unclean in itself” and “all food is clean,” the meaning is clear. Since the Roman church included both Jews and Gentiles, questions would naturally arise as to whether it was necessary for Christians to keep the old covenant rules. Paul clearly answers that question, but he also urges people to be cautious about this sensitive matter. He did not require Jews to change their customs.

In review, we see that Noah was permitted to eat any kind of meat he wanted. Paul also permitted people to eat any kind of meat they wanted. The dietary restrictions in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 were (just like other rules about ritual cleanness) given just to ancient Israel as part of the old covenant. When the old covenant came to an end when Jesus was crucified, the authority for these rules expired. The new covenant does not tell us to look to the law of Moses for either clothing styles or dietary guidance. Instead, the new covenant clearly tells us that all foods may be considered clean.



## JESUS AND THE OLD COVENANT LAWS

**1. Did Jesus ever break God’s law? Hebrews 4:15. Did his parents obey the law regarding circumcision? Luke 2:21. Did they observe the rules about purification after childbirth? Verses 22-27. Did they keep the annual festivals? Verse 42. Did Jesus continue in this pattern of doing the Father’s will? Verse 49.**

**2. Did Jesus teach people to obey everything God had commanded? Matthew 5:20, 48; 7:21. Did he encourage people to obey the ritual laws? Matthew 5:23-24; 8:4. Did he come to destroy the law? Matthew 5:17.**

The purpose of Jesus’ life and work was to fulfill both the Law (the books of Moses) and the Prophets (other Old Testament books). He did not destroy the Old Testament. But that doesn’t mean that Christians have to keep circumcision and all the other old laws. Jesus’ ministry caused many changes in the law — changes so dramatic that laws were “set aside” or declared “obsolete” (Hebrews 7:18; 8:13). Some laws remained the same, some were changed, and others were “abolished” (Ephesians 2:15).

When Jesus said, “I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets,” he did not mean that each specific law would stay exactly the same. He meant that the *purpose and message* of the Law and the Prophets remain exactly the same. The Law and the Prophets pointed to him and were intended from the beginning to be fulfilled by him.

Some of the specific laws of the old covenant are still valid, but many of them were set aside when Jesus came and fulfilled them by his life, death and resurrection. Matthew 5:17 is not a “proof” of any particular law, because this verse does not tell us which specific laws are still valid or which have been changed or set aside.

Old covenant laws (such as the laws of sacrifice) have been set aside precisely *because* Jesus has fulfilled them. He did not come for the purpose of destroying those laws, but for fulfilling their meaning. However, by fulfilling their meaning, he made it unnecessary for Christians to keep those laws. They are unnecessary because they have served their purpose by pointing to Jesus. He is the reality to which they could only point. Now that he has come, they are no longer legally binding.

Yet because they point to Jesus Christ and show how God interacted with a group of people at one time and place, the old covenant laws continue to give us insights into God’s will. Even the laws of sacrifice are “useful for

teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Jesus also fulfilled various laws about ritual cleanliness. That did not mean that he never became unclean, because anyone with normal bodily functions would occasionally become unclean (Deuteronomy 23:10). Jesus also touched dead people, lepers and other causes of uncleanness. It was not a sin to be unclean. However, Jesus fulfilled the purpose of the purity laws: He was *morally* and *spiritually* pure. He had internal holiness, set apart to do the work of God.

Jesus fulfilled the purpose of God’s laws. He did not destroy the fact that people should obey God, even though his crucifixion brought a change in some of the details of *how* they obey God.

**3. Did Jesus criticize the law of Moses as not being strict enough? Matthew 19:7-9. Did he teach that a stricter standard of righteousness was necessary? Matthew 5:20-22, 27-28.**

**4. The Pharisees were very strict about the small details of the law. What did Jesus say about their carefulness? Matthew 23:5, 23-28. Are some parts of the law more important than others? Matthew 9:13; 12:7.**

**5. Did Jesus teach the same things Moses did, or was there also a contrast between these two? Matthew 11:13; John 1:17; 2 Corinthians 3:15-16. When the disciples saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah, who were they told to listen to? Matthew 17:1-5; Acts 3:22.**

Jesus did not emphasize the same things Moses did. Moses wrote many chapters about the tabernacle and the “place” in which God put his name. Jesus said that place did not matter (John 4:20-24). Moses wrote many chapters about ritual uncleanness; Jesus was much less concerned about it. Instead, Jesus gave much more emphasis to the way people should treat each other.

The law of Moses required many animal sacrifices, but because of the sacrificial death of Jesus, the sacrifices are no longer required. Moses wrote that sins could be atoned for through the performance of rituals, but this was a temporary and external atonement; Jesus simply forgave people as a permanent gift and a cleansed conscience. Jesus often told people to obey God, but *Moses is not the standard by which obedience is now measured*.

**6. Who is the final authority for Christians? Matthew 7:21-29; 10:32-33, 39; 19:29; 28:18-20; John 3:25-26; 6:29; 14:21-23; 17:2-3.**

Jesus, as the Son of God, has more authority than Moses had (Hebrews 3:1-6). Jesus is the standard by which Moses is judged. Jesus could quote the law of Moses when it supported his point, and he could also criticize the law

of Moses as not being strict enough. In some cases the law of Moses requires too much, and in other cases it does not require enough.

Moses said one thing, but Jesus said another (Matthew 5:21-45). Jesus presented himself as the greater authority, the perfect authority, the basis on which people will be judged. Our lives should conform to the standard Jesus set, not the imperfect standard Moses wrote.

In Christianity, some of the laws of Moses are still valid, and others are not (for an example of each, the law about murder and the law about tassels). How do we know which is valid and which is obsolete? The New Testament is the authority by which the old covenant is to be understood.

Although the Old Testament is inspired Scripture and part of the Word of God, its purpose was to point to the coming and work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, when it comes to understanding what is required for Christian behavior, the Old Testament must be interpreted in light of what the New Testament says — and the New Testament says that the old covenant is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).

## **THE WEEKLY SABBATH — JESUS' EXAMPLE**

Of all Old Testament laws, the weekly Sabbath is probably the most controversial today. Many Christians believe they ought to obey the Ten Commandments — and one of the Ten is a command to rest on the seventh day (Saturday). Millions of Christians therefore observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Many other Christians observe Sunday as a day of rest, believing that the Sabbath commandment is in force for Christians, but changed from the seventh day to the day of Jesus' resurrection. But most Christians, although they worship on one day out of seven, do not observe any day as a required day of rest.

Does this Old Testament law about the Sabbath day apply to Christians today? Let's see what the New Testament says about this law. First, we will examine the example of Jesus Christ.

**1. When Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath, what were his disciples doing? Matthew 12:1. What did the Pharisees think of this? Verse 2.**

**2. What examples did Jesus mention to show that biblical laws can sometimes be set aside? Verses 3-6. Did Jesus say that temple work is more important than the Sabbath command? Verse 5. Did Jesus say that his own work is more important than the temple? Verse 6. Did he proclaim himself more important than the Sabbath? Verse 8.**

Temple rituals were more important than avoiding work on the Sabbath day. Temple rituals are now obsolete. This suggests that the Sabbath work restrictions, which are less important, may also be obsolete. If the greater thing can be set aside, then it would seem that the lesser thing can be as well.

In defending his Sabbath activities, Jesus put the Sabbath in the same legal category as temple bread, sacrifices, and the physical temple, all of which are now obsolete. He treated the Sabbath as a ceremonial law. Jesus is more important than any of these worship customs. He is more important than the temple itself and more important than the Sabbath day (Matthew 12:6, 8).

**3. In Mark's version of this story, how did Jesus summarize the purpose of the Sabbath? Mark 2:27. Did he again say he had more authority than the Sabbath did? Verse 28.**

Verse 27 teaches that the Sabbath was given for human good. Some people therefore claim that Sabbath rules must come before human needs, because those rules tell us what is best for us, and those rules are wiser than we are.

The context shows that Jesus meant the opposite: Human needs are more important than Sabbath restrictions. The Sabbath should serve human needs, rather than human needs being delayed to serve Sabbath rules. Jesus is definitely not saying that all human needs have to fit into the Sabbath rules!

Jesus pointed out that David could break an old covenant law without being guilty of sin (verse 26). This comparison would not be helpful if the Sabbath were considered a more important law than the one Jesus cited. The temple bread was holy; it could be eaten only by priests (Leviticus 24:5-9). Nevertheless, that law could be set aside when hungry people had no other food. Similarly, Jesus considered the law prohibiting work on the Sabbath to be a ritual law that could be set aside when there was a human need.

Jesus said that he is Lord of the Sabbath. Some people have concluded from this that the Sabbath is the Lord's day, which all the Lord's followers ought to keep. Yet this is not the point Jesus was making. Jesus was not emphasizing obedience to Sabbath rules — he was saying he could break the Pharisees' rules about the Sabbath. He was saying he had authority over the Sabbath.

**4. Did Jesus remind the Pharisees that worship customs were not as important as the way we treat other human beings? Matthew 12:7. What did Jesus then do on the Sabbath day? Verses 9-13. How did the Pharisees respond? Verse 14. According to Jesus, what activities are permitted on the Sabbath? Verse 12, last part.**

Since Jesus did not sin, and the Sabbath was a law at the time he lived, we know that Jesus kept the Sabbath in the way God intended it be kept under the old covenant. However, the Gospel writers did not consider it important to tell us that he “kept” the Sabbath. The Gospels do not tell us about resting on the Sabbath. Rather, they focus on activity, on action, on doing good work. These stories about what Jesus did on the Sabbath are *not* recorded for the purpose of telling us to keep the Sabbath by resting. The focus is on the healing work of Jesus and his authority over the Sabbath, not on what we must avoid on the Sabbath.

**5. What did Jesus do on the Sabbath? Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16. What is the significance of this example?**

If we follow Jesus' example in *all* its details, we must, among other things, go to synagogues on the Sabbath to teach the Jews. But this is not the purpose of these verses. They are informing us about the nature of Jesus' work, teaching and authority. They are not commanding us to do exactly the same thing he did in the same way he did or at the same time he did.

Jesus taught and healed on every day of the week. Jesus' activity on the

Sabbath was not much different from his activity on other days of the week, except that since the Jews were gathered in the synagogues on the Sabbath, that is where he taught them.

**6. On another occasion, what did Jesus do on the Sabbath? Luke 13:10-13. How did the Jewish religious leaders respond? Verse 14.**

**7. Did Jesus explain that the Sabbath is a day of freedom? Verses 15-16. Are the needs of people more important than rules about how the Sabbath should be kept? Luke 14:1-6.**

The Pharisees may have had good motives. They wanted to obey God's commandments, and they wanted to describe in detail the way obedience would work out in daily life. But their rules became more important to them than the needs of people, and the rules became burdens. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for requiring things God did not require (Luke 11:46; Mark 7:7-9).

Similarly, some modern religious leaders also have rules about how Christians should live. These rules are sometimes helpful and practical, but whenever the rules become more important than the real needs of people, the rules become more harmful than helpful. For example, many Christians have taught it is wrong to play cards, dance or wear jewelry. These rules may have been helpful at one time, and somewhat neutral at other times, but if they are taught today, the rules may be obstacles that distract people away from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It would be equally wrong to require something that God used to require but that he no longer requires. For example, if anyone said that Christians are required to wear blue threads in tassels on their garments (Numbers 15:38-39), they would be making a mistake in understanding the temporary nature of the old covenant, and their mistake would likely distract people away from the gospel.

Likewise, it would be erroneous to think that Christian men had to gather at one specific place three times a year (Deuteronomy 16:16). Although these rules are biblical, it would be wrong to require them today. They were given to ancient Israel, not to modern Christians. If imposed today, these rules would tend to drive people away from their Savior.

When we are considering an old covenant law, we need to be careful to require only what the new covenant requires. We cannot say Christ requires his people to consider certain foods unclean when Paul clearly says all foods are clean. Similarly, we cannot require people to build booths for the Feast of Tabernacles or to fast on the Day of Atonement when the only reasons the Bible gives for such customs do not apply to Christians. And we must not make requirements about the weekly Sabbath unless we can demonstrate

them from the new covenant.

**8. What other healing did Jesus do on the Sabbath? John 5:1-9. What did the Jewish leaders complain about this time? Verses 10, 16. How did Jesus respond? Verses 17-18.**

Jesus could have easily told the man that he would be healed as soon as the Sabbath was over. He could have easily told the man to wait until the Sabbath was over before he carried his sleeping mat. But Jesus did not. Instead, he boldly used the word *work* to describe what he was doing on the Sabbath day.

The Bible never shows Jesus as teaching people to rest on the Sabbath. Rather, it always shows him liberalizing what could be done. He stressed the importance of doing good work on the Sabbath — not only to take care of others' needs (healing) but also to take care of one's own needs (picking grain to eat and carrying a mat). The New Testament emphasis is on liberty and activity, not rest.

**9. On a later occasion, Jesus referred to this Sabbath healing. Which law did he say was more important than the Sabbath? John 7:21-23.**

The law of circumcision was more important than the law forbidding work on the Sabbath. Again, Jesus compared the Sabbath to a ritual law and said that the ritual was more important than the Sabbath. The Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments, but that did not make it more important. It was *less* important than rituals such as circumcision, temple sacrifices and holy bread.

**10. Did Jesus perform another healing on the Sabbath? John 9:14. What had Jesus done? Verses 1-11. Did he say the work of God must be done, even on the Sabbath? Verse 4.**

Jesus never discussed what should *not* be done on the Sabbath, nor did he ever specifically uphold the Sabbath commandment as binding. He did good work on the Sabbath just as he did on every other day of the week.

The example Jesus set for us regarding the Sabbath was one of freedom to do good. He did not teach or exemplify any restrictions. Jesus' example and teaching helps us understand why Paul could say what he did. Our next study will look at that.

## THE SABBATH IN ACTS AND THE EPISTLES

**1. In Antioch, what did Paul do on the Sabbath? Acts 13:14. In Corinth, what did he do? Acts 18:1-4. Did Paul have a custom of going to synagogue on the Sabbath? Acts 17:2.**

**2. Did Paul normally preach to Jews first? Acts 13:45-46; 18:6; Romans 1:16. In Philippi, where there was no synagogue, did Paul look for a place where Jews could be found? Acts 16:13.**

Paul wanted to teach Jews about Jesus and how he was the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (Acts 18:28; 28:23). The synagogue was a good place to start, because Jews gathered there to read and discuss the Law and the Prophets. The Sabbath was the day on which they gathered, so Paul, being a Jewish teacher, regularly went to synagogues on the Sabbath. This was a good evangelistic strategy.

But a historical fact is not a command for us today. We do not have to imitate Paul's participation in old covenant laws (Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:26). We do not have to imitate his activities on the Sabbath, either. Christians do not have to go to synagogues on the Sabbath.

James said that Moses was preached in the synagogues every Sabbath (Acts 15:21). But James was not encouraging Gentiles to attend synagogues! The converts needed to hear about Christ, not about Moses. The synagogues were preaching strict requirements, including circumcision and the law of Moses. The Gentile believers did not need to hear that kind of preaching. The Jerusalem conference gave Gentiles a lenient decree with only four requirements.

Most Jewish leaders believed that God gave the Sabbath law only to the Israelites. A book written in the second century B.C. gives their view: "The Creator of all blessed it, but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the sabbath thereon with the sole exception of Israel. He granted to them alone that they might eat and drink and keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth" (Jubilees 2:31, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, [Doubleday, 1985], vol. 2, p. 58). The Sabbath was one of the laws that distinguished Jews from Gentiles.

The rabbis taught that Gentiles should observe laws that go back to Noah, and the Sabbath was not included. Although God blessed the seventh day at creation, he did not command it as a day of rest until the time of Moses. The Sabbath law was added 430 years after Abraham, as part of the law of Moses, given to Israelites only.

First-century Jews understood that Gentiles did not need to observe the Sabbath unless they became proselytes and came under the covenant made at Sinai. This is why the Sabbath was not a big controversy in the early church. No one thought that uncircumcised peoples needed to keep the Sabbath, because God had never commanded them to.

When the early church decided that Gentiles did not need to become proselytes or to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15), the decision meant, in that culture, that Gentiles did not need to obey the law of Moses concerning the Sabbath.

When Paul said that Jesus destroyed the laws that separated Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15), the Sabbath would have been included, because the Sabbath was one of the main laws that separated Jews and Gentiles. When the early church allowed people to live like Gentiles (1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 2:14), they were saying, among other things, that it was not necessary to keep the Sabbath.

**3. Did Paul also preach on other days of the week? Acts 17:17; 19:9. In Troas, did Paul wait until *after* the Sabbath to preach? Acts 20:6-7.**

Although Paul was in Troas for an entire week, nothing is said about the Sabbath. But we are told the church came together on the first day of the week to break bread, and Paul preached. This means that a first-day meeting at which preaching takes place is a valid Christian example. Daily preaching (Acts 17:17; 19:9) is also a valid example — but an example is not a command.

The new covenant tells Christians to meet regularly (Hebrews 10:24), but it does not command when that must be. There is no biblical authority for changing the day of rest from the seventh day to the first. There is no new covenant authority for requiring any specific day of the week for rest or for worship.

We are never told that Paul rested or in any way avoided work on the Sabbath. We are told that he used the day as an evangelistic opportunity, just as he used any and every day of the week to preach about the Savior. His example shows liberty, and nothing about requirements.

**4. What did Paul teach Gentiles about the Sabbath? Colossians 2:16-17.**

These verses do not tell us whether the Colossians were keeping the Sabbath. It does not matter, for Paul clearly says that Christians should not let people judge them regarding the Sabbath.

Paul starts verse 16 with the word *therefore*. He is drawing a conclusion from what he has just written in verses 13-15. Because God has forgiven us,

because of Jesus' death on the cross, because of his victory over his enemies, therefore we should not let anyone judge us regarding the Sabbath.

Under the laws of Moses, the Sabbath *was* a law by which people were judged. But Jesus' crucifixion has changed that. Now, the Sabbath is no longer a basis for judgment. The proper standard for judgment is faith in Jesus Christ. The test of Christianity is not the day of devotion, but the Person to whom devotion is given. At the last judgment, the main question will not be about days, but about faith in Jesus Christ.

The Sabbath, festivals, new moons and other old covenant laws were a “shadow” of things to come. They were foreshadows — predictive shadows symbolizing things to come. Whether or not these have all been fulfilled, we are told not to let others judge us with regard to the Sabbath.

Whether we keep the Sabbath or not, we should not let others make us feel guilty regarding what we do on the Sabbath. In the new covenant, the Sabbath is neither forbidden nor required. It was a shadow, or precursor, of Jesus, and now that Jesus, the true Rest, has come, the shadow or precursor is no longer necessary.

The contrast between “shadow” and “reality” is also seen in Hebrews 10:1, which uses the same Greek word as in Colossians 2:17. The sacrificial laws were a shadow of the good things that were coming. Just as Jesus put the Sabbath in the same category as ritual laws, these verses also do. Just as the sacrifices were shadows that pointed to Christ and were superseded by him, the old covenant worship days were also shadows that pointed to Christ. Now that he has come, the days are no longer standards by which we are judged.

#### **5. What did Paul tell the Romans about special days? Romans 14:5.**

Both Jews and Gentiles were members of the church in Rome. Some of the Christians felt that they should consider certain days different than others; some considered every day alike. Paul did not seem to be troubled by either approach — what was most important in this situation is to avoid judging another believer (verse 4). One believer should not put stumbling blocks in another's way (verse 13). If God does not require a particular behavior, it is wrong to teach it as required.

In Judaism, special days were important. But Paul took a rather indifferent attitude to the concept of special days. That is because something significant had happened to change the basis of our relationship with God. The most significant event in history had happened: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of that, the old covenant laws came to an end. Days are no longer a matter for judging behavior.

**6. What did Paul tell the Galatians about observing days? Galatians 4:10.**

The Galatians had been pagans before they came to believe in Christ. But Judaizers were teaching them that they needed to be circumcised (which meant that they would need to keep the law of Moses — Galatians 5:2-3). The old covenant law was bondage, Paul said (Galatians 4:24-25; 5:1). The Galatian Christians had come out of one form of slavery (paganism, with its many external rules) and were being taught to come under another form of bondage (the obsolete old covenant, with its external rules). Such a teaching makes Christ of no value!

When the Judaizers taught “days and months and seasons and years,” it is likely that they taught the Jewish calendar with its days, lunar months, festival seasons and sabbatical years. Paul called these external requirements “weak,” since they could not transform the heart. He called them “inadequate,” since they can never earn us salvation, nor are they required after we are given salvation.

Christians may keep such days if they want (as many Jewish Christians did), but Paul said they should not teach that such days are required under the new covenant.

**7. Does a Sabbath rest still remain for the people of God? Hebrews 4:9. Is this rest something the ancient Israelites did not have? Verse 8. How do we enter God’s rest? Verse 3, first part.**

The letter to the Hebrews was written to people who liked the customs of Judaism. The letter explains that the old covenant is obsolete and its regulations have been set aside. Throughout the letter, the readers are reminded that Jesus is much, much better than anything the old covenant had.

Jesus Christ is the main focus of the epistle. He has fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. The old covenant rituals find their fulfillment in him. This is true of the Sabbath, too. The rest we experience through faith in Christ is infinitely superior to the rest the ancient Israelites were given in the Sabbath. When verse 9 mentions a Sabbath rest, it is praising the superiority of Christ. It is not re-commanding an old covenant law.

Joshua could bring the Israelites into the Promised Land, and he could give them the weekly Sabbath rest, but he could not give them the supernatural rest that comes only through Jesus Christ. But those who believe in Christ *have* entered God’s rest (verse 3), and they have entered it *through faith in Christ*, not by keeping an old covenant command. “Come to me,” Jesus said, “and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28-30). We are exhorted to enter

God's rest by faith in Jesus Christ.

In Hebrews, "rest" is used to symbolize salvation, which includes spiritual rest. The weekly Sabbath of the old covenant *symbolized* the salvation made available in the new covenant. Jesus fulfilled the purpose of the Sabbath day. We are not exhorted to enter the Sabbath day, but to enter the rest that comes with faith in Jesus Christ.

This passage does not say whether the weekly Sabbath should or should not be kept. It does not address that question. Instead, it is speaking about something we find in Jesus Christ. It is speaking of the reality, not a shadow.

In summary, we have seen the following:

- Many old covenant laws are now obsolete.
- The early church decided that Gentiles did not have to keep the law of Moses, the law that separated Jews from Gentiles and was given only to Israel, the law that was added 430 years after Abraham.
- The Sabbath was part of the law of Moses, given only to the Israelites.
- Jesus obeyed God perfectly, yet he did not command the Sabbath or set an example of resting on the Sabbath.
- Jesus gave examples of ritual laws that were more important than the Sabbath.
- There is no new covenant authority for commanding the Sabbath.
- Christians should not judge one another regarding special days.

No New Testament verse specifically cites the Sabbath as obsolete. Instead, there are verses that say the entire old covenant law is obsolete. The law of Moses, including the Sabbath, is not required. We are commanded to live by the Spirit, not by the law inscribed in stone. The Sabbath is repeatedly compared to things now obsolete: temple sacrifices, circumcision, holy bread, a shadow. The Sabbath is not a basis for judging one another, and it should not be taught as a necessary addition to Christ.

In concluding this section, we can briefly consider two stumbling blocks that confuse some people. First is the idea that the Sabbath is a "creation ordinance," commanded ever since creation. To understand the error of this view, we must note these facts: Although Genesis says the seventh day was declared holy at creation, there is no biblical evidence it was a commanded *rest* until the time of Moses. The idea that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance is a human invention.

Marriage and reproduction were commanded at creation and are therefore "creation ordinances," but Christians are free *not* to marry if they choose. Even if Sabbath observance had been commanded at creation, which it was

not, that would not in itself prove that everyone must keep it today — especially when Paul says we should not let others judge us regarding the Sabbath. The laws contained in the Old Testament, including the law of Moses and laws given to the patriarchs, pointed to and were fulfilled and superseded by Jesus Christ.

The second idea that confuses some people is the idea that the Sabbath is required because it is part of the Ten Commandments. Many Christians think of the Ten Commandments as a permanent law code for all humans for all time. Nevertheless, the Ten Commandments were given to Israel as the centerpiece of the old covenant (Exodus 20:2; Leviticus 27:34). They were not given to the whole world.

It is true that the principles on which the Ten Commandments are based are timeless, and that the new covenant contains those same principles. But just because nine of the commandments are valid does not mean that all ten are; there is nothing in the Bible that says they must all stay together. Throughout the old covenant, moral laws are mixed in together with ceremonial laws; it should be no surprise that the old covenant also has a ceremonial law in the center.

The Christian life is based on the new covenant in the blood of Christ, not on the old covenant given to Israel. The Ten Commandments, written on tables of stone, are part of the old covenant and have been set aside, superseded by something that is permanent (2 Corinthians 3:7-10).

The Ten Commandments were given at a certain time, for a certain people. They even start with the preface that they were given to ancient Israel (Exodus 20:2). One of the commandments refers specifically to the land of Canaan (verse 12, last part).

Jesus said that certain ritual laws were more important than the Sabbath command, which implies that the Sabbath command *is* a ritual law, and that it became obsolete when the rituals did. Paul said that the stone tablets were once glorious, but have lost their glory because of the greater glory that has now come (2 Corinthians 3:7-10). Most of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, but the Sabbath command is not. In fact, Paul specifically says that Christians are not to judge one another about the days they keep.

The Sabbath is not a new covenant command, but it can have practical benefits. It is a good practice to set aside a day each week, putting jobs and other activities on hold, in order to devote time to God in worship and service. But the church does not have scriptural authority (other than by misapplying the old covenant) for *requiring* an entire day to be set aside, and

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no authority for requiring either the seventh day or the first.

The Sabbath, as a commanded day of rest, was central to the old covenant, which has been declared obsolete. Although Christians may choose to obey it, it is not a requirement for Christianity. However, many commands *are* part of the new covenant. In our next study, we will examine some of these commands.

## NEW COVENANT COMMANDS

1. What is the most important command of the New Testament? Matthew 22:37. Since there is only one God, and Jesus Christ is our Lord, how can this foundational command be restated? 1 John 3:23, first part. Will people be saved or condemned on the basis of this one command? Mark 16:16; John 3:18.

2. What is the second most important command? Matthew 22:39. How is this command restated? 1 John 3:23, last part. Is this the visible evidence of Christianity? John 13:35.

3. How is this command related to the greatest commandment? 1 John 4:20-21. How is it related to the Law and the Prophets? Romans 13:10; Galatians 5:14; Matthew 7:12.

The New Testament contains hundreds of commands. All of them come under the general heading of love, for God is love. Everything he commands is an expression of love. Although some of Paul's comments about the law seem negative, Paul himself gave more than a hundred commands. He is not against law in itself, but he argues that the law of Moses is no longer valid. In regard to the Mosaic law, he could say, "I myself am not under the law." But in regard to obeying the Lord, he said, "I am under Christ's law" (1 Corinthians 9:20-21).

4. In many of Paul's letters, he begins by explaining some theological principles and ends with some practical application of those principles in the way we live. In the letter to the Romans, how did Paul summarize our behavioral obligations? Romans 12:1-2. How must Christians treat one another? Romans 12:9-18; 13:8-14; 14:19-23; 15:1-7.

5. The book of Galatians has some critical words about the law, but it also has some commands of its own — new covenant commands. How does Paul unite the concepts of liberty and obligation? Galatians 5:13-15. What behaviors should Christians avoid? Verses 19-21. And how should we seek to live? Verses 22-26.

6. Ephesians also has direct advice for Christians. How does Paul begin his exhortations? Ephesians 4:1-3. What should Christians quit doing, and what should we do instead? Verses 22-32. How is this life-style summarized? Ephesians 5:1-2.

7. Does the gospel of Christ have implications for the way we should live? Philippians 1:27. Does it affect the way we think? Philippians 2:1-

7; 4:8.

**8. When we identify ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ, what should we do? Colossians 3:1-17. What is God's will for us as his children? 1 Thessalonians 4:3-10. What other instructions does he give? 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22.**

We have seen here several dozen commands. Most of them are easy to understand. They are plain, and yet very demanding. They demand all our time, all our emotions, all our thoughts and all our actions. In this life, we will never achieve all they ask.

We might briefly contrast these clear commands with the idea of a Christian Sabbath-day command. The New Testament has space for all sorts of commands, from obvious things to subtle things, but it never commands the Sabbath. This would be odd if the Sabbath were an important command. We find sweeping statements that make the old covenant law obsolete, but unlike other commands, we never find the Sabbath commanded again or made an exception to the rule. Paul and John say a lot about the godly behavior that springs from Christian faith and love, but the Sabbath is simply never commanded.

Paul dealt with numerous problems of Christian living, and he listed numerous sins that characterize people who will not inherit the kingdom of God, but he never mentions Sabbath-breaking. In describing sins of the Gentiles (Romans 1), he says nothing about the Sabbath. If the Sabbath is essential, it is certainly surprising that no one is ever criticized for ignoring it.

In the first-century Roman Empire, slaves would have found it particularly difficult to keep the Sabbath. Some of them had pagan, harsh masters (1 Peter 2:18). Some parts of the Roman Empire didn't even use a seven-day week. But Peter and Paul did not have to answer questions about how slaves could keep the Sabbath. Why not? Because slaves didn't have to keep the Sabbath. For one thing, first-century Jews did not believe that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath. For another, the decision at Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, was that converted, Spirit-filled Gentiles were not required to become circumcised and keep the law of Moses. Little is said about the Sabbath because it was not a problem.

Instead, the Sabbath was a neutral matter, neither commanded nor forbidden. People were free to rest on that day if they wanted to, or to use the day in other ways, as long as they did what they did to the Lord (Romans 14:5-6).

Likewise, the New Testament does not say that any other day ought to be a day of rest. There is no command to keep the first day, either as a day of

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meeting or a day of rest. It is neither commanded nor forbidden. Christians are free to work these things out for themselves. We are commanded to assemble together for worship, but we are not commanded when (Hebrews 10:25).

The important thing is not which day we observe, but whether we have faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He is the test commandment, the center of faith, the standard by which we will be judged.

## SALVATION BY GRACE

**1. Does everyone fall short of what God commands? Romans 3:9-10, 23. What is the penalty of sin? Romans 6:23; 5:12. Did Jesus pay the penalty for us? 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; 1 Peter 2:24. Therefore, can we be confident that our sins have been forgiven through what he did? Acts 2:38; 10:43; 13:38-39; Romans 3:24.**

God is perfect, but human beings are not. God is holy, humans are not. We do not deserve to live forever with God. No one can claim such an eternal blessing as a right. No one can claim to have earned the right to be with God forever. On judgment day, no one can say: “You have to let me in. I’ve been good enough.” No one is ever “good enough” to obligate God to do anything for them. What we deserve is death.

However, God wants us to live with him forever. That is why he created us. He loves us and wants us, so he paid the penalty for us, as a gift. God loves us so much that he sent his only Son to die for our sins. Through his payment on our behalf, our sins are forgiven and we are given eternal life with God (John 3:16). This is wonderful news: God wants to live with us!

**2. Does God live in each believer? John 14:23. Does Jesus Christ live in us? Galatians 2:20. Does the Holy Spirit live in each Christian? Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 3:16.**

**3. However, does sin also continue to live in us? Romans 7:17-23. Do Christians continue to struggle with sin? Romans 6:11-13; Ephesians 4:22-32. Is there anyone who does not sin? 1 John 1:8, 10. What must Christians therefore continue to do? Verse 9; Matthew 6:12.**

No one is able to live up to the perfection that God commands. We are unable to be perfect and holy in the way God is perfect and holy (Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:15-16).

Therefore, we have a continuing need for God’s mercy and forgiveness. No one can say, “I’ve been so good that I deserve to live with God forever.” When judgment day comes, everyone will need mercy. Because all Christians sin, we continue to need God’s grace — and the good news is that we continue to be forgiven and made clean through the atoning work of our Savior. Salvation is a gift from start to finish.

Paul talks about forgiveness by using the term *justification*, which means not only forgiveness but also giving us the status of being righteous. Christians are not just declared neutral, but are declared good and righteous, acceptable to God. How can this be? Let’s take a closer look at what Paul

wrote about justification.

**4. Can a person be justified by obeying God's law? Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16; 3:11; Titus 3:5. How then can we be justified — declared righteous and acceptable to God? Acts 13:38-39; Romans 3:24, 28; 5:1; Galatians 3:24; Titus 3:7.**

We are incapable of earning our salvation. We can never perform enough good deeds to make up for the fact that we are sinners. We can never be saved on the basis of righteous things we have done. Salvation is always by God's mercy and his grace.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). This gift was made possible by the death of Jesus on the cross. He paid the penalty of our sins, and through faith in him — by accepting what he has done for us — we experience forgiveness.

God's grace does not mean we are given permission to sin (Romans 3:31; 6:1). God created us to do good works (Ephesians 2:10), and grace teaches us to quit sinning (Titus 2:11-12). Throughout the New Testament, we are exhorted to obey God, and we are warned about sin. But regardless of how obedient we might be, salvation does not come from our good works, but through the grace of God.

Of all humans, Paul had an excellent claim to his own righteousness, both in the Old Testament law and in zeal for Jesus Christ. But he did not trust in his own works.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ...in regard to the law, a Pharisee...as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. (Philippians 3:4-9)

The righteousness that we need for salvation cannot come from ourselves. It can come only from Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel is that his righteousness is given to us, and we receive this by faith, not by works of the law. It is in Christ that “we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

“Christ Jesus has become...our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). He becomes our righteousness, and in him we become the righteousness of God. We are justified — counted among the righteous.

Many Christians haven’t fully understood the gospel of salvation by the grace of Jesus Christ. Many people still think that salvation is by faith plus works. The truth is that works can’t save us, since even at their best they fall short of what God has commanded.

As an illustration, let’s suppose that people are at the gates of paradise, and the gatekeeper asks, “Why should I let you in?” Many Christians would respond: “Because I’ve been good. I went to church every week, I always gave a generous offering, I read the Bible every day, I never took anything that wasn’t mine, I never looked at pornography, etc.” Alcohol abstainers would mention what they did, and Sabbath keepers would mention what they did.

But the gatekeeper would reply: “So what? For one thing, you never did those things perfectly. For another, even if you did them perfectly, those things wouldn’t erase your sins and corruption. If that’s what God wanted, he could make machines to do those things.”

The correct reply, in contrast, is that we rely on the sacrifice and righteousness of Jesus Christ, knowing we have nothing to offer God. Salvation is given to us because of God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ, nothing else. The faith and love God has granted us lead us into obedience and wholehearted devotion to him, but salvation does not depend on our success in obedience, or we wouldn’t be saved. Since our obedience is never perfect, it can never count for salvation.

Even so, obedience is important. If we have faith in our Lord, we will obey him. We live for our King who died for us and now lives for us and in us (2 Corinthians 5:15). Our deepest allegiance is with him forever.

The Bible sometimes describes salvation with the word *redemption*. This word comes from the ancient slave market. People who could not pay their debts were sold into slavery. If their friends and relatives were able to get enough money to pay the debt, then they could *redeem* or buy the person back from slavery.

To use this figure of speech for salvation, we see that we have a debt to sin that we cannot pay, and we find ourselves in the slavery of sin. We cannot work our way out of slavery, but Christ is able to pay our debt for us. His death on the cross redeemed us out of sin and debt. He purchased us, and we belong to him. We are now obligated to our new Master, and we owe him our obedience and loyalty.

God values us much more than slaves. We are his children and heirs; we are his friends and family, members of his household. And through our Savior Jesus Christ, even our broken personal relationship with God is restored! We were once enemies of God, working against him. But through Christ, we are reconciled to him, made friends again. Once we were rebels; now we are allies. We have given our allegiance to God because of what he has done for us. Let's see how Paul develops this concept.

**5. How were we reconciled to God? Romans 5:8-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18. Did one person — Jesus — die for all of us? Verse 14. How then should we live? Verse 15. Do we have new life in Jesus Christ? Verse 17. What work does God then assign us? Verses 18-20.**

Because Jesus died for us, we now live for him. We obey him. We have a new life. This is described in other places as being “born again” (John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:23). Our purpose and orientation in life is changed by our new relationship with God. Our new identity as God's children has practical implications for the way we live. As he is living in us, he is also changing our hearts and minds toward his purposes. The Holy Spirit leads us to continue to put off old ways and to put on Christ-like ways. Because Jesus loved us, we love him, and we love the people he loves.

As part of our love for God and neighbor, we support the “message of reconciliation” — the good news that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ — the good news that forgiveness is given through him. As Christians, we are Christ's representatives, and God is making his appeal to humanity through us. Just as Paul did, we implore people to be reconciled to God through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel. (Colossians 1:21-23)

Peter says that Christians are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession.” And why have we been chosen? “That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Once we were not God's people — although he loved us, we were alienated from him. Now, through the reconciliation given to us through Christ, through the mercy of God, we are now his people, his children (verse 10).

How then should we live? Peter continues: “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (verses 11-12).

**6. What does the Holy Spirit put believers into? Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13. What is that body? 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18. Whom is our fellowship with? 1 John 1:3, 7.**

**7. What do the believers do together? Acts 2:42. What are we exhorted to do with and for each other? Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 Peter 4:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:18; Colossians 3:16.**

Throughout the New Testament, believers are often found meeting together. Although our homes may be scattered among unbelievers, we form a new community, the church. In the church, we are learning to love each other, to be reconciled to each other, to help each other. We worship God together, we pray together, we study the Bible together and encourage each other in the faith. And together, we reach out to share the gospel with those who walk in darkness.

As an organized community, the church encourages its members to serve others, each according to their ability. But our interactions are not just with one another — they are also spiritual. Our fellowship is also with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As we express love to one another, we also express love for God, since God wants us to love one another.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THE SABBATH?

A series by Michael Morrison

### Part 1: The Books of Moses

Some Christians observe the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week – Friday sunset to Saturday sunset – as it was commanded in the old covenant. But the New Testament treats the Sabbath in a significantly different way than the Old Testament does, and it is not required for Christians today. This does not mean that Sabbath-keepers must *cease* keeping the Sabbath. Christians who choose to keep the seventh-day Sabbath, and Christians who do not choose to do so, should be tolerant of each other’s convictions. Let us look at answers to questions often asked about this subject.

**On the seventh day of creation, God rested. Is this when he made the Sabbath?**

Genesis tells us:

- God created the world in six days.
- By the seventh day, creation was complete.
- God rested [a literal rendition of the Hebrew could be *sabbatized*] on the seventh day.
- He blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-3).

However, there are several things that Genesis does not tell us:

- It does not say that humans rested.
- It does not say that humans were told to follow God’s example.
- It does not say that humans were told to rest.
- It does not say that God taught Adam and Eve on the Sabbath.
- It does not say that God created or made the Sabbath.
- It does not say that humans kept the Sabbath.

Creation week was unique. We do not expect God’s activity on the first day to be repeated on every first day. What he did on the fourth day does not affect subsequent Wednesdays. And what he did on the seventh day of creation — cease from creation — is not repeated every week thereafter. He ceased only once.<sup>1</sup> [See end of chapter for the endnotes]

Humans are not able to imitate God's activity. Humans cannot create for six days, so we are unable to cease from creation on the seventh. We cannot imitate everything God did. If humans were told to imitate one specific aspect of creation week, rest, we are told nothing about it in Genesis. Scripture records various commands given to Adam and Eve, but there is no hint of a Sabbath command either before or after they sinned.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, even if every seventh day were holy, we are not told anything about how it was to be kept.<sup>3</sup> The way in which Israel was commanded to keep holy time is not necessarily how the patriarchs would have kept holy time.<sup>4</sup> God's end-of-creation rest could provide a pattern for a Sabbath command centuries later, just as it provided a pattern for the sabbatical year, but the pattern does not prove that the Sabbath command itself existed before Moses.

A Sabbath doctrine cannot be based on speculations about creation ordinances or assumptions about pre-Mosaic worship practices. Genesis does not command the seventh day to be observed in any particular way. The Bible does not say that the Sabbath command existed before Moses.

Nevertheless, some people think that the overall impression of Scripture is that the Sabbath existed ever since the seventh day of creation. They are of course free to keep the Sabbath. However, we cannot use an implied or inferred "creation ordinance" as proof of what God's people are required to do today. We cannot use Genesis to prove that everyone must abide by this rule or else miss out on salvation. If Christians should rest on the Sabbath, the doctrine should be based on other passages of Scripture.

If an individual were the only one involved, he or she could perhaps decide to keep the Sabbath "just in case." But when we are teaching others what is required, we must be careful not to add burdens that Christ does not require. Therefore, we must study the matter thoroughly.

**The Sabbath was commanded in Exodus 16, before the old covenant was made. Does this mean that it remained in force even after the old covenant ended?**

We cannot assume that every command given before Sinai is still in force simply because it was given before the old covenant was made. Sacrifices were instituted before Moses. Circumcision was commanded for Israelites before Moses, but it is not required for Christians today, except in a spiritually transformed way.

Likewise, various other pre-Sinai commands are no longer in force under the new covenant. We do not select lambs on the 10th of Abib or smear their blood on our doorposts. We do not consecrate to the Lord every firstborn

male. We do not gather food each day, gathering twice as much on the sixth day. We do not stay in our tents on the seventh day.

When the early church met to decide whether Gentile converts should keep the “law of Moses” (Acts 15:5), pre-Sinai commands given through Moses would have been considered part of the “law of Moses.” The Torah of Moses included not just sacrifices, but all the other regulations that Moses wrote about, whether before Sinai or after.<sup>5</sup> “The law of Moses” is not required for Christians today. Peter said that those regulations were an unbearable yoke (Acts 15:10) and were not required for Gentiles (verses 28-29).

In Paul’s analysis, too, Exodus 16 would not be considered binding on Christians. Exodus 16, just like other parts of the law of Moses, was added 430 or more years after the promise had been given to Abraham and therefore it did not affect the promise (Galatians 3:17). False teachers wanted the Galatian Christians to keep not only ceremonial laws, but the “whole law” (Galatians 5:3). The entire Torah went with circumcision.<sup>6</sup>

Some pre-Sinai laws are still valid, of course, as can be demonstrated from New Testament scriptures. But other pre-Sinai laws are not. We cannot use Exodus 16 to prove anything about Christian requirements today. If the Sabbath is still required, we need to demonstrate it from other scriptures.

In Exodus 16, Moses told the people that the seventh day would be a day of rest, a holy rest day (verse 23). Nothing in the account implies that the seventh day was holy before this.<sup>7</sup> The Lord, through Moses, gave some new instructions in conjunction with the manna that the Lord was giving the Israelites. He told them to cook all their food in advance (verse 23) and not to travel away from their tents (verse 29).

Simply because these Sabbath commands were given before Sinai does not mean that they are required today. Paul’s point in Galatians 3 is that obligations given after Genesis 17 do not apply to the covenant of promise, which Christians have inherited. Circumcision also shows that the antiquity of a law does not prove its continuity into the new covenant.

### **When God declared the seventh day holy, did that mean that he was present in that day?**

God is present in every day. He is present in every place. God is holy, but holiness does not necessarily indicate the presence of God in any extraordinary way. The Levites were holy, the sacrifices were holy, the temple utensils were holy, etc., but that holiness doesn’t mean that God’s presence was in these things. Rather, holiness means that the things were set apart for

specific uses. God specified how the Sabbath was to be used. He never said that he is “present” in that particular day.

Today, Christ is present among his people in a special way. He has promised to be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 18:20; 28:20).

**God made the seventh day of every week holy (Exodus 16:23). If God makes something holy, does it remain holy forever?**

No. In the Old Testament, various locations were holy — the ground around the burning bush, the ground covered by the holy of holies in the various tabernacle locations, and an area on the temple mount, but we have no reason to believe that the soil in such places is still holy. The showbread was holy, but a human need could cause it to become usable for ordinary purposes.

The Levites were once holy, having a special role in worship, but they no longer have that special status. After the Exodus, the Israelite firstborn male children and animals were holy (Exodus 13:1-2), but they are no longer holy, at least not in the same way. The jubilee year (Leviticus 25:12) is no longer holy. In the temple, the holy of holies was holy, but its holy role was negated at the death of Christ, when the veil was torn in two. Jesus said that the time had come for worship to be disassociated from holy places (John 4:21-24).<sup>8</sup>

In the Old Testament, people, times and places were declared holy, but such things can also become ordinary — all according to whether God designates them for his special use.<sup>9</sup> We cannot assume that the Sabbath is still holy simply because it once was. If we are to teach it as a requirement, we must have evidence that God still separates the day and tells his people to use that specific day in a specific way.

**The fourth commandment begins with “remember.” Doesn’t this indicate that the Sabbath existed long before Sinai?**

No. It need not have any historical reference at all, and it certainly does not require an ancient one. It could simply be a reference to Exodus 16, or it could be saying that the Sabbath should be remembered in the future. When God made a covenant with Noah, he promised to remember it (Genesis 9:15). He was not referring to anything in the distant past, but something that he had done that very same day.

**Are the Ten Commandments a permanently valid “core” of God’s spiritual law? Do all 10 stay together as an eternal law?**

God has communicated a lot of words to humans that are not

requirements today. Many God-given laws are obsolete. He spoke the law of circumcision just as much as he spoke the law of the Sabbath. God himself commanded that the firstborn males be set aside for him — he also commanded the building of altars. To discern which of his laws are still valid, we need careful study, not sweeping assumptions.

The old covenant was glorious, but the new covenant is much more glorious and has made the old fade away (2 Corinthians 3). The Ten Commandments were a glorious package of laws, but the new covenant has superseded that package. Although the covenant was inscribed by the finger of God in stone, it is obsolete.

Hebrews 8:6 tells us that the new covenant has been established, and verse 13 tells us that the old covenant is obsolete. Exodus 34:28 tells us that the old covenant was composed of the Ten Commandments. However, if all Ten Commandments are still in force in the same way, how can it be said that the old package is obsolete? We should expect a difference — a difference between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinaitic covenant, a difference between the Sinaitic covenant and the Christian covenant. Most of the commandments are repeated in the New Testament, but the Sabbath is not. The New Testament doesn't criticize anyone for breaking the Sabbath.

The old covenant, as a collection of laws, applied only until the Messiah came (Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 9:10). The laws were perfectly appropriate for Israel's circumstances, but they are not all requirements for Christians today. In some cases, old covenant laws are good descriptions of moral behavior and can be quoted in the New Testament. In other cases, they describe specific practices that are not required today.

The old covenant was a mixture of moral, civil and ceremonial laws. A moral law may be in the midst of ceremonial rules, and vice versa. Although we can categorize those laws according to function, Scripture does not. The only time that the Ten Commandments are given a special status or name, they are called the old covenant (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13).

The New Testament does not distinguish the Ten Commandments from any other group of laws. It does not give them any particular name or give them any special status. New Testament writers may quote some of the Ten and another law from elsewhere in the Pentateuch (Romans 13:9; Matthew 19:18-19; Mark 10:19; James 2:8-11), without any indication that the Ten are any more authoritative than other laws. In fact, the greatest commandments are not in the Ten (Matthew 22:36-40). If there is any consistent grouping in the New Testament, it is the last six commandments — the first four are not quoted with the others. We cannot assume that all 10 must remain together.

The Ten Commandments contain some temporary portions as well as some timeless truths. They were given in the context of physical salvation — they begin with “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). In Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath is commanded as a reminder of the Exodus. It was given in that historical context.

Also within the Ten Commandments, God says that he punishes “the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me” (verse 5). This applies to the physical blessings and curses of the old covenant, but it does not apply to the spiritual blessings of the new covenant. Today, God does not punish children for the sins of their parents.

These show that portions of the Ten Commandments are appropriate to Israel and not everything in the Ten should be considered eternal truth. We cannot assume the continuing validity of the Sabbath law merely because it was given with other laws that have continuing validity — especially when that package, considered as a whole, is called obsolete in the New Testament. We cannot assume that all 10 must stay together.

### **Is the Sabbath Commandment a moral law or a ceremonial law?**

Sabbatarians commonly assert that all the Ten Commandments are in the category of moral law, but there is no biblical proof for this assumption. The term “moral law” comes from theologians who attempt to categorize Old Testament laws according to their primary purpose.

In general, civil laws concern details of how humans interact as a society. Ceremonial laws concern specifics of worship (for example, specifying that the heifer must be red, or that the priest must touch the right big toe). Moral laws concern more fundamental aspects of our relationships with God and humans, the way we get along with each other. Many theologians say that Old Testament moral laws have continuing validity.

The Sabbath command touches on our relationship with God as well as our relationship with humans. It tells us that we should not require our servants to work seven days a week, so in that sense it is moral, concerning interpersonal relationships. The law ensured that servants had time to rest and worship. However, from a human standpoint, one day of the week would be just as good as any other for resting. The requirement that the day of rest specifically be the seventh day of the week is not an interpersonal matter. It was specified by God and was a worship detail.

Concerning worship, our relationship with God needs time. The Sabbath was made for human benefit, not because God’s holiness needed it. In the

old covenant, a specific time was required for work, and a specific time required for rest.<sup>10</sup> But in the new covenant, the basis of our relationship with God is faith, not a specific time. Time is still necessary, but the new agreement that God has given us specifies neither day nor frequency nor length of time.

The general worship value of the Sabbath command remains — humans need time to worship. But we should not assume that the specific details commanded (cessation of work specifically on the seventh day) are essential characteristics of a relationship with our Creator.<sup>11</sup> Day and night will eventually cease (Revelation 21:25), but our relationship with God will remain forever. The Sabbath is not an essential or permanent part of that relationship. God himself does not keep the Sabbath. It is not part of his character. Therefore, it does not play a direct role in our spiritual transformation to become conformed to his image. The Sabbath is not an end in itself — it was only a means to an end.

What we teach as commands cannot be based on assumptions about the Ten Commandments (that they are all moral, or that they must remain together as a package). Our doctrine about the Sabbath must be based on scriptural statements.

**In ancient Israel, Sabbath-breakers were stoned to death (Exodus 31:14; 35:2; Numbers 15:32-36). Does this severe penalty show the importance of the Sabbath, that it is not just a ritual?**

Exodus 31:14 shows that “cutting off” was the same severity of punishment as execution (see also Leviticus 20:2-3). People who violated the Sinaitic covenant could not be considered part of the covenant people — they had to be banished or executed. Numbers 15:30-31 says that any blatant, willful sin should be punished by cutting the person off from his people. This was immediately illustrated by the case of the man who was gathering sticks on a Sabbath. His rebellion was defiant, and that is why he had to be stoned. He was deliberately rejecting the covenant.

Severe punishments were also prescribed for violations of worship rituals such as using a sacred recipe for incense (Exodus 30:33), an unclean person eating some of the fellowship offering (Leviticus 7:20-21), sacrificing an animal in the wrong place (Leviticus 17:4), going too near the tabernacle at certain times (Numbers 1:51) and prophets who claimed divine authority but whose predictions failed (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). All such were to be cut off or killed. The severity of the punishment is not proof that those particular laws continue to be in force in the new covenant.

**The Sabbath is a perpetual covenant showing that the Creator is the One who makes his people holy (Exodus 31:13-17). Should Christians today keep this perpetual covenant as a sign that they are the Creator's people?**

The Sabbath was given for several purposes. Exodus 31 describes one of them: The Sabbath was designated as a sign between the Israelites and God so the Israelites would know that God made them holy. It reminded the Israelites that God had set them apart for his purpose. However, their holiness depended on their obedience to the old covenant (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 28:9). Thus the Sabbath covenant sign was dependent on the old covenant.

However, Exodus 31 does not say that God sanctifies only Israelites, or only those who keep the Sabbath. It leaves open the possibility that God might make other people holy or give them some other indicator of being sanctified. God is free to work with whomever he wants, in whatever way he wants.

God worked with Israel as a physical nation, and he told them to observe the Sabbath as a sign between them and him forever (verses 16-17). However, circumcision was given as a similar sign, required for Abraham and his descendants, a reminder of the perpetual covenant between God and the people (Genesis 17:10-14). But the sign is not required for the church — the New Testament gives a different sign.

Circumcision, like the Sabbath, was designated as a perpetual covenant in itself (Genesis 17:13b; Exodus 31:16b). The weekly showbread was also a perpetual covenant (Leviticus 24:8). But all these have been rendered obsolete by the establishment of the new covenant.

In the old covenant community, circumcision was the rite that marked the entrance of a person into the covenant, and the Sabbath was a regular reminder of participation in the covenant. In the new covenant, entry is marked by faith and baptism, and our acceptance of the new covenant is repeated regularly when we partake of the bread and wine in commemoration of our Savior. Those are the New Testament covenantal rites.

Baptism symbolizes being united with Jesus in his death and rising to a new life in him (Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12). This is our re-creation, the beginning of our new life. The Lord's Supper symbolizes our participation with Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). He is the living bread, the sustenance of our new life. Thus we look to Christ, not to Abraham and the Exodus. In the new covenant, Christ is our point of reference.

The New Testament shows that God works with everyone on the basis

of faith, not external conformity to a perpetual covenant (Romans 4:9-10). Even the circumcision covenant, given to Abraham himself, cannot annul the promise given to him because of his faith. Laws added after that promise (including the covenant of circumcision, the old covenant, the Sabbath covenant and the showbread covenant) cannot annul God's promise (Galatians 3:17). If there are other reasons to require Sabbath-keeping, then Christians should, of course, be willing to keep the Sabbath. But the Exodus 31 covenant is not binding on Christ's new covenant people.<sup>12</sup>

The Sabbath covenant between God and Israel showed that God had separated his people from other nations. This indicates that the Sabbath was not given to the Gentiles. But today, God does not physically separate his people from others, and he does not have laws separating Jews from Gentiles (Ephesians 2:11-18). The distinguishing characteristics emphasized in the New Testament are spiritual — faith and love — rather than physical, geographic or temporal.

We can't assume that perpetual covenants for Israelites automatically apply to the church today. Exodus 31 is interesting historically, but we cannot base our Sabbath doctrine on it. If we are to claim that Sabbath-keeping is required for salvation, we need more substantial evidence.

### **Didn't God give Israel his laws so they would teach the Gentiles to obey those same laws (Deuteronomy 5:5-7; Acts 7:38)?**

God gave Israel numerous laws that Gentiles are not required to obey today — sacrifices, purification rituals, dedicating firstborn children, etc. Although those rituals were a good example to Israel's neighbors, they are not required now. We must look elsewhere in the Bible to see which laws have continuing validity and which do not. We cannot assume that "old covenant laws are still valid unless specifically rescinded in the new" — the new covenant has made the old covenant obsolete, and the old laws have been set aside. Moreover, as we shall see, the New Testament presents a dramatically different approach to the Sabbath than the old covenant did.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> In creation week, the seventh day (unlike the other six days) has no stated ending. The physical creation continued to be complete (Hebrews 4:3b). However, God is now working (John 5:17). One of his ongoing works is that of re-creation, or redemption.

<sup>2</sup> God fellowshiped with them on the sixth day, and presumably he did on the seventh day, too, and every day thereafter. In Genesis, for humans, all days were alike.

<sup>3</sup> “Holy” does not mean “rest.” The entire jubilee year was holy (Leviticus 25:12), and it involved agricultural rest, but it did not require the cessation of all labor. “Holy” simply means that something is set apart for a special use. If God sanctified the seventh day of every week, he designated it for special use. But we are not told *how* it was to be used. Humans could have used the day for worship activities — but that is speculative, since we are told nothing about seventh-day observance before Moses.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham kept God’s requirements, commands, decrees and laws (Genesis 26:5), but we cannot assume from what Israel was told to do later that Abraham sacrificed all his firstborn male animals, or that he kept the annual festivals, or that he did anything different on the seventh day of each week. The verse tells us that Abraham was obedient, but it simply doesn’t tell us which statutes and decrees were in effect in his day. If we claim that Abraham kept all the requirements of the old covenant, we imply that the Abrahamic covenant was the same as the Sinaitic. The Abrahamic covenant was based on faith, but the Sinaitic covenant was based on the Ten Commandments.

<sup>5</sup> The “law of Moses” includes after-childbirth purification rituals (Luke 2:22), circumcision (John 7:22-23), prophecies of the Messiah (Luke 24:44; Acts 28:23), the law about muzzling oxen (1 Corinthians 9:9) and laws punishable by death (Hebrews 10:28). Thus it includes ceremonial laws, civil laws, prophecies and general principles. Apparently everything that Moses wrote was considered to be part of the “law of Moses.”

<sup>6</sup> It has been claimed that Galatians 3:19 refers to sacrificial laws only and that sacrifices were added to God’s law only after the people sinned. This is erroneous.

- First, the old covenant itself made provision for sacrifices (Exodus 20:24; 23:18); they were not a secondary provision.
- Second, Paul, who was trained as a rabbi, could have easily specified which aspect of the law he meant if he meant only a portion. Instead, he meant “the whole law” (Galatians 5:2) — the law that contained both patriarchal stories (Galatians 4:21-22) and civil penalties (Galatians 3:10). It was the Torah — everything Moses wrote about.
- Third, it is unlikely that Judaizers would claim that Christians in Galatia had to perform sacrifices.

<sup>7</sup> Verse 28 says, “How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?” After Moses told them about the Sabbath, some of the Israelites refused to obey on one Sabbath. God was not referring to persistent Sabbath-breaking, but to a persistent disobedience to all the commands he had given.

<sup>8</sup> In both Testaments, God is holy, and holiness comes from him, but the way his holiness affects people is different. The New Testament emphasis on holiness concerns people and their behavior, not special things and places and times.

<sup>9</sup> It is sometimes claimed that only God can make things holy, but this is not true. Leviticus 27 describes how people may devote or consecrate things to the Lord, and those things thereby become holy. Similarly, people can devote a day to the Lord (in

a fast, for example), and the day thereby becomes holy for them, designated for divine use.

<sup>10</sup> The way the command reads, work on six days is just as important as rest on the seventh. The command is given in physical terms, not in spiritual. In the Old Testament, rest was a much more prominent part of the Sabbath than worship was. There was a “sacred assembly” on the Sabbath (Leviticus 23:3), but there is no requirement that the people had to be at that assembly. Most Israelites would have been unable to assemble at the tabernacle each week; they simply would have rested at home – stayed in their “tents.”

<sup>11</sup> The Sabbath command may be divided into specific details (which day of the week, and what to do), the practical (we need rest), and the spiritual (we need to have a relationship with God). The last aspect is the spirit of the law. That’s the part that is eternally valid. And the practical is still practical — love for neighbor means that an employer gives employees a day of rest. But the new covenant does not specify which day this ought to be, nor does it say that every culture ought to worship on the same day. And the new covenant does not imply that we must look to the old covenant to see which day is proper.

<sup>12</sup> Is the Sabbath required for Israelite Christians but not for Gentile Christians? This may be addressed in three ways:

- God saves Jews in the same way that he saves Gentiles (Acts 15:9, 11). All are saved by faith; the new covenant applies to all. God does not require one group to keep different laws than the others. Peter was allowed to live like a Gentile (Galatians 2:14). With God, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female. The terms and conditions of our relationship with God are the same. If the Sabbath is optional for one, it is optional for all.
- As the book of Hebrews explains, the old covenant is obsolete, and that means it is obsolete for Jews, the likely recipients of this epistle.
- The Jews’ relationship with God was like a marriage, and a death has broken the obligations of that marriage. Paul used that analogy, saying that Jews and Israelites have “died to the law through the body of Christ” so that they might belong to the resurrected Christ (Romans 7:1-4). Figuratively speaking, both Israelites and Gentiles are betrothed to Christ, and the obligations of previous covenants do not apply to anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who has died to the law through Christ. Christianity is a new marriage, a new covenant. “We have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (verse 6).

## **PART 2: THE WRITINGS AND THE PROPHETS**

**The Israelites were punished for breaking the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:17-18; Jeremiah 17:27). They were promised blessings for keeping the Sabbath (verses 21-26). Doesn't this show the importance of the Sabbath?**

It shows the importance of the Sabbath in the old covenant system. As a sign, and as part of the tablets of the covenant, it showed covenant allegiance. The Israelites broke all aspects of the covenant, and they were punished with the curses that were attached to the covenant (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28).

Their disobedience regarding the Sabbath, as well as their disobedience in worship rituals, was an external sign of their unbelief. The blessings were physical, and the curses were physical, characteristic of the old covenant but not of the new.

The Jews were conquered again in A.D. 70, but Sabbath-breaking was not the reason. Their primary sin in the first century was the rejection of the Messiah, who was far more important than the Sabbath. They had rejected the new covenant. Jesus was the "test commandment" of the first century. Christ is the basis of our salvation.

In brief, God punished the Israelites for Sabbath-breaking because the Sabbath was a requirement for the time they lived in, for the covenant they lived under. But that cannot prove that the physical details of the Sabbath are still required in a new age.

**The Sabbath was a blessing for both Jews and Gentiles (Isaiah 56:2-8). Doesn't that show that both Jews and Gentiles should keep it today?**

Isaiah predicted that God, through the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, would establish a new covenant with his people (42:6-7; 49:8-10; 54:9-10; 55:1-3). However, in describing this new relationship, Isaiah also described old covenant customs that in some cases apply only figuratively to the new covenant. In Isaiah 56:7, for example, he said that Gentiles will offer burnt offerings and sacrifices at God's house.

Isaiah's main point is that God not only cares for Israelites, but also for Gentiles. God's house will become a place for all nationalities, and he will gather Gentiles as well as Israelites (verse 8). Eunuchs, who were excluded from the temple in the old covenant (Deuteronomy 23:1), would also be accepted. The terms of relationship between God and humans would be

changed, and a new covenant would be made.

God's house would "be called a house of prayer for all nations." Jesus quoted this scripture in Mark 11:17, but the real fulfillment of the prophecy is not in the physical temple, but in flesh in which the Spirit lives. Both Jews and Gentiles are invited into God's household, the church. The physical details of Isaiah's prophecy — physical offerings and a physical temple — are not required for Christians today. If we interpret these physical details according to spiritual counterparts, may we not interpret Sabbath-keeping in a spiritual way, too?

Is the Sabbath a physical detail, like offerings, or is it a permanent and intrinsic part of a proper relationship with God? Neither view should be assumed, and this passage does not give us enough information to decide. We must turn to the new covenant to understand how the Sabbath applies to Christians.

**The Sabbath is a delight and honorable (Isaiah 58:13). Wouldn't it be wrong to call it burdensome and give up its benefits?**

Isaiah 58 is a call to repentance. Isaiah is declaring to the house of Jacob their sins and rebellion (verse 1). Although the Israelites had an external appearance of worship (e.g., fasting), they did it for selfish reasons (verses 2-5). Although they claimed to worship God, they did not obey his more important ethical laws: justice, liberty and charity (verses 6-7).<sup>13</sup>

If the Israelites did the weightier matters of the law, then God would be responsive to them (verses 8-11). He would give physical blessings to the nation (verses 11-12). The same is true of the Sabbath. If the people were obedient to the covenant they were under, if they kept it without complaint, if they used God's day the way God wanted them to, then God would bless them.

Isaiah 58 is appropriate to old covenant conditions, and it does not necessarily tell us anything about new covenant requirements. We cannot assume that the requirements are the same. All the old covenant laws were good, but their value was temporary. They were designed to lead us to Christ, and they applied until he came. The laws had benefits, but it is permissible for us to give them up after we are led to something better, and we cannot teach as requirement something that is actually optional.

Peter was inspired to say that the law of Moses was "a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Peter did not specify which aspects of the law were the most burdensome, but it is clear that the old covenant package was stricter, in external regulations, than the new covenant is. We must look to the new covenant to see whether 1) it tells us

to look to the old covenant for worship days or 2) whether it gives new instructions regarding worship days and customs.

**Prophecies describe a worship of God that includes the Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 44:24). Does this show that the Sabbath is a permanent aspect of God's law?**

The prophets described an ideal time in which all peoples worshipped God. To effectively convey this concept to an old covenant nation, the prophets described old covenant forms of worship, including new moon observances (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3) and sacrifices in the temple (Zechariah 14:20-21; Ezekiel 20:40; 45:17; 46:4). They also describe discrimination against uncircumcised peoples (Ezekiel 44:9; Isaiah 52:1-2) and avoidance of ritual uncleanness (Ezekiel 44:25-27). But neither circumcision nor sacrifices are religious requirements in this age. Moreover, another prophecy indicates that the day-night cycle will cease (Revelation 21:25), implying that there will be no more Sabbaths.

Prophecies (whether New Testament or Old Testament, whether about Sabbaths or sacrifices or circumcision) are not a reliable source of proof regarding Christian practice. Our doctrines must be based on scriptures that are applicable to the age we live in.

### **Endnote**

<sup>13</sup> The people complained about new moons in the same way that they complained about Sabbath restrictions (Amos 8:5). Although the Pentateuch does not forbid commerce on new moons, apparently that is the way they were observed in Amos's day. The people kept the days, but reluctantly. God criticized them most for social injustice. Hosea 2:11 similarly includes new moons among the "appointed feasts" being kept in Israel. Because injustice permeated the nation, God threatened to stop all the hypocritical worship.

## PART 3: JESUS AND THE SABBATH

**Jesus kept the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). Was he teaching us how to observe the Sabbath properly so we could follow his example?**

Jesus lived sinlessly under the old covenant requirements (Hebrews 4:15). He was born under the law, while the old covenant was still in force (Galatians 4:4). He observed old covenant customs such as participating in the sacrifice of Passover lambs, tithing to the Levites, telling cleansed people to make offerings as prescribed by Moses, and he observed cultural customs such as Hanukkah.

Because of Jesus' historical context, Christians should be careful about using his example in different circumstances. For example, we do not follow his custom of going to synagogues.

Jesus never told anyone to keep the Sabbath. Although we are told various things that he did on the Sabbath, we are never told that he rested. According to the Gospels, what he did and taught on the Sabbath was consistently liberal. Let us examine the Gospels to see what the writers were inspired to preserve about Jesus' teachings regarding the Sabbath.

**Matthew 12:1-12:** "Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, 'Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.'" "

Jesus did not sin. He did not break the Sabbath, and presumably he did not permit his disciples to break the Sabbath. We must conclude that the accusation was wrong. However, Exodus 16:29 told people to stay in the camp on the Sabbath and not to pick up food off the ground. Exodus 34:21 says that the Sabbath applied to harvest season.

The Pharisees could claim good scriptural support for prohibiting grain-picking on the Sabbath. But their strictness was excessive — the old covenant rules were not meant to be blanket prohibitions of all activity. But Jesus did not try to argue that his disciples were abiding by the biblical law and violating only the pharisaic tradition. Rather, Jesus went to the Bible to show that the biblical law itself can sometimes be set aside.

The Pharisees were not interpreting the Scriptures in the right way. Jesus pointed out this out by mentioning the example of David: "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread — which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests" (verses 3-4).

The law said that showbread was holy and was to be eaten, without

exception, by priests. And yet David did it and was presumed innocent. It was not lawful according to the letter of the law,<sup>14</sup> and yet it was permitted in the purpose of God's spiritual law. Jesus' point here is that the letter of the law is not a reliable guide to holiness. People should be judged on the heart, not on superficial actions.

Jesus gave another example in verses 5-6: "Haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here." Jesus says that the priests "desecrate" the Sabbath day. They are, according to the letter of the Sabbath law, doing something that is not lawful. But yet their work was permitted because it was temple work. Something was more important than the Sabbath, and that something was the temple. The temple and its sacrificial rites were more important than the Sabbath and superseded it.

Jesus, however, is more important than the temple and its sacrifices. The logical conclusion is that he is also more important than the Sabbath. Even before his death and resurrection, he was more important than the Sabbath.<sup>15</sup>

The Pharisees, instead of worrying about a little activity on a holy day, ought to have been concerned with how they were treating the Holy One of Israel, who was standing before them. They should have worshipped him instead of looking to old covenant holy places and instead of using old covenant holy times to judge the Giver of those times. The Sabbath was holy only because God had designated it so, and here was God himself. They should have accepted without question whatever he did, and they should have followed his example!

Jesus then summarized his argument about the Sabbath and about his own identity: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (verses 7-8).

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that love for humans is more important than sticking to worship rituals. Holy bread can be given to ordinary people when they are hungry. Holy time can be used in an ordinary way when people are hungry. If the Pharisees had understood the intent of the law, they would not have been criticizing the disciples. They would have been merciful, not judgmental.

Jesus ends the discussion with his claim to be Lord of the Sabbath — someone who had more authority than the God-given Sabbath did. It is not just that Jesus claimed to have a more accurate understanding of how the day should be kept — he claimed to be more important than the day itself. It was a stupendous claim, and it is no surprise that some Pharisees thought he blasphemed and deserved to die (verse 14).

Jesus' next activity gives a practical demonstration not only of his

authority over the Sabbath, but also the proper use for the Sabbath in the old covenant. “Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’” (verses 9-10). The Pharisees seem to be baiting Jesus, confronting him with a situation to test him. Healing was one of the types of work they said was unlawful.

But Jesus again pointed out the hypocrisy in their approach. They would rescue a sheep on the Sabbath (verse 11) — thus even a sheep was more important than resting on the Sabbath — and yet they were so strict that they didn’t allow human needs, whether hunger or healing, to be taken care of on the Sabbath. Their rules were a terrible distortion of what the Sabbath should have been. “How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (verse 12). This is what Jesus taught about the Sabbath. Don’t worry about prohibiting work — be more concerned about doing good.

So Jesus healed the man, and the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus. They thought the holy day was more important than the One who had made it holy.

**Mark 1:21-22** — “They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.”

This verse doesn’t tell us much about the Sabbath, merely that Jesus happened to teach on this day. Presumably he taught on other days of the week, in other locations, but this is the day on which he could teach in a synagogue. The passage says that Jesus taught with authority. He also cast out demons with authority (verses 23-26), and the people were amazed at his authority (verse 27). Luke 4:31-37 is a parallel account.

**Mark 2:23-3:6** is parallel to Matthew 12:1-12. Mark does not include the comments about sheep and mercy, but he makes a similar point by saying, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Several unsubstantiated claims have been made about verse 27. Let’s note what it says and what it does not say.

First, it says that the Sabbath was made for humans. It was given to serve their needs and to benefit them. Actually, all of God’s laws, even the laws of sacrifice, were given for human good. All the old covenant laws were designed to lead people to Christ. They were made to benefit humans. But their value has been eclipsed in Christ. God has given us something better.

Jesus did not say when the Sabbath came into existence. Nothing in the context indicates that Jesus was alluding to creation week.<sup>16</sup> We cannot assume that something made for humans necessarily had to be made

immediately after humans were. For example, we could also say that the festivals were made for human benefit, and the rite of circumcision was instituted for humans. Christ was crucified for us. All these show that the word “for” is not precise enough to conclude, from this verse, when the Sabbath originated.

Also, Jesus did not say that the Sabbath was made for both Gentiles and Jews — this is not in the context. When Jesus used the word “man” in Mark 2:27, he was using it in a general sense, without any reference to Jews specifically or to Gentiles specifically. Most first-century Jews did not believe that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath,<sup>17</sup> and Jesus was not addressing this question. We should not ask questions that are beyond the context of the passage.<sup>18</sup>

The verse simply says that the Sabbath was made to benefit humans. We cannot assume that it was made at creation, nor that it hasn’t been superseded by a better blessing in the new covenant. Since the Sabbath was made for human benefit, the Son of Man has authority over it (verse 28). He is more important than the Sabbath. Our relationship with God is based on faith in him, not in old covenant institutions.

In the Sabbath healing that follows, Mark again is slightly different than Matthew. Particularly striking is the emotion of Jesus: “He looked around at them in anger...deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts” (Mark 3:5). Jesus was angry at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who were so much more concerned about the holiness of a day than about the well-being of humans. They were really more concerned with self than with God, for they were failing to do what God himself would do.

**Luke 4:15-30** — “He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read.” Jesus taught in the synagogues on the Sabbaths. Considering the historical context, there is nothing unusual about that.

What is more significant is what Jesus taught: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (verses 18-19).

Jesus used the Sabbath, in his preaching and in his miracles, to deliver poor people from bondage. His ministry was like a jubilee year. He preached the good news that the Lord’s favor was on the people. He gave physical sight to a few, but spiritual sight to many. He did not release anyone from physical prisons, but freed many from spiritual captivity (through casting out demons and through forgiving sins). Although many people appreciated his

ministry, many others did not.

In Nazareth, people were offended at who Jesus was. They recognized that he had wisdom, and that he could do miracles, but they also thought of him as an ordinary villager (Mark 6:2-3). How could a carpenter, the son of a carpenter, have such authority?

They could not believe that Jesus was more than an ordinary human, and Jesus said that it was a typical situation: “No prophet is accepted in his hometown” (Luke 4:24). And after Jesus reminded the people that God often sent his prophets to non-Israelites, the people were furious and tried to kill him (verses 25-29).

Although these incidents occurred on a Sabbath, there is little here about the Sabbath itself. There is more about who Jesus is and what he preached. He preached liberty and salvation.

Jesus has authority over the day. This is demonstrated by the healing that follows in all three Synoptic accounts. The miracle demonstrated not only Jesus’ ministry of liberation, but also his authority over the Sabbath, since he could perform such miracles on the Sabbath.

**Luke 13:10-17** — Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke includes two more stories of Sabbath healings, and these provide further information to us regarding Jesus’ attitude toward the Sabbath. “On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, ‘Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.’ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God” (verses 10-13).

By using the words “set free” or “loose,” Jesus was emphasizing liberation rather than healing. This also provided the context for the comparison Jesus soon made.

The synagogue ruler complained, saying that healing was a work that could be done on the other six days and was not appropriate for the Sabbath (verse 14). “The Lord answered him, ‘You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?’” (verses 15-16).

Since humans are more valuable than animals, and animals can be loosed on the Sabbath — an ordinary, daily, mundane task — then humans can be loosed on the Sabbath, too. The petty rules about the Sabbath were not designed to benefit humans.

Instead, the rules served the self-righteous attitudes of the teachers. They would prefer to see the woman labor with her infirmity rather than see the

labor of healing. They were binding unnecessary obligations on the people, and Jesus said that the people should be “set free” or “loosed” on the Sabbath day. Luke’s readers may have extended this principle even further than would have been possible in a Judean setting.

A similar point is made in the next chapter. Luke 14:1-6 — “One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?’” (verses 1-3). As in previous situations, the Pharisees had probably set the situation up to test Jesus. Jesus knew their thoughts and handled the situation so expertly that he left them speechless.

Jesus healed the man, then asked, “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?” (verse 5). Of course, these Jews would rescue a child or animal on the Sabbath. Rescue was permitted, so healing ought to be permitted, too.<sup>19</sup>

Consistently, whether alleviating minor hunger or healing major pain, Jesus pointed out that humanitarian needs took precedence over the Sabbath. The day was supposed to benefit humans, not cause burdens for them.<sup>20</sup>

**John 5:1-18** — The Gospel of John has some additional stories about Jesus’ Sabbath activities, and they reinforce the emphases we have already seen. On the Sabbath, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. And he told the man, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk” (verse 8). The Jews accused the man of breaking the Sabbath because he was carrying his mat.

Why did Jesus tell the man to carry his mat? There was no emergency, and the man was certainly capable of coming back after the Sabbath to get his mat. Jesus could have easily said, “You can carry your mat today if you want, but to avoid offense, leave it here for now.” But Jesus was not that conservative. He wanted to emphasize human freedom — not only the man’s freedom from his infirmity, but also his freedom to do something on the Sabbath.

The Jews criticized Jesus for what he was doing on the Sabbath, but Jesus provoked them even further by boldly saying that he was indeed working on the Sabbath and that he did so because he was like the Father! (verse 17). “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (verse 18). Jesus continued to equate himself with the Father (verses 19-27).

Jesus did not try to defend his work, and the man’s work, as within the intent of the law. Instead, he boldly described his activity on the Sabbath as “work.” However, we know from Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus kept the Sabbath

perfectly, even within the parameters of old covenant law. Just as the priests could do God's work on the Sabbath, Jesus could, too.

We today are not under the old covenant restrictions. Just what that means for the Sabbath is not addressed in this passage. If we imitate our Savior, we might conclude that we are allowed to work on the Sabbath. At least John does nothing to prevent such a conclusion.

Jesus alluded to this Sabbath healing, and the controversy it caused, in John 7:22-23. He pointed out the irony that the Jews did not allow healing on the Sabbath, but they did allow circumcision. "If a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?"

Work could be done on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses would not be broken, showing that the law of Moses commanding circumcision was considered more important than the Sabbath restriction. The circumcision law was more important than the strictness of the Sabbath law, just as the laws of temple ritual were – and yet circumcision and rituals are obsolete.

The Jews probably had no answer for Jesus. They could not refute what he said, and that is one reason they tried to kill him. But the readers of John's Gospel would understand that circumcision, temple rituals and "the law of Moses" were not required for Gentile Christians. If important laws could be swept aside, what does that imply for the lesser requirements of the Sabbath law?

In **John 9:1-7**, Jesus made mud to heal a blind man. "Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath" (verse 14). This had a spiritual meaning, of course: Jesus is the light of the world, enabling spiritually blind people to see the truth.

On this Sabbath day, Jesus said, "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (verse 4). Work must be done on the Sabbath, Jesus said.

The Jews, of course, objected to Jesus' work — and they objected to it being done on the Sabbath. Making mud was against their law, and so was healing. They judged Jesus according to their law, and they judged unrighteously. They claimed to have the correct standard, but they were spiritually blind, neglecting love, justice, mercy and faith (verse 41). They were looking at the law instead of the Lawgiver as the standard of judgment.

Throughout these Sabbath incidents, Jesus liberalized the standards. He repeatedly did things that could have waited until sundown. He boldly claimed to have authority to work on the Sabbath. That is one reason why many Christians conclude that the Sabbath is no longer required. Other Christians, who are also committed to God, conclude that they should keep the Sabbath, although not as strictly as the Pharisees did. They are all welcome to their opinions provided they do not judge others on this topic.

Every Christian should be fully convinced, living every day to the Lord, seeking to be led by the Holy Spirit. If people think that the day is required, then to them it is required. If people think that they have freedom in this matter, then Christ expects them to act responsibly with that freedom.

Numerous scriptures admonish us to follow the example of our Savior. In following his example, however, we must distinguish between his activities that were based on the historical situation he lived in (going to synagogues, for example), and those activities that were based on timeless laws of interpersonal conduct and worship in spirit and truth. We see some of these more important principles when we notice the context in which the scriptures admonish us to do as he did:

We are to serve one another, as he served his disciples (John 13:14-15). We are to love as he loved us (John 13:34; 1 John 2:5-7; 2 John 5). We are to accept one another, just as he accepted us (Romans 15:7). We are to be humble, as he was (Philippians 2:5-7). We are to suffer without retaliation, as he did (1 Peter 2:19-23). We should make sacrifices for one another, just as he did for us (1 John 3:16).

**Jesus risked his life by what he did on the Sabbath. Didn't he do this for the purpose of showing his disciples how to keep the Sabbath properly?**

Jesus criticized the Pharisees' approach to various laws and rituals, including ritual handwashing (Matthew 15:2), phylacteries (Matthew 23:5) and Corban rules (Mark 7:11-13). In all these things, he antagonized the Pharisees and risked his life. But these criticisms were not attempts to tell his disciples how to continue these customs in a better way. In fact, Jesus' criticisms helped the early church realize that these customs were obsolete. Therefore, we cannot assume, when the Gospels record Jesus criticizing the way something was done, that he wanted the practice continued by the church in a better way.

Jesus sometimes criticized the way the Pharisees approached customs that were good, including almsgiving, prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16). On these topics, Jesus clearly taught his disciples to continue the practice (verses 3, 6, 17). But Jesus never taught his disciples to keep the Sabbath. We are told about work that Jesus did on the Sabbath, but we are never told that he rested on the Sabbath. He repeatedly noted that restrictive rules were violations of the intent of the Sabbath — he taught that a focus on external details was ineffective and incorrect. Those restrictions did not transform the heart.

Jesus never broke the Sabbath, nor did he teach others to break the Sabbath. But neither did he teach against circumcision and sacrifices. He could not while the old covenant was still in force. He could point out

administrative problems, and present himself as the Lord, but it was not yet time to publicly reject any particular law (see John 16:12-13). But the implications are there. When John describes Jesus as working on the Sabbath, he does not feel compelled to explain that Christians cannot. When Luke says that people are freed on the Sabbath, he does not feel compelled to qualify what he said. Jesus' example regarding the Sabbath is liberty, not rules.

### Endnotes

<sup>14</sup> Jesus clearly said that David did something that was not lawful.

<sup>15</sup> Christianity rejects both the temple and its sacrifices, although some Jewish Christians continued participating in both while the temple still stood. Jesus is more important than those rituals, and they are now obsolete. Jesus is more important than the Sabbath, too, which implies that he has superseded it, just as he superseded the rituals. In defending his Sabbath activities, Jesus put the Sabbath in the same legal category as showbread, sacrifices, and the physical temple, all of which are now obsolete.

<sup>16</sup> In Mark 2:27 Jesus did not use the word for create — he used *egeneto*, which is usually translated “became.” This word does not allude to the creation account (the Septuagint does not use *egeneto* in Genesis 2:2-3), nor can any stress be put on the English word “made,” since it is not in the Greek.

<sup>17</sup> The rabbis taught that Gentiles should observe laws that go back to Noah, and the Sabbath was not part of the “Noachian” requirements (see the *Jewish Encyclopedia* or the *Encyclopedia Judaica*). Although the number of Noachian laws and the prohibitions varied, the lists did not include the Sabbath. The rabbis looked on the Sabbath, like circumcision, as something that marked the Jewish people as different from other nations. The second-century B.C. book of *Jubilees* gave the view that seems to have been common: “The Creator of all blessed it, but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the sabbath thereon with the sole exception of Israel. He granted to them alone that they might eat and drink and keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth” (*Jubilees* 2:31, quoted from James Charlesworth, editor, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [Doubleday, 1985], vol. 2, p. 58.). Although the Sabbath was patterned after the creation week, Deuteronomy 5:15 says that the Sabbath was given to the Israelites because God had brought them out of Egypt. That implies that it was not given to other nations. Gentiles did not have a covenant relationship with God.

<sup>18</sup> For example, some might ask: Was the Sabbath made to exalt God, or was it for human benefit? If we use verse 27 to try to answer the question, we are using it out of context and trying to read something into the text. In the same way, we twist the context if we use it to answer questions such as, Was the Sabbath made at creation? — or, Was the Sabbath made for all humans or just for Israelites? These questions are inappropriate for this verse. Jesus was saying that the Sabbath was made for humanitarian benefit; he was not addressing other questions.

<sup>19</sup> Today, we might call various emergencies “an ox in the ditch.” Jesus, however, was not basing his argument on the urgency of the situation. The healing was a

humanitarian need, but not an emergency need. Jesus could justify his healing activities equally well by referring to an ox in the ditch or to the ordinary need of leading an animal to water. His point was not urgency, but simple need.

<sup>20</sup> If Sabbath work actually dishonored God, then the Sabbath would have priority over humans in need and oxen in pits, since God is more important than human lives and oxen. If absolute rest were essential to worship, then Sabbath-keepers should let houses burn down, since that would only be a monetary loss, and God's honor is far more important than our material goods. This indicates that the command to rest on a specific day is a ceremonial matter rather than a moral one. God's spiritual law does not have any exceptions.

## **PART 4: PAUL AND THE SABBATH**

**Paul's custom was to keep the Sabbath (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2). Shouldn't we follow his example in this (1 Corinthians 11:1)?**

Paul, like Jesus, customarily went to the synagogue. But why should we insist on imitating one phrase of the sentence and ignore another part? Why should we cite the example of "Sabbath" but not of "synagogue"? The fact that this was a synagogue should alert us to the historical situation and should caution us regarding specific customs. Paul went to the synagogue on the Sabbath because that is when and where people were assembled to hear discussions of Scripture. That is when and where he had an audience. He went to Jews first, and then to Gentiles, and the best way to preach to Jews would be to go to the synagogues on the day Jews were there.<sup>21</sup>

Paul sometimes kept other Jewish customs, too, such as circumcision, making vows and participating in temple rituals. His example isn't automatically authoritative. If we imitate all the ways in which he lived like Jesus, we would have to be celibate traveling preachers. We need to discern which details of their lives were based on the culture they lived in, and which were based on timeless principles.

Paul considered himself under the law of Christ, not under the law of the old covenant (1 Corinthians 9:19-21). He was free to observe old covenant customs when with Jews, and he was free to ignore them in other situations. Peter was free to "live like a Gentile," and Paul was, too (Galatians 2:14). Today, we are to obey the commands of Jesus (Matthew 28:20), and neither Jesus nor Paul ever commanded anyone to rest on the Sabbath.

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul gave a controversial message in the synagogue: "Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39). The Jews and proselytes asked Paul to speak to them the next Sabbath (verse 42), and that is what Paul did. Paul did not try to change their Sabbath-keeping custom. Large portions of the audience would have had to work the next six days and would not have been able to assemble on Sunday. Also, it would be good for them to think about and discuss Paul's message for a week. Because Paul waited a week, the entire city was able to hear about the controversy and therefore came to hear him speak (verse 44).

In the Gentile cities of Lystra and Derbe, nothing is said about the

Sabbath. Even in Athens, where some Jews lived, nothing is said about the Sabbath. Instead, Paul reasoned “in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (Acts 17:17). Daily preaching is a valid custom, too, if we wish to follow the example set by Paul and Jesus.

Moses was preached in the synagogues every Sabbath, James noted (Acts 15:21). But James was not encouraging Gentiles to attend synagogues! The converts needed to hear about Christ, not about Moses. The Jerusalem conference rejected the view of those who thought the Gentiles had to keep the entire “law of Moses” (verse 5).

“We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (verse 19). Instead of requiring Gentile Christians to keep the law of Moses, the conference told them to abstain from blood, strangled things, idolatry and fornication (verse 20). The council gave a lenient decree because stringent requirements were being preached in the synagogues (verse 21). The Sabbath was part of the law of Moses, just as much as circumcision was, but nothing was said to make the Sabbath an exception, either by the council or by Luke, who wrote many years later for Gentile readers.

In Corinth, Paul again started in the synagogue, and there he argued every Sabbath (Acts 18:4). But soon Paul left the synagogue and began teaching next door (verse 7). After this, nothing is said about the Sabbath, and Paul could have taught every day of the week. Even as he made tents, he could discuss the Scriptures with any who had time to listen.

In Ephesus, Paul preached every day of the week for two years (Acts 19:9). This is a valid custom, too.

On his way back to Jerusalem, Paul stopped seven days in Troas (Acts 20:6). But we do not hear anything about the Sabbath. What we hear is that the church (“we”) waited until the first day of the week to come together and break bread, and Paul preached after the Sabbath was over (verse 7). Why wait till then? Apparently the first day of the week was the time that the believers could get together. Although Paul was in a hurry (verse 16), he had to wait until the first day of the week. This is a significant example, too.

In short, we are never told that Paul rested on the Sabbath, or that he taught anyone to rest on the Sabbath. What we are told is that he used the day as an evangelistic opportunity, and that he could use any day of the week to preach about the Savior. His example shows liberty, and nothing about requirements.

**Paul taught regularly on the Sabbath (Acts 18:1-11). Was he teaching the Gentiles to keep the Sabbath?**

This passage says only that he taught in the synagogues for a few Sabbaths — after that, it does not say when he taught. Although it may have been on the Sabbath, it may have been on other days, too, as it was in Athens and Ephesus. And the passage says nothing about avoiding work on a particular day of the week.

The book of Acts tells us what Paul did on a few Sabbaths and a few other days. If we want to know what Paul himself taught about the Sabbath, we must turn to the only place the word “Sabbath” is used in his epistles: Colossians 2:16-17: “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”

Paul begins his analysis of the Sabbath with a “therefore.” That word should alert us to back up and examine the context. It is because Christ has triumphed in the cross (verse 15) that Christians should not let people judge them regarding the Sabbath. Christ’s death on the cross had changed something about the Sabbath. In Colosse, the Sabbath had no connection with temple rituals. The only way it could be observed is by abstaining from work and assembling for worship. But Christ’s death had changed something about the Christians’ approach to the Sabbath. Christians were not to be judged by anyone regarding the Sabbath.

The Sabbath, festivals, new moons and the entire Jewish calendar were a “shadow” of things to come. They were foreshadows — predictive shadows symbolizing things to come. Grammatically, it is not clear as to whether those things have already taken place, or whether some are future. For Christian practice, it does not matter, since Paul’s conclusion is that we should not let others judge us with regard to the Sabbath.

Whether we keep it or whether we do not, we should not let others judge us over this issue. Whether we keep the Sabbath or not, we should not let others make us feel guilty regarding the Sabbath. We should not let others make us think that we will lose our salvation if we don’t comply with their ideas. The Sabbath is neither forbidden nor required. That is why we welcome Sabbath-keepers as well as non-Sabbath-keepers.

The contrast between “shadow” and “reality” is found also in Hebrews 10:1 — the sacrificial laws were a shadow of the good things that were coming (same Greek word and tense as in Colossians 2:17), not the reality. Just as the sacrifices were shadows that pointed to Christ and were superseded by him, the old covenant worship days were also shadows that pointed to Christ.

Now that he has come, the days are no longer standards by which we are judged. The proper standard is Jesus Christ. At the last judgment, the determining factor will not be about days, but about faith in Jesus Christ. His coming has made an enormous difference in the way God's people should worship in spirit and in truth.

Paul did not teach Gentile Christians to keep the Sabbath. He actually told them that the Sabbath was not an area in which we should be judged. As he told the Roman church, which contained both Jews and Gentiles, "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5).<sup>22</sup>

Paul did not think it necessary to tell these people that one particular day is sacred or superior. He left it to individual conviction. How could Paul take such an indifferent attitude to the concept of special days? Apparently something significant had happened — the most significant event in history: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Because of that event, days are no longer a matter for judging behavior.

Paul's main point is that one Christian should not judge another regarding any supposedly better days: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (verse 4). "Each of us will give an account of himself to God," Paul writes in verse 12.

But does this mean that we should live in fear of the last judgment, keeping the Sabbath "just in case," observing new moons "just in case," and other restrictions "just in case"? If a person does these things "to the Lord," they could be acceptable habits. But they cannot be made requirements on other Christians. Paul's conclusion is clear: "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (verse 13). We should not put obstacles in front of people.

It is good to be obedient, but we must not think that our obedience earns anything toward salvation. Paul warned the Galatian Christians strongly that faith in Christ was sufficient for salvation. Faith leads us to walk by the Spirit, and that means a life-style of love, joy and peace, etc. Faith does not mean a superstitious observance of circumcision or old covenant laws "just in case" they are also necessary.

We are called to faith — confident that the sacrifice of Christ cleanses us from all sin — not to fearful bondage to religious traditions and human rules. Such rules may appear to be religious and they may have the form of

godliness, but they do not have the power to transform the heart, which is the focus of Christianity. In fact, rules can become more important to some people than having love for neighbor. The rules can deceive people into thinking that they are right with God merely by keeping the rules. At least that's what they have done with some people.

The Galatians had worshipped numerous gods before they were saved by faith in Christ. But false teachers were apparently saying that, although they had started with Christ, they needed to complete their salvation with circumcision and a commitment to the old covenant (Galatians 5:3). Such a teaching must be condemned! It makes Christ of no value (verse 2).

The old covenant law was slavery, Paul said (Galatians 4:24-25; 5:1; note also the "we" in 4:3), just as paganism was (Galatians 4:8). The Galatian Christians had gone from one childish slavery (paganism, with its many external rules) to another (the old covenant, with its external rules)!

When the Judaizers taught "days and months and seasons and years" (verse 10), it is likely that they taught the Jewish calendar with its days, lunar months, festival seasons and sabbatical years. Such external requirements were "weak and miserable principles"<sup>23</sup> (verse 9), since they can never earn us salvation, nor are they required after we are given salvation. Christians may keep such days if they want (as many Jewish Christians did), but they should not teach that such days are required under the new covenant.

How could Paul be so indifferent to something that had been a commandment? Because something more significant than the old covenant has come — something more important than manna has given us life. The old covenant worship days were shadows or silhouettes, just as the sacrifices were, and now the Reality has come (Colossians 2:16-17; Hebrews 10:1-2). The law — the entire old covenant — was in force until Christ came (Galatians 3:25; Hebrews 9:10).

The old covenant was an administration appropriate to a carnal nation. The new covenant is administered in a different way. God's law is the same, but it is administered in different ways at different times for different peoples and different purposes.

We must recognize the continuing validity of God's law — but we must recognize that the New Testament gives us a more complete picture than the Old Testament does. We must interpret old laws from the perspective of the new situation Jesus Christ brought. The spiritual purpose of the Sabbath is still valid, but the spiritual purpose is not in the avoidance of work on a specific day. The spiritual purpose is to point us to Christ. Now that we have come to Christ, the pointer is of such diminished importance that (whether

we understand its function or not) Paul can say that it is not a matter on which Christians should be judged.

The Sabbath pointed an unconverted nation to its Creator. It gave them frequent reminders of him, just as the temple and its sacrifices did. But now that the Creator is living in us, we do not need pointers in the same way. Just as we abide by the spiritual purpose of circumcision through repentance and forgiveness — completely ignoring the physical details the old rite demanded — we abide by the spiritual purpose of the Sabbath when we have faith in Christ.

We can see that a little more clearly in Hebrews 4, which we will analyze below, but the conclusion is made necessary simply by Paul's indifferent attitude toward old covenant days. Something so significant has happened that the weekly Sabbath is no longer a matter on which God's people are to be judged.

However, the practical aspects of the Sabbath are still practical. We still need time to worship, and we need time devoted to God. If we work constantly, we will most likely drift away from God and starve ourselves spiritually.

We must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, not only for our own benefit but for the benefit of the entire community of faith. "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25). We should come to worship services prepared to encourage others, to give words of praise and thanks to the Lord.

Christians should not use liberty for self-destruction. They should not take their liberty to excess. Most of us recognize that there is great value in setting aside times for worship, times in which we do not allow secular duties to intrude, times for building family cohesion and building the community of faith.

We need to set boundaries for ourselves. This is good for our spiritual growth, and we should not recklessly abandon such valuable customs. But we realize that the New Testament does not specify when this ought to be done, nor exactly how much time it must involve. Therefore, we cannot demand that others must do precisely as we do. Christ gives liberty not for selfish pleasures, but for service to others (Galatians 5:13). We must be grateful for our freedom and use it to build others up, not to put stumbling blocks in their way. We must not allow our freedom to become offensive to others.

In summary, all the Sabbatarian arguments are faulty. We cannot prove that the Sabbath existed or was commanded before Moses. We cannot prove that it is valid simply because it is part of the Ten Commandments. We cannot prove that it is important for Christians simply because it was important for ancient Israel. We cannot prove that Jesus commanded it or that Paul commanded it. Instead, we see that Jesus consistently argued for more liberty, and Paul said that we should not judge others regarding worship days.

Of course, there is no New Testament verse that says the Sabbath is now obsolete. Instead, there are verses that say the entire old covenant law is obsolete. The law of Moses is not required. The Sabbath is repeatedly likened to things now obsolete: temple sacrifices, circumcision, showbread, a shadow. It is not a basis for judging one another, and it must not be taught as a necessary addition to Christ. Therefore, many Christians conclude that the Sabbath is not required.

If the Sabbath were a requirement, it would be astonishing that the New Testament never mentions such an important command. It has space for all sorts of other commands, including holy kisses, but no occasion to command the Sabbath. Sweeping statements are made regarding the old covenant law, but never does anyone say, “except the Sabbath.” If the Sabbath is essential, it is astonishing that no one is ever criticized for ignoring it.

Paul dealt with numerous problems of Christian living, and he lists numerous sins that can keep people out of the kingdom of God, but he never mentions the Sabbath. In describing sins of the Gentiles (Romans 1), he says nothing about the Sabbath. He says plenty about faith and love, magnifying the real purpose of God’s law, but the Sabbath is simply not commanded. Nor is it credible to claim that the entire New Testament was purposely written in such a way that only a spiritual elite would understand the most important command.

Instead, the Sabbath is an indifferent matter. People are free to rest on that day if they do it to the Lord. People are free to use the day in other ways, too, if they are living to the Lord. Believers are free to meet on the seventh day of the week, or on any other day.

## Endnotes

<sup>21</sup> Gentile God-fearers would often attend synagogues on the Sabbath, but they did not necessarily observe the day by abstaining from all work. Apparently the rabbis did not expect noncircumcised people to observe the Sabbath.

<sup>22</sup> The vegetarianism that Paul addressed was a daily life-style, not a restriction placed only on certain days. When Paul wrote to the Roman church, which contained

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both Jews and Gentiles, and mentioned that some people think certain days are better than others, many readers would conclude that he is referring to Sabbaths in a gentle way.

<sup>23</sup> The Greek word for “principles” is *stoicheia*, which refers to elementary or basic things. Just as the law was a disciplinarian that took young children to school (Galatians 3:24), it contained rules appropriate for immature children. Paul says that “we [including himself as a Jew and his readers as Gentiles] were in slavery under the basic principles of the world” (Galatians 4:3). It was an external approach to religion, having rules about what can be touched or eaten (Colossians 2:20-21). Such regulations appear to be religious, but they do not transform the heart, where real worship ought to be centered.

## **PART 5: DOES HEBREWS 4:9 COMMAND CHRISTIANS TO KEEP THE SABBATH?**

The epistle to the Hebrews may have been written to Jewish believers who were still participating in the customs of Judaism. The epistle explains that the old covenant is obsolete and its regulations have been set aside. When the word *sabbatismos* is used in 4:9, it is not trying to make an exception for one particular old covenant law.

Throughout the epistle, the readers are admonished that Jesus is much, much better than anything the old covenant had. Jesus Christ is the main focus of the epistle. Tithing is mentioned, for example, only because it shows the superiority of Christ over the Levitical priests. *Sabbatismos* is also mentioned, not as a point in itself, but because it illustrates something about the superiority of faith in Christ.

Jesus is better than angels, better than Moses, better than Aaron, better than all the rituals. He has superseded them all, fulfilling the spiritual truths that they pictured, rendering their physical performance unnecessary. Hebrews 4:9 does not command the continuation of an old covenant practice.

Let us begin our analysis in Hebrews 3: “Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.... Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses” (verses 1, 3). The epistle then quotes from Psalm 95, reminding the Hebrews that their ancestors had hardened their hearts and been faithless and disobedient under Moses’ leadership.

Don’t harden your hearts, the epistle exhorts, echoing the point that had been made in Hebrews 2:1-3. The Hebrew Christians were apparently being tempted to go back into Judaism, and the epistle exhorts them to be faithful to the superiority of Jesus Christ. Listen to what Jesus says (1:2; 2:1). Look to him, not to Moses, as our authority in faith and practice. Look to him as our High Priest in heaven, not to the Levitical priests in the temple, which are only shadows and copies of spiritual truth (8:1-5; 10:1).

Do not turn away from the living God, the epistle exhorts (3:12). Hold your faith in Christ firmly to the end (3:14). Do not harden your hearts (3:15). We cannot please God if we do not have faith (3:19; 11:6).

The epistle draws an analogy between the Israelites entering the promised land and Christians entering the better promise of the new covenant. This analogy is again designed to show the superiority of Christ. When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they sent spies into Canaan to see the land

that the Lord would be giving them. However, most of the Israelite spies were afraid of the Canaanites, and most of the Israelites believed the spies instead of God. God therefore declared that they, since they lacked faith and would not obey his order to invade Canaan, would not enter the promised land: “They shall never enter my rest” (Numbers 14:26-29; Psalm 95:11; Hebrews 3:11). In this psalm, “rest” was a metaphor for the old covenant promise, the land of Canaan.

The next generation of Israelites entered the promised land under Joshua’s leadership. Nevertheless, even after they entered the promised land, God continued to warn them, in the psalm, not to harden their hearts lest they fail to enter God’s rest. So the psalm was pointing toward a future rest (4:8). The promised land had been a physical type or foreshadow of a spiritual rest that the Israelites had not yet entered.

The epistle to the Hebrews picks up the message and continues it: Do not harden your hearts, and do not reject the teaching of Jesus. Do not become unbelieving and disobedient, but continue trusting in Jesus and obey him.

Christians have been given the new covenant, with its better, spiritual promises. They participate in this new covenant through faith in Jesus Christ. They enter God’s rest, his promise, by their faith in Jesus Christ. “Now we who have believed enter that rest” (Hebrews 4:3) — and that is the “rest” that the psalmist was talking about (verse 3b). Now, because we have entered God’s rest, we must be “careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (verse 1).

The spiritual rest that the psalmist spoke of, the rest that God wants us to enter, has arrived in Jesus Christ. And the way people might fall short is by abandoning their faith in Jesus Christ. We must be careful that we do not lose faith and lose the rest that we have already entered.

In Christ, we have rest. He has freed us from the old covenant, which was a yoke too difficult to bear (Acts 15:10), and has given us a new covenant, which is a yoke that is so much easier to bear that it is called a “rest” (Matthew 11:28-30). When we are in Christ, we are in spiritual rest. We have begun to experience the better promises of God.

God exhorts people to enter his rest — and the place that Scripture talks about God resting is on the seventh day of creation (Hebrews 4:4). We are invited to enter God’s end-of-creation rest by believing in the Son of God. By faith, we have joined with God in his rest. By faith, we have become new creations, created anew. We have been brought into the kingdom of God.

Our re-creation is not yet complete, but we have entered his rest. We have been reconciled and have fellowship with God through our High Priest, just as Adam and Eve had fellowship with God before they sinned. By faith in

Christ, we enter God's rest, as predicted by the psalmist.

We have entered into God's *katapausin* rest, the same type of rest that he had on the very first seventh day.<sup>24</sup> "Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his" (4:10). This is far more significant than resting one day a week, because the epistle has already noted that God's "work has been finished since the creation of the world" (4:3). God's rest is an enduring rest, and the believer's rest is, too.

As long as we have faith in Christ, no matter what day of the week it is, we have entered God's rest and we are resting from our own work. Our own work cannot save us, but we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. We enter God's rest permanently through faith in Christ.

"There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest [*sabbatismos*] for the people of God" (4:9). The writer is using a different word, but he is not referring to a different rest. Both words are used as metaphors for salvation. As can be seen by the word "then" or "therefore," it is the same rest that is mentioned in verse 8 — the "rest" of salvation.<sup>25</sup>

The writer of Hebrews is using the words for rest as synonyms, one alluding to the creation rest and the other alluding to its weekly commemoration, but both referring to the same rest that Christians are to try to enter. It is the salvation rest that remains for Christians to enter and to be careful not to fall short of through unbelief. We are exhorted to enter this rest through faith (verses 11, 3).

Let us paraphrase the passage: God promised a rest, but the first Israelites did not enter it because of unbelief and disobedience. Joshua brought them into the land, but the Israelites were still being exhorted to enter the promised rest. It was still future. Therefore, since there is still a promise of rest, we must be careful that we do not fall short of it. We who have faith in Christ enter the promised rest, which is called God's rest.

God rested at the end of creation, so this is the divine rest, the supernatural rest, the spiritual promise that believers enter. Although some people fell short of the promise, it still remains that some will enter it. That's why the psalmist was still exhorting people to hear God's voice and obey him.

If Joshua had fulfilled the promise, God would not have inspired the psalmist to continue exhorting people about the promised rest. Joshua's entry into the promised land was an antetype of a spiritual entry into a spiritual promise, a spiritual rest. The psalmist was speaking about another day, a day in which people could enter the promise. Therefore, there continues to be a spiritual rest for the people of God, because anyone who enters God's

spiritual rest is able to cease from work, just as God ceased from his creative works. Therefore, we should strive to enter this spiritual promise, and not fall away through disobedience.

Why does the writer use the word *sabbatismos*? It refers to the weekly Sabbath, but it is being used figuratively. The author is telling us that this spiritual rest is what the weekly Sabbath had pictured all along. The Sabbath was not only a reminder of the end-of-creation rest and the Exodus, it also looked forward, prefiguring something, as a predictive shadow of a coming reality, our spiritual rest. We enter God’s rest by faith in Christ (verse 3), and by doing so, we enter the rest that God entered when he completed his creation (verse 3b-4).

Our salvation rest is a Sabbath-rest, a fulfillment of the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath. If the author wanted to talk about the Sabbath day, he could have used the word for Sabbath. If he wanted to talk about keeping a law, he could have said that, too. But he did not use those words because he is not talking about the Sabbath day itself.

He is not saying whether it is necessary or unnecessary — he is not dealing with that issue. Rather, he is saying that the spiritual promise is a Sabbath-rest. Salvation is pictured by the Sabbath. Whether the Sabbath should continue to be kept as a weekly picture is not being discussed. The author is referring to salvation, the spiritual promised rest. He speaks of only one predicted Sabbath-rest, not a weekly picture of it. He is speaking figuratively of the kingdom of God. We enter our spiritual rest by faith in Christ.

The writer is describing an analogy, and we today often find analogies unconvincing. Even if there are parallels, we might say, that doesn’t prove anything, and doesn’t prove that the Sabbath is no longer required in its old covenant details. That’s true. Hebrews tells us what the Sabbath pictures, but it does not address Christian behavior regarding the Sabbath. For that, we must turn elsewhere, such as the statements of Paul we have already examined.

In summary, Hebrews 4 is not exhorting us to keep a weekly Sabbath, but to enter the rest of God by having faith in Christ. We come to Christ, and he gives us rest.

**We should pray that we don’t have to flee on a Sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Does this show that Jesus’ disciples would be keeping the Sabbath?**

This warning was given “to those who are in Judea” (verse 16). It is preserved only in Matthew’s Gospel, probably written to Jewish Christians.

Jesus' warning tells us more about practices in Judea than it does about Christianity.

It is permissible to flee for one's life on the Sabbath. The reason it might be difficult to flee on the Sabbath, however, is that non-Christians in Judea are keeping the Sabbath, not that the fleeing Christians are. Perhaps the fleeing people keep the Sabbath or perhaps they do not, but either way it might be difficult to flee when the people of Judea have closed their shops, closed the city gates, etc. This verse does not prove that the disciples would be keeping the Sabbath — only that it might be difficult to flee on a Sabbath.

**The resurrection stories show that the Sabbath still existed after Jesus' crucifixion. The women "rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). Does this show that the Sabbath is still commanded for Christians?**

The Sabbath still exists. Hanukkah does, too, but its existence does not prove that it has to be observed. When the Gospels tell us that the resurrection was discovered "after the Sabbath, on the first day of the week," they are not telling us to keep the Sabbath any more than they are telling us to keep the first day of the week. They are simply telling us when this event occurred, using the term that was widely known at the time.

The women rested on the Sabbath, but their example does not tell us whether that commandment is still in effect. Today, many Sabbatharians would consider it permissible to prepare a body for burial, especially if the person had been dead for more than a day and there is no refrigeration. Luke's readers, whether they kept the Sabbath or not, might have wondered why the women rested even though they were faced with this particular need. Luke was inspired to tell his readers that the women rested because of the commandment.

Luke used the word "commandment," but that does not prove that the commandment was required for Luke's readers. Paul used the word "commandments" to describe the rules that divided Jews from Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15), but the word does not imply that those commandments still had validity for his readers.

Luke is simply using commonly understood terms to explain why the women rested. He is not giving a command for his readers to follow that example.

In a similar way, the phrase "a Sabbath day's walk" (Acts 1:12) does not imply anything regarding the distance we may travel today on the Sabbath. The phrase was simply a measurement of distance, just as "Sabbath" was the

name of one day of the week. The name does not imply continuing obligation for Christians.

**The Sabbath is a reminder of creation and it points to salvation. God is re-creating us. However, our creation is not yet complete. Should we therefore continue to keep the weekly Sabbath as a celebration of salvation in Christ?**

The Sabbath was indeed a memorial of creation. And it foreshadowed and pointed to our salvation in Christ. And our salvation is not yet complete. Nevertheless, Paul says that we are new creations. John says that we have already been given eternal life, and that eternal life is in Jesus Christ. We have been given the promised Holy Spirit, guaranteeing the future promises. We do not yet have the fullness of salvation, but we have enough. Paul can say that we should not let anyone judge us regarding the Sabbath. The reality is Christ, and we have the reality, even if it's not yet in its fullness.

The sacrifices pictured our cleansing from sin, and yet we see that we are not yet sinless. But that doesn't mean that we still need sacrifices. Although the last judgment has not yet been done, the verdict has been declared for all who have faith. Circumcision pictured a cleansed heart, and we are not yet perfect in our hearts, but the physical symbol is not required. Likewise, although our re-creation is not yet complete, even the beginning is sufficient to make old covenant practices unnecessary and not a basis for judging others. Of course, we still have a practical need for physical rest and worship times, but we cannot use the old covenant to demand that everyone rest and worship at the same time that we do.

The Sabbath pointed to our renewal in Christ, and in that spiritual meaning, the Sabbath is still required — just as the spiritual meaning of circumcision is required, and the spiritual meaning of the sacrifices is still valid. But the physical details of such laws are in a different category.

That is why Paul could treat the question of special days in such a take-it-or-leave-it way (Romans 14:5). If the people had faith in Christ, if their entire lives were devoted to the Lord, then they were already abiding by the purpose of sacred days. They were already experiencing the holiness, righteousness, peace and joy that come with the kingdom of God, in which God had placed them based on their faith in Christ. God's own presence is in the saints on a full-time basis.

**The Sabbath points to the re-creative, redemptive work of Christ, which is the most important event of all history. Shouldn't we commemorate this weekly?**

The Bible tells us to commemorate Christ's redemption by means of bread and wine, not by a day of rest. Jesus made it clear, in his controversies with the Pharisees, that it is wrong to add requirements to God's law and make things more difficult. We cannot teach as a requirement something that the Bible does not. It is good to commemorate Christ's salvation in weekly worship services, but we cannot insist that everybody worship on the same day and time we do.

**The early church kept the Sabbath. Wasn't it the influence of paganism that motivated some people to abandon it?**

The earliest church was entirely Jewish, and it continued the practice of circumcision and other old covenant customs, too. It was only through time, discussion and the intervention of the Holy Spirit that the church came to understand that Jewish customs should not be imposed on others. Although Gentiles were being grafted into Israel, figuratively speaking, making them spiritual Israelites, they did not have to live like Jews (Galatians 2:14). They did not have to obey all the rules that separated Jews from Gentiles.

However, it was not paganism that prompted Paul to say that he was not under the old covenant law (1 Corinthians 9:19-21), or that Christians did not have to keep "the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5, 28). And it was not paganism that motivated Paul to say that days were not something to judge each other about (Romans 14:5; Colossians 2:16).

Many early Christian martyrs met for worship on Sunday. That doesn't prove that this was the only acceptable day of worship, but their willingness to die for their faith in Jesus is evidence that they were not compromisers. They were not likely to give up essentials merely for convenience or to make Christianity more attractive to pagans. In their lives and in their deaths, the central issue was allegiance to Christ, not whether they abstained from work on any particular day.

Although some early Christians kept the Sabbath, many others did not, and allegations of paganism are designed more to frighten people than to examine history objectively. Our doctrine must be based on Scripture, not on ancient or modern history.

**Many Christians have lost their jobs because they kept the Sabbath, and God miraculously provided better jobs. Doesn't his blessing show the correctness of their behavior and God's approval of Sabbath-keeping?**

God looks on the heart, on the attitude, and he blesses his people even if

their behavior is based on a misunderstanding. He honors sincerity. If we do something with the conviction that God wants us to do it, he is pleased with our willingness, and he may reward such sacrifices, but his rewards do not necessarily endorse our particular understanding.

**Many spiritual leaders kept the Sabbath, and we respect them. Wasn't God inspiring them, and shouldn't we follow their example?**

Many godly men and women have kept the Sabbath and inspired others to follow their example. But other faithful Christians, such as Peter Waldo, John Calvin and William Miller, observed Sunday, and many Christians followed the example they set. Such examples can be emotionally powerful to those who knew the people personally or knew them through their writings, but the examples do not carry as much weight with the general public.

When we preach to the public, we cannot ask them to follow a human — we must point them directly to Christ. The example of highly respected leaders, like any tradition, must be evaluated according to the biblical testimony. It is Christ we must preach, as he is revealed in the Old and New Testaments.

**The Sabbath gives us rest from our physical labors, giving us more time for worship, fellowship and good works. It is a spiritually valuable time. Wouldn't it be wrong to neglect it?**

The old covenant specified exactly when and how much time should be separated for the Lord. It specified when and how and where to make sacrifices. These physical requirements helped keep the people aware of God, reminding them of their need for reconciliation and fellowship with him.

In the new covenant, however, we have been given the fellowship with God that the old covenant customs pictured. The Holy Spirit lives within us, helping us be aware of our relationship with God. The Holy Spirit transforms our hearts, leading us to love the Lord and to desire to spend time with him. It is good for us to spend time with the Lord and with his people. Those who neglect worship time stunt their spiritual growth.

However, we have no biblical authority to mandate that everybody set aside the same time that we do. We encourage people to set aside time for prayer, Bible study, fellowship and good works, but we should not judge anyone regarding the days they keep. It is physically helpful to rest from our labors. It is spiritually helpful to devote time each week to the Lord, and we encourage people to do this, but we do not condemn those who do not set aside a 24-hour block of time. Rather than relying on an external discipline

of rules, each Christian needs self-discipline to devote time to the Lord for spiritual growth.

Devoting time to the Lord includes prayer, study and worship services, of course. It can also include volunteer work in humanitarian service, such as by helping out at a hospital. Since service is one way to express true Christianity, service projects can rightly express the spiritual purpose of a day of worship.

As a practical need, of course, we appoint a day and time for worship meetings. We encourage all who can to meet with us and worship the Creator and Savior with us, but we do not condemn those who worship on another day.

### **Shouldn't we uphold the law?**

We should use the law in a lawful way — and the new covenant, the law that Christians are now under, does not permit us to dictate when and how much time other Christians should give to the Lord. It does not permit us to bind heavy burdens on people and threaten them with the lake of fire if they don't comply with our understanding. The real law we must be concerned about is the spiritual law, not the precise way the old covenant was to be administered.

We want to uphold the law in the way that is appropriate to the age we live in, after the coming of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The New Testament gives hundreds of commands. It gives a high standard of conduct for God's people. It quotes various laws and amplifies them to the intents of the heart.

But it never commands Sabbath-keeping, and it commands the church not to lay unauthorized restrictions on God's people. We should never let traditions annul the Word of God, and that includes traditions about old covenant customs that were once authorized, but now are not authorized.

People who are led by God's Spirit want to obey our Creator and Savior. We also want to emphasize that salvation is by grace through faith, and we accept as Christian everyone who has faith in Christ.

Some Christians may continue to believe that their Savior wants them to keep the Sabbath. We do not criticize them for acting in accordance with their beliefs. We do not require people to change what they do on the weekly Sabbath. We are saying that we should not judge one another regarding this day.

We are saved by grace, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't matter how we live. Paul clearly expects believers to adhere to certain standards of conduct. But he treated the Sabbath as a matter of individual conscience, not for enforced conformity. He could approach the Sabbath in the same way as he dealt with circumcision: He could take it or leave it. Why could he take

such liberty with the Sabbath? It was not a requirement because faith in Christ superseded it.

All who have faith in Jesus Christ are already abiding by the intent of the Sabbath law. If we walk by the Spirit, we are fulfilling the requirements of the law (Romans 8:5). We have come to Christ and he has given us rest. All who believe have entered God's rest. Although a future rest yet remains, we have already entered into rest, and a specific day of rest is no longer required.

Our relationship with God depends on faith in Christ, not on a specific block of time. Of course, this does not do away with our practical need to give time to the Lord to pray, study, and imitate Jesus' life-style of good works to the needy and preaching the gospel.

Christ exhorts his church to meet regularly to encourage one another in faith and good works and to worship. Since God does not give a complete spectrum of his gifts to any one person, we need to work together to help one another grow in maturity. Christians should make reasonable efforts to meet weekly with the fellowship God has placed them in.

In summary, we enter God's rest, the true Sabbath, by having faith in Christ. Simultaneously, it is also through Christ that we are justified, regenerated, re-created, and adopted into the family of God. These are all metaphors for salvation. The Christian Sabbath is the regenerated life of faith in Jesus Christ, in whom every believer finds true rest. The weekly seventh-day Sabbath, which was commanded for Israel in the Ten Commandments, was a shadow that prefigured the true Reality to whom it pointed — our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>24</sup> The Septuagint version uses the verb form of *katapausin* in Genesis 2:2.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua, entering the promised land, did not give the people the spiritual rest (*katapausin*) of God. That's why the psalmist, centuries later, spoke about another day. Therefore, verse 9 says, for that reason, because the psalmist spoke of a future rest (*katapausin*), it logically follows that there still remains a Sabbath-rest (*sabbatismos*) for the people of God, and, verse 11, we should make every effort to enter that rest (*katapausin*). However, if the *sabbatismos* rest were different than the *katapausin* rest, then it would not logically follow that the *sabbatismos* remains simply because the psalmist talked about a *katapausin*.

Verse 10, which begins with "for," also presents a logical connection between *sabbatismos* and *katapausin*. A *sabbatismos* exists for Christians because they enter God's *katapausin*. The logical connection would not exist if these were two different rests. The equivalence of *katapausin* and *sabbatismos* can be further seen in the parallel way they are used. In verse 1, he says that the promise of *katapausin* rest still stands. In

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verse 6, he says that it still remains (*apoleipetai*) that some will enter the *katapausin* rest. And in verse 9, he says that there remains (*apoleipetai*) a *sabbatismos* rest for us.

## **SUMMARY: IS THE SABBATH REQUIRED FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY?**

### **Can the fourth commandment be obsolete?**

The Bible says, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8). God’s people were told to rest on the seventh day of every week. Nevertheless, most Christians today do not observe the seventh-day Sabbath — they say it is obsolete. This article explains why.

We will examine the major questions, and give brief answers. We have longer explanations available for each question, but this article will give a concise overview.

### **1. Was the Sabbath commanded at creation, even before humanity sinned?**

There is no evidence in the Bible that God commanded the Sabbath before the days of Moses. Genesis says that God rested, but nowhere does it say that the first humans were commanded to follow his example. Before humans sinned, they lived in a blessed and holy time, in which they were in a state of peace with God, trustful and obedient. They did not need to labor in the way they later did. They did not need to set aside a day for communion with God, for they had it continually. The first human did not need to rest on the second day of his life.

God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, but that does not mean that he required people to rest on it. As the Jubilee year shows (Leviticus 25:8-12), time can be holy without requiring a rest. In the days of Moses, the creation week was used as a pattern for commanding the seventh-day Sabbath, but that *pattern* does not prove that the Sabbath existed ever since creation.

If God commands the Sabbath, then we should keep it, of course, even if we have to adjust our schedules, suffer financially, and alienate our families. But if God does not require the Sabbath, then it would be wrong to put this unnecessary burden on anyone. When the effect on our lives is so great, we need to make sure that we have a clear command from God, not a questionable inference. Genesis does not command the Sabbath, never mentions the word, and never pictures anyone as keeping it.

Abraham kept all of God’s commands (Genesis 26:5), but this does not mean that he kept all the annual festivals, sacrificed his firstborn animals, or

did any of the other laws that Moses gave. This verse tells us that Abraham was obedient to all the laws that applied to *him*, but it doesn't tell us *which laws applied*. The Jewish Talmud says that Abraham did *not* keep the Sabbath; the Jews believed that the Sabbath was given, as the Bible describes, through Moses to the Israelite people.

## **2. The Sabbath was called holy time. Doesn't it remain holy forever?**

Not necessarily. In ancient Israel's worship system, many things and places were holy. Firstborn animals and children were holy (Exodus 13:1-2), but they are not holy in the same way today. The Jubilee Year was holy, but it is not so today. The laws of holiness told the Jews how to worship God, and although we might think that worship laws telling us how to show love to God are the most important, the fact is that *many* of ancient Israel's worship laws are now obsolete. God does not expect us to worship him in exactly the same way that the Israelites did.

## **3. The Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. Shouldn't Christians keep the Ten Commandments?**

Christians generally agree that nine of the Ten Commandments still apply today. The last six commandments are quoted several times in the New Testament — but it is a mistake to *assume* that the Sabbath command is also commanded today. We are asking *whether* all Ten of the Commandments are still required — we cannot assume in advance that all Ten *must* stay together. We need to see what the Bible says about it.

The Bible refers to the Ten Commandments *as a group* in only three places. They are called the covenant that God made with his people through Moses (Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 4:13) — and this covenant is now obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). Christians are not required to keep “the law of Moses” (Acts 15). The law-code of Moses, although containing some eternally-valid laws, also contains some temporary laws that became obsolete when Jesus Christ came. All Christians agree that *some* of these God-given laws became obsolete; the question now is whether the list of obsolete laws happens to include the Sabbath. We cannot judge the law by its neighbors — we cannot *assume* that it is valid, nor can we *assume* it is obsolete.

To answer our question, we must turn to the New Testament. Although some of the commandments are quoted at various places in the New Testament, the only place in the New Testament where the Ten Commandments are mentioned *as a group* is in 2 Corinthians 3. There, Paul talks about tablets of stone when Moses' face was shining in glory (vs. 3, 7).

Clearly, Paul is talking about the Ten Commandments. Notice what he says: They are the letter that kills, a ministry of death and condemnation, which came in glory but its glory is now fading away (vs. 6-11). The new covenant, in contrast, is a ministry that brings life, is much more glorious, and is a ministry that does not fade away.

Paul did not praise the Ten Commandments as part of the Christian way of life. Rather, he pointed out ways in which the gospel of Jesus Christ is *different* from the Ten Commandments. They were part of a ministry that was fading away. Since Paul says that the ministry of the letter is fading, it should be no surprise if we find that one of the Ten was a temporary command. *Something* about those stone tablets is fading away; we cannot assume that all Ten Commandments are eternal.

**4. Didn't Exodus 31:16 declare the Sabbath to be a perpetual covenant between God and his people?**

Yes, but so was circumcision (Genesis 17:13) and the weekly showbread (Leviticus 24:8). The same Hebrew word is used to say that the Day of Atonement is a lasting ordinance, and the Levitical priesthood will continue (Leviticus 16:29; Exodus 29:9; 40:15). Obviously, the Hebrew word does not mean eternal. The covenant that God made with the Israelites is now obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).

God gave the Sabbath to the Israelites as a sign between God and the Israelites (Exodus 31:17). The Sabbath made the Israelites different from other nations — but Paul says that the laws that separated Jews and Gentiles have been done away by the cross of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-18).

**5. Didn't Isaiah say that Gentiles would be blessed for keeping the Sabbath?**

Yes, he did. He also said that Gentiles will offer burnt offerings and sacrifices (Isaiah 56:7). The prophets predicted that people will observe new moons (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3), discriminate against uncircumcised people (Isaiah 52:1-2; Ezekiel 44:9), sacrifice in the temple (Ezekiel 20:40; Zechariah 14:20-21) and observe other laws that Christians do not need to. The prophets lived under the old covenant, and they described devotion to God in terms of the old covenant. We cannot assume that those specifics apply to Christians in this age.

**6. Jesus kept the Sabbath. Shouldn't we follow his example?**

Yes, Jesus kept the Sabbath. He kept all the Jewish laws, because he was

born under the law and kept it perfectly (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 4:15). He killed Passover lambs, tithed to the Levites, told cleansed people to make offerings commanded by Moses (Matthew 8:4), and he observed Hanukkah (John 10:22). He would have worn blue threads on his garments (Numbers 15:38) and done a lot of other things that Christians aren't required to imitate. When we look at the example he set, we must remember the historical context.

What kind of example did Jesus set on the Sabbath? The Bible never says that he rested — we are told only of his *activity*. He never commands anyone to keep the Sabbath, nor praises anyone for it. Rather, he constantly criticized people who had rules about what could or could not be done on the Sabbath. He always taught more freedom, never any restrictions. Although he told people to be very strict about some laws (Matthew 5:21, 28, etc.), he was always liberal about the Sabbath.

Jesus always compared the Sabbath to ceremonial laws, not to moral laws. When his disciples were picking grain, he used the example of the showbread, and the work of the priests in the temple (Matthew 12:3-6). Those rituals were just as important as the Sabbath. He said that circumcision could be done on the Sabbath (John 7:22), which indicates that circumcision is a more important law than the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a ritual law — it says that behavior that is perfectly good one day, is forbidden on another, simply because the earth has rotated. But true morality does not change from one day of the week to another. When ritual laws became obsolete when Jesus died, it should be no surprise that the ritual of the Sabbath also became obsolete.

Jesus said that daily chores could be done on the Sabbath (Luke 13:15). Even hard labor could be done in an emergency (Luke 14:5). He told a healed man to carry his sleeping mat, even though there was no hurry (John 5:8). He even used the word “work” to describe his activity (verse 17). Many Christians follow *this* example. They remember that Jesus consistently criticized the Sabbath rules of the Pharisees, and that he treated it as a ritual law.

### **7. Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27).**

Circumcision was made for man, too. All of God's laws, even the obsolete ones, were made for humans. The Sabbath law was made to benefit humans, to serve them, not become an unpleasant burden. Jesus said this to argue for liberty, not for making requirements. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath — he has authority over it, and he can set it aside if he wants to.

**8. Luke 23:56 tells us that even after Jesus' crucifixion, the women "rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). Does this show that the Sabbath is still commanded for Christians?**

The women rested on the Sabbath, but their example does not tell us whether that commandment is still in effect. They did not yet understand that God no longer required ritual laws. Luke's readers might have wondered why the women rested even though they were faced with an urgent need, so Luke told them why — the women rested because of the commandment.

Luke used the word "commandment," but that does not prove that the commandment was required for Luke's readers. Paul used the same word to describe the rules that divided Jews from Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15), but Paul says that those commandments do not have any validity for his readers. The word "commandment" does not imply any validity or permanence. Luke is simply using ordinary words to explain why the women rested. He is not commanding his readers to follow that example.

**9. Jesus said that his disciples should pray not to flee on the Sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Doesn't this mean that we should be keeping it?**

No. It is permissible to flee for your life on the Sabbath. But Jesus said that people *in Judea* (verse 16) could find it difficult, just as they would find it difficult but not sinful to flee in winter (verse 20). This verse does not say whether the disciples would be keeping the Sabbath or not — it just recognizes that other people in Judea would be, so it would be difficult for the disciples to flee when city gates were closed, shops were closed, etc. This verse does not command the Sabbath — it only shows that it would be difficult for people in Judea to flee on the Sabbath.

**10. Hebrews 4:9 says that a Sabbath-rest still remains for believers today.**

Hebrews 4 is talking about a future rest. People did not have this rest in Joshua's day, nor when Psalm 95 was written (verse 8), so this chapter is not talking about the weekly Sabbath. This rest is entered by faith in Christ (verse 2). By using the word "Sabbath-rest," Hebrews is saying that the weekly Sabbath symbolized the real rest that God wants his people to enter. Just as the Levitical sacrifices symbolized the work of Christ, the weekly Sabbath pictured our final salvation. This symbolism says nothing about whether Christians should continue observing the symbols.

In one way, symbols are obsolete, but in another way, they are still

required. Circumcision is a great example. Christians do not have to be physically circumcised (Romans 2:29) — but we should be circumcised in the heart. We are to keep this ritual law, but we do so in the spirit, not the letter. In one sense, Christ has made the law obsolete; in another way, he has transformed it and still requires it in its transformed way. The same is true of the Levitical rituals: although we do not offer animal sacrifices, we are obedient to those laws when we have faith that Jesus Christ fulfilled those sacrifices. The requirement has been transformed.

In a similar way, since the Sabbath points toward our final salvation, and this salvation is in Christ, we are abiding by the *purpose* of the Sabbath command when we put our faith in Christ. It is in him that we find the rest that we need (Matthew 11:28-30). The requirement for rest has been transformed to focus on Christ rather than a day of the week. If we have faith in him, we are entering God's rest and we are therefore keeping the spiritual intent of the Sabbath.

### **11. Revelation says that the end-time people of God will be keeping God's commandments (Revelation 12:17).**

This verse does not say *which* commandments are still valid. It is wrong to *assume* that it means the Ten, when God has actually given many more commandments than that.

### **12. Didn't Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, keep the Sabbath?**

When Paul was preaching the gospel in a new city, his custom was to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2). But this does not mean that he *kept* the Sabbath. Paul wanted to preach to Jews first, and the best place to do this was in a synagogue, and the best day to do it was the Sabbath, when the Jews were there. It was simply a good evangelistic strategy to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. However, Paul never taught anyone to keep the Sabbath.

Paul sometimes kept Jewish laws such as circumcision, making vows, and participating in temple rituals (Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:26). When he was with Jews, he lived like they did — but he did not consider himself to be under the old covenant law (1 Corinthians 9:20). When with Gentiles, he could live like a Gentile, just as Peter could (verse 21; Galatians 2:14). In the first century, neither Jews nor Gentiles believed that Gentiles should keep the Sabbath. If Paul had a different view, we should expect to see some evidence, but there is none.

In the Gentile cities of Lystra, Derbe and Athens, nothing is said about

the Sabbath. In some places, Paul preached every day (Acts 17:17; 19:9). When he was in Troas, we do not hear anything about the Sabbath. Rather, the church waited until the first day of the week to come together and break bread (Acts 20:7). The example of Paul, like that of Jesus, is always liberty, and makes no restrictions or commandments about the Sabbath.

Before we see what Paul taught about the Sabbath, let us summarize our observations.

- The first place we see a *command* for the Sabbath is in the law of Moses.
- The law of Moses contains many commands that Christians do not have to keep.
- Even laws that came before Moses, such as circumcision, can be obsolete.
- To see which laws are obsolete, we need to study the New Testament.
- The New Testament never commands the Sabbath.

Jesus always criticizes Sabbath rules, and never tells anyone to be careful about what they do on the Sabbath.

- Jesus always groups the Sabbath with ceremonial and ritual laws.
- Peter and Paul could live like Gentiles if they wanted to.
- Paul said that *something* about the Ten Commandments was fading away.

Should Christians keep the seventh-day Sabbath? Is the command clear enough to require people to lose their jobs and alienate their families? No — the only place that the Sabbath is commanded is in a covenant that the New Testament calls obsolete. True, the New Testament does not explicitly say that the Sabbath is obsolete. Instead, it says much more — that the entire old covenant is obsolete. It says that Christians do not have to keep the law of Moses. It says a large category of law is no longer required, and it never tells Christians to keep the Sabbath. *None* of the Sabbatarian arguments proves that the Sabbath is still commanded.

If the Sabbath were required, it is surprising that the New Testament never repeats the command. It has space for all sorts of other commands, from holy kisses to avoiding idolatry, but it never commands the Sabbath. It never criticizes anyone for breaking it. Paul dealt with numerous problems of Christian living, but he never tells slaves or others how to keep the Sabbath. He lists numerous sins that can keep a person out of the kingdom of God, but he never mentions the Sabbath. If the Sabbath is important, the silence of the New Testament is astounding.

But the evidence against the Sabbath goes even further than what we have covered. The New Testament not only *fails to command* the Sabbath — it says that it is *wrong to require it*.

### **13. Christians should not judge one another regarding the Sabbath.**

The only time that Paul mentions the Sabbath by name is in Colossians 2:16-17. He says, “Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” Here, Paul groups the weekly Sabbath with the annual festivals, the monthly rituals, and eating and drinking restrictions of Judaism.

There is no translation problem here — Paul is talking about the weekly Sabbath and saying that it, like the other rituals of Judaism, is not a basis for judging. The Christians at Colossae should not let other people judge them by what they do on the Sabbath day — and in the same way, they should not judge other Christians by what *they* do on the Sabbath. In other words, they are not to say it is wrong for other Christians to be working on the Sabbath. Christians should not let anyone make them feel guilty for what they do on the Sabbath.

The reason for this, Paul says, is because Christ is the reality that these rituals symbolized. Since Christ has canceled our debts (verse 14), we should *therefore* not let anyone criticize us for what we do on the Sabbath. Because of the cross, the regulations about the Sabbath (as well as the new moons and annual festivals) are obsolete.

Paul told the Galatians that the promises of salvation were given to Abraham (Galatians 3:16). Then a law was added 430 years later — meaning all the laws added through Moses (verse 17). This law was temporary, in effect only until “the Seed” (Christ) had come (verse 19). This law was put into effect until Christ, but now that he has come, we are not under the supervision of that law (vs. 24-25). The New Testament message is consistent: the old covenant, the law of Moses, is obsolete. If a command (such as the Sabbath) can be found *only* within the temporary law, then it is not likely to still be required.

### **14. In Christianity, every day may be treated alike.**

In Romans 14, Paul writes that some Christians consider “one day more sacred than another,” whereas other Christians consider “every day alike.” In the Roman church, partly composed of Jews and partly composed of

Gentiles, it is obvious what kind of days might be considered sacred.

But Paul says, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” In other words, he is saying that it is permissible for a Christian to think that every day is alike! He did not feel any need to explain that one day of the week should be considered different. He was quite content for Christians to consider them all the same. His concern here, as it was in Colossians, was that Christians should not judge one another about their different customs (verse 4).

Paul was indifferent about the question of days — and the only reason that he could be indifferent about it, was that he considered the Sabbath command to be obsolete. If Christians work on the Sabbath, we are not to judge them or call them wrong, because they are not wrong. The Sabbath command does not apply.

First-century Jews did not think that the Sabbath applied to Gentiles, anyway. Paul would have had an uphill battle if he had wanted to teach otherwise. The reason that Paul could be so indifferent about days, that he could tell people not to judge one another about them, is that they were not commanded.

**15. God accepts us on the basis of Christ, not on whether we keep a certain day of the week.**

The Sabbath (or any other distinctive practice) can deceive a person and subtly reduce the importance of Jesus Christ. The tendency is to think, “I please God because I keep the Sabbath. I am counted as one of his people because I keep the Sabbath.” But God knows us as his people through Christ, not through a day of the week. The Bible says that the *only* reason that we please God is because of Jesus Christ:

“He saved us, *not because of righteous things we had done*, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7).

No matter how many laws we keep, we are sinners, and the only reason that we can be saved is because Jesus died for our sins. But a focus on laws, especially laws that make us different from other people, tends to put the focus back onto ourselves — and what we do. For some people, the badge of betterness is a certain style of worship. For others, it is a certain belief, or the avoidance of alcohol, or a style of dress. For Sabbatarians, it is the

Sabbath. Not everyone falls into this trap, of course, but the more distinctive the doctrines, the more likely that people will value them too highly.

Suppose we come to the Day of Judgment and we are asked, “Why should we let *you* into the kingdom of God?” How will we answer? Will we talk about what laws we kept? Or will we trust in Christ alone? Will we try to claim *part* of the credit? The Bible says that our only basis of salvation is faith in Christ, and that no one has *anything* to boast about (Ephesians 2:8-9). Our works don’t count for anything; our only hope is Jesus Christ, and any doctrine or practice that obscures this fact is an enemy of faith. Anything that tempts us to look at what *we* do, tempts us to take away some of the trust that we should be giving to Christ.

Christians try to obey God, but our obedience does not count anything for our salvation. There are many reasons to obey God (faith in his wisdom, gratitude for his mercy, personal love for him, desire to spread the gospel, etc.), but salvation is not one of them. Salvation is a gift; obedience is a response — and that is for laws that are still valid in the New Testament era. If obeying a valid law counts for nothing, what good does it do to keep an obsolete one?

Of course, Christians may refrain from work one day a week if they wish. Spiritual disciplines like that *can* be helpful to a person’s spiritual growth, but they can also become obstacles, if people begin to think that these particular practices make them better than others. And these practices can become spiritually dangerous, if people think that everyone else ought to measure up to the way they worship God. Christians should not place themselves “under the law” (Galatians 3:25) as if the laws of Moses still had authority over them.

Jesus criticized people who taught requirements that God did not have: “You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” (Luke 11:46). When we teach requirements, we need to be very careful.

The Sabbath has nothing to do with salvation, and nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was never part of the message of the New Testament church. The message is always one of liberty, never one of restrictions on a particular day of the week. God accepts us because of Jesus Christ, not because of anything that we do. It is by grace, not works. We are to trust in Christ for our salvation.

## **THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH: DIVINE REST IN JESUS CHRIST**

A series by J. Michael Feazell

### **THE LAW AND THE PROMISE**

Some churches teach that Christians ought to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. The basis of this conviction is usually the belief that the Ten Commandments are binding on Christians. Simply put, if the Ten Commandments are in force, then the Sabbath commandment is in force, and the Sabbath commandment is clear about the seventh day being the Sabbath.

Ironically, many Protestants have never given a second thought to whether the Ten Commandments, as a body of law, are binding on Christians. They simply assume it to be true. It is not uncommon for Protestants to display the Ten Commandments on plaques on their walls or have their children memorize them.

The idea that the Ten Commandments, written on tables of stone with the finger of God, might not be binding on Christians would be considered scandalous. Yet, when it comes to the fourth commandment, these same Christians must find a way around the commandment, a way to change the commanded seventh day to the first day.

#### **Day never changed**

There have been a couple of fairly popular ways of “explaining” the supposed day change. One is to interpret the commandment as referring to one day in seven, not necessarily any particular day. Another is to say that the New Testament changed the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first day.

Yet neither of these popular explanations holds water. The commandment is quite specific about the seventh day; the idea of merely “one in seven” simply is not there (see Exodus 20:10). And the Bible never even hints at changing the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first day. Various people meet on the first day of the week, but it is never said to be a day of rest.

## Surprising truth

We know that the law is “holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12), and we know that the Ten Commandments reflect the holy love of God. Yet, surprisingly for many Christians, the Bible teaches that the Ten Commandments have been superseded by something far more glorious — something that God planned from the very beginning would one day outshine completely the law he gave to Israel.

The law (the Torah), the whole law, including the Ten Commandments, was given to Israel, for a specific period of time — the time from their encounter with God on Sinai until the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Once Jesus came, a new law came in — the law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 6:2; 1 John 3:21-24). It was a new covenant relationship, or arrangement, between God and humans, and it was not restricted to the Israelites. It was a covenant with all people.

When this “new deal” came in, the “old deal” expired. From then on, the invitation to God’s kingdom was open to everybody, not just to one people. The first deal, or covenant, was a preparation, a setting of the stage you might say, for the real deal — the new covenant in the blood of Christ.

The first covenant was designed to be for Israel (Galatians 3:23-25), and it was temporary, until just the right moment came. Then God’s plan for drawing humans into his kingdom went into high gear, and his own Son came to be one of us.

## All according to plan

The Sinai covenant, standing as it does between the promise to Abraham and the coming of Christ, was never intended to last forever. It was, rather, a vital phase in God’s plan of fulfilling his promise to Abraham and to all who, like Abraham, believe his word (Galatians 3:7-9). In it, as in every covenant he has made with humans,<sup>2</sup> is the bright reflection of God’s character and love for his people — but the climax was yet to come.

When Jesus Christ arrived, according to God’s promise and in God’s due time (Galatians 4:4-5), humans were confronted with infinitely more than the reflection. They were confronted with the actual character and heart of God in the person of his own Son (Hebrews 1:1-3) and invited to enter his kingdom by putting their faith in him! The Ten Commandments were given to Israel; Jesus Christ was given to the whole world.

The Sinai covenant was intended to shape the faith of the people of God until Messiah (Christ) would come. Then, with his arrival, the Sinai covenant

faded (2 Corinthians 3:7-11), just as God had planned from the beginning, and the “new covenant” (Matthew 26:28) in the blood of Christ began. The time had come for those who would accept and believe the gospel to come under a new administration of the will of God, the administration of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:1-17). From then on, by putting their confidence in Jesus Christ, God’s people would be made righteous by God himself. God would forgive them and change their hearts (Hebrews 8:7-13).

## **Covenant with Israel**

Many people are surprised to find that the Ten Commandments were given to Israel, and not to the rest of the world. It is just commonly assumed among many Christians that the “Big Ten” were designed for all humans and especially for Christians. But the Bible is very plain about who are the recipients of the Sinai law.

The last verse of the book of Leviticus sums it up this way: “These are the commandments the Lord gave Moses on Mount Sinai for the Israelites” (Leviticus 27:34). Verse 46 of the previous chapter gives the same basic information: “These are the decrees, the laws and the regulations that the Lord established on Mount Sinai between himself and the Israelites through Moses.”

These are definitely the commandments of God. But who are they for? They are for the Israelites, given to them by God through Moses on Mount Sinai. They are Israel’s part of the covenant God made with them.

## **Covenant promise**

In passages such as Deuteronomy 29:22-28 and 32:45-46 we find that the primary promise associated with God’s covenant with ancient Israel was a promise of land. If Israel would keep the covenant, they would remain long in the land; if they abandoned the covenant, then they would lose the land.

Someone might ask: “But aren’t the Ten Commandments separate from the covenant? Why are you including them in the covenant?” Deuteronomy 4:13 gives the answer. As he was reminding the Israelites of the events of Sinai, Moses said, “He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets.”

The passage in Deuteronomy 5:1-6 also makes plain that the Ten Commandments and the covenant are not separate. Far from being separate from the covenant, the Ten Commandments form the centerpiece of the covenant.

## **Created to fade**

In 2 Corinthians 3:6-11, Paul draws an analogy between the covenant with Israel, written on tables of stone, and the covenant with believers, written on human hearts. He wrote:

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone [in reference to the Ten Commandments], came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

What God did with the ancient Israelites was glorious. But God was not finished. From day one, he had even greater glory in mind.

## **Right on schedule**

When the time was right, God brought in something even more glorious, so much more glorious that it causes what he did with Israel to look faded by comparison. That is because this new arrangement, which is really just the blossoming, or goal, or climax, or fulfillment of the first arrangement, takes into it all that the first arrangement was and goes exponentially further. It becomes everything the first arrangement pointed toward but was purposely designed only to hint at.

Think of a tiny, hard gray seed that one day, when the time is right, produces a beautiful flower of radiant color, velvet texture and sweet fragrance, and you begin to get something of the idea. This “new covenant” started out as what we call the “old covenant.” You could, in a way, say there is only one covenant, really, but that it grew into something that anyone looking at it when it started could never have imagined it would become. Only God knew exactly where it was headed, and he kept talking about it all through what we call the Old Testament.

## **A superior covenant**

The book of Hebrews gives us even more insight into this new

arrangement. Here we are told, “But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).

This new covenant, or this blossoming of the old, is superior and comes with better promises. The promises that came with the first covenant were promises of land. But the superior promises that come with this superior covenant are no less than eternal life. The basis of this new arrangement is nothing less than the blood of the Son of God — something the old arrangement could not even imagine. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28).

God knew from the start that the people did not have it in them to be a holy people. But they didn’t know that. And in order for people to enter the kingdom of God, they must know their weakness and learn to rely totally on the grace and mercy of God.

To come to Christ is to come to know that you need Christ. You may look good on the outside, but on the inside you, like all other people, are a sinner. The law of Moses, given at Sinai, served to openly condemn everybody as just what they really were in their hearts — rebels and sinners. But then Christ came, and the Sinai law, having served its purpose, faded, and Christ began to shine with eternal light.

## **The law: good, but temporary**

So if the law faded, does that mean the law is bad? Definitely not, Paul says. The law is holy, righteous and good (Romans 7:12). But the law was temporary (2 Corinthians 3:11). It had a role to play, a role given it by God. It was in effect for a specific period of time for a specific people. When Christ came, it was God’s appointed time for the Sinai law to step aside. “Christ is the end of the law,” Paul wrote, “so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4).

When we say that Christ is the end of the law, we don’t mean that the Sinai law was a bad thing that Christ came to destroy. That is not the point Paul is making. Paul is making the point that God gave the Sinai law for a specific time period for a specific purpose, and that purpose has now been fulfilled. He is saying that the law was part of God’s way of setting the stage for Christ to come. Now that Christ has come, the purpose of the law has been fully served.

## **Designed for condemnation**

But what was the purpose of the Sinai law? Paul says the law came in so

that sin could be made all the more evident (Romans 5:20). In other words, God gave the law so that it could be made fully clear to everyone that his people were sinners. But that is not all. The Gentiles, who did not have the law, were also shown to be sinners by their own hearts and consciences on which God writes the requirements of the law (Romans 3:14-15).

Two things were going on at the same time with the law. First, it was through the law that God made his will known to the people he chose. Second, and greater, along with the law as well as in it, God made his promise known.

God knew that Israel, despite the unique advantage of being his special people, would show themselves hostile and rebellious to his will. (The same would have been true of any nation God might have chosen to be his people.) God also knew his own promise of a grace to come, a promise that was greater than the law in that it overcame the verdict of the law.

## **The promise fulfilled**

The law condemned, but the promise, being greater, brought about forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ, who died in the place of sinners (Romans 5:15-17). God himself, in Christ, bears the shame and death of humans resulting from their rebellion and unfaithfulness, as well as provides the obedience and faithfulness they need to be forgiven and saved.

In Christ, God makes it abundantly known that he is not the God of Israel only, but the God of all humans. The barriers of separation between Israel and Gentiles are removed in Christ: both are clearly sinners and both are clearly redeemed. There is no more separation (Ephesians 2:11-18). And since there is no more separation, there is also no more need for the aspects of the law that were designed to create separation: circumcision, the Sabbaths and the purity laws.

## **Laws of separation**

Paul frequently deals with circumcision, and especially so in his letter to the Galatians. In Galatians 5:3, he points out that when Gentiles are circumcised in accord with the law, they are obligated to obey all of the law. That is because circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel.

Likewise, the Sabbath was a sign between God and Israel (Exodus 31:13). The very fact that the Sabbath was a sign designating that Israel was God's special people shows that the Sabbath was not a command for to Gentiles. Gentiles were not sinners for working on the Sabbath; the Sabbath never

pertained to them. They were sinners because of malice, deceit, bitterness, murder, destruction and the like (Romans 3:9-20).

The same is true of the purity laws. They were given to demonstrate the separation between Israel and the Gentiles (Leviticus 20:25-26), a separation that existed only until Jesus came.

That is why there was so much controversy in the early church over rules governing the Jews and Gentiles eating together. Not only were the Jews under the strict dietary and washings rules of the law, they would not even eat with Gentiles in order to avoid ritual contamination. It was over this issue of separation regarding purity laws that Paul rebuked Peter in the meal incident in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-16).

## **The law and the Spirit**

So where does that leave us? We are not under the Sinai law (Romans 6:14). Does that mean that we ought to sin? No, of course not, Paul says (verse 15). We have now been made one with Christ. We are now under his law (1 Corinthians 9:20-21), and we serve God in a new way — the way of the Spirit (Romans 7:4-6).

In the next chapter we look at the relationship between the law and the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> For study papers on the Sabbath and holy day doctrinal change, see the other articles in this book.

<sup>2</sup> God's covenants with humans in the Old Testament include that of Noah (Genesis 9:9-17), of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 15:18; 17:2-21; etc.), of Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19:5; 24:7), of Joshua and Israel (Joshua 24:25), of David (2 Samuel 7:1-17), and the prophesied covenant to come (Jeremiah 31:31).

## **THE LAW AND THE SPIRIT**

In chapter one we saw that the Sinai law, or law of Moses, was God's covenant with ancient Israel and not with the church. We saw that it served a vital purpose in God's plan, and that God designed it to fade when Jesus Christ, whom it foretold and pointed toward, arrived. In this chapter, we will look at the connection between the Sinai law and the law of Christ.

### **Under a new law**

According to the apostle Paul, Christians are not under the Sinai law (Romans 6:14). But what does it mean not to be under the law? Does it mean we ought to sin? "By no means!" Paul answers (verse 15).

Paul is explaining that we have now been made one with Christ, and as such, we now serve God in a new way — the way of the Spirit — not in the old way of the written code (Romans 7:4-6). We are now under a "new law" — the law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21; 1 John 2:3; John 6:28-29; Hebrews 13:21).

The law of Moses — the law given to Israel at Sinai, including the Ten Commandments — was given on the basis of the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 7:11). When Christ came as High Priest forever, he superseded the Levitical priesthood, and with it, the law that was based on it (verse 12). He established a new priesthood, and the law that is based on this new priesthood is the law of Christ (1 John 2:3; 3:21-24; 4:13-21).

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:20 that he was not under the law, referring to the Sinai law. But the fact that he was not under the Sinai law did not mean he was not under God's law, since he was under Christ's law (verse 21).

The Sinai law, which was indeed God's law, has been transcended and superseded by Christ's law, which is also God's law. The Sinai law, the law of Moses, was God's law for Israel until Christ came (Galatians 3:24-25). Then, just as God planned, when Christ came, Christ's law became the law for all peoples. The temporary was replaced, right on schedule, by the permanent.

### **Exposed as sinners**

The Sinai law exposed everyone as sinners (Romans 3:19-20). When Jesus came, it was God's time for sin to be defeated (Hebrews 9:26). That cannot be done by a set of regulations. It can be done only by God. And that is what God has done in Christ (Romans 3:21-26).

In Christ, God became human. He, while remaining sinless and guiltless, took our sin and guilt upon himself, died, and was raised in glory.

That changed everything. Now it is clear to those who believe Jesus' message that God's purpose all along was to open the door of his kingdom to all humans. He has done what no mere human could do and what the law of Moses could not do — he has broken down the impossible barrier between himself and sinful humans.

Now humans are able to accept the invitation to go through that door — to make the decision of faith — to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that trusting and following him is the most important thing in the world (Romans 3:21-22).

## **The law of Christ**

It would be a great mistake to think that the law of Christ is simply a substitution of one set of regulations for another. The law of Christ is not a codified set of regulations, though the New Testament does give us clear descriptions of the kind of conduct that is characteristic of those who are under the law of Christ (Galatians 5:22-26; 6:2; Ephesians 4:20-6:20; Philippians 2:1-18; Colossians 3:1-4:6; etc.).

Far beyond any mere set of rules, the law of Christ constitutes a complete reordering of life, a total change of heart, mind, intent and purpose — a change brought about by the Holy Spirit at work in us. The law of Christ is identical with the law of God, and it is what the law of Moses, which was temporary, always pointed toward (Romans 3:21-22; 1 Peter 1:10-11; John 5:39-40, 45-46; Luke 24:44-47).

The law of Christ, which is also the law of God (1 Corinthians 9:20-21), can be summarized by two overarching commands: “This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us” (1 John 3:23).

## **Greatest commandment**

By obeying the law of Christ, which is identical with the law of God, we are fulfilling what Jesus called the “greatest commandments” of the law of Moses. Jesus was asked, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:36-40).

Jesus said that when we put our faith in him, we are demonstrating our love for the Father (John 5:23; 8:42), which fulfills the first of the two greatest commandments of the law of Moses. When we obey Jesus' command to love one another (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17), we are fulfilling the second of the two greatest commandments of the law of Moses.

But there is much more to the law of Christ. If it were simply a matter of doing these things on our own, we would surely fail, as we do not have what it takes.

## **Remaining in Christ**

Under the law of Christ, when we obey Jesus' commands by putting our belief and confidence in him, the Holy Spirit comes to make his home in us (John 14:15-17, 21). When the Holy Spirit lives in us, the Father and the Son are also living in us (verse 23), because God is one.

As we remain in Christ, the true "vine," we bear fruit, but only because we are in him (John 15:1-8). It is for this reason that Paul is able to say:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:1-4)

## **Righteousness apart from law**

To the church at Rome, Paul declared boldly: "But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets" (Romans 3:21). Because we are in Christ, God not only forgives our sins, he also provides the righteousness believers need — his own righteousness — and it is a righteousness that does not come from observing the Sinai law. It is a God-given righteousness — a righteousness that comes only by faith in God's own Son, something Paul says the Old Testament Scriptures had actually been declaring from the beginning.

Paul continued, "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (verse 22). Once Jesus came, the real meaning of all the Scriptures was revealed — salvation comes to humans only by faith in Jesus. The law of Moses proved everyone sinners; in Christ everyone who

believes is saved, and saved apart from that law.

In short, we are saved because God is righteous, not because we are righteous. God's righteousness, his faithfulness to his covenant promise to Abraham, was attested to by the Law and Prophets (the Old Testament) and has been made fully manifest in Jesus' death and resurrection. God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, transforms us sinners into his own forgiven and redeemed children through faith in Jesus Christ.

Christ is our righteousness — he is our wisdom, our holiness, our redemption and our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30). This righteousness, which alone is true righteousness, is not our own, but God's, and it comes only from God and only by faith (Philippians 3:9).

You see, what Paul wrote in Romans 3:28 is not negated by what he wrote in verse 31. Paul is not contradicting himself. In verse 28 he wrote: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." In verse 31 he wrote: "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law."

Paul means what he says. We are not made righteous by keeping the law given at Sinai. We are made righteous only by faith in Christ. When Christ came, the purpose of the Sinai law was achieved. "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4).

Christ was the fulfillment of the Sinai law. He was its goal, its end, its purpose. By God's design, that law was preparing Israel for Christ, and through Israel the whole world was being prepared for Christ. But the Jews Paul was writing about retained the Sinai law, and in so doing, they had no room for accepting Christ. In rejecting Christ, they entirely missed the point of what Jesus called "their law" (John 15:25).

## **The law and the Spirit**

The Sinai law served to condemn human rebellion against God — but through God's own loving initiative in Jesus Christ, the Spirit is now at work to transform rebellious hearts into faithful hearts (Romans 5:20-21). The law of Christ commands a life of faith in Christ that is led by the Spirit — a life confident of God's gracious love toward us and marked by self-sacrificial love toward God and fellow humans (1 John 3:21-24).

Believers are under the law of Christ, under the Spirit — not under the Sinai law — and as such they are not considered sinners, because the Spirit makes believers into children of God, people in whom God lives, and who love with God's love. "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count

against him,” Paul recites in regard to believers (see Romans 5:4-8).

Many people find that too hard to believe. They ask: “Why would God just ‘count’ believers righteous, even though they still sin? Why would he simply not count their sins against them? God doesn’t just pretend we are righteous. Surely there is something I must do. Surely I must stop sinning before God will count me righteous.”

But that is just Paul’s point. If we can be righteous ourselves, then we do not need God. Yet the real state of things is that we cannot be righteous ourselves, and we do need God. Alone, we are pitiful, wretched and hopeless sinners. Only God can make us righteous, and he loves us so much that he has taken the steps to do just that. He does it because he is good. He does it by his grace, not because we deserve it, because we don’t. We have no righteousness of our own, and the only pathway to God’s righteousness is through faith in Christ. By his grace through faith in Christ, God forgives our sins and imputes Jesus’ righteousness to us.

## **Faith in the promise**

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is strong. He knew that if they listened to the so-called Judaizers and placed themselves under the Sinai law, they were choosing not to have faith in Christ (Galatians 5:2-3). They would be rejecting Christ and the law of Christ. They would be missing the central point of the now-faded law of Moses.

As Jesus had said, if the Jews had believed Moses, they would have believed Jesus, because the law of Moses was designed deliberately to declare his coming (John 5:46-47; Luke 24:45-46). The Mosaic law was in force for a specific period of time, from Sinai till Christ.

When Christ appeared, everything for which God had been preparing the world was revealed. When Christ was raised from the dead, everything God had promised Israel was fulfilled (Acts 13:32). Even the promises God gave to David were designed to be fulfilled by the resurrection of Jesus (verse 34). This astounding mystery of the ages was revealed — yet many of those who had the law chose to reject what God was revealing (verses 38-41).

## **Not by the law**

God wants his people to love like he loves, not merely to conform to standards of conduct and rituals of separation. Jesus repeatedly condemned those who conformed to the letter of the law but whose hearts were without the love of God.

God wants us to have a new heart, a heart of belief, a heart in which the Spirit dwells. Only the Holy Spirit produces God’s love in us (Romans 5:5)

and enables us to keep the law of Christ (1 John 3:21-24). The Spirit comes only by belief. The Spirit does not come by keeping the law (Galatians 3:2-5). That is why Paul teaches that the Sinai law must step aside to make room for the new way of the Spirit, the way of the law of Christ.

Some have misunderstood Acts 5:32 (“We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”) to mean that God gives his Spirit only to those who keep the Sinai law. As we have just seen in Galatians 3:2-5, however, we do not receive the Spirit by observing the law. We receive the Spirit only by faith in Jesus Christ. That is precisely the point Peter made in Acts 5:32.

Peter was replying to orders of the Jewish council not to preach in Jesus’ name. Peter declared that Jesus’ disciples must obey God, who commanded them to preach faith in Jesus, and not people who order them to stop (verses 27-31). The obedience Peter is referring to is not obedience to the Sinai law, but obedience to the new thing God had done in sending his Son so that whoever believes in him would not perish, but have everlasting life.

## **New heart needed**

Many people are good at keeping certain rules. But if the love of God is not in their hearts, then their success at keeping rules has a way of turning their hearts sour. Without God’s love, they turn into sharp-eyed judges of the failings of others. They become prideful and arrogant, and begin to get the idea that the kingdom of God is meant only for them, “the obedient ones,” and not for sinners. They begin to see themselves as better than sinners.

The better they keep the rules, the more and more obscure their own sinfulness becomes to them. Their own need for a Savior becomes less plain, and they begin to imagine a great spiritual rift between themselves and ordinary people. (If you have been a Christian for long, you have probably experienced that tendency in yourself from time to time. I suspect we all do.)

## **Led by the Spirit**

When the love of God penetrates the heart, however, believers find two remarkable things happening at once. First, they are pleasantly surprised to realize that it is beginning to feel somewhat natural to desire the things of God. Second, they are chagrined and grieved to begin to notice the seemingly hopeless extent of the twisted network of hidden wickedness in their hearts.

That is because the Spirit is at work. The Spirit, through the law of Christ, is rewiring us, so to speak, so that we begin to appreciate and love the things God loves. At the same time, the opposite side of the same coin you might say, he begins to illuminate the dark corners of our hearts, so we can see in

God's light what is really going on in there.

The struggle is on. The believer is a citizen of the eternal kingdom, and as such, he or she walks with Christ with a keen sense of being in need of God's inexhaustible mercy and grace. But he or she also begins to sense the presence of the limitless power of Christ to give help in forsaking the selfish and hateful ways of the former life. New, godly habits begin to form, and old, ungodly habits begin to fade.

## **Taught by Christ**

We are learning to walk in the divine love God has given us. The Teacher, of course, is Christ. That is what it means to be Christ's disciples. It means to be his students.

Christ is also the living Word of God. The Holy Spirit has inspired the Bible to be an indispensable means of communicating the inner life of Christ to us. That is why Christians make Bible reading, study and meditation a central part of their daily lives.

As we read the Bible, asking God to bless our understanding and to help us hear his voice for us, God teaches us, rebukes us, corrects us, trains us in righteousness and equips us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Through this means and others, including the Lord's Supper (John 6:53-57) and through the faithful teaching of church leaders (Ephesians 4:11-16), God continually leads us into an ever-deepening communion with him.

## **Motivated by grace**

Paul knew that the grace of God, when we accept it, is effective in motivating us toward a godly life in ways the law of Moses could never be. He wrote these words to Titus:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

## **Sabbath fulfilled in Christ**

We have seen that Christians are not under the law given at Mount Sinai, which was a temporary expression of the law of God for Israel until Christ

came, but rather are under the law of Christ, which is the law of God forever.

We have seen that Christians are led by the Holy Spirit, who makes his home in believers and teaches us to live by the Word of God. In chapter three we will look more closely at the Sabbath day and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

**Christians are under the law of God,  
but not under the form of it given at Sinai**

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law [the Law given at Sinai] I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. (1 Corinthians 9:20-21)

**Implications**

- Jews were under the law (v. 20).
- Gentiles did not have the law (v. 21).
- Paul was not under the law (v. 20).
- Even though Paul was not under the law, he could be *like* one who was under the law (v. 20).
- The law was not binding on Paul, because he could be like one who does not have the law (v. 21).
- Paul was not free from God's law, because he was under Christ's law (v. 21).
- “The law” and “God's law” are not identical, because Paul was not under “the law” but *was* under “God’s law” in the form of “Christ's law” (v. 21).
- “The law” and “Christ's law” are not identical, but God's law and Christ’s law are identical (vv. 20-21).
- Christians are under Christ's law.
- Christians are not under “the law.”

The Law	The Law of Christ
Glorious (2 Cor. 3:7)	Immeasurably more glorious (2 Cor. 3:10)

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL

Temporary (2 Cor. 3:11; Gal. 3:19)	Permanent (2 Cor. 3:11; Rom. 5:9-11)
Springs from the law of God (Gal. 3:19-21)	Is identical with the law of God (1 Cor. 9:21)
Demonstrated human failure (Rom. 3:20; 5:20; 7:13)	Constitutes human success (Rom. 7:6; 8:3-4)
A precursor (Gal. 3:23-25; Rom. 3:21; John 5:39-40)	The end result (Gal. 3:23-25; Rom. 3:21-26)
Not rooted in faith (Gal. 3:12)	Rooted in faith (Gal. 3:24; Rom. 3:22; 5:1-2; 1 John 3:23)
Written on stone (2 Cor. 3:7)	Written on human hearts (Heb. 8:10)
Designed to fade (2 Cor. 3:11)	Designed to last forever (2 Cor. 3:11)

## Reflection

What does it mean to be “under the law”?

What “law” has superseded the law given at Sinai to Israel?

What does it mean to be “under Christ’s law”?

What is the “greatest commandment” of God’s law? Explain how this law operates within us.

What does Romans 10:4 mean when it says Christ is “the end of the law”?

Is conforming to standards of moral conduct enough to be counted as pleasing to God under the new covenant?

## ENTERING GOD'S REST

In chapter two, we saw that the law given to Israel at Sinai, which includes the Ten Commandments, was designed to last only until Christ came. We saw that Christians are not under that law, but rather are under the law of Christ and are led by the Holy Spirit. Now, we will look more closely at the Sabbath day and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

### Natural question

The question seventh-day sabbatarians have taken seriously is this: “Since the law given at Sinai is the law of God, then why shouldn’t we, as Christians, keep it as it is written?” Indeed, that is the issue at hand. If God commands, his people should obey. But the answer that sabbatarians have been taught is the wrong answer. They have been taught that since the law given at Sinai is the law of God, then Christians should keep it, and since the seventh-day Sabbath command is part of the law of God given at Sinai, then Christians are commanded to keep it, too. That is not the biblical answer.

The biblical answer is that the law given at Sinai, including the Sabbath command, was the law of God *for Israel* (Leviticus 26:46; Deuteronomy 4:13), and it was the law of God for Israel *until* Christ came (Galatians 3:19). It was not the law of God for all people, nor was it the law of God for all time. It was for Israel; it was temporary; it was in force until Christ, and when he arrived it was transcended and therefore it faded (2 Corinthians 3:7-11). It is no wonder that John, writing some 60 years after the resurrection of Jesus, was inspired to use such terms as “Jewish Passover” (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55), “Jewish Feast of Tabernacles” (John 7:2), and “feast of the Jews” (John 5:1) in references to annual festivals. Now that Christ, the Object and Purpose of the law of Moses, had come, it was clear to John that the feasts of the law were not intended for Christians. They were, rather, feasts of the Jews.

### Using the law

The Sinai law is no longer the instructor of God’s people (Galatians 3:24-25). Our instructor is Christ, who instructs us through the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). We are not under the Sinai law (1 Corinthians 9:20-21). We are under the law of Christ (1 John 3:21-24). Still, the Spirit uses the law of Moses as one of the ways he instructs us. This is important to understand. It is right to say that Christians are not under the law of Moses: Paul makes that plain in

passages such as Romans 7:6 and 1 Corinthians 9:20.

However, it is also right to say that Christians fulfill the law of Moses. They do not fulfill the law in the sense that they keep it as it was given to Israel and in the way Israel was commanded to keep it. But they do fulfill it in the sense of what God was driving at with the law, that is, the real intent and purpose that was always behind the details of the law.

Numerous descriptions of godly behavior, consistent with the law of Christ, which is the law of God for Christians (1 Corinthians 9:20-21), are given in the New Testament (for example, Galatians 5:13-6:10; Ephesians 4:20-6:20; Colossians 3:1-4:6). These descriptions of the new life in Christ go much deeper than the Ten Commandments. They reach deeply into the intents of the heart, where the Spirit of God is at work to fashion us into the image of Christ.

## **Fulfilling the law**

Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment in the law of Moses. He replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40).

On another occasion Jesus said, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). When he was giving instruction about Christian conduct to the Roman Christians, Paul wrote this:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

## **Not inconsistent**

Now we can begin to see what Jesus meant when he said he did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). To put our trust in Jesus and follow him in the life of godly love is the only way to be the true and real people of God (Galatians 3:26-27). Only when we are one with Christ are we

in fact walking in faithfulness to the covenant between God and his people, because only Christ is faithful to God. If we are to be counted faithful, we must be counted with him.

Who, then, puts his love in us and comes to dwell in us to teach us? God himself. Whatever God teaches us in person is not inconsistent with the law he gave Israel. The same God deals with all humans in the way that is in harmony with his plan.

So the Sinai law is instructive and useful for Christians, because it reflects the heart of God for his people Israel as a nation. Yet, as we have seen in previous chapters, that law, as written, was specific to ancient Israel. Because it was specific to ancient Israel, many of its details are not intended for Christians, such as the priesthood, tabernacle and temple worship, land rests, dress requirements and seasonal celebrations. The seventh-day Sabbath is another example. That commandment was a temporary pointer to something permanent that has now become available through faith in Christ.

## The Sabbath

But isn't it a good thing for people to rest from secular work once a week and devote that day to God? I doubt many Christians would argue against the value of taking a day off and using it to spend focused time with God. But that is not the real question for sabbatarians. Their real question is, "Doesn't God command us to keep the weekly Sabbath day?" The answer to that question is "No." God did command the Israelites to keep the weekly Sabbath day, but he never commanded the weekly Sabbath for anyone else.

The weekly Sabbath, as a sign between God and Israel, identified the Israelites as God's own people until Jesus came. When Jesus came, he opened the door to the real thing that the Sabbath command only presaged or foreshadowed. The real thing is for everybody, not just for Israel. The real thing is God's own rest — the kingdom of God — and Jesus now invites all peoples to enter that rest through faith in him.

The book of Hebrews tells us that Christians have entered into that reality of which the Sabbath command, now superseded, was only a precursor. God is interested in our entering his own rest, the eternal Sabbath, and his own rest is not a day of the week. The day of the week *symbolized* the rest God entered with his creation when he finished his creation work, but God's rest did not end (Hebrews 4:3), and, paradoxically, it was a rest in which he continued to work (John 5:17).

## **Entering God's rest**

This eternal, spiritual rest is the rest God offers believers, and it is a rest that is entered, not by setting aside one day a week, but by faith, by believing in the One whom God has sent (Hebrews 4:3). Many Christians make the mistake of thinking that the weekly Sabbath was changed from the seventh day, Saturday, to the first day, Sunday. In other words, they apply the Sabbath commandment to Sunday. But the Bible makes no such change.

In the Bible, the Christian Sabbath is not a day of the week. The Christian Sabbath is the kingdom life believers enter through faith in Christ. It is not one day in seven — it is the entire sum of one's life in Christ forevermore. The Bible is telling us that God invites humans to enter his own never-ending rest, the Sabbath rest in which kingdom work is the only kind of work that is done.

## **The real thing**

While the weekly Sabbath was important and had its vital place for a time, now that Christ has come, God doesn't want us to be content with a mere precursor — he wants us to have the real thing (Colossians 2:16-17). The precursor hinted at the real thing. It was a sort of glimpse into the eternal rest that God would one day make available through the Messiah. But now that the real thing is here and available, there is no point in insisting that we still need the hint.

Paul was very insistent about this with the Gentile believers in the Galatian churches. They were being told by certain Jews that they could not belong to the people of God unless they were circumcised and kept the law. Paul says, "Not so!" To be bound to the Sinai law is to be not bound to Christ.

The law cannot save. It can only declare that all are sinners (Galatians 3:19). Its role is ended (verses 23-25). Believers are bound to Christ, and not to the law of Moses (4:24-31). The two do not match; they are not on the same level (5:2-6). One supplants the other. The old must fade away in favor of the new (2 Corinthians 3:7-11). The tree cannot grow unless the seed dies and sprouts. The glory of the second is so much greater than the glory of the first that the first has no glory in comparison. The law of Christ supplants the law of Moses (John 1:17).

## **Whole counsel of God**

The whole counsel of God in the light of Christ regarding the Sabbath is

that God's rest is no mere 24-hour day, but rather it is eternal life — the life of the new creation in Christ. It is entered in the here and now through faith in the Son of God (Colossians 1:13-14), and after death, we will enjoy it forever with glorified bodies like that of Christ (Philippians 3:21) doing the works of God in union and harmony with him in a new heavens and new earth.

That is one reason it is so empty to insist that the weekly Sabbath day commandment is still in effect. To do so is the same thing as saying that we don't believe that the real rest is now available. It amounts to the same thing as insisting that the sacrificial commands are still in effect, or that the clean and unclean meat laws and other purity laws are still in effect. To say that would be like saying that we don't believe the real sacrifice has been made, or that the real cleansing has happened.

It is a little like telling the bus driver that I still need the bus token to remind me that there really is a bus and that I am really on the bus. "But I can't let you on the bus unless you give me the token," the driver would say. "If I give you back the token you will have to get off the bus. That token has no other purpose but to get you on the bus. Now that you are on, that token is canceled." (It's only an analogy; if it helps, great; if it doesn't, toss it.)

Sabbatarians fully understand the point about the sacrifices. They know that the sacrificial commands are made obsolete by the once-for-all sacrifice of the Lamb of God. But the concept that the real rest is now available through Jesus to all who believe is not something they are prepared to accept. One reason is that many sabbatarian teachers have missed the point of the book of Hebrews, especially in its discussion of the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God.

## **The rest that remains**

A reading of Hebrews 3 and 4 shows us that the Israelites who died in the wilderness did not enter the rest God had for them in the land of promise. The reason they did not enter that rest was that they did not believe the promise of God (Hebrews 3:19). The story in Numbers 13 and 14 and Psalm 95 shows us that they did not believe that God could and would do what he said he would do for them. They did not believe that God would rout the Canaanites before them and give them the land. They didn't trust him.

Using this story of Israelite unbelief as its illustration, Hebrews 3:12 warns Christians, "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." The point is made plainly that trust in God is required in order to enter God's promised rest. The specific

disobedience that God's people are being warned about here is the disobedience of unbelief or lack of faith.

Further, the specific faith being called for in the book of Hebrews is faith in Jesus Christ for salvation (Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:1, 14; 10:19-23). And there is something else we should notice. The Promised Land of the Israelites is called God's rest (Hebrews 3:11, 18).

The weekly Sabbath day pictured and pointed to a future rest far bigger than one day a week — even for ancient Israel. It pointed toward the “rest” of entering, possessing and dwelling in the Promised Land. But there is an even bigger surprise. That rest of dwelling safely in the Promised Land, the rest at last entered only by those Israelites who believed God, was not even the final rest. “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day” (Hebrews 4:8). There was still a rest for the people of God, a final rest that all previous rests could only point toward.

“Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (Hebrews 4:1). Who enters this final and greatest rest? “Now we who have believed enter that rest...” (verse 3). How can our entrance into that rest be challenged? By following the Israelite example of the disobedience of unbelief (verse 11).

God set a certain day for ancient Israel under Joshua, calling it “Today,” when they could through faith enter the rest he had prepared for them in the Promised Land (Hebrews 3:7-11). The previous generation had not been allowed to enter because of their unbelief.

Later, through the words of David, God set another day, also calling it “Today,” when the people of God who would believe him could enter the rest prepared for them (4:7). The Sabbath-rest that remains for the people of God (4:9) is a rest entered through faith in Christ, and it consists of eternal salvation. It is God's rest. It is the kingdom of heaven, the reign of Christ. We do not enter it through our own works (4:10), but through faith (4:3).

## Coming to the point

What is the point, then, of this passage in Hebrews about entering God's rest? Anytime we read a “Therefore” in Scripture we should read carefully what precedes it, because the “therefore” is the point of what has come before. Hebrews 4:14 reads, “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.” The whole point of the discussion about rest is that we hold firmly to faith in Christ.

It is the point of the whole Bible: Believe in Jesus. The point of Hebrews 4 is not that the weekly Sabbath commandment given to ancient Israel is

binding on Christians, as sabbatarian teachers try to say. Such a concept as that works against the entire message of the Bible. The Messiah has come. The shadowy figures have been obliterated by the brightness of the noonday sun.

## **Loss of rest**

When God finished the work of creation, he took rest in the good things he had made (Genesis 2:2; 3:8), and he gave Adam and Eve rest with him in the Garden (Genesis 2:8-9). It did not take painful toil to make the garden produce. They simply enjoyed its fruit as they took care of the ever abundant Garden, and rested in the joy of their free and unrestricted communion with God.

But then sin entered, and with it alienation from God (Genesis 3:1-10). Adam and Eve were no longer at rest with God. They were expelled from the Garden and had to live by the sweat of their brow (Genesis 3:17-19). In due time, God called Abraham and promised him that his descendants would one day inherit the land God showed him (Genesis 15:12-21). And much more than that, God promised Abraham that through his seed, everybody in the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:8).

Some 430 years later, God sent Moses to lead those descendants out of Egypt, where they had become slaves, into the Promised Land. Through Moses, God made a covenant with them in the Sinai desert (Deuteronomy 4:13; 9:11).

## **Entering the rest**

The sign of the covenant was the weekly Sabbath day (Exodus 31:13). Every seventh day, the people of Israel were to rest from physical labor (Exodus 20:8-10). They would remember that God created everything there is, and that there was once a time when humans were at rest with God in his creation (Exodus 20:11-12). They would remember that humans rejected God's reign over them and became alienated from him.

The Israelites would also remember that they had been slaves in Egypt, crying out under forced labor with no rest (Deuteronomy 5:15). By resting from work on the seventh day, the Israelites experienced a taste of the divine rest — what life would be like if humans believed God and trusted in him for everything, if they were again at rest with their Creator.

The weekly Sabbath was the sign of God's covenant with Israel. The body and blood of Jesus Christ are the sign of God's covenant with everyone who believes the gospel (John 6:53-57; Luke 22:19-20; Hebrews 10:19-20). The weekly Sabbath was a foretaste of the divine rest in Christ (Colossians 2:16-

17). Through faith in him, we enter the divine rest (Hebrews 4:3).

## Jesus is greater

In order for Israel to remain in the Promised Land, they had to continue to honor the Sabbath day (Isaiah 58:13-14). So, one might reason, doesn't it make sense that in order for us to remain in possession of eternal life in the here and now kingdom of God, we should also continue to keep the Sabbath day? No, it doesn't. We have possession of the gift of eternal life only one way — by faith in Jesus Christ.

That is precisely the point of Hebrews. In Christ, God has made a new covenant with humans. It is so much greater than the old one, that everything that came before is both taken up in it and completely transcended by it, so much so that the former covenant and everything that pertained to it are now obsolete (Hebrews 8:6-13). The book of Hebrews is a declaration of the utter superiority of Jesus Christ to everything anybody had ever thought to put religious stock or value in, and an admonition to put all our confidence and trust in him. In Christ, all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:17-18).

## Message of Hebrews

Consider what the book of Hebrews tells us: Jesus is superior to all previous forms of divine communication (1:1). Jesus is the exact representation of God's own being. He is God's agent of Creation, the sustainer and ruler of the universe and the redeemer of sins (1:2-3). Jesus is superior to the angels (1:4-14). Only Jesus saves his people, with whom he identifies and for whom he suffers (2:1-18). Keep your trust in Jesus, who is superior to Moses (3:1-6). Christians enter God's promised rest only by trusting in Jesus (3:7-4:13). Jesus is superior to the Israelite priesthood (4:14-5:10).

We inherit the promises of God through faith in Christ and patience in suffering (5:11-6:12). Our hope is secure and certain because of Jesus (6:13-20). Jesus is superior to the high priests of old, and the covenant he mediates is superior to theirs and has superior promises (7:1-10:18). Because all these things are true, let us put our confidence, trust and faith in Jesus alone, enduring all trials and hardships with our eyes fixed on him (10:19-12:12).

## Two mountains

In summary, we find that we, as Christians, have not come "to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire," that is, we have not come to Mount Sinai (12:18). Quite the contrary, we have come to "Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (verse 22). We have

come to “thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.”

We have come “to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect. To Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (12:22-24).

This is God’s rest, the rest that remains for the people of God, the inheritance of the saints — and we have already entered it. “See to it that you do not refuse the one who speaks” from this mountain, Mount Zion, we are admonished.

Our hearts are strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods. We eat from a new altar, an altar from which the former covenant offers no right to eat. We look for the Jerusalem to come; the former city has no place for us. Our sacrifices are sacrifices of praise, and they are offered through Jesus by lips that confess his name. The fruit of our lives is the fruit of love as God works in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ (12:25-13:21).

The point of Hebrews is definitely not to command Christians to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. The point of Hebrews is to urge and admonish Christian believers to maintain their faith in Jesus Christ despite all opposition and under no circumstances bow to pressure, even deadly pressure, from the synagogues to give up their faith in Jesus for something now weak and inferior that God has transcended through his own Son.

## **Spiritual discipline**

Some Christians refrain from secular work one day a week as a personal spiritual discipline to help them find special time for spiritual devotion. This is fine, but it is not the same as believing that the weekly Sabbath is commanded for Christians. It is also not the same thing as pushing the idea on others that they will be more obedient or more faithful to God if they set aside a Sabbath day. What we choose to do as a personal spiritual exercise is a completely different matter from what is a law for all believers.

No longer does the Sinai law define the people of God. Now, neither circumcision, nor Sabbaths, nor dietary restrictions are signs of who belongs to the heavenly Father’s kingdom. Instead, God has made Jews and Gentiles his own people through a new means — Jesus Christ. Paul wrote:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through

the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away [Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [Jews]. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. (Ephesians 2:14-18)

Christians are not under the Sinai law, but are under the law of Christ and are led by the Holy Spirit. The Christian Sabbath is not a day of the week, but our eternal rest in Jesus Christ. In chapter four, we will look at the purpose and content of worship.

## Reflection

- Was the law of God for ancient Israel temporary or for all people who have ever lived?
- What law or principle sums up all of the Old Testament teaching in the Law and Prophets?
- To what did the physical Sabbath rest given in the law point?
- To what kind of “rest” does the phrase in Hebrews 4:9, “there remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God,” refer?
- Since Jesus kept the Sabbath as Jews of his day did, why isn’t his action an example for Christians?
- Why doesn’t Jesus’ statement in Mark 2:27 tell us that all people and nations should keep the physical Sabbath rest?

## **THE OBJECT OF WORSHIP**

The law given to ancient Israel was designed to last only until Christ came, and it should not be confused with the law of Christ given to the church. The Christian Sabbath is not a day of the week, but our eternal rest in Jesus Christ. In this article, we will look at aspects of the purpose and content of Christian worship.

### **Worship in the Old Testament**

No human activity has greater relevance and meaning than that of the worship of God. There is much to learn about how we can worship more effectively today by looking at how the people of God have worshiped in the past.

The Old Testament is a treasure trove of instruction about God and worship. It is primarily from the Old Testament that we learn what we know about this invisible Being we call God. In the Old Testament we learn that God is unapproachable by anything or anyone unclean, or anyone tainted by sin. In order for the people of Israel to come into the presence of God, they had to undergo careful and detailed rituals of sacrifice and cleansing from sin.

In the Old Testament, we learn about God's holiness, his absolute perfection and complete "otherness" from all created things. God is revealed as so bright that he must "clothe" himself with dark clouds in order for the Israelites not to be destroyed by his mere presence on Mount Sinai.

### **Free and faithful**

In the Old Testament we learn that God comes and goes in the affairs of humans as he pleases, not as humans decide. We learn that God is the architect and maker of all that is, and that everything has its being and continued existence only in him.

We learn that God is not manipulated by rituals, magic, sacrifices or incantations like the gods of the nations around Israel. We learn that God is completely and eternally faithful, that he loves his people with a steadfast love, and that he makes promises and keeps his word. We learn that nothing can keep God from doing what he decides to do. And we learn that God's purpose is to save and redeem broken men and women, to heal the weak, to lift up the weary.

We learn that God cares about and is intimately involved in every detail

of his created universe. We learn that even though sin is catastrophically destructive to human beings, God does not forget his work, and he acts to save and repair and set humans right so they can be restored to him.

We learn that humans are helpless without God, that everything humans do is possible only because God allows them to have their own way. We learn that God wants people to love him and obey him because that is how they can have and achieve everything for which their souls truly long and become everything they were created to be.

We learn that God prizes and values the people he has made, and that it grieves God's heart to see people destroying themselves and others by their evil deeds and their evil hearts. Above all, we learn that God decided long ago that at the right time he would act powerfully and decisively, in accord with his covenant faithfulness, to redeem and heal humans from their sin and rebellion.

## **Israel learns to worship**

The people of Israel were given precise instructions about how they must go about worship of the one true God. These instructions were designed to teach the Israelites that God is completely unlike the gods of Egypt and completely unlike all the gods they would encounter in the nations around them or in the lands they would possess.

As they followed God's instructions for worship, the Israelites learned that God is perfect and holy, that he is good and faithful, that he is never deceived or tricked, that he knows everything, and that impurity cannot even come into his presence. They learned that he is subject to nothing and nobody, that all things are subject to him, and that he is to be worshiped on his own terms.

They also learned that God is personal, and that there are degrees of intimacy humans can have with him. The tabernacle, and the temple that replaced it, had an outer court, an inner court, the holy place and finally, the most intimate place of all, the holy of holies. No one was permitted to come that close to God except the high priest, and even then only once a year, and only after intensive purification rites.

Through this elaborate system of worship, Israel learned that God is absolutely holy, and that it is impossible for a person to come to God unless God makes it possible. They also learned that the most intimate relationship with God is possible only through the high priest, who represents the people before God and must be as ritually pure as possible.

When the Israelites left Egypt, their concepts about divinity were heavily

influenced by the Egyptians and the other nations of the region. There was much to learn. The table at the end of this article illustrates a number of aspects of the education about himself that God revealed to Israel and preserved through them for the world in the Old Testament.

## **Worship in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, something completely new happened. Yet even in its stark newness, what God did in Christ was nevertheless in complete harmony with everything he had done before. Just as the Israelites learned that only one person, the high priest whom God appointed to represent the people, could come into the most intimate presence of God, so Christians learn that only by being identified with Jesus Christ, God's own Son, can they come into the presence of God.

Jesus is our High Priest. He represents us before God. In him only can we come into intimate fellowship with God. That is the meaning of the Lord's Supper — a profound object lesson of our identification, or unity, with the sinless Son of God, our perfect and eternal High Priest.

Jesus is everything to us and for us. He is our perfect High Priest; through him we can come into intimate personal fellowship with God. He is our perfect Prophet, who declares to our innermost being the perfect and certain Word of God.

He is our perfect sacrificial Lamb, whose slaughter purifies completely our sins and our consciences so that we can enter into the "holy of holies" with him. He is our perfect King, who rules us in perfect righteousness, wisdom, justice and mercy. He is our perfect Teacher, who instructs us perfectly in the ways of God.

## **Barrier destroyed**

When Mark recorded in his Gospel that the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom, he was recording much more than the mere tearing of a piece of cloth. The veil was the curtain that separated the holy place in the temple from the holy of holies. When Jesus died, the barrier between God and humans was destroyed. In Jesus, and in Jesus alone, humans may now enter freely into the "holy of holies," that is, into the most intimate communion with God that is possible for redeemed humans (see Hebrews 9 and 10; Mark 15:38).

In the New Testament, worship is no longer defined by the regulations of the old covenant. That is not because those regulations were faulty. It is because those regulations had served their purpose. Through the rituals and

regulations of temple-centered worship, God taught the Israelites, and through the Israelites the world, who he is and how humans can be restored to their original purpose and standing with him.

## **World prepared**

In the fullness of time, Paul writes, God sent his Son, born of a woman (Galatians 4:4). Think of that! God sent his own divine Son to become one of us, so that *through him*, the perfect, sinless sacrificial Lamb, we might be cleansed of our sinfulness and brought into harmony and communion with God.

God had prepared the world for this *time of all times*. Through the people of Israel and his covenant with them, God had prepared a lineage through which his Son would be born. *He had also prepared the context, through Israel's worship of him, necessary for the world to understand who Jesus was.*

Had there been no promises to Abraham, no Israel and no Exodus, no covenant, no priesthood and no prescribed worship form, no captivity, no Davidic royal lineage and no messianic promise, then there would have been no context in which the world could rightly understand who God was, who Jesus was, and how Jesus' death and resurrection could be the salvation of the world (see box).

## **God acts, the people respond**

When Christians come together in worship, they are responding to the grace and power of God in their individual and corporate lives. God acts; the people respond. This is the essence of Christian worship: the response of the people of God to what God has done.

This response — the corporate worship of the people of God — involves some form. The people gather at particular places and particular times and participate in worship in particular ways. Through this means, the people of God respond to God together in humility — to his holy majesty and righteousness, his power and glory, his grace and mercy, and his great acts of salvation.

They recall what God has done, take joy in what he is doing, and look forward to what he will yet do. They rehearse, re-enact, participate, proclaim and celebrate. They listen to his Word. They

confess, repent and intercede. They praise, rejoice and give thanks.

The Israelites were given a temporary *form* or system of worship appropriate to the *content* of that worship. That form, described in the law of Moses, enabled the Israelites to respond in worship to the miraculous things God had done for them — saving them from Egypt, bringing them into the Promised Land and making them his own people. That form of worship was to last until Jesus came, and then to fade.

Then, just as God had planned from the very beginning (Ephesians 3:9), through Jesus Christ he did something amazingly new and transcendent, both for Israel and for all peoples everywhere. As a result, the worship practices of God’s people demanded a new response to the new thing God had done.

## **A new act demands a new response**

Just as Isaiah had prophesied, at the fullness of time God did a new thing (Isaiah 43:19) — he sent his Son. The response of the people of God to this new thing is a fitting new response. A new response to a new thing demands new worship content — content that must be carried out in appropriately new forms. In other words, the new wine of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to

Note: The church is the new Israel in Jesus Christ, the dynamic continuation of the Old Testament people of God, a new community of faith *without national or racial walls*, transformed and empowered for God’s service by the Holy Spirit. Peter expressed the Christian understanding of the church as the people of God in 1 Peter 2:9-10: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy” (New Revised Standard Version).

be placed into new wineskins, new containers or structures (Matthew 9:17).

Old covenant worship forms have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus brought something new to the worship of God. Since worship is the response of God's people to his mighty acts of salvation and grace, *the content and form of worship is a direct reflection of the fundamental beliefs of God's people.*

Jesus summarized the essence of Christian belief in Luke 24:44-48:

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

Likewise, Paul recorded the heart of the Christian faith in his letter to the church at Corinth: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve" (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

## **New content, new form**

A comparison of the biblical creeds of the people of God under the old and the new covenants illustrates the passing of the old and the arrival of the new. The old covenant people of God remembered and celebrated the great power and grace of God displayed in their miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt and gift of the land promised to the patriarchs.

The new covenant people of God, on the other hand, remember and celebrate the great power and grace of God displayed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is the defining point of our salvation. The content and form of our worship reflects our belief that through confidence in Jesus, all peoples everywhere can be delivered from slavery to sin and given entrance into the new life of the kingdom of God.

Israelite worship was for ancient Israel. It lasted till Christ came. Now God's people worship in new forms reflecting their response to new content — the transcendent new thing God has done in Jesus Christ. Table 2 below compares biblical creeds of the old and new covenants.

## New festivals for new Exodus

Christian worship involves new festivals because it celebrates the new Exodus, an Exodus from slavery to sin for all humanity, not the old Exodus, which was an Exodus from slavery in Egypt for the people of Israel. In worship, the people of God do not merely look back to a historical event. Through worship, we *enter* into the essence of our faith — the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We gather before God in Jesus’ name. We rehearse the gospel story. We submit to God’s Word, repent of our sins, rejoice in our Savior and give him thanks.

When Christians worship, what God did in Christ is brought into our collective “here and now” experience as his people gather in his name. This rehearsal of the gospel story unites us with and renews us in God’s miraculous saving work in Christ. Regardless of when Christians choose to gather, the real issue is whether their celebration becomes *a genuine rehearsal of the gospel story*.

In summary, Christian worship is entering into, or participating in, the gospel; it is not entering into the Israelite Exodus. The worship pattern given to ancient Israel was *for them*, given specifically *to them* so they could properly respond in worship and celebration for what God had done *for them* at the Red Sea, in the wilderness and in the Promised Land.

Christian worship, on the other hand, is Spirit-guided and is not found in a written code (John 4:24), just as the law of Christ is rooted in the Spirit and not in a written code. Christian worship specifically responds to *the gospel* — the surprising and amazing *new thing*, planned from the very beginning, which God did in the fullness of time in Jesus Christ for the salvation of all the people of the earth.

In this chapter we have seen that worship is our response to the gracious acts of God on our behalf. Israelite worship was designed to help Israel respond in worship to their miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the gift of the Promised Land. Christian worship has transcended Israelite worship, and is designed to help Christians respond to God’s supreme and conclusive act of human deliverance from sin and death through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on behalf of all who believe the gospel.

In the next chapter we will look at the biblical events that shaped the new “wineskins,” or basic forms, into which the new “wine,” or content, of Christian worship was poured.

<b>Table 1: A Brief Comparison of the ‘Gods’ of the Nations</b>
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<b>and the Lord God of Israel as Revealed in the Old Testament</b>	
<b>The ‘Gods’ of the Nations</b>	<b>The Lord God of Israel</b>
There are many gods, and they often fight with each other.	There is one God.
The gods can be manipulated by magic and ritual, including human sacrifice.	God cannot be manipulated.
The gods are fickle.	God is faithful and keeps his word.
The gods are sometimes good and sometimes not.	God is always good.
The gods are local, and are usually impotent outside their geographic area.	God is God of heaven, earth and all that is.
The gods often exhibit selfishness and immorality.	God is holy, just and merciful.
The power of the gods is limited.	God is almighty and his power unlimited.
The gods emerged from primordial matter.	God created everything there is.
The gods have the same moral problems as humans.	God is the author of righteousness.
The gods manage and manipulate human beings.	God loves human beings.
Some gods are wise; others foolish.	God is all-wise, the author of wisdom.
The gods operate only on a repeating annual cycle.	God promised a Messiah who would break into history and redeem his people.

CHRISTIANS AND OLD TESTAMENT LAWS

The gods only have local influence.	God rules not only his people Israel, but all the nations of the world.
The gods were induced to provide fertile crops by the participation of the priests and rulers in sexual rituals.	God eliminated sexual activities from all worship.

**Table 2: Creeds of the Old and New Covenants**

<b>Biblical Creeds of Israel Reflected in its Worship</b>	<b>Biblical Creeds of the Church Reflected in its Worship</b>
<p>“Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: ‘My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried unto the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.’” Deuteronomy 26:5-9</p> <p>“We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and</p>	<p>“For what I received I passed on to you, that which is of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.” 1 Corinthians 15:3-4</p> <p>“He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.” 1 Timothy 3:16</p> <p>“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and</p>

<p>terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.” Deuteronomy 6:21-25</p>	<p>became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:6-11</p>
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## Reflection

What was ancient Israel to learn about God through practicing the hundreds of worship commands he gave the nation?

What was the meaning of the tearing of the veil in the temple at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion?

Why is the history of Israel in the Old Testament important for us to understand?

Does the new thing that God has done through Jesus and in the Holy Spirit demand a new worship response on the part of Christians?

Who and what do Christians celebrate in their worship?

## **NEW WINESKINS: CELEBRATING SALVATION IN CHRIST**

In the previous chapter we saw that worship is our response to the gracious acts of God on our behalf. For ancient Israel, worship was centered in the Exodus experience — what God had done for them. For Christians, worship is centered in the gospel, what God has done for all believers. Christian worship celebrates and participates in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the salvation and redemption of all people.

The worship pattern given to Israel was designed especially for them. God gave the Israelites, through Moses, a worship pattern designed to enable them to respond in celebration to what God had done for them in delivering them from Egypt and bringing them into the Promised Land.

Christian worship does not require observances based on ancient Israel's experience with God, but responds instead to the gospel. We might say by analogy that the “new wine” of the gospel is to be poured into “new wineskins” (Matthew 9:17). The “old wineskin” of the old covenant was not made to hold the new wine of the gospel (Hebrews 12:18-24).

### **New forms**

Israelite worship was for Israel. It lasted until Christ came. Now God's people worship in new forms that reflect their response to new content — the transcendent new thing God has done in Jesus Christ. Christian worship is geared around the rehearsal of and participation in Jesus Christ. Its key components include:

- The Lord's Supper, also called Eucharist (or thanksgiving) and Communion, which was commanded by Christ.
- Reading of Scripture, through which we rehearse and review the record of God's love and promises, especially his promise of the Savior, Jesus Christ, and through which we are nourished with the Word of God.
- Prayer and song, through which we make our petitions to God in faith, repent of our sins in humility, and honor, praise and give him thanks in joyful and grateful adoration.

### **Focused on content**

Christian worship is focused primarily on *content and meaning*, rather than

primarily on form or time. Therefore, Christian worship is not limited to any day of the week or to any particular season of the year. Nor is any day or season commanded or required of Christians. However, Christians are free to, and normally do, set aside special seasons to celebrate major aspects of the life and work of Jesus.

Christians also set aside one day a week for corporate worship, that is, for gathering together as the Body of Christ to worship God. Most Christians set aside Sunday for such worship. Some Christians set aside Saturday. A few choose to meet at other times, such as Wednesday evening.

Typical of seventh-day sabbatarian teaching is the belief that it is a sin for Christians to use Sunday as their regular day of gathering for worship. However, there is no biblical support for this idea.

## Major events on Sunday

Surprising to many seventh-day sabbatarians, the Gospel accounts specifically pinpoint events of major importance as having taken place on Sunday. Even though there is no command that Christians worship on Sunday, there is certainly no reason for Christians to feel uncomfortable with worshiping on Sunday.

John's Gospel tells us that disciples of Jesus came together on the first Sunday after Jesus was crucified, and that Jesus appeared among them (John 20:1). All four Gospels tell us that Jesus was first discovered to have been raised from the dead on early Sunday morning (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1).

All four Gospel writers considered it significant enough to mention that these events occurred at a particular time — Sunday. They could have left that detail out, but they did not. *The Gospels declare that Jesus chose to reveal himself as the resurrected Messiah on Sunday, first in the morning, then in the afternoon, and finally in the evening.* Not only did these Sunday appearances of the risen Jesus cause the Gospel writers no concern or alarm, they chose to make it plain that these things took place on that particular day of the week.

## Road to Emmaus

If there is any question about which day the resurrection occurred on, consider the plain testimony of Luke's account of the two men on the road to Emmaus. Jesus had prophesied that he would be raised from the dead on "the third day" (Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7).

Luke records that Sunday, the day on which the women discovered that Jesus' tomb was empty, was "the third day." He makes the point that the

women discovered that Jesus was raised on Sunday morning (Luke 24:1), then makes the point that “the same day” (24:13), Sunday, was “the third day” (24:21), the day Jesus had said he would be raised (24:7).

Let’s review certain key facts that the Gospel writers were inspired to record about the first Sunday after the crucifixion of Jesus:

- Jesus was raised from the dead (Luke 24:1-8, 13, 21).
- Jesus was recognized in the “breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:30-31, 34-35).
- The disciples were meeting together, and Jesus came to be with them (Luke 24:15, 36; John 20:1, 19). John also records that on the second Sunday after the crucifixion, the disciples were again meeting, and that Jesus again came to be with them (John 20:26).

## **In the early church**

Luke recorded in Acts 20:7 that Paul spoke to the church in Troas when it assembled on Sunday to “break bread.” In 1 Corinthians 16:2, Paul told the church in Corinth, as he had told the churches in Galatia (verse 1), to use every Sunday for setting aside an offering for the famine-stricken Jerusalem church.

Paul does not say that the church must meet on Sunday. His statement here does, however, seem to indicate that Sunday meetings were not extraordinary. The reason he gives for the weekly offering was so that “when I come no collections will have to be made” (verse 2). If the members had been setting aside the money each Sunday at home, rather than giving it each week at a meeting, then a collection would still need to have been taken when Paul came.

The natural reading of these passages shows us that it was not unusual for Christians to meet on Sunday, nor was it unusual for them to “break bread” together (a term Paul associates with the Lord’s Supper; see 1 Corinthians 10:16-17) during their Sunday meetings.

As we can see, the inspired writers of the New Testament inform us that Jesus was raised on Sunday. They also had no qualms about the fact that at least some believers gathered on Sunday to break bread. While Christians are not commanded to gather for worship on Sunday, these examples show that there is no reason to have any qualms about doing so.

## **Potential pitfalls**

As we have seen, there are sound reasons for the Christian practice of

gathering on Sunday as the body of Christ to commune with God. So then, *must* Christians meet on Sunday? No. Christian faith is not based on days, but on faith in God and his Son, Jesus Christ. It would be a mistake to exchange one set of “commanded” days for another. Christian faith and worship is not about commanded days, but about knowing and loving God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

When we decide which day we will gather with fellow believers for worship, we should make our decision for right reasons. Jesus’ command, “take, eat, this is my body” and “drink of this, all of you,” is not bound to any particular day. Yet, it has been a tradition of Gentile Christians to gather in communion with Christ on Sunday since the earliest years of the church, primarily because Sunday is the day on which Jesus revealed himself as raised from the dead.

The Sabbath commandment, along with all of the Mosaic law, *ended with Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection*. To embrace it, or to try to reapply it in the form of a Sunday Sabbath, is to diminish God’s revelation of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of his promises.

To believe that God commands Sabbath-keeping for Christians is to deprive ourselves of the full joy God wants us to have in Christ. God wants us to trust in him alone for salvation, and he wants us to find our rest and consolation in him alone. We are saved by grace, and we live by grace.

## Confusion

Despite all the above evidence, some people think that the weekly Sabbath is God’s holy day for Christians. They declare that they will “obey God rather than men,” regardless of what anyone tells them. Certainly, such commitment to do what one believes God requires is good; the misunderstanding is in what it is that God requires. The strong sabbatarian conviction that we are obeying God by keeping the weekly Sabbath illustrates the confusion and error that sabbatarian teaching has given unwary Christians.

First, sabbatarian teaching sets up an unbiblical understanding of what it means to obey God, then it sets up that version of obedience as the defining content of Christian faithfulness. The result is an “us vs. them” way of thinking, an approach to God that creates divisions in the body of Christ based on adherence to a command that the New Testament teaches is not in force.

Faithfulness to the weekly Sabbath is not a matter of obeying God, because God *does not command* the weekly Sabbath for Christians. God

commands us to love him, and loving God is not defined by keeping the weekly Sabbath. It is defined by believing in Jesus Christ and by loving our neighbor (1 John 3:21-24; 4:19-21). There is, the Bible says, a new covenant and a new law (Hebrews 7:12; 8:13; 9:15).

It is a mistake for Christian teachers to set up the weekly Sabbath as a measuring rod for Christian faithfulness. The teaching that the Sabbath commandment is in force for Christians introduces destructive legalism into the Christian conscience, clouds the truth and power of the gospel and creates division in the body of Christ

## Divine rest

The Bible says that God's will for humans is that they believe the gospel and love him (John 6:40; 1 John 3:21-24; 4:21; 5:2). The greatest joy humans can have is knowing and loving their Lord (John 17:3), and such love is not defined by or enhanced by observance of a particular day of the week.

The Christian life is one of resting joyfully in the Savior, of entering the divine rest. It is a life in which every part of life is dedicated to God, and every activity is a sacrament of devotion. To set up Sabbath-keeping as a defining element of "true" Christianity causes a person to miss much of the joy and power of the truth that Christ has come, and that in him God has established a new covenant (Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:15) with all who believe the good news (Romans 1:16; 1 John 5:1).

The weekly Sabbath was a shadow, a hint, of the reality that was yet to come (Colossians 2:16-17). To hold up the hint as forever essential is to ignore the truth that the reality is indeed present and available. It robs one of being able to take full joy in what is *really* important.

It might be something like continuing to dwell on, treasure and meditate on one's engagement announcement long after the wedding has taken place. It is high time to put one's first attention on the spouse, and let the engagement announcement recede to its proper status as a pleasant memory, a step toward its own true goal.

Places and times are no longer central to the content of worship for the people of God. True worship, Jesus said, involves spirit and truth (John 4:21-26). The spirit involves the heart. Jesus is the truth.

When Jesus was asked, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" he answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:28-29). That is why Christian worship should revolve around Jesus Christ, around his identity as the eternal Son of God and his work as Lord, Savior and Teacher.

## More pleasing?

To believe that obedience to the Sabbath command is the criterion by which we will be saved or damned in the final Judgment, as many sabbatarians have taught, is to misunderstand both sin and the grace of God. If Sabbath-keepers are the only ones who will be saved, then the Sabbath is the standard of judgment, not the Son of God who died and rose from the dead for our salvation.

Sabbath-keepers believe that it is more pleasing to God to keep the Sabbath than it is to ignore the Sabbath. But this reasoning does not come from the Bible. The Bible teaches that the Sabbath command, along with the entire law of Moses, has been superseded and transcended in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is not “more pleasing” to God for us to keep the Sabbath than it is for us not to keep the Sabbath; the Sabbath was not given to Christians. The destructive element in sabbatarian theology is its insistence that Sabbath-keepers are the only *true and faithful* Christians, which means that the blood of Jesus is not enough to save you without your also keeping the Sabbath.

The Bible opposes such doctrinal confusion with powerful assertions that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ *without works* of any kind (Ephesians 2:8-10; Romans 3:21-22; 4:4-8; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:4-8). Such unvarnished declarations of the sufficiency of Christ alone to save us apart from the law plainly contradict the sabbatarian doctrine that salvation will not come to people who do not keep the Sabbath.

## More godly?

The average Sabbath-keeper feels he or she is doing something more godly than non-Sabbath-keepers. Consider these statements from old literature:

Only those who *continue to obey* God’s command to keep the Sabbath will finally enter the glorious “rest” of God’s Kingdom and receive the gift of eternal, spiritual life. (*Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course*, Lesson 27 of 58 [Ambassador College, 1964, 1967], 5)

Those not keeping the Sabbath will *not* be bearing God’s Sabbath “sign” which identifies His people, and therefore will not be born of God *at Christ’s coming!* (ibid., 12).

Not only was Sabbath-keeping considered more godly, it was believed

that no one would be saved without it. Consider this statement from a Seventh-day Adventist book:

Sunday observance, in the context of this eschatological struggle, will constitute in the end a distinguishing mark, here spoken of as the mark of the beast. Satan has exalted Sunday as the sign of his authority, while the Sabbath will be the great test of loyalty to God. This issue will divide Christendom into two classes, and will characterize the final time of trouble for the people of God. (Don Neufeld, ed., *Seventh Day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd. rev. ed., vol. 3 [Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1966], 492)

This statement displays the concept that Sabbath-keeping is the deciding criterion of who is faithful to God and who is not, a concept that emerges from a fundamental misunderstanding of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, a concept that promotes an attitude of spiritual superiority.

## Summary

Sabbatarian theology works against the grace of God in Jesus Christ and the plain teaching of the Bible. The law of Moses, including the Sabbath commandment, was given to Israel and not to the church. Although Christians should feel free to gather for worship on any day of the week, we must not make the mistake of thinking there is any biblical reason for choosing Saturday above any other day.

We can summarize it this way:

- It is contrary to biblical teaching to say that the seventh-day Sabbath is binding on Christians.
- It is contrary to biblical teaching to say that God is more pleased by Sabbath-keepers than by non-Sabbath-keepers, whether they are seventh-day sabbatarians or Sunday sabbatarians.
- It is contrary to biblical teaching to say that one day is more holy or godly than another for the church to gather for worship.
- A central gospel event occurred on Sunday, and that is the basis for the Christian tradition of gathering on that day to worship.
- The resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came as one of us to save us, forms the foundation of our faith. Therefore, gathering for worship on Sunday is a reflection of our belief in the gospel. Yet, gathering on Sunday is not *commanded*, nor does worship on Sunday make Christians more holy or loved by God than gathering on another day of the week.

- It is spiritually harmful to believe and teach that the Sabbath command is binding on Christians, because that teaching is contrary to Scripture and works against unity and love in the body of Christ.
- It is spiritually harmful to believe and teach that Christians are *required* to worship on either Saturday or Sunday, because such a teaching sets up the *day* of worship as a legalistic hoop that one must jump through to be saved.

### A final thought

As followers of Jesus, we must learn not to condemn one another in the decisions we make in accord with our consciences before God. And we must be honest with ourselves about the reasons that lie behind our decisions. The Lord Jesus Christ has brought believers into his divine rest, into peace with him in full favor with God. May we, who love God, grow in love for one another as Jesus commanded.

### Reflection

1. Why is Christian worship focused on content and meaning rather than on form and time?
2. What great event in Jesus’ life occurred on Sunday?
3. Why isn’t Sunday a “holy day” for Christians in the way the Sabbath was for ancient Israel?
4. What events and situation ended the authority for Sabbath observance?
5. What is wrong with the concept that we will be saved or damned in the judgment by our obedience to the Sabbath command?
6. In what way does the belief in literal Sabbath-keeping work against the grace of God?

Comparison of Worship Forms	
Holy Days of Leviticus 23	Christian Festivals
Rehearse God’s deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt through the events of the Exodus and the desert wanderings (Exodus	Rehearse God’s deliverance of all peoples through the events of the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus (Luke 2:8-11; 22:19-

CHRISTIANS AND OLD TESTAMENT LAWS

<p>12:26-27; Leviticus 23:43).</p>	<p>20; 24:44-48; Acts 2:17; 1 John 2:1).</p>
<p>Spelled out in the law code (Exodus 12; 13:3-10; 23:14-19; Leviticus 16; 23; Deuteronomy 16).</p>	<p>Emerge from faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the resurrected Lord (Galatians 3:26; 5:1; 1 Timothy 2:8; John 4:23-24; Romans 12:1; Philippians 3:3).</p>
<p>Centered in Tabernacle/temple worship (Exodus 25:8; 1 Kings 6:12-13; Hebrews 9:1-2).</p>	<p>Centered in the redeemed community of faith (Acts 17:24; Ephesians 3:16-19; John 14:23; 1 Corinthians 1:2).</p>

## OBEYING GOD

“I still don’t get one thing. If we are forgiven already, what’s to stop us from continuing to sin? I mean, I realize we are saved by God’s mercy and not by being good, and I realize we could never be good enough anyway, and I realize that even our goodness is tainted with sin, but still, doesn’t God want us to stop sinning?”

You’re worried that if we put too much emphasis on grace, people won’t care how they behave?

“Yes, I guess I am.”

I have never met a Christian who did not care about how he or she behaves. It just comes with the territory — Christians care about how they behave. But I have met lots of Christians who have serious trouble believing that God could keep on loving them and forgiving them in spite of how rotten they behave.

Most of us Christians have an easy time seeing our sins and trying to do better. What we have trouble with is handing off our deep sense of guilt and failure to Christ. Most of us are always and ever struggling to overcome something, but our moments of deep peace and guiltless rest in God’s total and unconditional love for us are few and far between.

“Well, that supports my point. If we would quit sinning, then we wouldn’t have to suffer from guilt.”

You said you realized that even our goodness is tainted with sin, and you are right about that. It is. If we are honest with ourselves (and as Christians, we ought to feel free to be honest with ourselves), we know we are never guilt-free. But in Christ, we *are* guilt-free, not because of us, but because of him. God accounts us righteous in Christ. All we can do is believe it, because we can’t see actual evidence of it. We might see a little, or even a lot, of improvement in this or that aspect of our lives, but we never see anything close to perfection (unless we are delusional).

In other words, yes, we should fight sin in our lives, and because Christ lives in us, we do. But we should never measure God’s love for us by our success levels in achieving sinlessness. God wants us to trust *him* to be our righteousness.

When we trust him to be our righteousness three things happen:

- We realize we are not righteous (that is, we are sinners in need of mercy; that's what we mean by repentance — admitting we are sinners in need of mercy).
- We realize his Word, his promise to forgive us and save us, is good.
- We rest in him.

God got hot with Israel over *unbelief* (Psalm 106:6-7, 21, 24; Hebrews 3:9, 12, 19). They would not trust him to do what he said he would do for them, which was to save them, to be their salvation, to take care of them. Instead of trusting him, they would make treaties with neighboring countries, or sacrifice to the gods of other nations, or trust in their own military strength.

(And hand in hand with their untrust, they would oppress the poor and weak among them. Not trusting God to take care of us always leads to walking all over the poor and weak. That is because when you try to make your own way in the world, you have to adopt the ways of the world, play by the world's rules — survival of the fittest.)

Trusting in God means that when we are hurt or taken advantage of, or when problems arise or tragedy strikes, all is not lost, because Christ was raised from the dead for us. It means that we know we have nothing to lose because everything we have was given to us by God in the first place.

It means we can cast all our cares on him because he cares for us. And that takes faith, because God's deliverance from the many things that fall on us in this life very seldom comes in ways that make sense to us.

Sometimes deliverance doesn't come in this life at all. In the same way, overcoming all our sins doesn't come in this life, which means we have to *trust* him when he says he doesn't count our sins against us (Romans 4:1-8) and that our new lives are hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).

## Holy in Christ

Sin is our enemy as well as God's enemy. It destroys the creation, including us. But God has moved powerfully, decisively and once for all in Christ to redeem the creation, including us, from the corruption of sin. The outcome of the war with sin has already been determined through the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God. The devil, along with the sin and death he champions, has already been defeated, but he still exercises influence in the world until Christ returns.

By God's grace, we are *God's* children. Our hearts are turned to him, devoted to him and sanctified by him. We have tasted his goodness and experienced his love, and we have given our allegiance to him. We fight sin

in our lives and strive to walk in righteousness because he lives in us.

Christ's victory is our victory. In other words, what Christ did, he did for us, and he stands for us with God. We are holy because, and only because, we are in Christ. That is something we can see only with the eyes of faith — we have to trust God that it is so.

## Christian life a paradox

Here is another way of putting it: God has given us an active part in Christ's victory. We stand clean and forgiven in Christ's blood even while we seek to live in harmony with God's perfect love. A repentant heart and commitment to obedience characterize our lives of faith in Christ, yet we routinely fall far short of Christ's ideal.

When we fail, which is continually, we can trust in the forgiveness of our God who loves us so much that he gave his Son to redeem us. In Christ we stand, and we stand only because we are in Christ, who is *for us*, as opposed to *against us*.

In Christ, even though we are sinners, we are righteous. Even when our commitment flags, Christ's commitment to us does not — God is faithful even when we falter (2 Timothy 2:13). There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Romans 8:1).

If all this sounds like a paradox, it is. At least, it is from our perspective. But from God's perspective, it is the way the universe is put together. God loves and redeems, and he has made all things new in Christ. We are dead in sin, yet we are alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:13). We still sin, yet God no longer considers us sinners (Romans 4:8). Our real lives, which are a new creation, are hidden in God with Christ (Colossians 3:3). Just as the old creation is judged, the new creation is saved.

Does that make sin OK? The question misses the point. Sin is not OK. It is never OK. But it is defeated. Its teeth have been pulled. It is on its last legs. It still slaps you around and might even kill you, but God has you covered forever.

Jesus confirms the ideals of the life of the kingdom in Matthew 5. The old categories of the law of Moses are transcended by Jesus' description of the transformed heart that reflects the new life in him. It is a heart that puts others ahead of self, that not only avoids hurting others but also actively loves others. It is a pattern of life that cannot be measured by mere outward appearances, but flows instead from a new creation, a new interior, a new birth.

It is the heart of Christ. And as such, it is a heart we are *given*, not one that

we work up with moral energy and personal commitment.

“Why does Jesus say that anyone who does not keep the whole law and teach it will be called least in the kingdom of heaven?”

Because it is true. But remember, it is in Jesus that we keep the whole law, not in ourselves. It is Jesus who has kept it for us. The law condemns us because we cannot help but fail to keep it (Galatians 3:10-14). In Christ, there is no condemnation.

We become law keepers only by putting our faith in Jesus, who himself alone is our righteousness. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. We don't begin to have what it takes to stand righteous in the presence of God. Jesus does, and the gospel is God's good news that God has *in Christ* made us everything he wants us to be. He has already done it.

Because we can't see any physical evidence of that, we can know it only by faith in the One who gives us the gift (Galatians 3:22). That's why God pleads, “Trust me!”

One other point, while we're on the topic: When Jesus refers to the law in Matthew 5, he is obviously not talking about the whole old covenant law. Otherwise we would all be wearing blue tassels and phylacteries and sacrificing lambs. Whatever way Jesus is defining “law” here, we are law keepers only through faith in him, not through our ever-bungling efforts to avoid sin.

## **Devotion born of trust**

Jesus is our Savior, Lord and Teacher. We can start with the confidence that we are indeed forgiven and saved, purely as God's free gift to us through his Son. Jesus is our Savior. With that sure trust in God's true word of grace, and because his love is growing in us from the moment we believed him, we can (in his strength) devote ourselves to doing whatever he says. Jesus is our Lord, which also means he is our Master, our King, our Ruler.

We come to know God better and understand his will more fully by listening to what he has given us about himself in the Bible. Some of the ways we listen to him are: reading the Bible, listening to our teachers in the church (Ephesians 4:11-14), reading devotional writing by Christian teachers, as well as “listening” to God's prompting of our wills during prayer. Jesus is our Teacher.

“So, you're saying that obedience really is important?”

Yes. We are commanded to obey God. If we believe in God's mercy and love through Christ, then the Holy Spirit works in us to lead us to desire to

obey God, and to actually obey him.

“So, that’s what we mean by ‘bearing fruit?’”

Exactly. We bear fruit, but it is not really that we are doing it ourselves. It is the Holy Spirit working in us to bear it. But the beauty is that the Spirit makes us able to cooperate with his work in such a way that we are indeed pleasing God and bring glory to him through Christ.

“But, back to the original problem. We fall short a lot.”

Yes, we do. But again, we can rest in the confidence that God has already forgiven us, already saved us and already made us his saints. In that confidence we don’t have to languish in discouragement; we can get up and continue our struggle against sin, resting in the sure and unlimited love of God. Our failures, lapses and sins are not the measure of who we are in Christ; his faithful word and his victory for us are.

“So, we really are in a battle against sin.”

Of course we are. But the victory does not depend on us; it depends on Christ, and he has already won. We are living out the implications of his victory in our personal struggles, and because the victory is already his, our God-given part in his victory is not at stake.

Our part has already been secured by the Son of God. By God’s gracious will for us, we are indeed safe in Christ, and we can take joy and rest in God’s presence if we believe his word about that. (If we won’t believe God’s word about that, then, of course, we won’t be able to rest in his joy. God doesn’t force people not to stew in hell, but hell is not his choice for them.)

## **Teaching right living**

“But shouldn’t the church teach people right ways to live?”

Yes, it should. And as it does so, it needs to keep in mind that teaching right ways to live is not the same as teaching people how to be loved by God or how to be saved. The two must be kept separate. God already loves us and has already saved us, even though we are sinners. Right living can help us avoid loads of trouble, pain and heartache, but it can’t make God love us or save us any more than he already has.

“But doesn’t it please God when we live right?”

Yes, it does. It pleases God because he loves to see us living in tune with him and with the persons he has made us to be in Christ. Likewise, he hates

to see us torturing ourselves and living in fear and despair, out of harmony with the new creation he has made of us in Christ. Do we stop loving our children when they ignore our rules and warnings and get themselves hurt? God loves us even more than we are able to love our children.

With the new covenant in Christ, God has eclipsed the old system of reward for righteousness and punishment for sin (Hebrews 10:9-10). That system bound everybody under sin and death (Galatians 3:21-22). Because of our utter helplessness, weakness and bondage, he has taken on himself for us the consequences of sin, and he, as the righteous Human for all humans, shares with us the rewards of his righteousness. Those rewards for righteousness are reconciliation and unity with God. We receive everything Christ has done for us only one way: *in faith*, and without faith, or trust in God that his word of the gospel is true, we will not accept his love, reconciliation and eternal life.

What this means is that we must get rid of the notion that our behavior determines how God feels about us. God alone determines how God feels about us, not our good works or our bad works. God decided before all time that he loves us, and his Son is the perfect Human for us in our place so that God's love for us may be complete and eternal precisely because its essence is his love for his Son. He will be faithful even when we are not faithful, because in Christ we are reconciled with the Father, and it is in Christ that he loves us for the sake of Christ.

So, when we teach people to live rightly, we are teaching them, and ourselves, how to live free of the bondage and pain that accompanies sin. We are not teaching how to be better than others, more loved of God than others, more important to God than others, or even more righteous than others. That is because our righteousness is only in Christ, and we walk in that righteousness only by faith in him, not by avoiding illicit drugs, sex and violence.

To be sure, life is indescribably smoother if we do avoid illicit sex, drugs and violence. But we need to remember that the blood of Jesus is just as necessary for indifference, laziness, stubbornness, selfishness, gossip, being judgmental, secret envy and the like as it is for blatant adultery, grand theft, heroin trafficking and murder. We are all sinners, regardless of how much success we achieve in right living, and we all stand in need of mercy at the foot of Jesus' cross.

## **Faith in the faithful One**

Still, the church does have the role of teaching right living, and every one

of us does have an obligation to God to commit ourselves to doing everything God wants us to do. God gives us all this instruction about right living because it is good for us, and because it reflects the way he is toward us. The more we trust in God to save us from our sins, the more we desire to turn away from sin. Yet it is God himself, reigning in his divine freedom to save sinners in Christ, who actually delivers us from sin.

When we pore over pornography or engage in casual sex, we are reinforcing empty illusions about human intimacy that corrupt our ability to find real and fulfilling intimacy. In other words, we are robbing ourselves of the very thing that led us to the porn site or the one-night stand in the first place, the need for an honest, trusting, intimate relationship.

Besides that, we are defrauding and taking advantage of other children of God for our own gratification, whether by indulging in photographic images of their shame and ignorance, or by participating with them in their own painful journey of humiliation and indignity. We are ignoring God's warning to avoid the attractive but dangerous trap door in our quest for the real thing he made us to need and desire.

When we resort to fraud or larceny, we are turning our backs on God's promise to be our provider and see us through. We are finding our own solutions to our needs or wants, overlooking the consequences our actions will bring to others, and robbing ourselves of the peace of heart that God wants us to experience with him through the deepening trust that comes of patience.

## **Church of forgiven sinners**

Whatever instruction the church gives in paths of right living needs to be framed in humility and love. The same Bible from which we draw God's pearls of wisdom about human conduct provides us his testimony about his Son who died to save us from our failure to heed perfectly such instruction.

Every teacher of the Bible is himself or herself a sinner. As fellow sinners with the world, then, we must guard against the tendency of the church to allow its proclamation to descend into a mere rattle of condemnation against people who don't walk in the precepts of the Bible. To become a voice of condemnation does violence to the gospel and reduces the Christian proclamation into merely another religion vainly trying to hold together a powerless façade of human morality.

The church (I'm talking about the people, not the buildings) is the place in the world where the gospel visibly intersects human history. It is the place where sinners have found out they are clean and forgiven, and where these forgiven sinners continually offer to God their worship, praises and

thanksgiving.

It is where this good news of the gospel is celebrated and affirmed for everyone who will listen. It is where the love of Christ can take root in the world. It is where men, women and children of faith have been made able, by their Savior and Lord in whom they trust, to be like him in the world — a friend of despised people and sinners.

Wherever the church comes into contact with the world, the world should be the better for it. The poor should be hearing good news. Prisoners should be hearing about the release that transcends physical freedom. People in bondage to personal and societal sin should be finding mercy, kindness and hope.

The cleansing, purifying light of Christ's truth and love and peace should be finding its way into dark fears, lost hopes and tortured souls. And this should be happening because the crucified Christ is risen and living in his people, not because the church found an ancient book of laws it can use to more effectively declare sinners condemned.

Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17). That is why the gospel is *good news!* How sweet it is when the proclamation of the church is the same good news.

## **THE COVENANTS AND THE SABBATH: THE OLD TESTAMENT EVIDENCE**

By Paul Kroll

Are Christians obligated to keep the Sabbath rest law of Exodus 20:8-11? Some Christians believe that the Sabbath must be observed because this law appears in the Ten Commandments. Is this true?

We can clear up this question by taking a broad look, not just at the Ten Commandments, but at the entire old and new covenants. As we shall see, the covenants tell a fascinating story about the history and purpose of the Sabbath rest command. More than this, by looking at the sweep of God's dealings with the human race from the beginning until the completion of Jesus' redemptive work and the creation of the church, the purpose of the entire Law of Moses — including the Ten Commandments — will become clear. Let's explore what Scripture says about the covenants.

God first made a general covenant pledge in the presence of Adam and Eve, promising that evil — personified by the devil — would be destroyed (Genesis 3:15). This was the first covenant between humans and God after “the Fall.” Despite the fact that humans had sinned and had become fallen creatures, they now had a promise that a Savior would, in the future, crush and destroy the evil that held them prisoner.

Later, God also made a covenant with humanity through Noah. “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you,” God told this patriarch (Genesis 9:8). It was an everlasting covenant that promised saving grace, in a physical sense, to all people.

Still later, God made a covenant with Abraham, and this one becomes the crux of both the old and the new covenants. Most of the Abrahamic covenant concerns a promise that the descendants of Abraham would be a people of God and be given a land (Genesis 15:31-21; 17:3-8). There was also a promise in this covenant that through Abraham's offspring or “seed” all the nations on earth would be blessed (Genesis 22:18).

The apostle Paul understood this “seed” to refer to Christ (Galatians 3:15-16, 19). Abraham was given a promise of God's salvific intention in the world. A Savior would come who would rescue humanity. This was a promise of the “new” covenant given some 430 years before the “old” covenant was introduced! This is the point Paul argued in the book of Galatians.

There is an interesting aspect to the covenant God made with Abraham. It would have an unusual reminder or sign — that of the physical circumcision of males. We read the following in Genesis 17:9:

Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.... Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

About 430 years after the covenant was made with Abraham, the descendants born to his son Jacob or Israel were rescued by God from the land of Egypt. God brought his people into the Sinai desert and made a covenant with them. The original terms of this covenant extend from Exodus 20:1 to 23:32. Chapter 24 of Exodus details the ratification of this covenant. The people said, “Everything the Lord has said we will do” (verse 24).

What the Lord had said so far was that Israel was to keep the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20); follow certain laws regarding Hebrew slaves (Exodus 21:1-11); obey guidelines set down for personal injuries (Exodus 21:12-36); provide protection of property, including against theft (Exodus 22:1-15). The covenant also had regulations about fornication, sorcery, sexual relations with animals, idolatry, treatment of aliens, protection of widows and orphans, lending, blasphemy and other laws relating to justice and mercy (Exodus 22:16-23:13). The covenant also mandated for Israel the observance of the annual festivals in three seasons (Exodus 23:14-19).

This was what we may call a “package deal.” All the laws from Exodus 20:1 through 23:32 were a *singular* law system so far as the old covenant is concerned. They were all part of the same covenant.

God also described his part of the covenant. He would guide Israel into the Promised Land, take away illness from the nation, give people a full life span, and destroy their enemies (Exodus 23:20-33). This formed the old covenant between God and the people of Israel. The terms of the covenant became a book, a legal code, we might say. Moses “took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people” (Exodus 24:7). The people responded by saying: “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey” (verse 7). After which, the Lord told Moses to come up to the mountain and he would give him “tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for

their instruction” (verse 12).

We should notice several important things about this “old” covenant. It includes not just the Ten Commandments but all the laws and regulations described in Exodus 20-23. All the laws are said to be “spoken” by the Lord, because he did, indeed, speak them. What happened was that after God began to speak directly to the people of Israel, they became so fearful of the magnificent theophany shaking Mt. Sinai that they begged Moses to speak to them in God’s place (Exodus 20:18-21). God agreed to their wishes. After that, he spoke his laws to Moses, and he passed them on to the people. But they were all equally God’s laws, and all were spoken by him.

## **There is but one law**

There is no legal difference between the Ten Commandments and the rest of the covenantal law. They stand together as the basis of the old covenant to Israel. The law that mandated the delivery of first-born animals to God and leaving the land idle in the seventh year was just as important as the law of Sabbath rest or the law against adultery, in terms of the covenant. They were all, equally, part of the old covenant.

As noted above, the laws of the covenant as well as God’s promises were first written in a “book” or scroll. It contained all the laws in Exodus 20-23, and this entire book was the basis of the covenant. Moses had not yet gone up to the mountain to have these regulations written on tablets of stone.

As we progress through the first five books of the Jewish Holy Scriptures, we see that more laws were progressively added to the covenant. Other laws were further expounded, amplified and clarified. For example, Exodus 25 through 30 provides regulations for the building and ceremonies of the old covenant tabernacle. The tabernacle pattern and furniture were later transferred to the temple in Jerusalem. The temple worship system became the center of Jewish religious life. We see many references to this in the New Testament. The book of Hebrews, in particular, deals with the passing away of the Levitical priesthood and Jewish temple life. Jesus becomes the heavenly High Priest in the real temple.

We also learn in Exodus that, like circumcision, the Sabbaths — plural — served as a sign of the covenant between God and Israel. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come”’” (Exodus 31:12). God told Moses that the weekly Sabbath was a sign of the old covenant: “It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever” (verse 17). God finished speaking and wrote the laws of the covenant on two tablets of stone.

We should note some interesting facts here. Both the annual Sabbaths and the weekly Sabbath served as a sign of the covenant between God and Israel. Further, the sign and the covenant created a relationship between Israel and God, not between all people of the earth and God. Also, we should note that, *like circumcision*, the annual and weekly Sabbath sign was to remain between Israel and God “forever.” That means, since circumcision could be ended as a physical requirement for Christians (the spiritual children of Abraham), it is possible that the physical demands of Sabbath-keeping and festival observance could also be ended.

With Moses on Mount Sinai, there follows a historical interlude in Exodus that deals with the incident of the golden calf. This causes Moses, when he returns to the camp, to break the tablets containing the words of God. Moses then must go back to the mountain so God can “write on them the words that were on the first tablets” (Exodus 34:1). On the mountain, God reiterates his intent to make a covenant with his people Israel (verse 10). He also repeats in an abbreviated form many of the regulations of the old covenant. (See Exodus 34:17-26.)

Most of the remaining chapters of Exodus are taken up with the making of the tabernacle and its parts, and the construction of its furniture and the priestly garments. This relates to the center of Israel’s religious life at the tabernacle, and later at the Jerusalem temple. Leviticus continues this theme by describing various offerings (Leviticus 1-7). The ninth chapter describes the priests beginning their ministry.

Laws relating to the functions of the Levitical priesthood and the temple worship service are important because almost all of Israel’s religious life was centered on these two realities. For example, the festivals were to be kept “in the place he [God] will choose as a dwelling for his Name” (Deuteronomy 16:5, 11, 16). Eventually, the place God chose was Jerusalem. This means that if the temple was destroyed or the priesthood supplanted, it would be impossible to fulfill God’s demands regarding festival observance.

Leviticus 11 lists clean and unclean living creatures. Chapters 12-15 continue the theme of “clean and unclean” with a discussion of purification after childhood, regulations about infectious skin diseases, the ritual cleansing after these diseases, and discharges causing uncleanness. The food laws of Leviticus 11 are but one part of an entire array of regulations regarding matters of ritual purification and cleanliness that Israel was to follow. We again observe that all the laws of the Mosaic Law are part of a greater whole, and they stand together.

Leviticus 16 details the Day of Atonement ritual. Chapters 17 through 19

mention various other covenantal laws that Israel was to follow, including specific laws about unlawful sexual relations. Over 20 laws are stated as “do not’s” in chapter 19, and some others are stated in a positive way. This includes admonitions to do everything from keeping the annual Sabbaths (verse 3) to not holding back overnight the wages of a hired man (verse 13).

## The two “great commandments”

Buried in these “do’s and don’t’s” is one of the two most important and basic laws of both old and new covenants. It is simple: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). When asked about the “greatest commandment” of the Jewish Scriptures, Jesus said:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it; “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40)

Here we have the astounding assertion that everything in the Law of Moses and the Prophets does not hang on the Ten Commandments, as most people erroneously assume. It hangs on two inconspicuous statements inserted in two widely separated parts of the Law of Moses! (The “greatest commandment” is found in Deuteronomy 6:5.) The popular preoccupation with the Ten Commandments is somewhat misguided. The essence of the Law of Moses is not in the Ten but in two simple statements buried in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Going back to Leviticus 19, Israel is told: “Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the Lord” (verse 30). The sanctuary was first found in the moveable tabernacle and later in the temple. Consider the following. If God would allow the sanctuary to be destroyed and thus to end the ministry of the Levitical priesthood, he could also allow an end to the observance of his Sabbaths. The book of Hebrews speaks to this. It says that in God’s purpose, the entire old covenant religious system was ended by Jesus’ redemptive work.

Leviticus 20-26:3 lists further regulations that Israel was to keep as part of its covenant with God. These included everything from avoiding adultery to rules for priestly function to guidelines for keeping the seven annual festivals and the year of Jubilee. This section contains some familiar commandments discussed earlier as well as some new ones. We see a progression or *further amplification* of covenantal regulations, as well as the

adding of more stipulations. Like a progressive code of law, the terms of the covenant increase. But they still form a single body of law applied to a specific nation, Israel.

Leviticus 26 begins with God telling Israel what he will do in exchange for Israel's obedience to all the commands that have so far been described. He begins his list of promises by saying, "If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will..." (verse 3). God also details the curses that will follow if Israel fails to obey God.

The "Book of the Law" we have so far looked at ends with the statement: "These are the decrees, the laws and the regulations that the Lord established on Mount Sinai between himself and the Israelites through Moses" (verse 46). The entire regulatory system, as it is now described, must be seen as a unit — as a single law given from Mount Sinai. All its component parts and laws stand together. If Israel sins in one point, the nation is guilty in all points. All the laws given so far are equally the laws of the Lord.

Numbers 1 begins one year after Israel left Egypt (verse 1). The material refers to events during the years of Israel's wanderings. There are also discussions of the various laws of the covenant in the context of specific situations. Some new material is added, but most of this book is not pertinent to our purposes.

## **The law restated in Deuteronomy**

Deuteronomy takes place near the end of Israel's 40 years of wandering (1:3). This book gives us a restatement of the laws of the covenant. Moses says, "Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you" (Deuteronomy 4:1).

The restatement of the law of the covenant begins in chapter 5 with a review of the Ten Commandments. Here we learn why Israel was to keep the Sabbath holy by resting from work. Moses says to Israel: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day" (verse 15).

The Sabbath was for Israel, so that they could remember being saved from servitude in Egypt, where they had no rest. For them, the Sabbath did not look ahead to Christ so much as it looked backward to Israel's rescue from Egypt. We can see why the physical Sabbath rest is not for Christians, whose rescue and "rest" is a spiritual one. In Christ, we rest from the slavery

of sin, and not from physical labor in a condition of national slavery.

In Egypt, the people had no rest from their labors (Exodus 1:11-14). God brought them to a land “flowing with milk and honey” so they could enjoy the fruit of their labor. There, they were to remember that God was the source of their prosperity and ease. Parents were to teach their children this central aspect of God’s saving grace to Israel, that he had brought them out of bondage and slavery in Egypt (Exodus 13:14). For Israel, the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant in that it reminded them that God was the source of their liberation and happy prosperity.

We saw in Exodus 24:12 that the tablets of stone contained the “laws and commands” that were written by God for Israel’s instruction. In Deuteronomy there is further explanation. Moses recounts that the tablets were to contain “all the commandments the Lord proclaimed to you on the mountain out of the fire, on the day of the assembly” (9:10). In chapter 10, Moses refers to the material on the tablets as “the Ten Commandments” (verse 4).

No matter how much was written on the tablets, the fact is that *all* the laws of Exodus 20-23 form the regulatory code of the old covenant in its *original* form. Later, the new and amplified laws of the other parts of the Law of Moses become part of the legal code system of Israel. This was not a one-law or a ten-law covenant – the covenant contained *hundreds* of regulations.

Deuteronomy 12 through 26:15 also becomes part of this legal code of the old covenant. There are many familiar laws, amplified or put in another context. There are also some new items. Moses restated the fact that Israel had a covenant with God, based on the law system that the nation had promised to uphold:

You have declared this day that the Lord is your God and that you will walk in his ways, that you will keep his decrees, commands and laws, and that you will obey him. And the Lord has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands. (Deuteronomy 26:17-18)

Israel, if it follows the commands of the covenant, will be “high above all the nations” and a “people holy to the Lord” (verse 19). But Israel must keep *all* of God’s commandments as though they were one unit. Both Paul and James understand the Law in this sense (James 2:10-11; Galatians 3:10). This becomes like a final covenant promise (Deuteronomy 29:1).

The people are commanded to set up large stones in the Promised Land. They are to write on these stones “all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy

27:2-3, 8). Before they enter the land, curses are pronounced on evildoers. In chapter 28, blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience are restated, as they were in Leviticus 26.

The last chapters of Deuteronomy highlight this final covenant ratification and its implication for the Israelites. The nation is to “carefully follow the terms of this covenant” so the people can prosper in all that they do (Deuteronomy 29:9). The covenant is a fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and it applies to all the descendants of Israel (verses 12-14). Torah or the Law of Moses becomes the covenantal “Book of the Law” for the nation (verse 21).

## **All or nothing**

This detailed summary of the old covenant legal system is meant to help us understand the conditions under which the Sabbath day and the other Mosaic legal requirements apply. The entire law code described in Exodus 20 through the end of Deuteronomy is the basis of the old covenant — not just a single law, or a few laws found therein.

All the laws are of equal importance in a covenantal context. If a person sins by breaking one law, then such a person is “guilty” of breaking the covenant itself. Since all the laws are equally part of the same covenant, we cannot use the old covenant to “prove” any particular law while admitting that some of its other laws are obsolete. Since the covenant is obsolete, a different authority is needed to prove any particular law. We cannot pick and choose without having another authority to tell us what to pick.

But if we are considering the force of the old covenant, the point has to be made that no law of that covenant is isolated as of special significance. No grouping of laws — like the Ten Commandments — is more important than any other grouping. No individual law — such as the weekly Sabbath — is more important than another. This is seen in the fact that the two “greatest laws” of Torah are not singled out or emphasized in any way. They are barely visible in the contexts in which they appear in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

The question to be solved in terms of the application of the Law of Moses is not whether a specific law might apply to Christians. The covenant, composed of God’s promises and Israel’s agreement to uphold Torah, is a unit. One cannot say that one or a few laws of the old covenant Book of the Law — such as Sabbath, Festivals, food laws, strict tithing — apply to Christians. Either the old covenant as a covenant (or the Book of the Law as a single law code) applies to Christians in entirety, or none of it applies. The package is valid, or it is not.

All arguments to try to “prove” that the rest command of the Sabbath as an individual law must be observed or certain foods avoided, for example, are faulty arguments. These claims must be tested against one fundamental question: Must Christians obey the old covenant legal system in its totality — all 613 laws contained in that system — or none of it?

However, there are eternal, “spiritual laws” that govern relationships between humans and between humans and God. These laws governed relationships before the Mosaic Law was enacted. They were included in the Law of Moses, but their validity does not rest on the old covenant. They therefore they continue to govern human conduct after the annulment of the old covenant. The commandment to love God above all else would be a prime example of such a law (Deuteronomy 6:5).

These “spiritual laws” are incorporated into the new covenant “Law of Christ,” and are expounded in the New Testament. (See below, “Sin and virtue lists” and “Mosaic Law unnecessary,” for further details.) Thus, we come back to the fundamental question: Are Christians obligated to keep the entire Mosaic legal system or not?

## **THE COVENANTS AND THE SABBATH: THE NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE**

By Paul Kroll

Let us now look at the New Testament witness to these matters. By Jesus' day, the covenantal literature of Israel included not only the Law of Moses but also the Prophets and Writings. These were the Holy Scriptures of the Jews, or the Christian Old Testament. This body of writing is sometimes called the "Law, Prophets and Psalms" (Luke 24:44). At other times it is referred to by the term "Law and Prophets" (Matthew 5:17), or simply "the Law" (John 15:25).

The books of Exodus through Deuteronomy (along with the circumcision law in Genesis) constituted the basis of the covenantal law between God and Israel. This part of Scripture was called the Law of Moses, or referred to as the law that "Moses gave" (John 7:19, 22-23). All the laws and commentary in the books of Moses are part of the same cloth.

We come now to the dawning of new covenant times with the arrival and work of Jesus. The first thing we notice is that the Jews were surprised by Jesus. He was not a conquering Messiah, as most had expected him to be. (Perhaps the Maccabees of two centuries earlier had fixed the idea of a warrior Messiah in Jewish expectation.) Jesus seemed to speak of a somewhat different sort of redemptive work than was expected. Jesus said he would die for the sins of the people. He would not redeem people simply because they had the Law of Moses and appeared to obey it, nor would he save people because they were born as Israelites.

Jesus seemed to imply that the most pious of the people — the religious leaders — were not the best candidates for the kingdom of God (Matthew 23). To all appearances, the Pharisees and others loved God and would be among the vanguard of a people called to follow the Messiah to victory over the enemies of Israel. Surely, they would have the best positions in the kingdom of God by reason of their zealotry for Torah. But Jesus was said that this idea was wrong. The kingdom would be taken away from them and given to others (Matthew 21:43-46).

God sent Jesus to create a new people from all nations through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Further, he was not at that time interested in creating a powerful political unit that would, in effect, rule the world. Jesus would

save eternally those who put their faith and trust in him as Savior (John 3:16). This became the new covenant in Jesus' blood. He was bringing and offering a different covenant from the old covenant – one that had been planned all along, but now unveiled in Jesus.

However, Jesus made it clear that he was not out to abolish what the Hebrew Scriptures stood for. Jesus said: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

The Jewish Scriptures pointed to Jesus and his redeeming work, and were fulfilled in his work (Luke 24:25-27, 44; John 5:39-47). Jesus was the object of the Law and Prophets, as even Moses had said: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him” (Deuteronomy 18:15). Jesus pointed out that a greater law — we can call it the “law of Christ” — should govern human thought and actions. He made his point by contrasting what the Law of Moses said (“You have heard that it was said...”) with what he now said (“But I tell you...”). See Matthew 5:21-48 for six examples.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus told his hearers to obey the Law of Moses. He said to a man he healed of leprosy: “Go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing” (Luke 5:14). Jesus worshipped at and upheld the sanctity of the temple (Matthew 12-13). He told his disciples and the Jewish people to obey the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, who he said sat “in Moses' seat” (Matthew 23:1). Naturally, these individuals would have taught obedience to the Law of Moses.

Jesus told his disciples to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, upholding the notion of Israel as the special people of God. Jesus came as a Jew to Israel as the covenant people of God. “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him,” said John (John 1:11).

But since Jesus worked in an old covenant context, we cannot say that his remarks about a particular Mosaic law means that one of its isolated commandments — like the Sabbath, or festivals or food laws — must be kept by Christians. Jesus commanded sacrifices, obedience to the religious leaders who would be teaching all of the Law of Moses, and temple worship. Before his crucifixion, he upheld the notion of a national covenant people. If we say that Jesus' remarks in the Gospels tell Christians to keep the Sabbath rest commandment, then we must accept all of the commandments of the Law of Moses as being binding, including physical circumcision. He upheld them all, before his crucifixion. Clearly, something else is in view in

Jesus' remarks about the Law, the Sabbath or some other Mosaic regulation or promise.

Jesus did not change anything in terms of old covenant worship until his redemptive work was accomplished. However, he did imply during his ministry that things would change in the future. The kingdom of God was to be taken away from those who represented the Law of Moses and “given to a people who will produce its fruit” (Matthew 21:43). The people of God would no longer worship at the temple in Jerusalem, but they would worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-24).

After his resurrection, Jesus told the disciples that rather than limiting their evangelizing work to Israel, as he had counseled during his lifetime, they must go to all the world (Acts 1:8). Shortly thereafter, Peter learned through a vision that the feared and hated Gentiles were also being called to be among the people of God (Acts 10:9-15). A new age of the Spirit had begun. A new covenant had come into force.

The church began on the day of Pentecost in the year that Jesus was crucified and resurrected. At first it was composed almost entirely of Jews. Even Pharisees and priests were converted to the faith (Acts 6:7; 15:5). But many of these people were still zealous for the Law of Moses (Acts 21:20). This caused a problem for the church.

Many Jewish Christians did not see clearly that the new covenant had supplanted the old, and that this had profoundly impacted the authority of the Law of Moses and Israel's religious system. For example, these former Jewish religious leaders still viewed physical circumcision as a sign between God and his people. They saw the Law of Moses as a binding legal document for anyone who wanted to become part of this people.

That is why in Acts 15 the believers of the party of the Pharisees claimed: “The Gentiles must be circumcised and *required to obey the law of Moses*” (emphasis ours, verse 5). They didn't say, Gentiles must keep the Sabbath or the food laws or some other singular law of the Mosaic system. Rather, the Pharisees said “obey the law of Moses.” The Jews understood that the entire Law of Moses was a unit — and that the authority of this law as a complete and unified legal compact in the Gentile Christian life was the issue.

They knew that the old covenant did not apply to Gentiles. It was only for Israel. Gentiles were to follow a more generalized law called the “Noachian Laws.” But if any Gentile wanted to become part of the people of Israel — that is, to become a “full Jew” — he or she would be obligated to keep the Law of Moses. The Jewish Christians probably reasoned from this principle that in order to become a part of God's *spiritual* people, Gentiles

must first become God's physical people by keeping the Law of Moses. It was easy to reason that way because most Jews apparently thought of the Christians — at least in the early years — as simply members of another Jewish sect. The only difference was that Christians had accepted Jesus as Messiah.

Thus, religious Jews who had been converted to Christianity were implying that for Gentiles to be part of God's people, they would have to be circumcised and keep all 613 laws of the Law of Moses. The issue of contention was not a specific law such as Sabbath-keeping, but the Law of Moses in its entirety. (The argument in Acts 15 wasn't over Sabbath or festival observance, but over the full Mosaic Law.)

The issue of the role of the Law of Moses in the lives of Gentile Christians became more troublesome as more Gentiles became converted. This led to the convening of the historic council of Acts 15 around AD 50 to consider this important matter.

It became clear to the assembled elders and apostles that Gentiles had been called and converted apart from any obedience to the regulations of the Law of Moses. The assembly concluded that Gentiles did not need to keep the commandments of the Law of Moses or be circumcised. They did not need to keep the Sabbath, nor the food laws, nor tithing, nor the annual festivals. This explains why no separate law, such as Sabbath-keeping, was discussed. The entire Law of Moses, and its accompanying religious institutions, were seen to be passé, or obsolete.

This was conveyed to the Gentile churches in an apostolic letter mentioned in Acts 15. Gentiles were asked to hold to only four regulations that could be said to be Mosaic: abstention from the meat of strangled animals, from food polluted by idols, from blood and from sexual immorality (Acts 15:19-20, 29). Naturally, all Christians would have been commanded to avoid sexual immorality.

The three other regulations had to do with foods, and may have been enjoined on Gentiles so that they would not offend the sensibilities of Jewish Christians, or unconverted Jews in the synagogues. Both Jewish Christians and, in many cases, Gentile Christians would be attending the Jewish synagogue, and it was important not to bring offense. The church wanted to keep in the good graces of the Jewish religious community and to keep peace between the church and the synagogue.

But, even here, Paul later seemed to rescind, under special circumstances, the regulation against eating meat that had been offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8:4-13). The reason the Acts 15 council imposed a ban on eating

meat offered to idols in pagan ceremonies, and later sold in the meat markets, had to do with conscience only. Eating such meat would greatly offend Christian Jews who still believed that idolatry made the meat sinful. The reasoning was, why make trouble over something inconsequential in terms of the gospel message? The ban on such foods had nothing to do with any lingering authority of the Law of Moses upon Gentile Christians, as the council had decided it had no such authority.

## The Galatians controversy

Nonetheless, the question of whether Gentile Christians should keep the Law of Moses continued to be a controversy within the church. The pressure to have Gentiles be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law came from converted Jews or Judaizers. We can see this controversy in full bloom in the book of Galatians.

In this very strong letter, Paul brands this idea as a “different gospel,” which was really a perversion of the true gospel (Galatians 1:1-7). Paul makes several points about this issue. He says Christians cannot be justified by observing the Law of Moses and righteousness cannot be gained through its observance (Galatians 2:16, 21). Those who look to the Law of Moses as their spiritual authority, even though they may “believe” in Christ, are still in bondage (Galatians 4:21-31).

In fact, those who preach that observing the Mosaic Law is necessary are under a curse, said Paul. He referred to the Scripture that says, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do *everything* written in the Book of the Law” (Galatians 3:10). This point is obvious from our panoramic view of the law material in the books from Exodus through Deuteronomy. We cannot pick and choose which specific law (such as Sabbath-keeping) we think should be obeyed. It’s an all-or-nothing situation.

Paul says: “I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law” (Galatians 5:3). We can write in any Mosaic law in the place of the word “circumcised” — such as Sabbath-keeping — with the same conclusion. If a person feels obligated to keep the Sabbath, then logic says that the person should keep all the laws of Moses, because the only place that the Sabbath is commanded is in the law of Moses. If it is still valid for the Sabbath law, it is valid for the other laws, too.

What had occurred at least since the period of the Maccabees is that the Jews had emphasized several laws from the Mosaic Law as “boundary marker” practices. These distinguished Jews from Gentiles and kept the Jews separate and “pure.” Among these boundary marker beliefs were

circumcision, the food laws of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, the keeping of the Sabbath and the observance of the holy days.

Except for circumcision, we can see the interesting parallel between the Judaizing Christians of the apostolic church and people who still teach that Christians should observe the seventh-day Sabbath and annual holy days. For a thorough discussion of how the Jews had adopted “boundary marker” practices from the Law of Moses as a litmus test of being a part of the “in” group — that is, a part of the people of God — see the book *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, by James D.G. Dunn.

The biblical book that most thoroughly deals with the abrogation of the Law of Moses and the old covenant religious system is Hebrews. It begins with a defense of Jesus as the high priest of God’s people (3:1). This implies that the authority of the Aaronic high priest of the Mosaic covenant, who stood as the representative between God and Israel, had been superseded by Jesus. As the mediator of the old covenant, Moses was great, but Jesus is greater. (John 5:39-46 with Hebrews 3:4-6).

## The Sabbath as metaphor

In Christ, the physical Sabbath rest is seen to be a metaphor for the spiritual rest of salvation that God’s people now have (4:1-11). However, it’s not that the Sabbath rest commandment was “changed” and that we keep the Sabbath as “holy time” in terms of “a spiritual rest.” The Sabbath is a *symbol* for Christians, in the same way that other elements of the Mosaic institution are symbols. We can look at other old covenant practices and institutions (such as the high priest’s office, burnt offerings, dwelling in tents during the Festival of Tabernacles), and see metaphorical meanings that symbolize aspects of Jesus’ redemptive work. That’s what the Mosaic Law points to, is fulfilled in and is superseded by that work. Those old covenant laws are instructive as symbols and metaphors, but they are not valid as laws about Christian behavior.

We can see the same principle at work in physical circumcision. For new covenant Christians, it serves only as a metaphor of the fact that we are cleansed of our sins and have a new birth in Christ. “Circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code,” Paul wrote in Romans 2:29.

In the same way, Hebrews 4 tells us that Sabbath-keeping is of the spirit. It points to the salvation rest we have in Christ. The physical Sabbath rest command is not performed by Christians in the way it was specified in the old covenant written code, the Law of Moses.

Hebrews explains that the entire system of the old covenant law as carried out by the high priest and the Levitical priesthood has come to an end. Another High Priest, Jesus, has come in the order of Melchizedek (7:1-11). This necessitates a change in the law (verse 12). “The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God” (verses 18-19). This better hope is the new covenant, which provides the indwelling Holy Spirit, and with it comes salvation. Those who are saved under the new covenant are not obligated to obey the Law of Moses, but to obey the “law of Christ.”

However, some people object to the idea that the Mosaic Law (which includes the Ten Commandments) is “done away.” They retort, “Well, then, does that mean we can kill, steal or commit adultery?” Of course not. No Christian would teach or believe such an absurdity.

Let’s pose the question another way to show it has no validity: “If the Law of Moses is done away, does this mean we don’t have to love God and our neighbor?” Obviously, Christians continue to love God and neighbor — and they do not break any of the spiritual principles found throughout the Mosaic Law — because that is the Christian thing to do — and it is what the New Testament clearly tells us to do. But this obedience is based on the law of Christ, not the Law of Moses. People were supposed to love God and neighbor from the very beginning of creation. The old covenant included those two laws, but it did not begin them, and the law of love therefore did not end when the old covenant ended.

## **Sin and virtue lists**

The idea that any Christian church would teach that we can sin because the Law of Moses has been “done away” is preposterous. What has happened for Christians is that the Law of Moses has been replaced by the law of Christ. (That is one aspect of the Christian becoming a “slave” to Christ.)

For anyone willing to look at the facts, and to think in terms of the New Testament witness as a whole, it spells out clearly how Christians are to live. A quick look at one or more of the so-called “sin lists” or “virtue lists” in the New Testament should dispel the notion that Christians can sin because the old covenant Law of Moses has been “done away.”

(See the following lists as examples — Matthew 5:3-11; Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 4:32; 6:14-20; Philippians 4:8; 1 Timothy 3:2-13; Titus 1:6-9; Mark 7:21-22; Romans 1:29-32; 13:8-14; Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; 6:9-10; Ephesians 4:25-31; 5:3-5; Colossians 3:5-9; 2 Timothy 3:1-5.)

Let us briefly refer to one of them. Galatians 5:13-25 shows the new

covenant “law of Christ,” though it doesn’t label it with that particular terminology. Paul begins by saying that Christians should keep the second great law of God: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14). He points out that if we live by the indwelling Holy Spirit, we will “not gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (5:16). Paul points out the kinds of sins Christians under the “law of Christ” will avoid. This includes everything from sexual immorality to idolatry to drunkenness to selfish ambition.

Paul next points out some fruits of the Holy Spirit. These include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Christians will have crucified the sinful nature itself, not only sinful acts, through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

## **Mosaic Law unnecessary**

Christians do not need the Law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments, as a direction for their lives. They know what they must do to obey God from the New Testament witness. Christians also do not need the Mosaic Law as a “tutor,” because they have the indwelling Holy Spirit as their Paraclete or Counselor — whom Jesus sent. He is with them forever (John 14:15-21 with Galatians 3:23-25).

In Romans 7:1 Paul points out that the Law of Moses has authority over a person “only as long as he lives.” (Of course, it had authority only over the Jewish person; Paul is writing to Jews at this point.) He uses the example of a married woman who was bound to her husband while the husband was alive. When he died, she was free. Even though she remarried, she was not called an adulteress.

Paul uses this analogy to point out that Christians have died to the Law of Moses (which includes the package called the Ten Commandments) “through the body of Christ” (Romans 7:4). They now belong to another — to the risen Christ. “We have been released from the law,” says Paul, “so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (verse 6). If Paul could say this to Jews, how much more would it apply to Gentiles, who were never under the written code of the Law of Moses to begin with!

Many more things could be said about these matters from New Testament Scripture. The above discussion, however, should make it evident that Christians are not required to keep the Law of Moses (including the Ten Commandments). Sabbatarians cannot “pick and choose” a few boundary marker observances such as Sabbath-keeping and insist Christians must keep them. But Christians are not in some lawless limbo as a result of not being

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obligated to the Law of Moses. They have the New Testament “law of Christ” and the Holy Spirit to guide them.

## **GENESIS 2:2-3 — GOD’S “REST” AND THE SABBATH**

By Paul Kroll

Genesis 2:2-3 is sometimes used in an attempt to prove that Christians must keep the seventh-day Sabbath. It is important that we understand what this verse does and doesn’t say about the Sabbath rest. Further, we must ask what this verse tells us about the Sabbath when viewed against the essential message of Scripture about our salvation in Christ.

After the creation account in Genesis 1, we read the following in chapter 2, verses 2-3: “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”

In chapter 1, the writer of Genesis used the seven-day weekly cycle as an organizing outline to make an important theological point: The one God of Israel is the true God — the Creator of all that exists in the heavens and on earth, including the human race. This was his answer to the myths of the nations that had spun fantastic stories of how their deities were responsible for the creation. Genesis 1:1-2:3 sets the record straight about creation. The God of Israel, Yahweh, is Creator.

Yet, the writer of Genesis ends this creation outline by adding the statement that the God of Israel “rested” after creation was complete. What theological point was he trying to make about God and his purpose in the creation? We shall see the answer unfold in this paper. The concept of the “rest” will prove to be a monumental part of God’s purpose, one the New Testament explains for us in a definitive way.

### **Sabbath rest in Genesis**

Before we undertake to solve this mystery, we should consider the idea that Genesis 2:2-3 tells us God made the weekly Sabbath “holy time” at creation, and that this day has been and continues to be a sacred day for all peoples. We may begin by noticing that the verse does *not* say a physical Sabbath-day rest was to be observed by human beings. Genesis 2:2-3 contains no command for human beings to rest from their labor or to otherwise keep the seventh day as “holy time.” God is the one said to be

“resting,” and by his act he creates something holy about the seventh day. But at this point in the story we haven’t been told what that is.

If the writer of Genesis wanted to make the point that God commanded the Sabbath to be a day of rest for humans since the creation, then he failed to support this idea in further chapters. He provided no evidence that any of the great patriarchs, Abraham included, kept the seventh day as “holy time.” Neither did he make any comments to the effect that humanity was breaking the Sabbath-day rest and thereby sinning against God between Adam and Sinai. Not until the old covenant is instituted with a single nation — Israel — does the Sabbath rest become a command (and then only for Israel).

If the Sabbath was commanded since the creation, then it is surprising that none of God’s faithful people kept it until Sinai. Conversely, we would also have to ask why evil people are not chastised for Sabbath-breaking during the ages before the giving of the Law of Moses.

However, Genesis 2:2-3 does tell us that God made the seventh day of creation week “holy.” What does this mean? For God to make something “holy” is for him to set it apart in some way for his special use, or to use something set apart to explain part of his purpose. For example, the temple had a Most Holy Place whose environs only the High Priest could enter, and that only once a year. The book of Hebrews explains that the “holiness” that God ascribed to this location was to show that a true entry into his presence was not yet available.

But Genesis 2:2-3 does *not* tell us what lesson we are to learn from the seventh day of creation being made “holy” or set apart through God “resting” from his work. We understand that God does not become tired. Nor is he affected by an earthbound reality in which the motions of the planet mark time. This would lead us to believe the writer of Genesis used a literary device when speaking about the “rest” of God. That is, the “rest” of God had a symbolic meaning for him. But what was that meaning?

## **Author’s point**

The writer had already used the seven-day week as an outline on which he hung various creation events and by which he made his theological point. It’s not surprising, then, that he would use the metaphor of God’s “rest” to make another theological assertion about who this God of Israel was, and his purpose. We should remember that the writer lived under the old covenant. This would lead us to believe that his experience of God taught him something about his purpose with Israel, something that was explained by the “rest” concept.

“Rest” is a key idea in Genesis 2:2-3. Why did the writer use the concept? What did it mean to the writer, and what should it mean to us as Christians? We have already seen that the seventh-day rest follows all the creative acts of God that are summarized in Genesis 1. More than this, the rest of God follows the creation of humanity — male and female — in God’s own image (1:27-31).

The fact that this is mentioned in the context of the creation account implies that the writer understood that humanity has a special purpose beyond the other parts of the creation. First, all of creation is pronounced as being “very good” (1:31). Humanity is to “fill the earth and subdue it” — to be God’s representatives on this planet and caretakers of the creation (1:28). But all is not completely revealed to this point in Genesis about God’s aim in creating humanity. Is there no further purpose for the human race (and, from the writer’s point of view, of his choosing Israel to be his people) than to fill and subdue the earth?

The writer refers to God’s “rest,” and tells us that it is holy — set apart for some purpose. But for what purpose? And, how does this relate to humanity and Israel? That the creation of man and woman was announced just before the making of the holy rest could imply that this “rest” has something to do with the creation in general and humanity in particular. God, as it were, “sits back” after setting his creative purpose in motion and pronounces everything as being good. Since God doesn’t literally get tired, we can understand his “rest” as figurative, and as part of his creative purpose. We could see the “rest” as extending to humans (and Israel) in some way, since they seem to be the end object of God’s creative process.

## Humanity’s loss

But whatever this rest is to signify, the ensuing Genesis story tells us it is not something that humans enjoy in a physical sense except, perhaps, for a brief interlude in the Garden of Eden. Almost immediately after creation, we read about the tragedy that befell Adam and Eve in the Garden. As a consequence of sin, they suffer increased *labor* rather than rest. The notion of labor, the opposite of rest, becomes an important motif in the Genesis account.

Eve must labor in childbearing. The Lord tells her, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children” (3:16). For mother Eve, childbearing becomes painful *work*. Adam will be forced to labor to eat. The Lord tells him, “Cursed is the ground because of you; through *painful toil* you will eat of it all the days of your life” (3:17, emphasis

ours throughout).

Their son, Cain, murders Abel. The latter's blood figuratively finds no rest, as it "cries out" from the ground (4:10). For his sin, Cain will be forced to engage in backbreaking labor. The Lord tells him, "When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you" (4:12). More than that, Cain was to be a "*restless wanderer on the earth*" (4:12). He would have neither rest in his labor nor rest from enemies seeking to kill him because of his murder.

The "anti-rest" motif continues in Genesis. When Noah was born, a great hope was attached to his future. It was said of him, "He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed" (5:29). But humanity found no rest because "the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence" (6:11). The only "rest" humanity could achieve was to rest in death.

In Noah, God restated and broadened the covenant made with Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28-30. He reissued his promise to neither curse the ground nor to destroy humanity despite the fact that he knew "every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood" (8:21; 9:8-17). Despite this covenant of promise, many generations passed during which humans became more alienated from God. The story of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel indicates the condition of the human race. Then God made a covenant with Abraham. This is first found in Genesis 12:2-3:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

## Israel in toil and slavery

We know the rest of the story from Genesis. Abraham had a son named Isaac, and he had a son named Jacob. (Jacob had to be saved by the Lord from 20 years of servitude at Laban's hand — Genesis 31:38-42.) As Jacob said to Laban: "If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my *hardship and the toil of my hand*" (verse 42).

Jacob had 12 sons. The oldest ten sold their young brother, Joseph, into slavery. During a famine, they all moved to Egypt, where the family of Jacob grew into a great nation. But the Egyptians placed the Israelites into slavery and hard bondage. They, too, failed to find the "rest" of God. The first chapter of Exodus, verses 11-14, shows how Israel subsequently suffered as a slave people:

So they [the Egyptians] put slave masters over them [the Israelites] to oppress them with *forced labor*, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.... The Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and *worked them ruthlessly*. They made their lives bitter with *hard labor* in brick and mortar and with *all kinds of work* in the fields; in all their *hard labor* the Egyptians used them ruthlessly.

## Israel rescued

The writer of Exodus was trying to make a point, again about the notion of “rest.” The Israelites were oppressed with hard and forced labor — and they had no rest for their souls. But help was on the way. We read in Exodus 2:23-24:

The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.

The savior of Israel would be Moses, who as a young man had seen his own people in slavery and “watched them at their hard labor” (2:11). Now, after his own exile of 40 years in the desert, the Lord appeared to him and said in Exodus 3:7-8:

I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Moses was to tell the Israelites about their impending freedom and physical rest:

Say to the Israelites: “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.” (Exodus 6:6-7)

## A covenant of “rest”

This promise is the first intimation of a covenant between God and Israel. It is a covenant based on God providing freedom from slavery, and hence

rest from unending labor. The “rest” of God mentioned in Genesis 2:2, which was not attained by humans because of sin, was now promised in a kind of second Garden of Eden — the Promised Land. The old covenant was a covenantal promise of peace, prosperity and security for Israel in the Promised Land (Leviticus 26:3-13; Deuteronomy 28:1-14). It contained all the elements that give human beings a feeling of well-being and “rest.”

In short, the old covenant was a promise of *physical* rest to God’s people, which (as shown in Genesis 2) was part of God’s creative purpose at the beginning. We will see how this purpose of “rest” unfolds, but we are getting ahead of our story. Let’s go back a moment to God’s promise through Moses that he would provide freedom and rest to the people of Israel.

We know from the Exodus story that the Egyptian Pharaoh did not want to let the Israelites go free. He ordered that they should work even harder for their captors (Exodus 5). But God rescued the Israelites and brought them into the wilderness in preparation for their entering the Promised Land of freedom and rest. However, that generation failed to trust the Lord, and they were not allowed to enter. They died without coming into their rest.

The next generation of Israelites entered the Promised Land under Joshua. They were told to obey the covenant that had been made between the people and the Lord. All the tribes were told to help each other take possession of the land “until the Lord gives them *rest*, as he has done for you” (Joshua 1:15). We read that this promise was fulfilled. In a summary statement before Joshua’s farewell to the nation, it was said that “the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them” (Joshua 23:1).

Despite Israel’s lapses from faith and obedience, the Lord fulfilled his promise to give the nation prosperity and rest. The high point of this physical rest and well-being occurred during the days of King Solomon. “During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree” (1 Kings 4:25). The nation of Israel had experienced the physical “rest” of God in abundance.

One of the hallmarks of the Law of Moses was an emphasis on the “rest” that God provided Israel. This included many physical blessings (Deuteronomy 7:10-12). God’s merciful grace in saving the nation from extreme toil and servitude in Egypt — and his giving the people bountiful physical blessings in the Promised Land — was to be memorialized in the religious practices of the nation. A weekly Sabbath of rest from work was a main feature of this rest memorial.

A good comparison for Christians is the Lord’s Supper. The bread and wine remind Christians that God has saved them through the redemptive

work of Christ. On the other hand, the Israelites rested each week to remind them that God had saved them from Egyptian bondage and had blessed them abundantly.

Exodus 20:11 explains why God gave Israel the Sabbath day: “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (These are the same words the writer of Genesis wrote for the creation account.)

In a restatement of the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy 5:12-15, a related reason was given for the Sabbath “rest” command. “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day” (5:15).

What had the writer seen here? Possibly, he saw that what God had done with Israel was the beginning of a restoration of God’s purpose for all humanity. His purpose, dimly seen in the Garden of Eden story, was that human beings should live in a relationship with him, through which they would be blessed. If they were one with God, then they would enter his rest because he would bless them physically. That was God’s intent, as the Garden of Eden story tells us. But human beings sinned and were cursed. Humans were cut off from the presence of God and the relationship with him was broken.

## **Reminder of blessings**

With Israel, as the Exodus and old covenant show us, God had again moved to begin to bring the human race back into a relationship with himself. Israel would be the starting place. The nations would look at Israel, living in blessedness and loving obedience to Yahweh, and perhaps other nations might also someday come to love the Lord and find blessing as well (Deuteronomy 4:5-8). That was the ideal — just as the Garden of Eden had been an ideal. But as we know from the rest of the story of the Old Testament, the ideal was not achieved.

The reason Israel was to keep the seventh day as a rest period was because of a physical “rest” that was available to the nation. As slaves in Egypt, they had no rest for themselves, but toiled in harsh labor daily, at the whim of their taskmasters. God had freed them from this slavish labor and had given them freedom and prosperity in the Promised Land. Israel was supposed to remember the gracious freedom and rest they had been given — and they were to do this each week

The weekly rest was but one memorial of how God had saved the nation from Egyptian slavery and mindless toil. There were seven *yearly* “rest” days within three yearly festival seasons that also were celebrated by cessation from labor (Leviticus 23:7-8, 21, 25, 32, 35-36). These were harvest festivals when Israel could give thanks for the crops they had reaped — and when they could rest from their labor. By contrast, in Egypt the Israelites had toiled ceaselessly for uncaring taskmasters.

Beyond that, the land was to lie idle and not be tilled every seventh year (Leviticus 25:1-7). This means that while the land rested, the people could also rest, because they did not need to sow or till. Whatever the land produced on its own could be eaten.

Also, each 50th year was a land rest (Leviticus 25:8-12). It was also a year of release, as we read in verse 10: “Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan.” In Egypt, the Israelites had neither land nor inheritance. Now, God had given the nation the Promised Land, and each family was to enjoy its own parcel of ground.

While the Promised Land was not a place of idleness and ease, there was rest from backbreaking and meaningless toil on someone else’s land. On the other hand, the Promised Land would yield abundant produce because of the blessing of the Lord. The nation would rest from war and the fear of famine and disease. The inhabitants could breathe a sigh of relief — and they could “rest” both physically and psychologically in the sure knowledge that God was watching over them.

## **The meaning**

Now we can understand why the writer of Genesis may have been so keen to divide the physical creation into a six-day format and then make the seventh day a day of God’s “rest.” It must have been driven home to him through his experience with the saving acts of the God of Israel, that God’s purpose was to rescue humanity from the curse that they had brought upon themselves. This curse had required backbreaking toil in unyielding soil. The curse had also brought famine and disease, fighting and war. Life was anything but restful.

The writer of Genesis must have seen the problem of the “curse” and the restless sorrow it had brought as having been solved specifically in the promises to the nation of Israel. Israel had once been in captivity and the people had been forced to toil incessantly under taskmasters. Life was neither

prosperous nor restful. But God had purposed to fulfill his covenant with Abraham whereby he would rescue his descendants from terrible toil in slavery. The nation would find true prosperity, peace and rest under the protection and blessing of the Creator, the one true God. The nation's religious practices, including various "rest" days and times, reminded the people that they had been saved from toil and slavery in Egypt and now rested in peace and prosperity under the loving hand of their God.

Genesis was written for Israelites who lived in the Promised Land, who were to commemorate each week the rest they had been given by the Creator. Their weekly experience of rest was then associated with the creation by the words of Genesis 2:2-3. The writer of Genesis was informed by and influenced by the weekly Sabbath as he wrote about the "rest" of God. He was writing from the point of view of an Israelite who had been saved from slavery and who enjoyed the "rest" God provided the nation. The writer understood that the various rest days commanded for Israel — the weekly Sabbath, annual festivals, and years of agricultural rest — reflected what God had done for the nation. God's actions of providing "rest" signaled to the writer that in God's creative purpose his creatures should find rest *in him*. In the world there was cursing and trouble, but in God's kingdom — the Promised Land — there was prosperity, peace and rest.

Genesis 2:2-3, then, is not an early command for all people to keep the seventh day as holy time. It is a reflection of the writer's understanding that humans should find their rest in God. For the nation of Israel, the old covenant specified that this was to be commemorated by a weekly physical rest on the seventh day. There is no command for other peoples to do the same. Other peoples did not have the physical "rest" of the Promised Land nor the command for physical rest on the seventh day. What the Israelites had was a physical image of a spiritual reality; other nations did not have this.

## **Future promise**

The Old Testament shows that the restful state of affairs did not last very long for Israel. The nation sinned and the people suffered invasion, curses on their land and captivity. The old covenant between God and Israel failed because the nation did not live up to its promises to be faithful to God (Hebrews 4:2).

Later in Israel's history, the prophets spoke of the need for a new covenant, based on better promises. Isaiah prophesied of a time when God would renew his covenant with Israel and give them a final rest. In chapter 11, Isaiah spoke of a Branch to come, upon whom the Spirit of the Lord

would rest. The Spirit of the Lord would be upon him and he would bring justice, mercy and peace. The Branch would usher in God's kingdom of righteousness and peace.

In soaring metaphorical language, Isaiah said of this new era: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat...the cow will feed with the bear...The lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra" (verses 6-8). He summarized this future hope by painting the arrival of an idyllic worldwide kingdom of God: "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full for the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (verse 9).

"In that day," when this future kingdom would be established, the Lord would bring his people Israel out from all the nations (verse 11). And what would he give his people? He would give them "rest." Isaiah explains: "In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and *his place of rest* will be glorious" (verse 10).

Jeremiah also spoke of the rest that the Lord would bring. "'At that time,' declares the Lord, 'I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they will be my people.' This is what the Lord says: 'The people who survive the sword will find favor in the desert; I will come to give *rest* to Israel'" (Jeremiah 31:1-2).

It's no wonder the Jews looked for a Messiah who would save them from their enemies and gather the nation. It was a beautiful vision of peace and prosperity. The Messiah would make the regathered clans of Israel in the Promised Land the people of the kingdom of God in which righteousness, justice and prosperity would know no bounds. The enemies of the Jews, whoever they might be, would be defeated and destroyed.

## Jesus is our "rest"

The Branch, the Root of Jesse, the Redeemer Messiah, came as promised, in the person of Jesus. He offered the greatest "rest" the world would ever know, but it was not a physical rest of power and prosperity given to a single nation within certain geographic borders. Jesus brought the offer of "rest" of freedom from sin and death — and this was for people of all nations — and life in the eternal kingdom of God.

The notion of "God's rest" found in Genesis 2:2-3 and the Old Testament was still alive and well. Yes, God would send the Deliverer, and his rest would be glorious. That rest, though, would be the result of the redemptive work of Jesus, and it would be commemorated not through the seventh day, but through Jesus. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus told his hearers: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you

rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” What a glorious promise to a hurting humanity. Jesus was not necessarily promising physical rest and peace, but an eternal and spiritual rest.

Jesus said to his disciples: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives” (John 14:27). Jesus did not promise his disciples a Promised Land of peace, plenty and security. In fact, in his last talk with the disciples before his arrest, Jesus told them they would have anything but physical rest. “I have told you these things,” Jesus warned, “so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

The promise to Israel had been peace, prosperity and rest in the Promised Land in exchange for obedience to the old covenant and Law of Moses. The New Testament “rest” is a rest in Christ. It is the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit and a spiritual rebirth that leads to eternal life in the kingdom of God. This is the ultimate “rest” of God. God’s purpose in Genesis 2:2-3, not completely understood under the old covenant, is now revealed and fulfilled in its final sense through Christ.

The theme of Sabbath-rest is also discussed in Hebrews 4. For a full-length discussion of that passage, see a later chapter.

## **IS LEVITICUS 23:3 A COMMAND TO HAVE WORSHIP SERVICES ON THE WEEKLY SABBATH?**

By Paul Kroll

We read the following command from Jesus in Luke 5:14, when he healed someone: “Show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” If one assumed that Jesus’ teaching applied to all people at all times, it could be claimed that this passage is “proof” telling Christians they must offer the proper Mosaic sacrifice and appear before a Jewish priest.

However, we know that Luke 5:14 is *not* a command for us to offer sacrifices. How do we know this? It is because the total witness of the New Testament makes it clear that such sacrifices applied only to Israelites and Jews under the Mosaic old covenant.

This illustrates the folly of isolating a verse from its context. We need to examine both the verse in question and the larger context of the Bible. We must not start with advance assumptions.

Let us look at whether Christians must attend “holy convocations” on the Sabbath. If we are to understand what Leviticus 23:3 might mean in its context, we have to know something about the manner of communal worship in Israel under the old covenant. The national corporate worship had to occur in the place that God designated as a central worship site. Originally, this was at the Tabernacle, and after Solomon’s time, at the Temple in Jerusalem.

We can see an explicit instruction about the place to worship in Deuteronomy: “You are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go...” (12:4). See also verses 11, 14, 17-18, and 26. This command to worship only at a designated location is also seen in Deuteronomy 16, which lists the annual festivals. See verses 5, 7, 11, and 16, among others.

The reasons for this were numerous. One consideration was that Israel should not alter the worship format and purpose that God had given the nation; otherwise they would easily lapse into worship that was directed to pagan deities. We can see how this happened in the wilderness when Moses

left the people to receive the stone tablets (Exodus 32), and when Israel broke politically from Judah and set up its own religious system, including new worship formats, places and times (1 Kings 12:25-33).

## What made Sabbath “holy”

The essence of Sabbath-keeping was physical rest. In Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15, the Sabbath command specifies rest from labor as the way to keep the day “holy.” There is no mention of going to a worship service each Sabbath. Other passages in the Old Testament also define the Sabbath by *rest*, not by attendance at worship services. See Exodus 31:12-17, Numbers 15:32, Nehemiah 13:15-22 and Jeremiah 17:19-27. The latter two passages, though they refer to Jerusalem, do not mention anything about failure to attend worship services or “sacred assemblies,” but only work on the Sabbath as a desecration of this day.

An interesting study is to look up the word “Sabbath” in a concordance, find all the Old Testament references and then read those passages to see how this day was kept “holy.” The conclusion will be that rest from labor is what made the Sabbath sacred time, not attendance at a worship service. Most Israelites lived too far from the tabernacle to attend a worship service every Sabbath – and there is no evidence in the Old Testament that they did. And the law did not allow them to assemble anywhere else for worship. Nor do we find commands even for people near the Tabernacle that they had to gather for worship. The Sabbath was kept at home, by resting.

There is no mention in Old Testament passages that attending a worship service on the Sabbath is a way of keeping this day holy. The way the Sabbath was sanctified, made holy or set apart as sacred was through physical rest from labor. All the Old Testament references to Sabbath observance in Israel speak to this point. There is no Old Testament theology of weekly Sabbath holiness that centers around attendance at “holy convocations.”

It would be strange, then, to have one phrase in Leviticus 23:3 refer to a weekly worship service commanded for all Israel, and then claim that this was just as important as resting as a way to keep the Sabbath. It would be a mistake to assume such a teaching from a single and vague phrase in one verse when the entire witness of the Old Testament does not mention worship service attendance in conjunction with the Sabbath.

There is no indication in Scripture of Israelites going to worship services of one kind or another in their local towns and villages. They could travel to worship services at the Tabernacle only for the annual festivals.

## Synagogue system

One might point to the New Testament and say, “But Jesus and Paul attended the synagogue on the Sabbath. Doesn’t this indicate that worship services were an essential part of God’s command to keep the Sabbath holy?”

So far as we know from Scripture or Jewish history, there was no national system of Sabbath-day worship sites or places of communal instruction throughout Israel’s history in the Promised Land up to the captivity of Judah in the 530s B.C. and the return of a remnant to Judea a few decades years later. There were no synagogues before the exile; there were no local meeting places in Israel before the exile, because there was no command for weekly meetings.

The synagogue system allowed Jews to meet together in local towns and villages for prayer, the reading of the Holy Scriptures and for fellowship. The synagogue became a miniature sanctuary to replace the loss of the Jerusalem Temple. We do not know when the synagogue system originated. Neither the Old or New Testaments provide any information about this development. It is generally believed that the synagogue system developed when worship at the Temple in Jerusalem became impossible and when Jews were dispersed into other nations.

Jews added the synagogue worship system, not based on biblical command, but on a sociological need, due to the loss of the Temple and the scattering of the people far away from the Promised Land. Nowhere in the Old Testament will you find a command to have local worship sites.

There wasn’t anything necessarily wrong with the Jews setting up synagogues. They became an important center of fellowship and instruction in the Jewish faith. The New Testament does not condemn the practice; it is taken for granted. It is nowhere commanded.

Regarding the day on which Jews had their worship service, it’s natural that it should occur on the Sabbath. The people worked the other six days and the Sabbath was a good time for them to meet. But there is no biblical command to set up local worship sites and to make the weekly Sabbath “holy convocations.” The Old Testament does not indicate that the Sabbath is kept holy through a meeting. Rather, it was kept as holy through rest.

## Leviticus 23:3

Let us look at Leviticus 23:3 directly: “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of *rest*, a day of sacred assembly. You are *not to do any work*; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the Lord.” The verse emphasizes *rest*.

Since the passage is about resting and not working, it seems that the expression “*day* of sacred assembly” is a parallel to “Sabbath to the Lord” and refers not so much to official communal worship on the Sabbath but to the *day* itself as being a “sacred assembly.”

The phrase “day of sacred assembly” can be understood as a “sacred day of celebration” or a “sacred occasion,” as well as a “sacred assembly” or convocation. The weekly Sabbath, as well as the annual festivals, were occasions to worship and praise God for the abundance of his physical blessings and for saving Israel from bondage in Egypt. But this worship and praise could be given to God in the Israelites’ participation in rest itself (thus experiencing the blessings of Yahweh through rest), as well as in contemplation and conversation *at home*.

By resting from their labor and self-interests on the weekly Sabbath, the Israelites were presenting themselves before God through rest. Resting was a way of being in the presence of God and fulfilling his sacred purpose. The only people who were commanded to come to the Temple for worship were the Levites and priests. On behalf of the entire nation, they performed the prescribed ceremonies. There was no command for people to watch them, or for them to teach the people. It was simply not possible for very many people to be there.

The concept of “rest” is important in Scripture, and it has a deep spiritual meaning for Christians. As Christians, we understand that our rest is in Christ, who is our Sabbath. When we rest spiritually in Christ, we present ourselves as the people of God before his presence in continuous sacred assembly. We are *always* the church, in his presence every day of the week, not just one.

In conclusion, for most Israelites, the Sabbath was a day to rest at home, not a day to travel long distances and attend a worship service. The annual harvest festivals were the time for Israelites to enjoy communal worship and fellowship. Here is what the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (volume 2, page 623) says about Leviticus 23:3:

There is an emphasis here that the Israelite rested at home. There were special offerings given in the tabernacle (e.g., a double burnt offering), but the ordinary Israelite and his whole family rested. Presumably here was an opportunity for family worship and instruction in the law of God, but this is not specifically enjoined. What a boon a weekly rest must have been to the ancient laborer and farmer in his weary round of toil!

## CHRISTIANS AND OLD TESTAMENT LAWS

As did the Jews in their synagogue system, Christians find that regular fellowship and communal instruction is an important foundation of their religious life. As Christians, we are free to meet together at any time of the day, any day of the week, and any season of the year. We are not limited to meeting on just one day, since no day has been specifically set aside by God for Christian fellowship and worship. We are always in the presence of God and worship him continually because he and Christ reside in us through the indwelling Holy Spirit. At the same time, we can gather weekly and seasonally in small groups or in larger communal situations to praise God, to recall Christ's work of salvation and to fellowship in the Spirit.

## **JESUS KEPT THE SABBATH. SHOULDN'T WE FOLLOW HIS EXAMPLE?**

By Michael Morrison

Jesus was a Jew, born under the law (Galatians 4:4), and he did many Jewish things:

- Attended synagogues (Luke 4:16).
- Observed Hanukkah (John 10:22).
- Told people to obey ritual laws (Matthew 8:4).
- Went to Jerusalem for the festivals (Luke 2:41).
- Gave money to support the temple (Matthew 17:27).

As a law-observant Jew, Jesus would have kept many additional customs required under the old covenant:

- had a *sukkah* booth each year (Leviticus 23:39-41)
- killed a Passover lamb each year (Exodus 12:3, 14)
- wore phylacteries (Deuteronomy 6:8-9)
- had tassels on his garments (Numbers 15:28).

Jesus did these things, so should we follow his example in these things, too? No. We do not imitate Jesus in every detail. We don't have to follow him like that.

Why should we follow him in one respect but not the others? We do not have to keep the Sabbath "just because Jesus kept it," unless we find other biblical evidence that this command applies to Christians.

We should follow Jesus in his attitude of obedience. We want to obey God, but to obey the instructions he has given us, not the rules he gave someone else. We do not have to keep old covenant laws unless they also happen to apply in the new covenant age.

In other words, the example of Jesus carries no weight on its own. As the above examples show, other biblical evidence is needed to see whether his example is something we should follow, whether it is commanded for us today.

The Gospels do not preserve any example of Jesus "keeping" the Sabbath or "resting" on the Sabbath. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John apparently did not believe they needed to preserve such an example. Instead, the Gospels show Jesus breaking traditions about the Sabbath, and never teaching any

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restrictions. Jesus set an example of activity, not of avoiding work. Indeed, he pointed out that God himself is working (John 5:17). God himself does not keep the weekly Sabbath; it is not part of his character, and therefore not part of the eternal and universal law.

## **MARK 2:27 – THE SABBATH WAS MADE FOR HUMANITY**

By Michael Morrison

After the Pharisees criticized Jesus for allowing his disciples to pick some grain on the Sabbath day, Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Was he saying that God made the Sabbath for all human beings—both Jews and Gentiles?

We can see what Jesus meant by looking at the next phrase: “and not man for the Sabbath.” His point was that the Sabbath was made to *serve* people, instead of people being created to serve the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a servant, not a master. He was addressing the relative importance of the Sabbath, not which specific people were given the Sabbath.

To see the point, suppose Jesus had said, “The law of circumcision was made for man, not man for circumcision.” Would this statement mean that circumcision was commanded for all humans? Of course not. It was commanded for the humans it applied to, not to all humans. The Sabbath, like circumcision, was given to Israel, not the rest of the world, and only to males, not females.

If Jesus had implied that the Sabbath was made for Gentiles, it would have created another, even larger, controversy, because the Pharisees believed that the Sabbath was given only to Israel. The Pharisees were challenging the behavior of the disciples, not the behavior of Gentiles. They were overestimating the importance of Sabbath restrictions, and Jesus responded to them not by expanding the Sabbath to all humanity, but by reducing its relative importance to the people it was designed to serve.

## **DOES MARK 2:27-28 COMMAND CHRISTIANS TO OBSERVE THE WEEKLY SABBATH?**

By Paul Kroll

Let us begin by quoting Mark 2:27-28. Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Sabbatarians generally make the following assumptions about this verse. They believe Jesus was commanding all people in all ages to observe the weekly Sabbath as “holy time.” They reason that the Sabbath law could be changed or eliminated only if Jesus had specifically stated here that it was abrogated. But, Sabbatarians claim, Jesus by his word and actions in Mark 2:27-28 was implying that the Sabbath must be observed by all human beings. Therefore, they conclude that this passage in Mark is, in effect, a command to observe the Sabbath.

Is that what Mark 2:27-28 tells us? Let’s look at the context of Mark 2 to see what Jesus’ purpose was in saying what he did in verses 27 and 28. One Sabbath, Jesus and the disciples were picking heads of grain (verse 23). Jesus’ action and that of his disciples was challenged by the Pharisees. “Why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” they demanded to know (verse 24). The Pharisees had set themselves up as religious authorities, defining what could or could not be done on the Sabbath.

### **A question of how, not who**

What the Pharisees objected to was Jesus and his disciples picking the heads of grain on the Sabbath. They regarded this as reaping. It was one of the many acts the teachers of the law had decided should be forbidden on the Sabbath. The people challenging Jesus in Mark 2 would all have rightly assumed that the Law of Moses commanded *them* to keep the Sabbath. As the old covenant people of God, they were obligated to observe it. The question for these people was *how* to keep it.

To answer this question, Jesus countered their challenge with a question, and an example of his own about David and his companions. He pointed out that on one occasion, because they were hungry, David and his companions ate the consecrated bread, which was unlawful for anyone but priests to eat (verses 25-26). Jesus was pointing out that while David technically broke the Law of Moses, he was not condemned, because such violations under certain

conditions of need might be warranted. Jesus applied this principle to what he and the disciples were doing when they were picking the heads of grain on the Sabbath.

Jesus' point was that although the action of David was contrary to the Law of Moses, he was not condemned for it. The issue in this passage, then, is how to interpret the Mosaic Law, and who has the authority to do so. Nothing is said about which group of people, or whether everyone, is commanded to keep the Sabbath.

To drive home this explanation regarding the purpose of the weekly rest day, Jesus said to the Pharisees: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." What was his point? It was *not* whether Christians – or everyone – or a limited group – must observe the old covenant Sabbath. That doesn't come up at all in the conversation.

Jesus was talking to Jews under the old covenant. Jesus was a Jew, born under the Law (Galatians 4:4). Jesus kept the old covenant worship regulations.

The issue was how should the Sabbath law be interpreted and observed by those people, the Jews, to whom it applied. The Jewish teachers of the law, at least many of them, had made the Sabbath a burden for the people. Jesus was pointing out that human needs sometimes supersede legal requirements. His statement has no application to the question of whether Christians should or should not keep the Sabbath. The question was, "How should those who are *required* to keep the Sabbath (the Jews under the old covenant) do so?"

## Made for human need

Jesus was saying that the Sabbath, under the old covenant, was meant to serve human needs, not the other way around, thus the use of the expression that the "Sabbath was made for man." It was made *for human need* in a certain context, under the old covenant worship system as defined by the Law of Moses, until the Seed, Christ, should come.

Israelites were to rest from their work because they needed a rest from their agricultural toil. Through that rest they could worship God as the provider of all their needs, and as the God who had saved them from slave-like toil in Egypt. The Sabbath regulation was not given to Israel simply because God wanted people to keep religious rituals. It had a purpose for all those human beings to whom it was given. But it was given *only* to Israel under the old covenant.

Jews recognized that the Law of Moses, particularly its cultic observances

such as weekly and annual Sabbaths, applied only to national Israel. Jewish rabbis understood that non-Jews did not need to keep the Law of Moses, including the Sabbath rest. This law was given to Israel alone, and only for as long as the old covenant was in force.

## Lord of the Sabbath

In his conversation with the Pharisees in Mark 2, Jesus added another thought: “The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” Why did Jesus say this? The issue was not about who should keep the Sabbath, but about who had authority or lordship in terms of deciding *how* it should be kept in the old covenant era. In the conversations between Jesus and the Pharisees, the question of “who” should keep the Sabbath never came up. Everyone understood that the Jews under the old covenant Law were the ones who should keep it. The question was: For those who were required to keep the Sabbath, how should they keep it – and who had the authority to *determine* how it should be kept?

The Pharisees, the religious leaders, had questioned Jesus’ authority on the matter of his disciples’ picking grain on the Sabbath. They had set themselves up above him on the issue of Sabbath interpretation. Yet, Jesus was the Word of God made flesh. Therefore, Jesus, God incarnate, had more authority than the Pharisees to decide how the Sabbath should be observed – again, under the circumstances where it was required. He was, after all, the Lord of the law that had commanded Sabbath observance for old covenant Israel.

Jesus’ statement says nothing about who should or should not keep the Sabbath. Of course Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. He is Lord of every command ever given by God – including all the 613 commands (by rabbinical count) of the Law of Moses. Jesus is also Lord of all time and all days of the week, including Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Jesus is, after all, *Lord*. But his being Lord of the Sabbath does not mean to say it is commanded for all people. The Lord of Israel was Lord of the law of circumcision, given as a sign to the children of Israel. But the fact that God was Lord of the circumcision law does not of itself imply that all human beings must keep it. In all cases, we have to know *which* of the laws apply to new covenant Christians.

Let us ask what has been and has not been said about the Sabbath in Mark 2:27. Jesus was addressing the Sabbath issue in the context of speaking to the religious leaders of old covenant Israel and the interpreters of the Law of Moses in his day. He was telling them as old covenant people how they

should apply the law of the Sabbath, that is, with mercy and thought to human need. He was telling them he had the authority to define how they should observe the Sabbath.

What isn't said here? The issue of whether Gentiles or Christians need to keep the Sabbath is not mentioned. Jesus is not commanding anyone to observe the Sabbath. That is not the question under debate in this verse. Therefore, we should not import this idea into this passage of Scripture. That is, we shouldn't first assume that Christians must observe the Sabbath, and then claim that this idea is found in Mark 2:27-28, because it isn't there.

To conclude, Jesus' comments about the Sabbath being made for humanity reflect the idea that the Pharisees (as representatives of old covenant Israel) should have taught an enlightened Sabbath observance, not missing the reason why God gave the nation this holy time. Jesus' statement about being the Lord of the Sabbath challenged the Pharisees' attempt to subvert his authority in the matter and claim it for themselves.

## **MATTHEW 24:20 – WHY PRAY NOT TO FLEE ON THE SABBATH?**

By Paul Kroll

Pray that your flight will not take place  
in winter or on the Sabbath. (Matthew 24:20)

If Sabbath observance was not a concern for Christians when Matthew wrote his Gospel, why did he mention Jesus' words about fleeing on the Sabbath? Some people claim that this implies that Christians ought to keep the Sabbath rest. Is this true?

We begin by noting an important point. If we carefully read his words in Matthew 24:20, we find no command from his lips for Christians to observe a Sabbath rest. He simply advises Christians that for circumstantial reasons, they should pray that the need to flee will not arise on the Sabbath or in winter. Why it would not be prudent to flee in winter is obvious. Adverse weather conditions would hamper flight and put those fleeing at risk from the elements. But why would fleeing on the Sabbath day be a problem?

Here is where we have to be aware of Jewish customs and practices regarding the Sabbath. Jesus gave his warning to the disciples because of the possibility that Jewish people in Jerusalem and Judea would have prevented Christians from fleeing on the Sabbath. Note that the warning was given "to those who are in Judea" (verse 16), not to disciples in other parts of the world. It is preserved only in Matthew's Gospel, which was probably written to Jewish Christians.

Thus, the passage tells us more about the religious practices and social regulations regarding the Sabbath of non-Christian Jews in Jerusalem and Judea, than what the church would be doing. The context in which the warning about fleeing is given leads us to conclude that it has nothing to do with any supposed command for Christians to keep the Sabbath rest. Jesus gave his warning not because the church would be keeping the Sabbath, but because Christians in Judea and Jerusalem might find it difficult or impossible to flee on this day,

Since the Jews honored Moses' laws, they believed it was wrong to take long journeys on the Sabbath. They even had a measurement for the maximum distance to be traveled on this day, which was called a "Sabbath day's walk" (Acts 1:12). This was a short distance. In Luke's example it was

the distance between the Mount of Olives, on the perimeter of Jerusalem, and the city itself. But Jesus' warning was given in the context of a catastrophe on the city and Judea, which would have required getting much further out of the area than a limited "Sabbath day's walk" might allow.

Further, the gates of Jerusalem were locked on the Sabbath day, which would have prevented people from fleeing the city. The Jews also had authority to police their own people regarding certain religious matters. The zealots would have tried to prevent fellow Jews from taking long journeys on the Sabbath. They would have tried to prevent anyone from fleeing Jerusalem and Judea while the war with the Romans was in progress (A.D. 66-70). Such fleeing would have been considered a traitorous action by the Jews battling the Romans.

But Jesus said that people who were in Judea at the time of the crisis at Jerusalem would need to *immediately* flee far away into the hills. Jesus gave the warning in Matthew 24:20 because he knew that the Jews would not allow the kind of escape in troubling times on the Sabbath that his warning required. His warning was not a command to rest on the Sabbath any more than it was a command to rest in winter. These were simply inconvenient times to flee.

## Warning for the future?

Those who interpret Matthew 24 as applying only to a future time claim the warning in verse 20 has nothing to do with the practices of Jews in the first century. Thus, Jewish customs with regard to the Sabbath would not have any relevance for explaining this verse. They note that Jewish authorities today – an example for the future, they believe – would not prevent people from fleeing the city or the area of ancient Judea. Matthew 24, they claim, is a warning for the future "time of the end" of the world. In this context, they teach that verse 20 is, indeed, an implicit command for the Sabbath to be kept.

Does this theory have any validity? This idea of a future context to the warning in verse 20 is fraught with difficulties. Let's briefly look at some of the problems.

First, we have no idea what Jewish authorities might or might not allow during an unknown future time when it is claimed that all of the Holy Land will be in the throes of military, social and natural destruction and upheaval. Today's modern military power is overwhelming in its ability to pinpoint, corner and destroy. When Israel invaded Palestinian territory in April 2002 to prevent suicide bombers from killing Israelis, there was no escape for groups of people from any town, and certainly not from the area. We have

no way of knowing what might or might not be possible in terms of fleeing an area to safety – and any escape seems doubtful.

Second, leaving this hypothetical argument aside, we need to repeat that there is no command in Matthew 24:20 for Christians to keep the Sabbath. Jesus doesn't say, "Keep the Sabbath holy." He says that those who are in Judea should hope they don't need to flee in winter or on the Sabbath day. That is not a command to keep a rest day; it is advice about adverse conditions for fleeing. Jesus taught that it was permissible to help people on the Sabbath, to save lives. It would not be wrong to flee on a Sabbath — but it would be inconvenient if society was enforcing a Sabbath rest.

Third, if the warnings given throughout Matthew 24, including those about fleeing on the Sabbath, were meant only for some future "end times," then they would have had no meaning for the Christians to whom they were originally spoken, and then written. The hearers would have been confused by the meaning of such assertions. The existence of these warnings – in a future scenario – would require an explanation to the effect that Jesus was talking only to people living in some distant "end time." But no such explanation is evident in Matthew 24:20. The disciples who first heard these warnings are addressed throughout the chapter. In fact, Jesus says the following after giving such warnings: "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (verse 34).

Fourth, the idea that Matthew 24 refers to specific events in some future "end time" is speculation. Christians have been trying to understand how to interpret this chapter without great success or agreement for 1900 years. Some Christians believe that *all* the events mentioned in Matthew 24 were fulfilled before A.D. 70 and have no application for the subsequent history of the church, or for the future. The interpretation that these events are yet future is by no means proven.

## Conclusion

We cannot use one speculative assertion (that Matthew 24 refers to a future time) as the basis for a dogmatic assertion about another unproved claim (that the Sabbath should be kept). Verse 20 contains no command to keep the Sabbath. One can read the New Testament from Matthew through Revelation and not find a single instance in which the church is commanded to keep the Sabbath as "holy time."

Given all the above considerations, we can only conclude that Matthew 24:20 was a warning to Christians living at the time the book was written, and not specifically to Christians living in a supposed future time of "the end" of

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the world. The warning was given to Christians of that day living in Judea and Jerusalem because they would find it difficult to flee on a Sabbath day. There is no command in this verse to keep the Sabbath as “holy time.”

## **DOES HEBREWS 4:9 COMMAND US TO KEEP THE SABBATH?**

By Paul Kroll

Those who believe that Christians are required to keep the seventh-day Sabbath, especially as it applies to resting from work, sometimes cite Hebrews 4:9-11 as a proof-text. In the New International Version these verses say the following:

There remains...a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall.

If this passage requires Christians to keep the seventh-day Sabbath, it would be the *only* direct post-resurrection scriptural command to do so. If it does not command the Sabbath, then we have no command specifically written to the New Testament church mandating the keeping of the Sabbath. In view of this, it is important that we understand what the verses in question are telling us.

An important principle in understanding a specific passage of Scripture is to see it in context. The context includes the *immediate* subject at hand in which the verses are found, as well as the *overall* context of the book itself. Each passage should be understood as much as possible on its own terms. It should not be interpreted on the basis of an assumed premise, in this case, an advance assumption that God commands Christians to keep the seventh-day Sabbath.

### **The theme of Hebrews**

In order to understand Hebrews 4:9-11, we must first ask what the book of Hebrews is about. We recommend that you take the time to read the entire epistle in a modern translation.

We can state the theme of Hebrews in the following brief summary. It is generally believed that Hebrews was written to Jewish believers. At the least, it was written to people who were attracted to Jewish forms of worship, perhaps thinking that old covenant rituals were required. The writer of Hebrews takes issue with this. He indicates that the Jewish rituals were based on an obsolete covenant. Christians, he says, are under the better and greater

new covenant. This theme is sounded in many ways throughout Hebrews.

In chapter 8 the writer cites Jeremiah 31:31-34 to show that the Hebrew Scriptures themselves say that the old covenant would become null and void. They also look forward to a time when God would make a new covenant with his people. The writer summarizes: “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he [God] has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear” (8:13).

## Moses and Jesus

Throughout the epistle, the Hebrew believers are admonished to look to Jesus as the center of their faith. The writer summarizes this claim by saying:

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man (8:1).

The writer goes out of his way to show that Jesus is superior to anything offered in the old covenant. Moses — and the law system inaugurated through him — needed to be put into perspective because both were so highly venerated in classical Judaism. William Barclay wrote in the Daily Study Bible Series commentary on Hebrews that:

To the Jew it would have been impossible to conceive that anyone ever stood closer to God than Moses did, and yet that is precisely what the writer of Hebrews sets out to prove. (page 29)

Hebrews tells us: “Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself” (3:3). Moses represents the old covenant. To place Christ above Moses, then, is another way of saying that the new covenant supersedes and has better promises than the old covenant.

The entire New Testament attests to this fact. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul expounds this point: “He [God] has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (3:6).

Hebrews is telling Christians to look to Jesus and the new covenant and not to Moses and the old covenant as the authority for faith and religious practice. The writer insists that Jesus is the true High Priest, rather than the Levitical priests.

He also makes the point that the worship components of the law were

only shadows and copies of spiritual truths (8:1-5; 10:1). The old covenant laws given through Moses regarding temple rituals and the priesthood have only metaphorical value for Christians in that they point to the fully delivered faith through Jesus Christ.

Having said this about the theme of Hebrews in general, let us now turn to the specific context of Hebrews 4:9-11.

## **Wilderness experience**

Hebrews 3 and 4 speak of something vital that Christians share — the “heavenly calling” we have in Christ (3:1). In these verses we learn what the “rest” of Genesis 2:2-3 pictures to Christians. The subject at hand in these verses begins to be addressed under the word “today” in Hebrews 3:7, when the writer quotes Psalm 95:7-11:

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, “Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.” So I declared an oath in my anger, “They shall never enter my rest.”

Psalm 95 refers to the wilderness story as told in Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13. This psalm is used liturgically by Jews to inaugurate the Friday evening service of prayer. It may have been sung during the days of the early church as part of the temple service, before the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.

There are several things we should notice about this passage. The author focuses on the introductory word of the quotation, “today,” and the phrase in which it is found. He repeats the word “today” five times (3:7, 13, 15; twice in 4:7) and the phrase, “Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts” three times (3:7, 15; 4:7). The phrase with its opening word “today” is significant for the writer in that it allows him to apply the promise of “rest” found in the Scripture to his readers. William Lane discusses this point in the *Word Biblical Commentary on Hebrews*:

“Today” provided the writer with a catchword for bringing the biblical statement before his hearers sharply. “Today” is no longer the today of the past, surveyed by the psalmist in his situation, but the today of the present, which continues to be conditioned by the voice of God that speaks day after day through the Scriptures and in the gospel tradition. (page 87)

Lane makes the point that Psalm 95 “was a prophetic announcement that God was determining a future date for making his rest available” (page 100). The writer of Hebrews insists that the prophecy is being fulfilled in his day, in the church — and his readers need to heed its call. He wants his readers to make a connection between themselves and the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness. The author emphasizes a key concept: The Old Testament promise that God’s people would enter into “rest” is being fulfilled in the church and through Christ.

He begins by discussing God’s “rest” in terms of the promise of God to bring the rescued Israelites into the Promised Land. But as we know, and as the Scripture points out, the first generation of freed Israelites did not enter God’s “rest,” but they died in the wilderness (Numbers 14:26-35). The Israelites Moses led out of Egypt did not enter into God’s “rest.” The author wants his Christian readers to focus on the meaning of this tragedy. They are not to turn away from the living God (3:12) or be “hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (3:13). Rather, they are to “hold firmly till the end” their first confidence (3:14) so that they may enter into God’s “rest.”

The writer summarizes his admonition by saying, “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (4:1). The readers of Hebrews are encouraged to keep up their faith and hope in Christ. Otherwise, as the unbelieving Israelites in Moses’ day lost their opportunity to enter the rest in Canaan, the believers may forfeit the greater blessings of the “rest” in the new era.

## **From the beginning**

The author of Hebrews then turns to a discussion of God’s “rest” from another point of view. He says that this “rest” has been available to humanity since the beginning: “His [God’s] work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: ‘And on the seventh day God rested from all his work’” (4:3-4).

The “somewhere” is Genesis 2:2. When Hebrews was written, the Scriptures were on scrolls. It was difficult to look up specific passages, so writers often quoted passages from memory. But here is our familiar Scripture, and the one we sought to understand in terms of its meaning for Christians. We can understand the “rest” described in Genesis 2:2-3 as the archetype of all later experiences of rest — including the various rest commands given at Sinai, the physical rest Israel received from its enemies under Joshua (a type of Christ), and the promised future rest of the kingdom

of God.

The Genesis “rest” of God, applied to God’s creative purpose in Genesis 2:2, can be seen to typify the spiritual salvation of the people of God. That means the weekly Sabbath rest (along with the other rest commands in the Law of Moses) is a lesser expression — a shadow — of the true “rest” symbolically inaugurated at the seventh day of creation. This makes the weekly Sabbath a metaphor of the Genesis “rest” of God, as was the Canaan rest.

The idea of the Genesis rest is that, beginning with the seventh day of creation, God ceased creating. He continues in a state of nonwork in that he is not creating more *physical* things. However, this doesn’t mean God has been idle. Leon Morris points this out in the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* on Hebrews:

It is worth noticing that in the creation story each of the first six days is marked by the refrain “And there was evening, and there was morning.” However, this is lacking in the account of the seventh day. There we simply read that God rested from all his work. This does not mean that God entered a state of idleness, for there is a sense in which he is continually at work (John 5:17). But the completion of creation marks the end of a magnificent whole.... So we should think of the rest as something like the satisfaction that comes from accomplishment, from the completion of a task, from the exercise of creativity. (page 41)

F.F. Bruce also explained what this means in the volume on Hebrews in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*:

When we read that God “rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done” (Genesis 2:2), we are to understand that he *began* to rest then; the fact that he is never said to have completed his rest and resumed his work of creation implies that his rest continues still, and may be shared by those who respond to his overtures with faith and obedience. (page 106)

Thus, God’s “rest” has been available from the time the creation was finished — from the foundation of the world. Even though it has been available, few people entered into it before Jesus’ death and resurrection. The offer of entering this “rest” still stands. The writer of Hebrews makes this point by saying: “It still remains that some will enter that rest” (4:6). Whatever this “rest” is, the writer is emphasizing that it is — at the time of writing —

a promise his readers can take advantage of. In fact, they *must* take advantage of it, and not fail to achieve the “rest” because of disobedience (4:11).

## Joshua’s “rest”

The author of Hebrews must have realized as he wrote that, on the surface, there had been an apparent large-scale exception to his claim that no people had ever entered a “rest” of God. After all, the second generation of Israelites who were saved from Egypt did enter the Promised Land under Joshua. We read that under Joshua “the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them” (Joshua 23:1). But the writer of Hebrews quickly points out that this is not the kind of “rest” he has in mind, or one that constituted God’s ultimate objective — the “rest” promised to Christians.

Hundreds of years after Joshua led the Israelites into the rest of the Promised Land, the Psalmist urged people to enter a divine rest, and later still, the author of Hebrews was insisting that there is a “rest” its readers must yet enter into. There is more to the “rest” than mere entry into Canaan. Hebrews tells us: “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God” (4:8-9).

Israel had not secured the true “rest” after all. The writer can therefore exhort his readers to seek, obtain and hold on to this superior “rest” in Christ. This is the true “rest” to which Genesis 2:2-3, the literal Sabbath, the other festival rests, the wilderness experience, the Joshua rest, and the prophecy of Psalm 95 all looked forward to. He is interested in the redemptive and eternal rest in the kingdom of God, of which the weekly Sabbath and Canaan rests were symbols.

William Lane, in the Hebrews commentary in the Word Biblical Commentary, explains why the Joshua rest was but a type of the true “rest”:

The settlement of Canaan did not mark the fulfillment of the divine promise but pointed to another, more fundamental reality. If in fact Joshua had achieved the promised rest, there would have been no need for the renewal of the promise in Ps 95. Accordingly, the experience of rest in Canaan was only a type or symbol of the complete rest that God intended for his people, which was prefigured in the Sabbath rest of God. (page 101)

We have now come from Genesis 2:2-3 to Hebrews 4:9-11, and we see something interesting. The author is not telling his readers to keep a weekly seventh-day Sabbath holy by resting on it. He is not talking about the weekly

Sabbath at all. Rather, he is making the point that there is a *spiritual* “rest” that God’s people should be entering into. It is the heavenly counterpart of the earthly Canaan, and this is the goal of the people of God today — to achieve this present and eternal rest. The epistle of Hebrews makes this point by creating an analogy between the Israelites entering the Promised Land and Christians entering the better promise of a new-covenant spiritual “rest.”

### **A present “rest”?**

The Promised Land was a physical type or foreshadowing of a spiritual “rest” that the Israelites had not yet entered. The weekly Sabbath was a temporal foreshadowing of the spiritual “rest” that God wants his people to enjoy. Christians have entered God’s “rest” by their faith in Jesus Christ. “Now we who have believed enter [or, “are entering”] that rest,” the writer insists (4:3). Christians have the real rest, the spiritual rest, and do not need to observe shadows of it, neither geographical shadows nor temporal shadows.

During his ministry, Jesus had promised a rest *for the spirit*:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:28-29).

Leon Morris points out in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* that the word for “enter” in Hebrews 4:3 is in the present tense. The author of Hebrews was suggesting that his readers were already in the process of entering the “rest” of salvation that Jesus had promised. Some commentators agree that the Hebrews 4:3 “rest” into which Christians have entered begins *now*, in this life. Leon Morris quotes Hugh Montefiore on this point:

Contrary to some commentators, the Greek means neither that they are certain to enter, nor that they will enter, but that they are already in process of entering. (page 40)

Morris points out that some other commentators feel that the “rest” is something that occurs in the future. The present tense used here, they insist, is meant to be applied only in a generalizing sense. Morris concludes by saying:

Either view is defensible and probably much depends on our idea of the “rest.” If it lies beyond death, then obviously “rest” must be understood in terms of the future. But if it is a present reality, then

believers are entering it now. (page 40)

## **We enter now**

The view we take here is that Christians have begun to enter their spiritual “rest” *now*. We *are* receiving *some* of the blessings of salvation, even though we do not yet enjoy them in their fullness. Peter says that Christ “has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). Paul says God “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Colossians 1:13). The author of Hebrews says that we are “the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven” (12:23).

It’s a question of how we understand when the kingdom of God comes — now or in the future? The answer is both. The kingdom is already, but not yet. There is a sense that the kingdom is both present, and yet future in its full reality. Christians live in the tension between promise and fulfillment, between the already and the not yet, between the glimmer and the reality. Christians have entered the “rest,” even if only in an imperfect and qualified way. The spiritual realities we already enjoy, although incomplete, are enough that we do not need to observe the physical symbols and rituals of the old covenant.

We have already been invited to enter God’s end-of-creation, the Genesis 2:2-3 “rest,” by believing in the Son of God. By faith, we have joined with him in his “rest.” By faith, we have become new creations — created anew. Our re-creation is not yet complete, but we already have been given entrance, through Christ, into God’s kingdom “rest.”

The writer of Hebrews does not state how he views the time in which the “rest” takes place. His concern is with the spiritual reality, not the physical shadow. His concern seems to be with the present time — with *today*. He no doubt understands that the fullness of rest comes only with a future resurrection (10:37-38; 12:26). But his point of view in Hebrews 3 and 4 is the present time, the time for which he is writing. The writer is thinking of the salvation “rest” as beginning in the present.

No matter how the writer of Hebrews conceives of the future “rest” in the future, he is not concerned to discuss it in chapters 3 and 4. He is interested in his readers who are alive when he writes — and who need to take hold of the promise of spiritual “rest” in this age. F.F. Bruce agreed that the future rest is not in view here. He stated the following in his commentary on Hebrews:

The identification of the rest of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews with a coming millennium on earth has, indeed, been ably defended; but it involves the importation into the epistle of a concept which in fact is alien to it. (pages 106-107)

The writer of Hebrews is not so much concerned with the future as with the present spiritual state of his readers. In this passage, “tomorrow” is not in his view. That’s why he stresses the word “today.” It was the privilege of the readers to enter God’s “rest” then — and it is our privilege to do so *now*. We are in “today,” not some future time. The promise of entering God’s “rest” remains valid for each generation — and is repeated to each successive generation — in the church age.

### **We enter God’s “rest”**

Hebrews 4:9-11 is telling us we have entered into God’s promised “rest,” the one he inaugurated on the seventh day of creation. This is the writer’s main theme. The epistle has already noted that God’s “work has been finished since the creation of the world” (4:3). That is, the “rest” of salvation has been offered and promised to humanity since the foundation of the world. It was a work of creation, inaugurated with humanity and for humanity. Donald Guthrie writes the following on this point:

What believers can now enter is none other than the same kind of rest which the Creator enjoyed when he had completed his works, which means that the rest idea is of completion and not of inactivity.... It is important to note that the “rest” is not something new which has not been known in experience until Christ came. It has been available throughout the whole of man’s history. This reference back to the creation places the idea on the broadest possible basis and would seem to suggest that it was part of God’s intention for man. “Rest” is a quality which has eluded man’s quest, and in fact cannot be attained except through Christ. (*Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, page 113)

As long as we have faith in Christ — which is the main point of Hebrews — no matter what day of the week it is, we have entered God’s “rest” and we are resting from our own work. “We who have believed enter that rest.... Anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his” (4:3, 10).

What does the author mean by “work”? He is not discussing the question of employment or labor. That is not his interest. (He has been encouraging

his readers to enter the *spiritual* “rest” of salvation throughout Hebrews 3 and 4.) The writer of Hebrews wants his readers to stop putting their faith in the things that humans do, such as the works of the old covenant — and to place their faith in Christ as Savior. He wants them to look to the *work of Christ*, which gives forgiveness and empowerment through the Holy Spirit, allowing us to enter the true spiritual “rest.”

In comparison to Christ, the writer has a lower view of the “works” of the Law of Moses. He says of the Law in general and the Levitical priesthood as a whole:

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced by which we draw near to God (7:18-19).

Hebrews seems to be suggesting that the readers should rest from the ceremonial “work” required under the Mosaic Law. Their “work” in such things as offering sacrifices could not save nor endear them to God. They were saved by grace through faith in Christ, and were endeared to God by that same grace.

## The weekly Sabbath?

The Christians to whom Hebrews was written were already attracted to Judaistic practices. This epistle was written to show the church why Judaistic practices were not necessary for Christians. The readers were already attracted to the Sabbath day and would not need any admonishment to rest on this day.<sup>1</sup> The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* understands this:

Certainly, in writing to Jews, the author of Hebrews would not consider it necessary to prove to *them* that Sabbathkeeping “remaineth.” If the conclusion of the extended argument beginning with ch. 3:7 is that Sabbathkeeping remains for the people of God, it would seem that the writer of Hebrews is guilty of a *non sequitur*, for the conclusion does not follow logically from the argument. There would have been no point in so labored an effort to persuade the Jews to do what they were already doing — observing the seventh-day Sabbath.... What relationship a protracted argument designed to prove that Sabbath observance remains an obligation to the Christian church might have to the declared theme of chs. 3 and 4 — the ministry of Christ as our great High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary — is obscure indeed. (page 423)

The writer of Hebrews is interested in the spiritual or heavenly meaning of such things as the Sabbath and animal sacrifices, not their literal

observances, which are shadows of the true “rest” and sacrifice for sin. The Israelites who had been given the Sabbath (the generation that left Egypt) failed to enter God’s “rest.” So did the Jews who strictly kept the Sabbath day when Hebrews was written. Keeping the Sabbath does not automatically bring someone to God. Why, then, would the writer of Hebrews insist on it? The literal seventh-day Sabbath is not in his view at all.

The book of Hebrews, considered as a whole, tells us that the *practices* of the Mosaic Law are obsolete (7:11-12, 18-19). This would refer to the *works* or observances of the Law (of which the Sabbath is one example), as opposed to its great moral principles. These are eternal principles that define our relationship with God and fellow human beings. They existed before the old covenant, were imbedded into that covenant, and even after the new covenant brought the old one to an end, remain as fundamental principles.

The new covenant theme of Hebrews suggests — though it doesn’t directly make an issue of this — that the weekly Sabbath day as described in the old covenant has been superseded by a better promise. In particular, Hebrews 4:9-11 tells us that the various allusions of “rest” in the Old Testament, including Genesis 2:2-3 and the weekly Sabbath, picture a spiritual reality to Christians — the eternal rest of God. But that is all Hebrews tells us. It does not address the issue of whether the weekly Sabbath should be kept. This is not the author’s interest.

## In conclusion

Let us now survey the biblical motif of “rest.” God had given Israel physical rest in the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, just as Adam and Eve would have had physical “rest” in the Garden of Eden. But the first humans, like all others after them, sinned. Adam and Eve and their descendants were cursed because of sin and lost their “rest.” When Christ brought the solution for sin, he also brought spiritual “rest.”

As part of its covenantal law, God gave Israel various rest days and years to commemorate their having achieved physical blessings (the “rest”) in the Lord (Deuteronomy 5:15). The rest days (especially the weekly Sabbath) commemorated this, and the writer saw it as a representation of God’s original purpose at the creation. The writer included the statement about the symbolic meaning of the Sabbath (that is, about God’s “rest” — Exodus 20:11) in his description of the creation in Genesis 2:2-3. This was a prophetic statement of God’s purpose of providing physical bounty to his human creatures, now fulfilled in Israel.

What the writer of Genesis did not clearly see, since he lived under the old covenant, is that God’s real purpose was to provide humanity with another “rest” — a true eternal rest — God’s purpose in creating humanity

in the first place. This more fundamental purpose was fulfilled in Christ, and could be understood only after he had completed his redemptive work. Christ is the true Sabbath rest of Genesis 2:2-3 — promised to us from the beginning (Matthew 25:34; Ephesians 1:4-6; Hebrews 4:3; Revelation 13:8). This is how the author of Hebrews understands that “rest.”

Thanks be to God that through his love he gave us his Son, allowing us in his mercy to begin to enter into his eternal rest.

## Two Greek words for “rest”

We should briefly take up the issue of the Greek words for “rest” used in Hebrews 4:9-10. We quote here the verses in question and show the two Greek words being used: “There remains...a Sabbath-rest [*sabbatismos*] for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest [*katapausin*] also rests from his own work” (4:9-10).

The Greek word *katapausin* is used to denote “rest” throughout Hebrews 3:7-4:11. There is one exception, in 4:9, as shown above. Here, *sabbatismos* is used, and it is translated “Sabbath-rest” in the New International Version. The word is formed from the verb *sabbatizō*, which means to “keep/observe/celebrate the Sabbath.”<sup>2</sup>

The only time that *sabbatismos* is used in the Bible is in Hebrews 4:9. The word is not found in ancient Greek literature until well after the time when Hebrews was written. Some decades later, *sabbatismos* is found in Plutarch as part of a list of superstitious practices. In his work, the word signifies weekly Sabbath observance. In later Christian documents, *sabbatismos* sometimes indicates the celebration or festivity associated with the Sabbath day.

With this in mind, William Lane translates Hebrews 4:9 as: “There remains a Sabbath celebration for the people of God.” He points out that the use of *sabbatismos* is meant to “define more precisely the character of the future rest promised to the people of God” (*Hebrews*, Word Biblical Commentary, volume 47A, page 101). The word conveyed something about the promised spiritual rest that *katapausin* would not have done — “the special aspect of festivity and joy, expressed in the adoration and praise of God” for his wonderful grace (page 102).

On one level, the writer of Hebrews seems to have used the two Greek words interchangeably. In 4:9, he says that a promised Sabbath-rest (*sabbatismos*) remains for the people of God to enter into, and this same rest is called God’s *katapausin* “rest.” Some scholars suggest that the writer of Hebrews coined the word. He wanted to differentiate between the ultimate spiritual “rest” and the Promised Land rest into which Israel went. If so, the author may also have been making the same difference between the true spiritual “rest” and the weekly Sabbath rest. That is, the Sabbath day is a

metaphor of the true rest in the same way that the Israelites entering the Promised Land under Joshua was also a metaphor for spiritual rest. One was a time-based metaphor; the other a geographical one.

Since the seventh-day Sabbath is simply a symbol of the true spiritual rest, the writer would have no logical reason to stress the keeping of the weekly Sabbath. Like the Promised Land, the Sabbath day was a shadow that prefigured the coming reality — the spiritual “rest” of the Christian in Christ.

To summarize: The spiritual rest of salvation into which God’s people are entering is a *sabbatismos* — a “sabbath keeping” — in the sense that it is a participation in God’s own “rest,” which we enter by faith (4:3). “Anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his” (4:10). That is to say, the *sabbatismos* rest of God described in Hebrews 4:9 refers to the salvation “rest” into which all Christians have entered. As mentioned earlier, the culmination of this rest does not occur until the resurrection. But, upon conversion, we have begun the journey.

The weekly Old Testament Sabbath points to the *blessing and joy* of the spiritual “rest” Christians have in Christ. This may be why the author of Hebrews coined the word *sabbatismos* — making a play off the word for the Sabbath day (*sabbaton*). That is, *sabbatismos* stressed the joy, the celebration, the peace, the jubilation of the *spiritual* “rest” Christians enjoy. (We’ve put “rest” in quotes here because it does not mean inactivity.)

Hebrews is not clear as to the writer’s attitude toward the weekly Sabbath day. Perhaps he wanted his readers, who were attracted to old covenant customs, to understand the Sabbath’s true meaning in the light of the Christ event, but without making an issue of whether it needs to be kept. This would be in line with the spirit of Romans 14, in which the apostle Paul avoided making one’s view of “sacred days” a test or issue of faith or fellowship.

The Sabbath is meaningful on its own terms, just as the Festival of Tabernacles or the Passover sacrifice is. The Sabbath stands as a metaphor of the whole purpose and meaning of redemption, as do the sacrifices and other old covenant, Mosaic institutions. They foreshadowed the true spiritual “rest” we have in Christ, which includes a “resting” in forgiveness of sin and “resting” from sin itself through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

But Hebrews 4:9 issues no command about keeping or not keeping the Sabbath. The book as a whole makes the point that *all* the old covenant institutions are obsolete now that the reality has come in Christ. The verse in question cannot be used as a proof-text to insist that Christians keep a weekly seventh-day Sabbath rest. The passage does not exhort us to keep an old covenant Sabbath, but it admonishes us to enter the spiritual “rest” of God by having faith in Christ.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> One old commentary, the *Critical, Experimental and Practical Commentary* by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (published in 1864), became confused on this issue and came (we feel) to a wrong conclusion:

It is Jesus, the antitype of Joshua, who leads us into the heavenly rest. This verse [4:9] indirectly establishes the obligation of the Sabbath; for the type continues until the antitype supersedes it: so legal sacrifices continued till the great antitypical sacrifice superseded it. As then the antitypical Sabbath rest will not be till Christ comes to usher us into it, the typical earthly Sabbath must continue till then. (page 537)

The authors, influenced by the Puritans, were thinking of a Sunday Sabbath, and reading their own opinions into the text. The principle they enunciate is erroneous. The type does *not* continue until the antitype supersedes it. Various Old Testament rituals pictured purity and holiness, and even though we do not yet see complete purity and holiness in the church, the rituals are obsolete. More correctly, types continue only as long as God says they do, and God has declared the old covenant obsolete. It has served its purpose, even though God's plan is not yet complete.

Moreover, true spiritual rest is found through faith in Christ, and Christ has already come. The antitype has arrived. Christ has already led us into the heavenly rest, just as he is already our sacrifice for sin. We have come to Christ and he has given us rest — seated us in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6). This argues against the commentary's claim that the literal Sabbath is in force. The antitypical salvation rest has already been ushered in, even though incompletely. The shadow (the literal Sabbath) is no longer required.

<sup>2</sup> *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, volume 3, page 219, edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, gives the following explanation of *sabbatismos*:

1. The New Testament offers in Hebrews 4:9 the oldest documentation of the noun *sabbatismos*, which occurs several times in post-New Testament early Christian writings independently of Hebrews 4:9 (e.g., Justin *Dial.* 23:3; Origen *Orat.* 27:16; Epiphanius *Haer.* xxx.2.2; lxvi 85:9; *Acts (Martyrdom) of Peter and Paul* 1; *Apostolic Constitutions* ii.36.2; pseudo-Macarius (Symeon) *Homily* 12.2.4.... At present, *sabbatismos* has been documented in non-Christian writings only in Plutarch *Superst.* 3 (*Moralia* 166a).

The noun is derived from the verb *sabbatizō*, which in the LXX [Septuagint] appears as the translation of Hebrew *sabbat*. The vb. means: a) “celebrate/observe the sabbath” (Exod 16:30; Lev 23:32; 2 Macc 6:6; so also Ign. *Magn.* 9:1; Pap. Oxy. 1,1.2; Justin *Dial.* 10:1 and *passim*), b) “observe (sabbath) rest” (Lev 26:34f; 2 Chr 36:21; 1 Esdr 1:55).

Accordingly, the substantive means *sabbath observance* (thus in the non-New Testament passages mentioned) and *sabbath rest* (thus the understanding of *sabbatismos* in Heb 4:9 by Origen *Cels.* v.59; *Selecta in Exod* on 16:23 [PG XII, 289b]).

2. In Heb 4:9 *sabbatismos* encompasses both *sabbath rest* and (cultic) *sabbath*

*observance*. The word is neither identical in meaning nor interchangeable with *katapansis* (3:11, 19; 4:1, 3, 5, 10f); it designates more closely what the people of God should expect when they enter the *katapansis* of God (cf. 4:9 with v.6a). Just as God rested on the seventh day of creation from all his works, so also will believers find the eternal sabbath rest on the day of the completion of salvation in God's "place of rest" (see 4:10). Quietistic or mystic elements have nothing to do with this expectation. The statement in Heb 4:9f. remains dependent on a Jewish sabbath theology that associates the idea of sabbath rest with ideas of worship and praise of God (*Jub.* 2:21; 50:9; *Bib. Ant.* 11:8; 2 Macc 8:27; cf. also *1 Enoch* 41:7). Accordingly, the author of Hebrews understands by *sabbatismos* the eternal sabbath celebration of salvation, i.e., the perfected community's worship before God's throne.

## **CAN OLD COVENANT WORSHIP LAWS BECOME NEW COVENANT SPIRITUAL “SHADOWS”?**

By Paul Kroll

The Christian Sabbath is life in Jesus Christ, in whom every believer finds true rest. The weekly seventh-day Sabbath is a shadow that prefigured the true Reality to whom it pointed – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We publish a booklet titled *The Christian Sabbath: Divine Rest in Christ*. The booklet examines in detail the theological underpinning for the conclusion that the Sabbath for Christians is not a day of the week that needs to be made “holy” by physical rest from labor. It demonstrates that the Sabbath rest is only a “shadow” – or we could say metaphor – for the life that believers enter through faith in Christ. In their “Sabbath rest,” Christians enjoy the real thing – eternal life as a gift of God – to which the physical old covenant Sabbath rest could only point.

We can understand why some Sabbatarians would not be comfortable with such an understanding of the Sabbath, even when the underlying theology sounds right. If a person has been taught for years that the Sabbath rest or some other Mosaic law should be kept *literally*, it might be difficult to accept that this command – stated with such forcefulness in the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses (Exodus 31:12-17) – should have only *figurative* meaning for Christians.

Is it scripturally valid to claim that the Mosaic physical Sabbath rest is *only* a metaphor of spiritual reality, thus negating the need for participation in a seventh-day rest from labor? Is there New Testament precedent for interpreting Old Testament worship commands as being only “shadows” representing a spiritual truth in Christ?

What could ease or eliminate the Sabbatarians’ concern over the teaching that the Sabbath rest has only “shadow” value for Christians? Perhaps if they could see examples of Old Testament commands being interpreted in a figurative way by the apostles who wrote and influenced the New Testament writers, they might be more receptive to the metaphorical understanding of the Sabbath rest. The purpose of this article, then, is to show that a number of commands in the Law have only “shadow” or figurative meaning – pointing to Christ – under the new covenant.

## Some general considerations

We start with the assertion by the apostle Paul in Colossians 2:16-18 that the Mosaic annual festivals, New Moon celebrations and weekly Sabbath day “are a shadow of the things that were to come,” the reality of which “is found in Christ.” That Paul is referring to a three-fold series of old covenant practices is clear. They are referred to in this way throughout Israel’s history as weekly Sabbaths, New Moon festivals and “appointed feasts.” Please see the following passages as examples: 1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; 8:12; 31:3; and Isaiah 1:13.

The book of Hebrews refers to the law of Israel as a body of law (most specifically, temple worship and the sacrificial system) that was figurative of spiritual truths to come. “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves,” says Hebrews 10:1. The discussion that follows in Hebrews 10 makes it clear that the entire temple service with its sacrifices pointed to the One Sacrifice for sin carried out by Jesus in his death.

Hebrews quotes from Exodus 24:8: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I [Christ] have come to do your will, O God’” (Hebrews 10:5-7).

The Holy Scriptures of the Jewish nation, or the Christian Old Testament, have many things to say that foreshadow Jesus Christ and his redemptive work. These Scriptures refer to a reality that would be fulfilled in Christ. This is discussed in several places in the New Testament.

Luke records the following words of Jesus to two disciples after his resurrection:

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25-27)

Later, when Jesus was eating with his disciples, he said,

This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. (verse 44)

Whatever it was in the Holy Scriptures that referred to Christ and his redemptive work had to be specifically pointed out and explained by Jesus.

This implies that it was not immediately evident that what was *literally* expressed in the Old Testament applied to Jesus in a *figurative* way. It would be a mistake to restrict the meaning of these Old Testament verses to the literal meaning.

The Gospel of John records a teaching about the content of the Holy Scriptures that is in the same vein as Luke's commentary. In John, Jesus is shown as telling the Jewish religious leaders the following:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.... Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say? (John 5:39, 45-47)

As a principle of biblical interpretation, then, we can see that it is proper to understand literal statements of various kinds in the Old Testament as applying in a "shadow" or figurative way to Jesus and his redemptive work. The question that follows is, can we see examples of literal commands in the Law that apply to Christians only in a spiritual way? The answer is yes.

## Law of circumcision

Let's begin with the command in the Old Testament that most obviously doesn't literally apply to Christians. This law preceded the Law of Moses by a few centuries, but was incorporated into that law (Leviticus 12:2-3).

We read in Genesis 17 of God's command to Abraham to have every male in his household physically circumcised (verse 10). Just as the weekly Sabbath was a sign of the Sinai covenant (Exodus 31:12-13), circumcision was to be a "sign" of the covenant between Abraham and God (verse 11). More than that, circumcision was to be "an everlasting covenant" (verse 13). So important was this command from God, that he would have prevented Moses from leading the Israelites into the Promised Land – to the point of killing him – if he did not have his son circumcised (Exodus 4:24-26).

Let's consider the importance and binding nature of the law of circumcision. It was given as a command for Abraham's descendants long before the Law of Moses was codified. Its authority, therefore, existed prior to, outside of and beyond the Law. It was given to Abraham, the father of the faithful, not just to the nation of Israel. Circumcision was to be an "everlasting" practice. It was a "sign" of the covenant in the same way that the Sabbath was. It *could* be argued that circumcision as a literal practice had

*greater* authority than the Sabbath rest and the other commands of the Mosaic Law.

It is no wonder that circumcision became a controversy in the apostolic church. In the church council around A.D. 49, which decided the question of whether Gentile Christians must keep Mosaic worship practices, some Jewish believers said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). (Since Jewish Christians would have already been circumcised, the question of whether they needed to undergo this practice under the new covenant did not come up.)

The church decided against this claim. This was a paradigm shift in how the church came to understand the role of the Law in the Christian life. Here was a command that came before the Law of Moses, was commanded by God to be an “everlasting covenant” and became a defining sign of God’s people. Yet, the church leadership said it did not need to be practiced by Christians! On what Scriptural considerations was the decision made?

From the apostle Paul’s writings, we can see that the church came to understand that Christian circumcision was of the heart, not a literal cutting away of the foreskin. There are a number of references to this point in his writings, but let us consider Romans 2:28-29:

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code [that is, by the law code of the old covenant given by God to Israel].”

In Philippians, Paul wrote: “For it is we [the church] who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (3:3). He says in Colossians 2:11, “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ.”

The church understood that literal circumcision – though it had been anciently and strongly commanded by God for Abraham and his descendants – was not necessary for Christians. Circumcision was to be understood figuratively, or as a “shadow,” of Christ’s spiritual work. That is to say, Christians are spiritually circumcised through the redemptive work of Christ and in the work of the Holy Spirit.

## The Passover ceremony

Another important and strongly commanded worship practice of Israel under the Law of Moses was the Passover ceremony. It is first described in Exodus 12 along with the Festival of Unleavened Bread, while Israel was still preparing to leave Egypt. The Passover also technically antedates the giving of the Law of Moses, but was incorporated into the commanded annual observances for Israel (Leviticus 23:5; Numbers 28:16; Deuteronomy 16:1-8). The Passover festival was given only about two months before the Mosaic covenant was ratified on Sinai (compare Exodus 12:1-2, 6 with 19:1-2, 10, 16 and 24:1-8).

The Passover was considered one of the most important observances in Israel. So important was the Passover that provision was made in the Law for keeping the festival in the second month by Israelites who were unable to keep it at its normally scheduled time on the 14th day of the first month (Numbers 9:1-14).

The Gentile church did not keep the literal Passover practice of eating roast lamb with bitter herbs. Rather, Jesus had instituted what we call “the Lord’s Supper,” with its symbols of the bread and wine, as a premier worship practice for the church. There is no mention in the Gospels of a sacrificial lamb or bitter herbs in the “Passover” meal that Jesus ate with his disciples on the night of his arrest.

The church understood the literal old covenant Passover worship practice in a figurative way, not as a literal practice to be observed. Virtually nothing is said in the New Testament of the Mosaic Passover, except that the Gospels point out its celebration occurred during the time when Jesus was crucified and buried. This suggests that the Jewish Passover as a practice did not hold much significance for the church.

In one statement by the apostle Paul, we see that the old covenant Passover ceremony was thought of in a figurative way as a “shadow” pointing to Jesus Christ. Paul said, “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Christ did it, and so the believers did not need to do it in a literal way.

## Temple worship

Temple worship (and before that, worship around the moveable tabernacle) was the cornerstone of the Israelites’ worship life. All the annual festivals of Israel were to be observed at the place where God “will choose as a dwelling for his Name” (Deuteronomy 16:2, 5, 11, 16), which originally

was wherever the tabernacle stood, and later at the temple in Jerusalem.

Sacrifices were offered daily and on special occasions at the temple (Leviticus 23). The Levites and priests served in various capacities, carrying out the duties as prescribed in the Law of Moses. They were the central actors in the worship life of Israel under the old covenant (Hebrews 9:1-6). Without a literal priesthood, there was no worship life for Israel. But their work depended on a “holy place,” in and around which they could do their work. This was, as mentioned above, the moveable tabernacle, and since the days of Solomon, the temple in Jerusalem, the city that God chose for his name.

All these aspects of Israel’s worship life were quite literal, that is to say, they were physical practices carried out by the priesthood and the people. But with the coming of the new covenant, the temple and the “holy work” carried out were seen to be “shadows” pointing to Jesus and his redemptive work.

Jesus had explained that his people would not be doing physical acts of worship at the temple in Jerusalem. There would be no such thing as a “holy place” in the coming church age. Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well:

Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain [Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem.... A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. (John 4:21-24)

With one statement, Jesus was eliminating the significance of the entire worship system of Israel, as described in the Law of Moses. Since almost every aspect of Israel’s worship was in one way or another centered on the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus’ statement implies that a wide range of worship practices are no longer required in a literal way.

If Jesus’ true worshipers would not be worshiping at Jerusalem, they could not be taking their cues for worship from the Law of Moses, since it was dependent on the existence and use of the temple. For example, the annual festivals, as mentioned earlier, were to be observed at the place where God chose to place his name. If no such place existed, there would be no *lawful* way to observe the festivals.

Jesus was also “spiritualizing” true worship. His words imply that worship did not consist of doing physical things – offering sacrifices, resting from labor, doing homage to the temple as a physical building where God’s “presence” rested, observing days in Jerusalem, and so forth. Worshipers would be worshiping God “in spirit and truth.” When understood in the

context of all that transpired in Jesus' life and in his teachings, that statement alone points to a "shadow" understanding of old covenant worship practices.

This is why the church leaders, instructed by Jesus, led by the Spirit, saw that it was right to understand all the elements of old covenant physical worship only in terms of how it pointed to Jesus, his redemptive work and the church.

## **Temple, high priest and Day of Atonement**

Let's continue with a few other, interrelated examples of Mosaic institutions and practices that had only symbolic value for the church.

The physical temple in Jerusalem, in symbol, comes to stand for the new people of God in Christ. "Don't you know that yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" asks the apostle Paul. "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). In the physical temple in Jerusalem, God's presence was in the inner sanctum, the Most Holy Place. In the new covenant, this is understood to be a "shadow," figurative of a more real dwelling of God within his people, the church.

Another example is the high priest of ancient Israel. In the old covenant, the high priest was the most important religious figure of the nation – a human being who carried out vital religious acts of Israel's religious life (Hebrews 9:7). But for the church he was only a symbolic and figurative representation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is our high priest (Hebrews 2:17; 3:1), who has "entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood" (Hebrews 9:12).

The Day of Atonement was the most holy annual Sabbath of the Hebrew calendar. On that day, the high priest went into the temple to perform a special sin-cleansing ritual (Leviticus 17). It was an "annual reminder of sins," but it was of no value in itself because the blood of animals cannot take away sins (Hebrews 10:3). It was only a shadow that pointed to Jesus, our high priest and atoning Savior who "offered for all time one sacrifice for sins" (verse 12).

Here, then, we see that the observance of the holiest Sabbath day of all for Israel became only symbolic of the real, spiritual work of Jesus in cleansing and saving us. In particular, the offering the high priest made on behalf of the people and his entry into the Most Holy Place, allowed only once a year on Atonement, was symbolic of the fact that Jesus Christ is our High Priest and Mediator between God and his people, who are made clean by Jesus' atoning work. Through Jesus' atoning work we are cleansed of sin

and able to come into the presence of God.

Jesus is our atoning High Priest. The sacrifices offered under the Mosaic covenant were but “shadows” pointing to his real cleansing work. The book of Hebrews is a sustained discussion of how the worship practices of Israel, in particular the work of the Levitical priesthood, point to the reality of Jesus. Once the Reality has arrived and completed his work, there is no longer a need for participating in the old covenant works and practices. They have no value in themselves, but were meant only to be reminders to Israel of the One who was to come.

## Conclusion

We could cite other examples of how various worship regulations of the old covenant are to be understood only in a shadow or metaphorical way, representations of true, spiritual realities under the new covenant. A survey would include such Mosaic practices as the eating of unleavened bread and bitter herbs and the laws of clean and unclean. These practices kept Israel mindful of their sinfulness and need for a Messiah Savior.

This way of interpreting Old Testament worship practices applies to *every aspect* of Israel’s religious life, even to the food and purification laws. Hebrews tells us: “They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – *external regulations* applying until the time of the new order” (Hebrews 9:10, italics ours). Thus, Hebrews can say, as mentioned earlier: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves” (10:1).

The conclusion regarding the weekly Sabbath is clear from the discussion above. This practice, like all the other literal worship practices of Israel, ceased to be commanded when Jesus finished his redemptive work, sent the Holy Spirit and the church age began. The church becomes the Israel of God (Galatians 6:2), a “new creation” in which neither Sabbath-keeping nor non-Sabbath-keeping “means anything,” to paraphrase Paul. Through Christ and in the Holy Spirit a real faith – a dynamic relationship between God and his people – is now possible. Worship is in “spirit and in truth,” as Jesus said. Worship is of the heart and mind through the mediation of Christ, and is elevated to a spiritual level.

The apostle Paul, speaking of himself as a Jew and to Jewish believers, could say the following about the Law of Moses and its worship system – *including the weekly and annual Sabbath rests*:

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead

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us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. (Galatians 3:23-25)

We are free to worship God in spirit and in truth.

## **IS THE SABBATH A MORAL LAW OR A CEREMONIAL LAW?**

By Michael Morrison

### **Defining types of laws**

Many theologians divide Old Testament laws into three general categories: moral, ceremonial, and civil. The Bible itself does not divide the law into these categories (many of the laws overlap in their purpose), but this three-fold division is nevertheless useful when we talk about the laws.

Moral laws are generally considered timeless, eternal, and universal, based on God's own character, and therefore in force today. This is a good working definition of the category, but a problem arises when people *assume* they know what is in the category. Some people claim that a certain law is moral, or a certain group of laws is moral, without attempting to see whether the laws are actually timeless, eternal, and based on God's character. Instead, they seem to reason in a reverse direction: They take laws that they think are still in force, and from that, conclude that they are also a timeless reflection of God's character.

This procedure, although incorrect, sometimes yields believable results. People's assumptions about morality are often correct — but sometimes they are not. Before we claim that a law is “moral,” we should examine to see whether it is truly timeless, eternal, and universal, applicable to all.

For example, one law in the Old Testament says, “Do not bear false witness.” A witness in court must tell the truth. This law is a specific application of God's desire that people tell the truth. This is based on God's own character, his honesty — what he says can be counted on. He is utterly faithful; his word is always true. This principle is reaffirmed in the New Testament, too: people should tell the truth.

This law is universal — everyone, in every nation in every age, should be honest. Even angels should be honest. The principle is always true, and the specific application in a courtroom is also true: No one should give false testimony. This is a moral law.

### **Ceremonial laws**

God gave his people ceremonial laws, too. These laws do not contradict

God's nature, but they reflect it only in a very general sense. For example, he told the Israelites to have a weekly offering of "showbread." This offering, like other offerings, showed that God is holy and worthy of worship, but the Bible does not assign any theological significance to the details of the offering. The quantity of flour does not tell us much about God. With some ingenuity, some people may see symbolic significance in every detail, but other people may see different significance in the same details. Since the Bible itself does not tell us what the significance is, we cannot be sure.

A cleansing ritual is another illustration of ceremonial or ritual law: the priest was to touch the person's right earlobe, right thumb, and right big toe (Leviticus 14:1-18). Although God gave these laws and expected them to be kept as written, these details do not reveal much about God's character. Although God may have had a particular reason for specifying exact quantities and precise details, he has not told us the reason, so it therefore cannot tell us much about God.

Some aspects of the rituals and ceremonies, from our perspective, seem to be arbitrary. For all we know, God could have required the left cheek instead of the right earlobe. He could have required 10 percent less bread than he did. Some of these details do not seem to be based on anything intrinsic — they were simply what God specified. Since we do not know the divine significance of such details, they had to be given by special revelation.

The Israelites (like other peoples around them) might have invented a bread offering on their own, but they may not have used the precise quantities God specified. Even without God's special revelation to them, they might have had a concept of religious impurity, and from that developed a religious cleansing ritual, but they probably wouldn't have come up with the exact formula God gave them.

Although the ceremonial laws portray concepts like sacrifice and cleansing that are found in many cultures, the details of God's ceremonial laws are given by special revelation, not by ideas that people could figure out for themselves.

## **What about the Sabbath?**

Some people claim that the weekly Sabbath is a moral law, and therefore required today. They often claim this simply because they assume that the Ten Commandments are all moral laws.

But let us look at the evidence: God himself does not keep the Sabbath as a six-day/one-day cycle of work and rest. He did not before creation, and he does not now. Angels do not keep the weekly Sabbath, either. In the new

heavens and the new earth, when there is no nighttime, no one will have to change their behavior according to days of the week. Everyone will be in God's eternal rest all the time.

Although the seventh-day Sabbath has a basis in what God did once, the six-one cycle does not reflect what God is eternally. Although the weekly Sabbath rest looked forward to the eternal rest we have in salvation, the six-one cycle of work and rest is not an eternal one. The seventh-day Sabbath is not a universal or eternal law.

Instead, the Sabbath has characteristics of a ceremonial law. Although people might figure out that regular rest is good for us, it is not likely that they would figure exactly one day out of seven. This detail had to be specially revealed. Of course, if God says that we have to keep this detail today, then we do. That's the same for any law, ceremonial or otherwise. The point here is that the details of the Sabbath command are like ceremonial laws, in that they have to be specially revealed.

The Sabbath law says that behavior that is perfectly acceptable one day is forbidden the next, merely because it is a different day of the week. But God's morality does not change with the days of the week. If it is moral one day, it is moral on all others. God has the right to require different things on different days, but this would be a ceremonial law, not a law about what is moral all the time.

Paul tells us that the Gentiles, even without the written law, had a law written on their hearts (Romans 2:14-15). They could know by nature that honesty was proper. But in contrast, they could not know from nature that they should anoint the right thumb instead of the elbow. They could not know by nature that they were to avoid work every seventh day.

God did not require the Gentiles to obey laws they did not have. They were required to obey the law written on their hearts, but they were not required to obey the ritual laws, for such laws have to be specially revealed, and God revealed them only to Israel, and they applied only to Israel.

God did not expect Gentiles to celebrate the Israelites' exodus, or to have harvest festivals on the exact dates that Israel did. He did not require them to have Levitical priests, nor to make the animal sacrifices he told Israel to offer. Nor did he command them to keep the Sabbath. They could if they wanted to (Isaiah 56:4), but he did not require it.

## **Jesus categorizes the Sabbath**

When Jesus talked about the Sabbath, he clearly grouped it with the ceremonial laws, not with the moral law. When it came to matters of morality,

Jesus had a very strict standard, stricter than the Pharisees. When it came to ceremonial laws, however, he was more lenient than the Pharisees.

With the Sabbath, Jesus was more lenient. On several occasions, he noted that the Pharisees were too strict about the Sabbath. He is never recorded as giving any restrictions about the Sabbath. He never told anyone to avoid anything on that day. This in itself suggests that Jesus saw the Sabbath as a ceremonial law.

But even more clearly, Jesus compared the Sabbath to ceremonial laws. When his disciples were criticized for picking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus used the example of David eating the tabernacle showbread (Matthew 12:1-4). He said, if David could eat the showbread, my disciples can pick enough grain to eat.

The argument doesn't work if the Sabbath is more important than showbread — the Pharisees could have said, It's permissible to take liberties with the showbread, but the Sabbath is more important, so we have to be more careful about it. No, in order for the logic of the argument to work, the showbread has to be just as important as the Sabbath. Only then could the comparison carry any weight. Jesus used a *ritual* law as a point of comparison for the Sabbath.

Jesus also compared the Sabbath to sacrificial laws (Matthew 12:5). The priests were allowed to work on the Sabbath because the requirement to sacrifice animals was more important than the requirement to rest on the Sabbath. The ritual law was more important than the Sabbath law. This again shows that there is nothing intrinsically wrong about working on the Sabbath. It was permitted for priests. It is not a universal law required for all peoples at all times. Rather, the Sabbath was a ritual law, specifying when certain kinds of work could or could not be done.

Jesus also compared the Sabbath to circumcision (John 7:22). Again, ritual work was allowed (even required) on the Sabbath, because the ritual law was more important than the requirement to rest on the seventh day. Again, Jesus is putting the Sabbath into the company of ritual laws.

Jesus never grouped the Sabbath with moral laws, or any of the other Ten Commandments. He always compared it to ceremonial laws. Jesus treated the Sabbath as a "lesser" law. The requirement to work on certain days and avoid work on other days was a ritual law. It was an important part of the covenant God gave Israel, but it was not given to other nations.

No doubt some of the first Christians were surprised that any of God's laws could become obsolete when Jesus died. This had to be explained, as we see in the book of Hebrews. But once they realized that some of God's laws were indeed superseded, that they had been given for a temporary reason,

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that their purpose had now been fulfilled by Jesus Christ, then they could also understand that God no longer required ritual, ceremonial laws.

Since Jesus ranked the showbread as more important than the Sabbath, and the temple sacrifices as more important than the Sabbath, and circumcision as more important than the Sabbath, it should be no surprise that the Sabbath command expired at the same time as those other commands.

Jews in the first century understood that God did not require Gentiles to keep the Sabbath. When the barriers between Jews and Gentiles were eliminated through Jesus' death (Ephesians 2:13-16), the Sabbath was one of the barrier ordinances eliminated. It was a ritual law, not a timeless and eternal moral law.

## CAN GOD'S SABBATH LAW BE "DONE AWAY"?

By Paul Kroll

Many people assume that because the weekly Sabbath is in the Ten Commandments, it must therefore be a law for all times and for all people to keep. They conclude that Christians are obligated to keep the Sabbath as "holy time."

We cannot make a blanket statement that the law of God or the Ten Commandments are "done away." Two of the Commandments tell us not to commit idolatry or to murder. These laws are not done away.

The Law of Moses tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18) and to love God with all our soul, mind and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus reaffirmed these as the two greatest commands in existence (Matthew 22:34-40). These great laws of God are not done away. As Christians we are "under" them in the sense that we should do what they command, loving God above all else and our neighbor as ourselves.

The question about God's law ought to be put in these terms: Which "laws of God" are Christians to have written on their heart, and which are they obliged to keep? Does that obligation include keeping the Sabbath day holy? Let's begin by looking at one of several New Testament scriptures that talk about keeping the commandments of God. What are the "commandments of God" that Christians are to obey?

There is an important principle to consider here: We must be careful to understand the words "law" and "commandment" when we find them before the giving of the old covenant in the Old Testament, and especially *after* the new covenant was instituted in the New Testament. We need to be careful how we understand and apply the words "law" or "commandments" when we see them in various places in the Bible. If we casually refer to these words when they are used in Scripture — and say they mean that Christians must keep the old covenant law — we can lead ourselves astray.

The words "law" or "commandments" don't always refer to the Ten Commandments, or the Mosaic law as a system. When we claim this, we are "reading back" our already-held belief that Christians must keep every one of the Ten Commandments in their entirety, as well as the Mosaic law. But we should allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves.

For example, Christians must keep the "law of Christ," which the Holy Spirit puts into our hearts (Galatians 6:2; Romans 8:2). But it is not the entire

set of ceremonial, sacrificial and civil regulations found in the Mosaic law from Exodus through Deuteronomy. Otherwise, Christians would have to obey every single law in those books, including the purification rites, sacrificial laws, priestly laws, and physical circumcision. But these laws are not to be kept by Christians. The book of Hebrews and the New Testament makes this clear.

So we need to be careful when we read about “commandments” in the Bible — particularly in the New Testament. We should not confuse them with the Ten Commandments as a group, or the package of legal requirements (the Law of Moses) the old covenant was based on. The issue is not whether we are to keep the Ten Commandments or the old covenant Mosaic laws as a group. The question is, *which* commandments are Christians to obey?

The answer is, we are to teach the commandments of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:20). What did Jesus say in John 14:15? He said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” Matthew concludes his Gospel with the same thought about obeying Jesus’ commandments: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

But what did Jesus command? He told Jews still living under the old covenant to keep the purification rites of the old covenant, for example (Luke 5:14). We know from Hebrews that Christians don’t need to keep these ceremonial regulations. To which commandments, then, was Jesus referring?

He summarized them in John 15:12: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” What Jesus talked about — what he commanded to his disciples — was that they should love each other selflessly. This is a tall order. His commands had to do with loving neighbor and God, not keeping ceremonial regulations such as not working or avoiding personal pleasures on the Sabbath. This shouldn’t surprise us, for he said that the greatest commandment is to love God, and the second greatest is to love our fellow human beings. (Two of the most important commandments are to believe in Jesus Christ and to love one another, as 1 John 3:24 tells us.)

The orientation of the new covenant is to Christ and the cross, not to Moses and the tables of stone. The great sermon of the new covenant is not the one given at Mt. Sinai, but by Jesus Christ, in his Sermon on the Mount. There he began to explain the principles of the new covenant.

Similarly, let’s ask what we mean by “God’s law.” What commandments of God are Christians obliged to obey? When we think of the aspects of

God's law that are eternal, we see the kinds of principles that govern our conduct in relationship primarily to other people. That is, we shouldn't steal, be drunkards, bear false witness or slander, be sexually immoral, be greedy or arrogant, and so on. The New Testament contains ample teaching in these areas.

The eternal aspect of God's law also tells us to love God with all our soul and mind and strength. This tells us we shouldn't be idolaters and have any thing or any god in place of the true one. In that sense, this law also reflects principles of an eternal, moral law.

The New Testament is filled with admonitions not to break these "spiritual-moral laws," if that's what we want to call them. The book of James discusses many of these moral failures as examples of the breaking of the "royal law" of loving your neighbor as yourself (2:8). Some Scriptures contain what are called "sin lists." These mention a number of wrong human actions that God's spiritual-moral law would prevent, if followed. (For three examples, see Mark 7:20-23, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and Galatians 5:16-24.)

To break the spiritual-moral law of God described above is to be a wicked and sinful person. To follow this law of God is to exhibit the "fruit" of the Holy Spirit, and thus to be in concert with the will of God. Those are the commandments of God that Revelation 12:17 tells us to follow.

Probably most — or even all — the spiritual-moral laws one might think of can be found somewhere in both the New and the Old Testament. The Law of Moses is heavily sprinkled with these laws. Nine of the Ten Commandments, the centerpiece of the Mosaic law, are moral-type laws of one sort or another. The first three commandments can be thought of as spiritual-moral in that they tell us not to worship anything that is not the true God. Breaking these laws is idolatry, a sin that is mentioned in the New Testament, too.

However, we are only partially correct in saying that the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic laws are spiritual-moral in nature. The problem is that all of its laws do not all fit into this category. The law of Moses also includes ceremonial as well as spiritual-moral laws.

The Sabbath day, even though it is in the Ten Commandments, must be counted as a ceremonial law. We can look at the situation in this way. A spiritual-moral law would have no exceptions. It's not enough for us to refrain from stealing, greed or sexual immorality on one day and commit it on six others. We can't refrain from worshipping idols on one day but do so on the other six. These practices are intrinsically wrong, and are contrary to eternal, moral laws.

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But the Sabbath, in its major old covenant regulation, forbids work on one specific day each week. However, work is not an evil, but something that is a necessary part of life. Work is permitted on the other six days of the week. In contrast, lying is always wrong, because it is intrinsically a violation of a spiritual-moral law. Making a graven image for purposes of worship or being disobedient to parents is always a sin.

Yet, working is not wrong, and was only ceremonially banned on the Sabbath and the annual festivals in a certain situation, that is, when the old covenant was in force. Working, per se, is not sin. Its opposite, laziness, is condemned as morally unsound (1 Timothy 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

The principle when speaking of “God’s law” or “commandments” is the following. No requirements from the old covenant — including the Ten Commandments — are binding on Christians except the spiritual-moral principles, which are repeated in the Scriptures of the new covenant — the New Testament. However, keeping the Sabbath by not working is not based on any eternal, spiritual-moral principle. Nor is it mentioned in the New Testament as a Christian requirement. We must conclude that, at its heart, Sabbath regulations were ceremonial practices and not necessary for Christians to “keep holy.”

## **IS THERE A “SABBATH PRINCIPLE” FOR CHRISTIANS TO KEEP?**

By Paul Kroll

The old covenant Sabbath rest regulation does not apply to Christians. It was part of Israel's Mosaic Law that had governed the old covenant relationship with God. With the completion of Jesus' redemptive work and the beginning of the church, the new covenant came into force. The old covenant religious regulations found in the Law of Moses became obsolete, and Christians now follow the “law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21). The standard of godly conduct and the principles that should guide a person's life are expounded in the New Testament.

This new covenant teaching for Christians superseded the old covenant teaching for Israel. Nowhere in the New Testament Scriptures to the church was it commanded that Christians must keep the religious regulations given to Israel such as circumcision, temple worship, offering sacrifices, keeping weekly or annual holy days, tithing on farming and husbandry increases, engaging in purification rites, following special food laws, and other similar practices.

The old covenant institutions have symbolic value for us. Here are a few examples. The book of Hebrews tells us that Moses was a type of Christ. The Law points to Jesus and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Its essential principles, that we are to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40), is now embodied in the “law of Christ,” as it is expressed through the Spirit. The physical sacrifices point to the one sacrifice of Jesus, both for sin and as a sweet aroma to God of our own total sacrifice of ourselves to him. The temple is now the people of God in whom he dwells through the Holy Spirit. This reality was foreshadowed by the presence of Yahweh in the physical temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is our High Priest, our Passover and our Tabernacle. And so on.

Jesus himself is our Sabbath, in whom we can rest – in freedom from sin and in the assurance of eternal life, as guaranteed by his own resurrection. We have entered by faith into the ultimate rest, which will blossom into its fullness at Jesus' return. This was prefigured by the weekly Sabbath under the old covenant. All the various “rests” of the Mosaic Law — the weekly Sabbath, the annual festival rests, the land year rests and the Jubilee Year

freedom rest — all prefigure the ultimate rest we now have in Christ.

But is there a different kind of “Sabbath principle” still in force, one that teaches us that it is good and pleasing in God’s eyes for us to physically rest on the seventh day of the week? Some have come to this conclusion. The reason and reasoning for such an idea is the following.

Some, while still believing that the Sabbath rest should be kept, have come to realize that the New Testament does *not* teach that Christians must keep this weekly day. It has also become clear to them that to insist that Christians must keep the Sabbath simply because it is mentioned in the Law of Moses is to use faulty reasoning.

However, these people still believe that there must be something special about the Sabbath rest. It is sometimes expressed in the phrase “the Sabbath principle for Christians.” Some of the arguments for such a principle take the following forms: As people of God, we need to have time to commune with God, free from the distractions of everyday life, especially that of earning a living. According to this view, it is generally recognized that humans benefit from a time of rest from work, and this is evidenced in such human institutions as the five-day work week. While we should not keep the weekly Sabbath in a legalistic manner or base our arguments on Mosaic laws, they say, the *principle* of a physical Sabbath continues.

Let’s look at these arguments. Almost no one would deny the physical and spiritual benefits of having a weekly day or days off from work. Many in the generation of Israelites who came out of slavery and endless toil would have been elated to have a day off each week.

Whether this exuberance for such “time off” continued or was universally accepted by the Israelites is doubtful. The fact that Israel had to be *commanded* on pain of death to not engage in labor on the Sabbath implies that such supposed “benefit of rest” was not appreciated, or even wanted in some cases. The history of Sabbath-breaking by Israel underscores this point. The idea of physically resting on a special day of the week is *not* a self-evident principle intrinsic to or indelibly stamped on the human psyche.

Nowhere in the old covenant Sabbath commands is the supposed benefit of rest as such, either for physical or spiritual reasons, extolled as a reason for making the seventh day of the week (and several days during the year) a day of rest. The reasons given to Israel for the Sabbath were different: so the nation would remember that Yahweh was the one true Creator God (Exodus 20:11) and that he had rescued the people from Egyptian slavery because he was faithful to the promises he had given (Deuteronomy 5:15). Thus, the Sabbath was a “sign” of the covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 31:12-

13).

It is not a sign between God and Christians. Jesus himself has become Our Sign through the indwelling Holy Spirit (Isaiah 7:14; Luke 2:12). The evidence of our relationship with God is faith in Christ, not in which day we set aside.

The argument about a “Sabbath principle” is not advanced solely on the idea that physical rest is good. It is also said that such rest from our normal work and daily activities allows us to commune with God and develop a relationship with him. Thus, the argument is advanced, a Sabbath rest is pleasing to God, and something that Christians should joyfully want to keep. On this basis, it is argued, the “Sabbath principle” is intrinsically good and pleasing to God.

No one would deny that we should take time to commune with God. It is good to leave the distractions of daily life to deepen our relationship with God through spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, fasting and meditation. If a person uses Saturday for such communion with God, that is fine.

However, there is no New Testament teaching that Friday sunset to Saturday sunset is a special time to do such communing with God. It is one thing to take “time out” for special communing with God — whenever this is possible, convenient or necessary to do so. It can be done for a portion of every day or any day. It can be done all day on any day of the week, during a weekend retreat or during some other period of time. But we cannot imply that it is holier or better to keep one particular time.

In the early centuries of Christianity, and into the Middle Ages, individuals sometimes left society so they could commune with God in what they felt was a more complete way. Some went into the wilderness and established monasteries far from human civilization. Others walled themselves up in rooms for weeks, months, years or even a lifetime, receiving only food and water so that they could fulfill their desire to live in communion with God without the distractions of human life. Such practices stemmed from the individuals’ perceived needs for spiritual contemplation. But it could not be demonstrated that Scripture directly stated or through principle implied that such communing activities were expressions of a principle that applied to all human beings.

Similarly, Scripture does not teach that Christians must use the seventh day of the week (or that this day is the best one to use) to commune with God or to gather for worship.

If a person rests on each Sabbath because this day is thought to be special

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and God-ordained, then one is essentially keeping the letter of the Mosaic Law, which commanded Israel to rest on this day. One can invent a different reason for such a rest, or claim to base it on higher spiritual considerations. But to claim that a certain 24-hour period has *special* significance for Christians is to claim that such a time is “holy time.” This is simply a restatement of the Mosaic command to keep the Sabbath holy.

People who want to keep the Sabbath rest can do so as strictly as they desire. However, they should not cause division by teaching, contrary to church doctrine, that others should do so. Sabbath-keepers are as welcome in our fellowship as non-Sabbath-keepers, but they are not to advocate Sabbatarian *doctrine*.

## A RESPONSE TO “WHY THE SEVENTH DAY?”

By Michael Morrison

Will Eva, editor of *Ministry*, a Seventh-day Adventist magazine, asked an important question in a two-part editorial titled “Why the seventh day?” (*Ministry*, July 1999, pp. 4-7, and September 1999, pp. 4-8). His discussion is interesting and worth responding to. Although you can find that article online, I think you can follow the discussion without having it in front of you.

I commend Eva for asking the question, for not simply relying on his church’s tradition for stock answers and dogma. I further commend Eva for his willingness to go against some of his tradition even in his effort to support the tradition of seventh-day observance. And I commend him for wanting to bring all doctrines into “the light of the arrival of Jesus and the rest He brought, indeed the rest He *is* through faith” (July, p. 4).

Eva has recognized that “the traditional Adventist approach to such issues as ‘the perpetuity of the law’ simply does not seem, by itself to answer the legitimate, seminal questions posed by the contemporary antisabbatarian initiative” (by which he means our denomination as well as Adventists who are “moving out of Adventism into independent congregations”). He recognizes that his own approach “is not traditional Seventh-day Adventist fare.” He wants to put the Sabbath into “a thoroughly scriptural and new covenant setting” (ibid.).

It seems that the traditional Adventist approach did not address some important questions. The foundation had some pieces missing, even some defects, and it seems that the conclusion now needs to be shored up in some other way. This is of course a reasonable thing to do when traditional doctrines are challenged, and it is also reasonable for us to assess whether Eva has given adequate answers.

Even on the first page, Eva assumes rather than proves “the permanence of the Decalogue...the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments.” This is a common Christian assumption. He gives some support for it in part 2 of his article, but this pivotal point seems more assumed than proved. I will have more to say about it later. First, I wish to address the Old Testament material he treats in part 1.

## Genesis 2:1-3

Eva makes these claims:

- The seventh day has an inextricable connection with creation.
- The seventh day is tied to an unchangeable historical occurrence.
- The meaning of the seventh day thus transcends Hebrew history.
- The seventh day comes before the giving of all law.
- The seventh day is blessed and made holy by God.
- The seventh day was made holy before the arrival of sin (p. 5).

These claims are defensible, but they do not require a Sabbatarian conclusion. The argument is based more on inference than on connections that the Bible actually makes. Genesis 2:1-3 does not call the seventh day the Sabbath. It does not call it a day of rest. God rested on that day, but nothing is said about any need for humans to rest on that day. There is no suggestion that humans are to imitate what God did on any of the days of creation.

The *sixth* day, just as much as the seventh, has a connection with creation, the creation of humans, an unchangeable historical occurrence, therefore with a meaning that transcends Hebrew history. The connection of a day of the week with creation carries no weight, since they are *all* given some connection to creation.

The fact that God *blessed* the seventh day is more significant. But we should ask, how were humans supposed to respond to its sanctity?

Before sin entered, humans lived in a blessed and holy time, in which humans were in a state of peace with God, trustful and obedient. They did not need to labor in the way they later did. They did not need to set aside a day for communion with God, for they had it continually. They did not need a weekly Sabbath until after sin had entered. The first human did not need to rest on the second day of his life. It is significant that the Sabbath, as a command, was not given until *after* sin entered.

It is important to distinguish the concepts of “seventh day” and “Sabbath.” They were joined in the old covenant, but the Bible does not show that they were joined at creation. I commend Eva for talking of the “seventh day” (instead of calling it by the later term “Sabbath”) of creation, but he still expects readers to equate the two. The Sabbath, *as a command*, is found only in a covenant that God has declared obsolete. When we are discussing whether the Sabbath is commanded today, we must distinguish the command from the day itself. It is only through Moses that God tells anyone to treat this day as different from other days. We should not try to read Christian commands into an ancient Hebrew narrative.

We can compare two creation concepts: reproduction and Sabbath. The first is commanded in Genesis 1:28; the second is not commanded anywhere in Genesis. Although reproduction is a creation-based command, it is *not* required for all Christians. Despite this, some people claim that the Sabbath, which is *not* a creation command, is required for all Christians. This is to make exceptions for a command that is clear, and to inflexibly require something that is not clear. The logic of “creation command” is thereby called into question.

Eva writes, “This prelapsarian [before sin] existence of the seventh day must be allowed at least to call into question the assumptions of a theology that dismisses the seventh day because of its ‘old covenant’ connections” (p. 5). But this is confusing the issues. We are not concerned about the seventh day – what we are concerned about is the seventh day *as a commanded day of rest*. The command did not enter until after sin entered, and it entered as part of the old covenant. That brings us to the next passage Eva discusses.

### **Exodus 16:1-30**

Eva sees the following significance in the Exodus 16 manna-Sabbath story:

- The Sabbath instructions came before Sinai, before the Ten Commandments were given.
- The wording in Exodus 16 “presupposes a certain knowledge of the nature of the seventh day before this event” (p. 5).
- If we question the pre-Sinai Sabbath, we should also question other pre-Sinai morality.

These arguments seem to have little merit. First, these Sabbath instructions came only a few weeks before Sinai, and the fact that they came earlier is no more significant than the fact that Passover sacrifices were commanded before Sinai, and the Festival of Unleavened Bread was commanded before Sinai, and the consecration and redemption of firstborn animals and humans was commanded before Sinai. All these belong to the old covenant, the Law of Moses, the law given 430 years after Abraham, the law that is now obsolete. There is no theological significance in the few weeks’ difference.

Second, the wording in Exodus 16 does *not* presuppose that the Israelites knew anything about the Sabbath before this. Moses simply tells the people to gather twice as much on the sixth day (verse 5), and on the sixth day he tells them that the Lord had commanded, “Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord” (verse 23). Moses is not assuming anything about

what the Israelites know – he is telling them as if they knew nothing about it. Even Eva recognizes this when he writes, “It is entirely possible, even likely, that Israel while in Egypt had all but forgotten the Sabbath” (p. 5). So where is the presupposing? I think it is in the presupposition that the Sabbath predated Moses.

Last, Eva suggests that if we “discount the pre-Sinai consciousness of seventh day sacredness, we might also question the existence of a pre-Sinai moral heritage in Israelite life behind the other nine commandments” (p. 5).

I am not questioning the validity of the principles behind the other nine commandments, but I do think it fair to “question the existence of a pre-Sinai moral heritage in Israelite life.” The patriarchs did many immoral things. They also worshipped God with sacrifices, circumcision, and other obsolete practices. Genesis simply tells the story – it does not tell us to do likewise or to avoid the likewise. To see whether it is right to imitate their behavior, we must turn to other biblical books. In other words, since some aspects of their behavior are wrong, *every* aspect of their behavior must be questioned.

The principles behind God’s law were indeed operative in the time of the patriarchs, but that is a conclusion we reach from other biblical books, not from Genesis itself. To proclaim that the Fourth Commandment must have pre-Sinai validity just because the other nine commandments do, is begging a question that needs to be addressed, not assumed. In both of the places where the Decalogue is mentioned by name, it is equated with a covenant that in the New Testament is called obsolete. We cannot assume that all the parts of an obsolete covenant must stay together, or that they were together before the covenant was given.

“It is begging the question,” Eva writes, “to say that there is little or no evidence of Sabbath keeping or Sabbath consciousness before Sinai. It is true that there is not a high volume of biblical material, but no fair-minded person can ignore the evidence that is there, along with its clear implications. Historically, Genesis 2 and Exodus 16 precede Exodus 20” (p. 6). But on the contrary, when we want to make claims about the Sabbath before Sinai, it is *not* begging the question to point out the lack of evidence. When somebody says that Abraham wore phylacteries, for example, it is not begging the question to point out the lack of evidence.

No fair-minded person can ignore the fact that Genesis never mentions the word *Sabbath* and never commands anyone to do anything in particular on the seventh day. If the implications were so clear, why could the Talmud state that Abraham did not keep the Sabbath? When we are discussing a time span of more than 2,000 years, Exodus 16 (set in the Sinai Peninsula after the

Exodus) cannot fairly be categorized as “pre-Sinai.” It is certainly not pre-Mosaic, and it would not be profitable to insist on a distinction between pre-Sinai and pre-Mosaic.

Eva suggests that further evidence for “pre-Sinai seventh day consciousness in Israel is found in Exodus 5:1-9 and 15:25, 26” (p. 6). He admits that they are “allusions” to the “pre-Sinai existence of some cultic material or custom.” Why they should be connected with the Sabbath (as if worship could not take place on any other day) is completely unexplained. This seems to be grasping at straws in an attempt to create evidence for a theory that doesn’t have enough.

## Exodus 19 and 20

Eva makes the following observations about the Ten Commandments:

- The decalogue is distinct from other laws given through Moses. God spoke “with awesome displays of lightning, thunder, earthquake and fire...etching this moral essence of His will with His finger on tables of stone” (p. 6).
- “The seventh-day command is placed in the company of the other nine moral principles, at the heart of the decalogue.” This makes it distinct from cultic and ceremonial laws.
- The Fourth Commandment begins with the word “remember,” suggesting the existence of the Sabbath before Sinai.
- The Commandment connects the Sabbath to the seventh day of creation, as “part and parcel of first things...original being and consciousness.”
- In Exodus, the Sabbath is given a significance in creation, not in any national history or ceremony.

Yes, it is true that the decalogue is distinct from other laws. It has a specific name: the ten words, which are equated with the Sinai covenant (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13). No matter how many miracles were performed, no matter how awesome the displays, the Ten Commandments are the old covenant. As Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 3, the Ten were glorious, but they had a fading glory. They were God-given, but it was a covenant that did not last (2 Corinthians 3:11; Hebrews 8:13). If we equate great displays of glory as a sign of permanence, we are wrong (Hebrews 12:18-19). If we equate stone with permanence, we are wrong. The Bible does not assign that kind of significance to these facts.

True, the Fourth Commandment is in the heart of the Ten. It is in the center of the old covenant. Should we read any significance into that?

Perhaps it is a legitimate exercise, to explore the possibilities, but its significance would then pertain to the old covenant, not the new.

When we are arguing for Christian requirements, we cannot build our arguments on inferences. No matter how good the other nine commandments are (and they are *not* a sufficient guide to Christian life), we cannot assume that the Fourth must remain with them in perpetuity. There are a lot of good laws in Leviticus 19, too, including some exceedingly high principles, but we cannot assume that *all* its verses are equally valid today. We cannot judge a verse by its neighbors. We are dealing with a covenant that has been declared obsolete. The fact that it alludes to creation does not diminish the fact that it is the old covenant.

True, the Fourth Commandment begins with the word “remember.” But in Genesis 9:15, “remember” refers to something that began that very day. This is an argument by inference and English word-association, and I think Eva recognizes its weakness when he writes, “this again *suggests* or refers back to the existence of the Sabbath *in some form* before Sinai” (p. 6). When we are dealing with a doctrine that requires Christians to give up their jobs, to alienate their families, to look to the movement of the sun, we need more than suggestions, allusions and inferences. We need clear commands, and the fact remains that the only *commands* for the Sabbath are in a covenant that has been declared obsolete.

As Eva notes, the Sabbath command refers to creation. But the connection comes from Sinai, not from Eden. Since Genesis does not refer to the Sabbath command, the reason we know that there is a connection is Exodus 20. The Sabbath command is *patterned* like the creation sequence. But so what? The connection is clear in the old covenant, but it is valid for the new? We are again dealing with an argument by inference, by hypothesis. The land sabbath can also be connected to creation, but this connection does not imply a permanence of command. Reproduction is also connected to creation, but it is not required of every person.

The old covenant commemorated the first creation, but Christians are in a re-creation. Instead of commemorating “first things,” we look to *future* things. Instead of looking to “original being,” we look to eternal being. Instead of looking to a creation connected with the first Adam, we look to one connected with the second and final One. If we want to commemorate a creation, we need to commemorate the more important one. The New Testament tells us that the new is more important than the old. The old is instructive, but it does not have legal authority over us.

Last, was the Sabbath given a national significance? In the context of

Exodus 20, it is set in the center of a national covenant between Israel and God. The Decalogue begins with, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt.” It is given to a people brought out of a specific land. The creation account is mentioned as an example, a paradigm for the Sabbath, but *not* as a command that dated from creation. Rather, it looks to what God did at creation, not at what he commanded at creation.

The pattern in Exodus 20:11 is consistent with the evidence of Genesis: the seventh day was blessed at creation, but it was not commanded as a Sabbath, a day of rest, before the Exodus from Egypt. The decalogue in Deuteronomy connects the Sabbath with the Exodus, not with creation. It is connected with a deliverance from slavery. That is an application of a timeless principle, but that does not make the Sabbath itself timeless. The Jubilee year is also an application of eternal truths. Truths are eternal, but applications are not necessarily eternal.

Regardless of whether the Sabbath command is cosmic or cultic, the command is found in a covenant that is obsolete. We cannot invent categories of command such as “primal” or “original creation” or “cosmic” and then declare all such commands to be perpetually binding, when Scripture says no such thing – especially when Jesus categorizes the law as a ceremonial law, and his apostles write that it is no longer in force. With that, we turn to part 2 of the editorial.

## Part 2

Eva begins part 2 by summarizing part 1: “We showed that the seventh-day Sabbath, based on its Creation origin, its pre-Hebrew, pre-law, pre-sin, and divine infrastructure was invested with qualities clearly transcendent of anything limited to Hebrew or ‘Jewish’ covenantal constructs” (September, p. 4). He assumes more than he has proven. He has shown that *the seventh day* was made by God before sin and before Moses. He has not shown that the seventh day *as a commanded day of rest* was made at creation or that it would have been necessary for humans to keep the Sabbath before they sinned. He has not shown that any Sabbath command existed before Moses. He has sidestepped the Sabbath’s importance in the old covenant and has ignored the biblical equation of the decalogue with the old covenant and what it means for the covenant to be obsolete.

In part 2, he approaches the important task of seeing “how Jesus’ Messianic arrival actually affected or impacted the role of the law.” He focuses particularly on Galatians 3 and Romans 7, as well as touching on a number of other relevant passages.

### Galatians 3

Eva rightly identifies the Galatian heresy as Judaizers who “held that the Gentile Christian was obligated to continue keeping the whole law (as Paul identifies in Galatians 5:1-6) in order to achieve standing with God. Although their perceived obligations involved observances such as circumcision, behind that the whole Mosaic system was involved, which by all means included the Sinai decalogue” (p. 4).

He asks, “What law was Paul referring to when he told the Galatians that ‘the law was our custodian...until Christ came?’” (pp. 4-5). He gives the right answer: “Both the ceremonial and the moral code.” In saying this, Eva appears to be arguing against some Adventists, for he takes space to show that his answer agrees with 19th-century Adventist authorities. It seems that some modern Adventists are afraid of the idea that Paul might be including the Ten Commandments in his argument against the Law.

It is clear from Galatians 3:17 that the entire Mosaic law is under discussion; Eva turns to Galatians 4:24 to show the same thing: “The reference to Mount Sinai shows unequivocally that Paul has the moral law or the Sinai decalogue (the Ten Commandments) in mind in his Galatian teaching, and not just the ‘ceremonial law’ as many Adventists have maintained” (p. 5).

Eva further connects this to Romans 7:7, where Paul quotes the tenth commandment as part of “the law.” He mentions Romans 7:4 and implies that the same law is in view: “Through Christ we died to the law (including every one of the Ten Commandments).” Eva notes that we now belong to Christ, not the law. “A fresh center of moral or ethical definition has been introduced – not now a written code, but the living Word Himself.” Excellent! We belong to Christ, not to the law. This is true.

But how does a person die to the Ten Commandments? How does this connect to verse 1: “The law has authority over a man only as long as he lives”? Since the law under discussion in this passage includes the Ten Commandments, verse 1 is saying that the Ten have authority over us only as long as we live, and then the passage proceeds to tell us that we have died to the law. The next step is to conclude that we are no longer under the authority of the Ten Commandments. But Eva does not make this step, at least not in those words. He is aware that many Adventists will be uncomfortable with what he is saying. “It seems to me that historically, Adventists have not grasped this watershed reality” (p. 6).

The point is that under the “old covenant” the ethical or moral emphasis was on the validity of the written code, the law. Since the

arrival of Jesus the emphasis has shifted to the divine, definitive person of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the giver of the law in the first place. There is a significant difference in theological orientation and practical result between obedience that comes by merely observing the written code, and the loving discipleship that develops when...one simply follows the living Christ, the One who is the believer's righteousness to begin with. (p. 6)

"Many have been so afraid of the perceived negative implications that dying to the law would produce, that they have been unable to see the three fabulous resultant principles," which I summarize as belonging to Christ, serving in the Spirit, and following Christ.

In the latter concept, of imitating Christ, Eva tries to re-insert the commandments he has so ably dismissed in his discussion of Galatians 3 and Romans 7. He is trying to argue, in effect, that we are under the authority of Christ, not the law, but that Christ's example immediately puts us back under the authority of the law. So we obey the law not because the law says so, but because Christ tells us to. This does not seem to be the significant breakthrough that Eva suggests that it is.

On page 7, he acknowledges that "this dying to the law includes all ten of the commandments" – but then argues that since the other nine are "an abiding, continuing core of human morality residing...in the very person of God Himself," then the fourth commandment must be, too. "There is no reason to exclude the fourth commandment from this core." But this again assumes something that should be proved. We cannot assume that an Old Testament command is valid simply because its neighbors are. If the thrust of the commandments "does not decrease a jot or tittle" (p. 7), then in what sense can we say that the tables of stone were a covenant that did not last (2 Corinthians 3:11)? *Something* must have changed.

## The law became flesh

Eva rightly notes that God's Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, who lived without sin. "In the living Christ 'the word' was incarnated, law was incarnated, the seventh day was incarnated.... In Christ the written code comes to life...and lives out among us all that the written code was ever meant to convey" (p. 7).

This is good, and I think we can extend it further. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the entire law, including the sacrifices, the grain offerings, the cleansing rituals, the clothing taboos, and if there be any other law, the living

Christ is the last word on the subject. I believe that these additions are valid, and I believe that they point out the principle that we do not have to keep a law merely because Jesus was the incarnation of it. Jesus is the incarnation of the Sabbath, but that does not mean that we have to keep it in our flesh, too.

When Eva writes that Jesus “gave the written code its fullest expression,” he is right, but he skates on thin ice when he adds “thus confirming it and affirming it” (p. 7). Did Jesus confirm and affirm all the laws he kept? The law said to wear tassels on your garments, to go to Jerusalem three times a year, to kill at least one lamb each year, to go through purification rituals after touching a dead person, etc. We do not have to do everything Jesus did. He lived under the old covenant, and we do not. There is a significant difference, and a “do as Jesus did” is too simplistic. We are to live as if he were us, not as if we were him.

When we belong to Christ and are under his authority, we are to do not as he did, but as he commanded. We do not keep the old covenant laws he did, but we keep the new commands that he gave – and he never commanded the Sabbath. Even his example is not as supportive of the Sabbath as Sabbatarians often assume. His example is always of activity, never of rest. His example is always pushing the edge of what is allowed, with never any word about what is forbidden. His example is always liberty, never restriction.

Eva is right when he says, “The Gospel writers are then seen to have carefully selected, under inspiration, certain illustrative occurrences from the life of Jesus.” But then he writes, “There is lavish New Testament verification of the Sabbath just in the accounts of the miracles Jesus performed on that day.” He picks Luke 6 to show that “Jesus’ words and actions that day definitively expose the true and ultimate meaning of the Sabbath” (p. 7).

In Luke 6, however, Jesus defended the activity of his disciples. He used the example of David eating the tabernacle showbread. He said, if David could eat the showbread, my disciples can pick enough grain to eat. However, notice that the argument doesn’t work if the Sabbath is more important than showbread rules – the Pharisees could have said, The Sabbath is more important than showbread, so we have to be more careful about it.

In order for the logic of the argument to work, the showbread has to be at least as important as the Sabbath. Only then could the comparison carry any weight. Only then could the argument conclude, if it was permissible to bend the showbread rules, then we can bend the Sabbath rules, because it is easier to bend the Sabbath, because it is not as important. Jesus used a *ritual* law as a point of comparison for the Sabbath. Elsewhere, he put the Sabbath in the company of circumcision (John 7:22) and temple rituals (Matthew

12:5). Jesus treated the Sabbath as a ceremonial law, not a matter of morality.

Eva notes, “Jesus invested the seventh day with associations of restoration, healing, re-creation and liberation” (p. 8). That is true, but I would like to add that a notable aspect of the Sabbath is missing from this list. Jesus never invested the seventh day with any associations of avoiding work. This apparently was not part of his vision for the Sabbath.

Eva argues that Jesus would not have removed a law so “strongly associated with the unchangeable creation event itself.” This is again arguing by inference, not by Scripture. One could just as easily argue that Jesus could not remove a law so strongly associated with Sinai, or a sacrificial law that so perfectly pictures our redemption in Christ. The fact that we can make the argument sound good does not mean it is good. The facts are 1) that creation is changeable and there will be a new heavens and new earth and 2) Jesus can change whatever he wants.

Eva says, “It is true that in many ways type met antitype in Jesus, but one cannot say that the creation of the world was a type of any kind” (p. 8). Wrong. The creation was a type, to be replaced by the new and better heavens and earth. We already belong to the heavenly. There is no need for a Sabbath in the new heavens and new earth; this is not something rooted in God’s very nature so that he lives perpetually by a six-one cycle.

Eva’s last argument about Jesus was to note that “he rested in the tomb over the seventh day, apparently confirming by this the significance and the connections this day was designed to have in the light of His arrival. In this He connected Seventh day rest not only to creation, but also to redemption.” I think this is grasping at straws again. Does Eva really think that being dead or comatose is the way to keep the Sabbath? Is this what “rest” means? That seems far removed from the intentions of the Gospel writers. There is no hint in the text that Jesus’ time in the tomb had any symbolic significance for the Sabbath day. This is reading things into the text.

## Colossians 2

Eva then gives one paragraph to Colossians 2, mentioning it merely as “another question that could stand some development.” But she acknowledges, “if Paul, in these passages has in mind the cosmic, Creation-sourced, weekly Sabbath of the decalogue, we have some difficult matters to explain” (p. 8). Indeed. If this passage says what it appears to say, then Adventists do have some difficult matters to explain, particularly when we realize that the Sabbath is not creation-sourced, and Paul says that we are not under the authority of the decalogue!

As evidence, Eva mentions the controversy about circumcision that is evident in the New Testament. “One can only begin to imagine the atomic explosion that might have ensued had the issue of the weekly Sabbath been questioned by people such as Paul.”

We can easily envision an explosion when a modern Sabbatarian church questions the Sabbath, but if we think that first-century Judaism would have had an explosion over this doctrine, we do not understand the culture. First-century Jews did not believe that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath unless they were circumcised as proselytes under the Sinai covenant. They did not believe that the Sabbath command applied to Gentiles, and so there wouldn't have been any “explosion” if Paul said that the Sabbath did not apply to Gentiles. Maybe the Jews were right — and maybe that is why Paul could so easily say that the Sabbath was not a matter on which Christians should judge one another. It never did apply to Gentiles, and still does not.

I will end as Eva did: “Jesus Himself is the rest of the believer and indeed the ultimate personification and terminus of all truth.”

## **ANOTHER LETTER TO AN ADVENTIST**

After Michael Morrison sent the above letter to Will Eva, Eva responded with a letter of his own. Michael Morrison responds to it here.

You asked for a concise explanation of why we do not believe that the Sabbath is required for Christians.

### **Genesis**

Let me begin, as you asked, as to the authority of Genesis in this question. Even if Genesis called the seventh day a Sabbath and a commanded day of rest, I would still allow the epistles to overturn that commandment, in the same way that I allow the epistles to overturn the command for circumcision (which is in Genesis), or the worship practices found in Genesis (altars, sacrifices, etc.). You would probably allow the epistles to do that, too – the question is whether the epistles actually do that or not.

The status of the Sabbath in Genesis is not determinative for the question, yet it is an important supporting argument. If the Sabbath were in Genesis, then it would be found outside of the old covenant and therefore better rooted, like circumcision. I agree with you that Genesis and Exodus were written about the same time, from the same theological perspective. I agree that Exodus 20 commands humans to rest on the seventh day because God rested on the seventh day of creation. The language of Genesis 2:1-2 and Exodus 20:8-11 is similar.

But when God says, I want you to rest as a memorial of what I did at creation, he does not necessarily mean that all good people have done so ever since creation. That is possible, but it is not shown by the text. Since Genesis was written by a Sabbath-keeper, it is interesting that he never editorializes to say anything about the Sabbath, not for Adam, Noah, or any patriarch. The Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 31), but Abraham was given a different sign. If the Sabbath marked the people of Israel as distinctively God's, couldn't it just as easily mark Abraham as distinctively belonging to God? But the author says nothing about it. When Jacob is fleeing for his life, willing to make promises to God if God would only protect him, Jacob promises to worship and to tithe, but he says nothing about the Sabbath. It seems that he did not view it as a major component of worship.

If the author of Genesis wanted to promote Sabbath-keeping, he could

have easily inserted the Sabbath somewhere in the book, but I think it is a mark of historical accuracy that he did not. We credit him with historical accuracy when we take his silence seriously. He viewed the Sabbath as a sign given to Israel only, not to any other descendants of Abraham. But what can we learn from silence? It shows that the issue was not important to the author. He was not worried about whether Abraham kept the Sabbath – his concern was only that the Israelites should keep the Sabbath.

Jewish interpreters believed that Abraham did not keep the Sabbath – what seems clear to you, did not to them. The evidence of Genesis can be interpreted either way. Some Sabbath-keepers conclude that Adam was told to keep the Sabbath and Abraham kept it; other Sabbath-keepers do not. What do we do with such evidence? I think it is fair to put it on the shelf, so to speak, and come back to it later. But when we are dealing with commands for Christians today, particularly a command that divides Christians from one another, we need a “Thus saith the Lord,” and Genesis doesn’t have it.

### **Which laws are permanent?**

Obviously, *some* old covenant laws were nullified; that is why Paul had to clarify that “the law” is not nullified. Some people were worried that Paul was doing away with the law, and apparently some people were afraid that Jesus was also doing away with the law, and that is why he had to say, Don’t think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. These clarifications were necessary then, and are still needed today. Some laws are done away, but there is another law that is not. So our task is to rightly divide the law(s).

What sorts of laws came to an end with Christ? They are described as the Law of Moses (Acts 15), the old covenant (Hebrews), the laws that divided Jew from Gentile (Ephesians 2), the ceremonial, sacrificial and ritual laws. These include laws that came through Moses and laws that came before Moses, too.

What sorts of laws continued in force, or even increased in force? Moral laws, laws rooted in the character of God, laws that are inherent and essential in showing love to others. These, being eternal principles, were true before Moses and are also found within the Law of Moses, the old covenant. The eternal and the temporary are mixed together in the Pentateuch. I think you can agree with this so far.

The laws that showed people how to express love for God are especially interesting. We might assume in advance that *these* laws were the most important, and yet it is these that are (for the most part) obsolete. Within the old covenant, the sacrificial and ceremonial rituals were the laws that told the

Israelites how to express their love for God. But *our* love for God is expressed in a very different way in the Christian era. This doesn't mean that we don't need to love God, nor that our love should not be expressed in particular ways, but it does mean that we must be open to the possibility of significant changes in this area.

Is the decalogue ceremonial? Most of it is not. Most of it is quoted with approval in the New Testament. You are mistaken when you write that we have “gathered the decalogue or ten words in with that [the ceremonial aspects of things], seeing no distinction at all between the logically eternal principles of the decalogue and the ceremonial and cultic aspects of the Old Testament.” There is certainly a distinction between the eternal principles of the decalogue and the ceremonial laws – but we do not believe that all of the decalogue is eternal.

There is a distinction even within the decalogue between eternal principles and ceremonial aspects. The validity of the eternal principles is not because they happened to be included in the decalogue, but because they existed long before Moses, long before Adam, and will exist forever. The legal authority lies not in the stone tablets, but in the eternal principles that transcend those tablets, and I suspect those eternal principles are “the law” that Paul viewed highly.

The “second table” (the last six commandments) is quoted in the New Testament. The way we express love to other humans has changed little, except that Jesus has deepened the meaning. (Much more could be said here, but the point right now is that most of the decalogue continues into the Christian era.) These moral laws are timeless.

## What is a ceremonial law?

But is *all* of the decalogue moral, or is it possible, like the rest of the Mosaic law-code, that it is a mixture of ceremonial and moral? (Even the ceremonial laws are moral in one sense, of course; they are not immoral. But I am speaking here of moral in a more restricted sense, as concerning eternal principles of interpersonal relationships.) I see no biblical reason to assume in advance that they are all eternal. I believe that the decalogue has a ceremonial law in it.

Ceremonial laws, if I may speak in generalities, are based in special revelation rather than natural law or general revelation. By nature, a person could be aware that God exists, and that he has standards of behavior that humans should abide by. By nature, a person can be grieved in conscience when he falls short of the ideal, and he might sense a need to sacrifice as an

expression of his repentance. But by nature, he has no way of knowing whether a camel is an appropriate sacrifice, or whether a water buffalo would be better. If he feels unclean in some way, he has no way in general revelation of knowing about the ashes of a red heifer, sprinkling and touching the right ear lobe and right thumb, etc.

The ceremonial laws often contained a specificity that could appear arbitrary. God may have had a reason for specifying the right earlobe, but he has not told us what it is, and from the perspective of natural law, it seems arbitrary. God certainly has the right to specify what his people are supposed to do, and the ceremonies were laws under the old covenant. The details were important, but are no longer required.

Now imagine that a particularly enlightened person could discern by natural law that it is good for humans to rest one day out of seven (rather than one out of six, for example). Such a person has no way of knowing which if any day is better than another. The law of love does not specify a particular day of the week. The only place such a detail can come from is special revelation. There is nothing in the cycles of nature to reveal which day is the seventh. This suggests that the Sabbath command is a ceremonial law, at least in its requirement of the seventh day in particular, rather than simply resting one day out of seven.

We find additional evidence that the Sabbath is ceremonial in that God himself does not keep the Sabbath. He rested once, but a six-one cycle is not part of his eternal nature. Nor do angels keep the Sabbath; it is not an inherent part of the way good creatures show love to God or to one another. The Sabbath is not eternal, for it did not exist before creation, and I do not believe that it will be relevant in the new heavens/new earth. The Sabbath is not God's nature, nor universal, nor timeless. It fails these tests of a moral law.

Angels always worship God only, they never make idols, they never misuse his name. They always honor the Father, never murder, steal, commit adultery, steal or covet. They cannot commit adultery because they are sexless, but they would not commit adultery even if they could. They are in literal compliance with nine of the commands, and will forever be in compliance with nine, but they do not keep the Sabbath. This also shows that the Sabbath is different from the other nine commands. It is different in *quality* – a ceremonial law rather than a moral law.

I am willing to admit the possibility that Jesus commanded a ceremonial law. The Lord's Supper is a commanded ritual. Baptism is a ritual, a symbolic action. Calling the Sabbath a ceremonial law does not automatically mean

that it is obsolete. But it does change the way other theological concepts are applied to it.

Perhaps I have now gone further than you are willing to go. Do you believe that God keeps the Sabbath? Do you believe that angels do? Do you believe that the Sabbath is an essential part of the way intelligent created beings honor God? Is it eternal? Does it have the characteristics of a moral law, or a ceremonial law? This ties in, of course, with the evidence from the Gospels that I cited in my previous letter, arguing that Jesus treated the Sabbath as a ceremonial law.

### **Which law is holy, just and good?**

Let's go back to Paul and Romans 3:31. There is a moral law that was not nullified by Christ. This law is holy, just and good. This is a law about which we can say, "I love your law." But what is this law? It is tempting to put our words into Paul's pen by saying precisely what "the law" is. Lutherans have their idea, Calvinists have theirs, theologians have theirs, etc.

Is this "law" identical to the decalogue? I see no evidence in the New Testament that anyone equated "the law" with only the decalogue. Is "the law" larger? Does it include *all* of the decalogue? Or is only *part* of the decalogue in this non-nullified law? That brings us back to the central question, and unfortunately Romans 3:31 does not tell us what we want to know. It simply tells us that there *is* a law that continues to be valid. Other parts of the epistle tell us that there is also a God-given law that has expired. How do we fit this into Romans 3:31? Let's take circumcision as an example. Do we nullify this law by faith? The answer could be developed in two ways, and I do not know which way you might prefer. Both have some validity.

First, we could say no, we do not nullify the law of circumcision by faith. Rather, we uphold it and we keep it better, in the heart instead of in the flesh. Similarly, we keep *all* the rituals and ceremonies better, by faith in Christ, even though we do not keep them in the letter, even though the New Testament does not tell us how precisely we are keeping the grain offerings and the clothing rules by having faith in Christ. We figure that faith in Christ fulfills whatever purpose those laws had. In this Christological approach, it is possible to "keep" a law without paying any attention to what it actually says. We might say that the physical requirements have been spiritualized away. This line of thought, however, does not tell us which laws can be so spiritualized, and which must still be kept in the letter.

The other approach is to say yes, the law of circumcision is nullified by faith, and we do not have to keep it. Theologically there may be continuity,

but practically there is not.

Our question about the Sabbath is primarily a practical question – does God command Christians to rest on the seventh day? — and the theological understanding of “why” is a subsequent question. The “bottom line” is that some Old Testament laws should still be kept in the letter, and others are no longer required in the letter and in the flesh.

That still leaves us without a precise definition of “the law” that is not nullified. Does it include most of the decalogue? Apparently. Paul quotes most of the decalogue in Romans. But the non-nullified law also includes Leviticus 19:18b, Deuteronomy 6:5, Micah 6:8 and various laws from other parts of the Old Testament.

Now let us suppose that Paul illustrated what he meant by “the law,” by quoting one of the Ten: “The law is not done away. Doesn’t the law tell us not to steal? It is not done away.” What would this argument tell us? Paul is obviously citing one example out of a larger body, but *what* is that body? Is it the “second table” of the decalogue, is it the entire decalogue, is it the book of the covenant (Exodus 20-23), is it the Pentateuch as a whole, or is it a different group? From the context, we cannot tell what the boundaries of the source are. Even if Paul cites the entire second table, we cannot know whether he means to stop there, or to include a larger context, such as the decalogue or the book of the covenant. It is tempting for us to specify the boundaries that he did not, but I do not see anything in the context that would allow us to justify a particular set of boundaries.

So what is “the law” Paul is discussing in Romans 3:31 and 7:12? I find no reason to equate it with the decalogue. Rather, it leaves me with the general principle that the *concept* of law is still valid, and that God still has behavioral standards for his people. But precisely what those standards are, I cannot tell from this verse alone. So after many words, we still are not any closer to the question of the Sabbath. Romans 3:31 does not tell us whether the Sabbath is part of the non-nullified law, or part of the law that is no longer required. We will have to look at other verses.

## **The Decalogue in the New Testament**

The New Testament seems to put little emphasis on the decalogue as a whole. In several places it quotes a series from the second table (not always in the same order), but it never quotes anything from the first table with the second. The emphasis is on interpersonal behavior rather than worship. (Worship is of course important, but the New Testament contains few specifications for how it is to be done.) Jesus can quote from the second table

and from Leviticus 19 without any acknowledgment that he is crossing any literary boundaries. The second table was probably known as a group, but everything else was “a bit here, and a bit there.” We do not know what was actually in their minds.

The only place the New Testament deals with the decalogue as a whole is in 2 Corinthians 3. The references to the stone tablets and Moses’ glowing face shows that Paul is talking about the decalogue. But he says it was a covenant that did not last (verse 11). Something about the decalogue must have changed, and an increase in strictness would not qualify as “fading away.” Something about the decalogue has faded away, is no longer a requirement, is no longer definitive for what it means to be God’s people in covenant with him.

## Basic points in our understanding

Now I will stop dealing with individual verses and attempt to give a broad overview, as you asked for. It *could* take an entire book to deal with this, but I will attempt to sketch an outline of the major points.

1. The law is not done away. Historically, we stressed this point, and this is where we began. Probably *anyone* who has questions about the Sabbath begins with this point, because if the law is all obsolete, the Sabbath question is irrelevant. We begin with a desire to obey God. We want to do what he says and teach what he wants us to teach.

2. Some God-given laws are no longer in force. People have wrestled with this for a long time. Some have kept the annual Sabbaths, sometimes tried to implement land sabbaths, tried to avoid blended fabrics and hybrid corn because of Leviticus 19:19, considered women religiously unclean after childbirth, etc. People were willing to obey God, but struggled to find out how much he required. They all knew that some laws are done away, but they could not always explain why. Just because God gave a law to Israel does not mean that we today have to keep it. Just because “the law” is holy, just and good and profitable for training in righteousness does not mean that we have to keep every detail today.

Because some laws are obsolete, we must carefully distinguish between them, because it would be a sin for us to teach as required something that isn’t. Just because God told the Israelites to wear blue threads in tassels, does not mean that we can teach that believers should today. We cannot jump instantly from New Testament scriptures about obedience, which is good, into Old Testament laws. But many people have that approach: “Christians obey God. [which is true] God gave this law. [which is also true] Therefore

we should keep it. [which is false].”

The logic seems straightforward until we apply it to circumcision, and then we find that this approach is somehow, somewhere, completely wrong. If the law is still valid, it should be demonstrated to be valid by a valid approach, not a flawed approach.

In the case of the annual Sabbaths, for example, there are two problems to this approach: 1) God gave this law to Israelites, not to Gentiles. 2) He gave it for a temporary period, and it is no longer required even for Jewish Christians. We must be careful when we go to the Old Testament to see a law. We must discern who the law was given to, and consider whether it may be obsolete.

3. The New Testament does not specify all the obsolete laws. It says nothing about mixed fabrics, land sabbaths, tassels on garments, and yet we understand that these are obsolete. The New Testament does not have to itemize all the obsolete laws. The idea that a law is in force until specifically rescinded, is not valid.

But only God can declare a God-given law to be obsolete. We must have a biblical authority for considering any Old Testament law obsolete. Where in the New Testament do we find that any Old Testament law is obsolete?

4. The New Testament does away with Old Testament laws in large categories. When the New Testament declares Old Testament laws obsolete, it does so in large categories. The Acts 15 council dealt with a category called “The Law of Moses.” Judging by the way that phrase is used in the New Testament, it appears to cover everything attributed to Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy..

In Galatians 3, Paul says that Christians are no longer under the law. The law he mentions there is the law added 430 years after Abraham, that is, through Moses.

In Hebrews, it is the Sinai covenant that is obsolete. Although the letter to the Hebrews concerns itself with ceremonial examples of the law, it still uses the more comprehensive word “covenant” and says that the covenant is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). In the Bible that covenant is equated with the decalogue (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13). It would also include Exodus 21-23, since Exodus 24 is the ratification of the covenant, and it includes ceremonies given after that, too, since Hebrews tells us that the covenant included instructions about the tabernacle.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul deals with the decalogue, calling it a ministry of death, a ministry that was fading away. We dealt with this in a commentary at [www.gci.org/bible/2cor3](http://www.gci.org/bible/2cor3).

Ephesians 2 also refers to laws that were abolished. The passage does not give these laws a name, but they were the ones that divided Jews from Gentiles. Some have claimed that these were human-created rules. But Jesus did not have to die to eliminate human traditions – rather, his death is what marked the end of various God-given laws. Ephesians 2 is saying the same as the other above-mentioned passages: the laws given to Jews but not Gentiles are now obsolete. These are the laws given through Moses, 430 years after Abraham, forming the old covenant. There’s a commentary on Ephesians 2 at [www.gci.org/bible/eph2](http://www.gci.org/bible/eph2).

In all these New Testament passages, a large category of biblical law is declared obsolete. That body of law happens to include laws that are still valid, but their validity does not depend on their being included in the old covenant. They came before that covenant, or they came after it, through Jesus.

Since that covenant has been declared obsolete, every law within it is suspect. The question must be asked: Was this given only to Israel, only for a time, or is this a timeless principle that transcends this particular covenant? We cannot just dive into the old covenant, grab a verse, and proclaim it as valid before we even look at it. It has to be questioned. For practical purposes, it is best not to use the old covenant as a legal source at all, because whatever is valid in it can be demonstrated to be valid with verses from outside of the old covenant, and it would be more straightforward to go to those verses in the first place, instead of taking the circuitous route through the old covenant.

Nevertheless, the civil and ceremonial laws of the old covenant are still informative. The ceremonial laws may be used typologically; the civil laws illustrate principles of ethics – not in exact imitation, but in careful exploration. Christopher Wright has developed that well. The laws are informative, not normative.

5. The change of covenants is important. This was the paradigm shift that was central to doctrinal change in one Sabbatarian group. Herbert Armstrong had taught that the old covenant was ended (which is true), but that the new covenant was not yet made (which is false). This erroneous idea allowed the WCG to insulate itself from the idea that a major change had occurred in the way God was working with his people.

But the Bible shows that the new covenant *has* been made, and so we need to explore what the change of covenants might mean. It explains, for one thing, why Christians don’t have to wear tassels and keep other laws that the New Testament does not specifically rescind. The New Testament rescinds

it by large category, not by itemizing individual laws.

But how far does this go? If tassels are done away, why not the Feast of Unleavened Bread? There is no rationale for requiring one but not the other. The proof-text chains are broken. The example of circumcision proves most proof-texts invalid, but people keep using them anyway.

Calvinist “covenant theology” stresses unity between the covenants. This is used to support the continuity of the moral law, but the logical extension of this approach is theonomy. Why could theonomists (such as Bahnsen and Rushdoony) stress Matthew 5:17 and end up so different? One critique of theonomy calls the entire structure of covenant theology into question. See H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?*

Zondervan publishes a symposium of views on the law with the title *Five Views of Law and Gospel*. In this book, theonomy is presented and critiqued; and also reformed theology, dispensational theology and Lutheran theology. In this book, Douglas Moo seems to present the best exegetical evidence. The Calvinist view is inadequate, particularly when they try to argue that the new covenant is so much like the old that it is better to speak of only one covenant. They did not deal with the verses of discontinuity. The same weakness is seen in Sabbatarian arguments. The pillars under the platform are faulty.

6. Jesus’ example is ambivalent, since he kept some laws that are now obsolete. As you note, it is too simplistic to “just follow Jesus’ example.” Nevertheless, this argument is often used by Sabbatarians. People who keep the annual festivals are a bit more consistent with it.

You are advocating a more sophisticated approach to evaluating what Jesus means regarding the Sabbath. Did he not invest the day with a significance that transcended the old covenant? Yes, he did, just as he did for Passover, Tabernacles, and other ceremonial laws. What does it mean in practical terms? His activity on the Sabbath is informative, but is it also normative? Does being a disciple of Jesus mean following him in this particular specificity?

When we are dealing with a command that divides families, causes people to lose their jobs, alienates Christians from one another, etc., we need a *Thus saith the Lord*, not some vague impressions that people can interpret in different ways. All the pillars used to hold up the Sabbath doctrine – all the proof-texts – are flawed, and we cannot find any authority from Christ to require the Sabbath. We cannot in good conscience teach the seventh-day Sabbath.

7. The early church example is ambivalent, since the early church met on many different days. We have records of Sabbath meetings, Sunday meetings,

every-day-of-the-week meetings, etc., without any internal criteria to show that one is normative and the others are exceptional. And in early church history, we do not see Sabbath-keeping in the second or third century. (A compilation from the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary was particularly helpful in this research). [Editor's note: That study is a later chapter in this book.]

8. The New Testament shows a lack of concern about the Sabbath. Sabbatarian churches today face many questions about how to keep the Sabbath. What is permitted, what is not? Why weren't the first-century Christians similarly filled with questions? What about slaves – were they supposed to keep the Sabbath or be beaten or killed? What exceptions were allowed? Early Christians dealt with the subject of circumcision often enough – why not the Sabbath? Why was circumcision, a ceremonial law, considered more worthy of attention?

There are also some “difficult scriptures” – Colossians 2:16, Romans 14:5, Galatians 4:10. Why did Paul bring up the subject of days and treat it so casually? This is totally unlike a Sabbatarian approach. They could never say the things that Paul did (nor would they ever be accused of doing away with the law, as Paul was). The New Testament is not afraid of repeating the Old Testament, so why did Paul never clarify that the Sabbath was still a valid command?

Why could Paul say that some people considered some days special, and others not, and just leave it by saying people should make up their own minds on this subject? Surely he realized that some people would apply these words to the Sabbath! Is it that unimportant? He would never say that about any other part of the decalogue, would he? For Colossians 2, see [www.gci.org/bible/col2](http://www.gci.org/bible/col2). For Galatians 4, see [www.gci.org/bible/gal4](http://www.gci.org/bible/gal4).

9. The Jewish view is that the Sabbath is Jewish. One thing that helps explain the New Testament silence is that Jews did not believe that Gentiles needed to keep the Sabbath in order to be righteous, unless they were full proselytes. Jews did not believe that the Sabbath had been given to Adam, Noah or Abraham – they believed it was given to Israel only. See the primary sources at [www.gci.org/law/sabbath/history1](http://www.gci.org/law/sabbath/history1), endnote 8.

This meshes well with Genesis and Exodus. It explains why there would be controversy in the early church about circumcision, but not about the Sabbath – the Sabbath was considered subsequent to circumcision. If the Jews taught that Gentiles did not need to keep the Sabbath but Paul taught that they should, it would be controversial and the silence of the New Testament would be harder to explain. But if Paul was teaching something that had always been taught in Judaism, then that explains the silence.

10. Adding it up. The prooftext chains are all weak. The old covenant is

not a good place to get commands for Christians, but the only biblical command for the Sabbath is in the old covenant. We can add to that 1) the evidence that the Sabbath is ceremonial, 2) that something within the decalogue itself has faded, 3) that the new covenant has done away with hundreds of Old Testament laws, and 4) that Paul was not concerned about whether his people kept the Sabbath.

The conclusion is that the Sabbath was one of the ceremonial laws that came to an end with the death of Jesus Christ. It has a typological value, looking back to creation and looking forward to our rest in Christ. Its typology goes back to creation, but as a command, it goes back only to Moses. It is one of the laws of Moses given 430 years after Abraham, it is the sign of the now-obsolete old covenant, one of the laws that had been a barrier between Jews and Gentiles. For a more detailed examination of the Sabbath in Scripture, see [www.gci.org/law/sabbath1](http://www.gci.org/law/sabbath1).

This is a big volume of material, even without going to the website articles I mentioned. Perhaps it seems argumentative, opinionated, biased, etc., and I apologize if I have come across that way. Perhaps there are many points above that we are in agreement on, and perhaps there are others that we could come to an agreement on through further discussion.

Editor's note: This was the end of the conversation.

## THE ROLE OF THE DECALOGUE IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

By Michael Morrison

How are Christians to evaluate the laws of the Torah? How are we to use these writings, some of which the New Testament calls “obsolete” — and yet *all* Scripture is “useful for...training in righteousness”? (New Revised Standard used throughout this chapter).<sup>1</sup> Some Christians tend to emphasize the obsolescence of the Old Testament; others stress continuity between the old covenant and the new, including continuity between the Ten Commandments and Christian behavioral expectations.<sup>2</sup> Some Christians take the permanence of the Decalogue so seriously that they keep the Sabbath on the seventh day of each week, as it commands.

The Sabbath, a worship regulation that includes ethical instructions, is a useful test case to help us clarify a Christian approach to the Decalogue, and thus to other Old Testament laws.<sup>3</sup> Before we comment on the role of the Decalogue in Christian ethics, we must take the Sabbath command into consideration. An interpretive method that leads to an incorrect answer on the Sabbath question is thereby shown to be invalid, and such a method should not be used. Nevertheless, invalid arguments are common, and they create potential hazards for Christians who are unaware of the problems.

### **Prooftexts of continuity**

Many Christians teach that the Decalogue was spoken by God himself, written in stone, the major expression of the moral law, based on the unchanging character of God and therefore permanent.<sup>4</sup> Many teach that Christians should keep the Ten Commandments — yet often the same teachers say that the Sabbath command is changed or obsolete. But it makes no sense to say that we have an unchanging moral law that has a change in it. There is little to be gained by claiming to uphold Ten when only Nine are meant.

Continuity of the Decalogue may be stressed in two basic ways: 1) a prooftext<sup>5</sup> approach that may be used in popular presentations, and 2) a more sophisticated approach that views the old and new covenants as two aspects of God’s covenant of grace. The question of the Decalogue becomes intertwined with the larger question of covenantal continuity.

The proof-text approach may use these points: God himself spoke the Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-22). He wrote the words himself (Exodus 34:1), and commanded that they be stored in the ark in the holiest place (Deuteronomy 10:2). Jeremiah describes the new covenant not as a new law, but as the same law written in the heart (Jeremiah 31:33). Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law of God (Matthew 5:17), and all of it would remain as long as heaven and earth remain (verse 18). Jesus advocated righteousness (verse 20), quoted commandments as authoritative (Matthew 19:18-19), and obeyed Old Testament laws (Hebrews 4:15). Paul said the law was holy and good, and he quoted commandments as authoritative (Romans 7:12; 13:9). Old Testament scripture is God-breathed and a good source of Christian teaching (2 Timothy 3:16). James quoted commandments as authoritative for Christians (James 2:11), and Revelation tells us that the saints are commandment-keepers (Revelation 14:12).

Some draw this conclusion: “Our attitude must be that all Old Testament laws are presently our obligation unless further revelation from the Lawgiver shows that some change has been made.”<sup>6</sup> However, everyone agrees that *some Old Testament* laws are obsolete. Therefore, we cannot conclude that Jesus meant the continuing validity of all Old Testament laws, nor did Paul mean that *all Old Testament* laws are normative ethical standards. Since exceptions exist, even the most conservative person must ask *which* laws are normative today — and the verses of continuity do not answer the question. Since exceptions exist, all verses of continuity need careful qualification, which is not easily done with a proof-text approach.

The proof-texts of continuity may be countered with another series of texts: Jesus argued that Old Testament ethical requirements were not strict enough (Matthew 5:21-32); the most important ethical principles are not even laws in the traditional sense (Matthew 23:23). Christians are not under the law that Moses brought (Acts 15; Galatians 3). The old covenant is obsolete, faded, and set aside (2 Corinthians 3:11; Hebrews 8:13). Old Testament laws are not the best laws, and some are no longer normative. They can be inspired and educational without being requirements today (Colossians 2:11; Hebrews 10:1). We cannot assume that every God-given law reflects God’s character equally, or that every law is as eternal as he is. Some are concessive (an allowance for the people’s hardness of heart) and temporary.

Because exceptions exist, we cannot make blanket statements about “the law” as if they applied to all Old Testament laws. We cannot assume that every law is still normative, nor that every law is obsolete. And since ethical, civil, and ceremonial laws are mixed together in the Torah, we cannot judge

a verse by its neighbors. For example, we cannot assume that Leviticus 19:19 is normative even if we believe that all the other verses in the chapter are normative and based on God's holiness (verse 2). Each law must be judged on its own merits – by standards given in the New Testament.

Even in the Decalogue, we cannot *assume* that all the verses are equally permanent. Questions about the Sabbath in particular force us to examine this assumption. Further doubt may arise when we note that the Decalogue is equated with the old covenant (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13), a covenant that the New Testament calls temporary and obsolete. It is not just the sacrificial laws that are obsolete — the stone tablets themselves (a clear reference to the Decalogue) are contrasted with a covenant that is permanent (2 Corinthians 3:7-11). This suggests the possibility that at least *part* of the Decalogue may have changed.

## Covenant theology

A more thorough case for continuity is developed in covenant theology.<sup>7</sup> O. Palmer Robertson argues that “the cumulative evidence of the Scriptures points definitely toward the unified character of the biblical covenants.”<sup>8</sup> He notes that Scripture describes several covenants, but that each covenant builds on the previous ones rather than replacing the previous relationship. “The Abrahamic covenant continued to function actively after the institution of the Mosaic covenant.... The Davidic covenant in its turn did not annul or interrupt the Mosaic covenant.... The covenants of Abraham, Moses, and David actually are successive stages of a single covenant.”<sup>9</sup> Robertson uses Jeremiah 31:31-34 to conclude that in the new covenant, “the substance of the law will be the same” as in the Sinaitic covenant.<sup>10</sup>

William J. Dumbrell also argues for continuity in his analysis of Jeremiah 31. He asks, “What is the place of ‘law’ in the New Covenant framework?” He answers by saying that v. 33 refers to the Sinai law — “specifically, one presumes, to the decalogue by which the Sinai covenant was primarily expressed.... God is returning to the original intent of the Sinai covenant.”<sup>11</sup> Thomas McComiskey notes that Jeremiah “spoke not of a change in the nature of *torah*, but of its localization. The covenant context of the passage would certainly lead Jeremiah’s hearers to think in terms of the Mosaic legislation.”<sup>12</sup>

Covenant theologians stress continuity between the covenants, and, as part of this continuity, they stress the validity of the Decalogue. Willem VanGemeren says, “The Ten Commandments...are the summary of the moral law.... Each one of the Ten Commandments expresses the moral law

of God.”<sup>13</sup> Robert Knudsen writes, “It is also inconceivable that there will be any changes in the meaning of God’s law as expressed in the Ten Commandments.”<sup>14</sup> Tremper Longman draws this conclusion:

Moral law states God’s principles for a right relationship with him and with others. The Ten Commandments are the most visible and powerful expression of God’s will for his people. As we read the New Testament and reflect on the Bible as a whole, we see that these commands are still operative. Thus Jesus heartily approved a legal expert’s summary of the Ten Commandments.<sup>15</sup>

However, if the Ten Commandments are eternally valid laws, what are we to make of the Sabbath command, which specifically states that God’s people should rest on the *seventh* day? An eternally valid law cannot be changed or abrogated, so if these theologians are consistent, they should keep the seventh day as a Sabbath, as a day of rest. Most covenant theologians do not, and a variety of explanations are given, all claiming that the New Testament changes the Sabbath command in some way:

1. The Sabbath is changed to the first day of the week, and is still a day of rest. The Westminster Confession 21.7 supported this view and cited some New Testament examples of believers meeting on the first day of the week. However, these examples do not show that *the day of rest* was changed. The Ten Commandments forbid work on the seventh day; the fact that believers did something else on the first day is logically irrelevant. It is quite possible to keep the seventh day as a Sabbath *and* to meet on Sunday. The New Testament does not give any imperative about the first day that could correspond to, counter, or change the imperative of the Decalogue about the seventh day. Nor can church tradition overrule a biblical command. The Westminster approach, by claiming the permanent validity of the Decalogue, yet claiming a change within it, creates an internal contradiction that Sabbatarians sometimes exploit.

2. Another alternative to Sabbatarianism is to argue that the day is changed to the first day, and its focus shifts from rest to worship. This approach at least acknowledges that the New Testament verses are about something different than the Old Testament command,<sup>16</sup> but it fails to show that the verses are relevant. It does not show that the command to rest is abrogated, nor that there is a command (not just an example) to gather for worship on a specific day of the week. The resurrection of Jesus on a Sunday does not in itself cancel a command regarding the seventh day.

3. A third approach is to argue that the Sabbath command was moral and

eternal in requiring people to rest one day each week, but ceremonial in specifying that it must be the seventh day.<sup>17</sup> This approach may note the ethical value of requiring rest for servants and animals, but it admits that part of the Decalogue is ceremonial and temporary.<sup>18</sup>

Whether these arguments are valid or not, they all involve a change in the Sabbath command and therefore imply that the Decalogue is not an unchanging moral law. It would then be misleading to call the Ten Commandments *the* moral law, as if the entire package were moral law. Individual commandments may well be moral and unchanging, but it is misleading to call the Ten *as a unit* “the moral law.”

It is therefore appropriate to explore the authority by which the Decalogue might be changed. Let us briefly examine the question of the Sabbath in the New Testament.

## Has the Sabbath been changed?

The Gospels describe several incidents involving Jesus and the Sabbath. Although Sabbatarians often cite this as evidence that “Jesus kept the Sabbath,” the text never makes this point. It never uses the word “rest” or “keep” — instead, it describes Jesus’ *activity* on the Sabbath. Jesus’ example is always one of liberty, of breaking traditional restrictions. Jesus never affirms any Sabbath restrictions, and is never portrayed as supporting the focus of the Sabbath as found in the Old Testament, that is, the avoidance of work.

Moreover, Jesus treated the Sabbath as a ceremonial law, not a moral law. In the grainfield incident, Jesus defended the activity of his disciples by pointing to David breaking a ceremonial law and the priests keeping a ceremonial law (Matthew 12:1-6). The priests are said to “*break* the Sabbath” by their ceremonial work. The text is not saying that the Sabbath command permitted such work; rather, it is saying that the Sabbath command was violated by the work, but that the ceremonial work was so important that the Sabbath could be broken in order to do it. I cannot imagine Jesus saying that a moral law could be broken because a ritual had to be performed! Rather, he is putting the Sabbath on the same (or lower) level as ceremonial laws. He does this also in John 7:22-23, saying that the requirement to circumcise was more important than the requirement to avoid work on the Sabbath.

Further evidence that the Sabbath law is ceremonial rather than moral: It is patterned after what God did only once, not on his eternal nature. God does not live by a six-one cycle of activity and rest, nor do the angels. The Sabbath command says that behavior that is good one day is forbidden the

next, merely because it is a different day of the week. But God’s morality does not change with the rotation of the earth.

The apostles preached on the Sabbath, but they preached on other days, too. Their example is not a command. More important than the apostolic activity on the Sabbath is the apostolic teaching — and the Sabbath was not an important part of their teaching. The word “Sabbath” is found only once in the epistles — in Colossians 2:16. There, Paul puts the Sabbath into the same category as other ceremonial laws (food, drink, festivals and new moons) and says it is not a matter on which Christians should be judging one another. Allusions to the Sabbath may also be seen in Galatians 4:10, where Paul disapproves of the Galatians observing special days, and Romans 14:5, where Paul seemed to be unconcerned about special days.<sup>19</sup> These statements support the conclusion that the Sabbath command does not apply to Christians.

The evidence throughout the New Testament is that the Sabbath command was abrogated, without being replaced by any comparable commands. The day that the Decalogue had specified is now unimportant. The rest that the Decalogue commanded is no longer required. It is therefore misleading to call the Decalogue the moral law, as if all ten commandments were moral and permanent. Some are, but the Ten as a unit are not.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, because there are internal differences of applicability to Christianity, *it is misleading in Christian ethics to treat the Decalogue as a unit*. It is a unit within the old covenant, but it does not function as a unit in the New Testament.

## Authority for change

If we focus on the Decalogue, we might wonder why a command would become obsolete. But if we view the Torah as a whole, we see *hundreds* of laws that are no longer in force. The Sabbath is not an isolated case, but a representative case. After we see that the New Testament sets aside hundreds of biblical commands, it is less of a surprise that the list of obsolete laws happens to include the Sabbath, too.

Early Christians may have been surprised that *any* biblical command (including the sacrifices and rituals) could become unnecessary. If God had given these laws, what human could say that they were done away? Only one authority could do away with canonical commands: God. So we look to the New Testament to see whether it has overturned Old Testament laws, and this will help us clarify the role of the Decalogue in Christian ethics.

The New Testament does not itemize all the valid Old Testament laws, nor all the obsolete ones. Some laws (unclean meats, sin sacrifices, washings)

are mentioned; others (tassels on garments, grain offerings) are not. The New Testament quotes some Old Testament commands (even ones that are now obsolete) with approval; others are quoted as being inadequate or in need of replacement (Matthew 5:31-37). Commands from the Decalogue, the Holiness Code, and Deuteronomy are quoted as valid; other commands from those same codes are treated as obsolete. Some are moral and eternal; others are not, and in this, the Decalogue is no different than other Old Testament laws. The Decalogue does not require a different method of interpretation and should not be given special treatment.<sup>21</sup>

Commands from the last half of the Decalogue may be quoted together, or they can be quoted with another law of similar authority (Matthew 19:18-19). Although the New Testament appropriates *most* of the Decalogue, it does not cite the Decalogue *as a whole* as a moral authority for Christians. It uses the last half several times, but never uses the whole. It never even refers to it by name. When the New Testament quotes the last half together, there is no reason to assume that it is endorsing any larger group, such as the Ten, the Book of the Covenant, or the old covenant as a whole. It would be arbitrary to assume any larger group.

Although the New Testament cites many individual Old Testament laws as valid, it does not specify a general category as permanently valid.<sup>22</sup> However, when it declares laws obsolete, it uses large categories. In Acts 15, it is “the law of Moses.” In 1 Corinthians 9:20, it is “the law.” In Galatians 3:17, it is “the law” that came 430 years after Abraham, that is, at the time of Moses. In Ephesians 2:15 it is “the law with its commandments and ordinances,” the law that separated Jews from Gentiles. In Hebrews 8:13 it is the Sinai covenant. Although various terms are used, there is a consistency in what is meant. A large category of law is being declared obsolete. That does not mean that every command within the category is obsolete, but the package itself is.

What is the New Testament explanation for this significant change in divinely given laws? It is a change in covenants. The book of Hebrews makes this clear in chapters 7 to 10. Although the focus in Hebrews is on the ceremonial laws relevant to the priesthood, the conclusion is more broadly stated — it is the covenant itself that is obsolete (8:13). A new covenant has replaced the Sinai-Moses covenant. The Sabbath, which was a sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 31:16-17), is obsolete, and so is the covenant itself. The new covenant has some similarities to the old, but it is a new covenant.

Hebrews uses strong terms: laws are set aside, changed, abrogated, abolished, because one covenant has ended and another has begun. Of

course, since the old and the new covenants were given by the same God, we should expect *some* similarities. We should expect truly moral laws to be found in both covenants. It should be no surprise that laws against adultery, which predated Abraham, should also be included in Sinai, a later and larger package of laws. But we accept those laws as moral not because they were given to Moses (the fact that a law was given to Moses does not automatically make it moral), but for other reasons.

Paul tells us that the law of Moses was a temporary addition to the Abrahamic promises (Galatians 3:16-25). The Sinai covenant, which includes the Decalogue, civil laws and ceremonial laws, came 430 years after Abraham, and it was designed to come to an end when Christ came. John Goldingay puts it this way: “Paul does not mean that the Hebrew *scriptures* are annulled. Indeed, his argument that the law is annulled appeals to these scriptures. But he does assert that they are no longer binding *as law*.”<sup>23</sup> And the Bible makes no exception for the core of the Sinai covenant, the Decalogue.

Paul deals with the Decalogue directly in 2 Corinthians 3, where he describes laws written on stone tablets and Moses’ face shining with glory. It is clear that he is talking about the Ten Commandments, and he calls them “the ministry of death” (3:7). He is not talking about the *administration* of the Decalogue, as Walter Kaiser claims<sup>24</sup> — he is saying that the “ministry of death” itself was chiseled on the stone. The word “ministry” in this verse refers not to administration, but to the Ten Commandments themselves. That is what was chiseled on stone, and that is what was fading. Paul is talking about Moses’ glory because it parallels the Mosaic covenant. It once had glory, but no longer does because it has been eclipsed by the new covenant. In verse 11, he says something that “came through glory” was “set aside.” It is the stone tablets that came in glory, and it is these stone tablets that have been set aside, replaced by “the permanent” (the new covenant), which came in greater glory.

In other words, the Ten Commandments have been set aside, and we should expect at least some change in it. We do not look to the stone tablets as the standard of godly living. Every moral law within the Decalogue is also found outside of the Decalogue, and one of the Ten has specifically been annulled in the New Testament. The Decalogue is neither sufficient nor necessary for Christian ethics. Saying, “It’s one of the Ten Commandments” is no more proof of current validity than saying, “It’s in Deuteronomy.”<sup>25</sup>

An Old Testament law’s validity cannot be assessed by its location — it must be assessed by new covenant criteria.<sup>26</sup> Theft is immoral not because God happened to forbid it in the Decalogue, but because by new covenant

principles we can see that it was immoral long before God gave this law to Moses. Love is moral not because it was written on stone (it wasn't), but because it was moral long before the Torah was written. The Decalogue is not the standard of comparison we need; its role in Christian ethics is *ambiguous*. It proves nothing in itself.

## Morality of nine commandments

In showing that the Sabbath command has been abrogated, in showing that the Decalogue as a package has been set aside and that it should not be our primary point of reference, we do not mean to say that Christians have no moral standards, no ethical duties. The New Testament has hundreds of commands, hundreds of behavioral expectations for how forgiven people should respond to their Savior. Some of these commands are also found in the Decalogue, but their validity does not rest on the fact that they were on the stone tablets. As shown by the Sabbath command, we cannot equate stone with permanence. The validity of such laws rests on moral principles that transcend the specific situation of Sinai.

Jesus affirmed the validity of the first commandment (Matthew 4:10), and of five more (Matthew 19:18-19). But the two most important commandments were not even in the Decalogue (Matthew 22:37-39; 23:23); Jesus also said that true morality went beyond the wording of the Decalogue (Matthew 5:21-28).<sup>27</sup> The Decalogue, when isolated from its historical context in Exodus (as it often is in Christian moralizing), easily becomes a mere list of rules, a legalism.

Jesus was not claiming to be simply a better interpreter of Moses — he claimed to have more authority than Moses. He allowed what the law of Moses did not (John 8:1-11) and forbade something that Moses allowed (Matthew 5:33-34). He was setting a new standard for right conduct. In Jesus' last instructions to his disciples, he told them to teach people to obey, but the standard he gave was not the Decalogue, but his own teaching. Jesus' teaching is a better basis for ethics than the Decalogue is, and *it is unethical for us to refer people to an inferior standard when a better one is available*.<sup>28</sup>

## Law as story

What then are we to do with the Decalogue? How are we to approach it as Scripture inspired by God, “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16)? We should approach it in the way it is written — as a report of what God gave his people in the time of Moses. We read it as a narrative first, before jumping to conclusions that

we are supposed to obey every command within it.

The Decalogue, like other Old Testament laws, was given as a norm for Israelite behavior. That was its original intent. However, the New Testament tells us that *the Old Testament is informative but not normative*. If we approach the Torah as law, as command, then we quickly run into erroneous conclusions about what Christians are required to do — thus showing that this approach to the Bible is not valid. A different model for reading is needed, and the narrative model takes the text seriously yet without leading to erroneous conclusions.<sup>29</sup>

Even the commands must be read as part of a narrative. When we read in Genesis 17 that the males among God's people were to be circumcised, we do not assume that we should do so today. When we read in Exodus 13 that God's people are to have a festival of flat bread, we do not assume that we should do so today. Those commands were given for a specific people. So also the commands we find in Exodus 20. They begin with this preface: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This gives a historical context to the situation: it was a multitude of just-escaped slaves, in a desert, surrounded by polytheistic nations. And God gave them laws that would compensate for their lack of civic experience, laws that would help them resist polytheism, laws that would help them become a distinct nation, laws that would help them structure society in a new land. These laws were good for their situation, but it is another question as to whether those same laws are good for us today in our situations. This is to be explored, not assumed.

Much of the Old Testament is narrative. Nevertheless, 2 Timothy 3 can say that this type of writing, since it is part of Scripture, is "useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Stories can help inform our ethics. They can illustrate consequences, misunderstandings, deficiencies and flexibilities. The story of Abraham and circumcision is useful for teaching and for training in righteousness without requiring us to practice circumcision. The commands about sacrifice are to be read as story, not as commands for us today. The details may be useful typologically, but they are read first in the context of a story, not as currently valid law. Even the civil laws of the Old Testament are useful illustrations of how moral principles may be fleshed out in a specific culture.<sup>30</sup>

Genesis is a story, and in that story God gave certain commands and implied other commands. Some of them apply to us today and some do not. Exodus continues that story and gives more commands, commands about how people should worship, how to behave with one another and what to do when someone disobeys. Some of these commands apply to us today;

others do not. So we must see them first in the context the books give them: a covenant or arrangement God made with a specific people at a specific time in history, a covenant God has now revealed to be obsolete. The commands that God gave them *are instructive but not necessarily imperative for us*. They may have exemplary value, and may be reinterpreted for different contexts. Their ethical value must be cautiously explored, not assumed,<sup>31</sup> and in our evaluation we must give greater weight to the New Testament revelation, the part of the canon that has the authority to cancel and change the laws of the Old Testament.

Christopher Wright explains a helpful “paradigmatic” approach:

I would regard “paradigm” as a useful category for ethically understanding and applying the Old Testament itself. . . . We do not think in terms of literal imitation of Israel. We cannot simply transpose the social laws of an ancient people into the modern world and try to make them work as written. . . . On the other hand, the social system of Israel cannot be dismissed as. . . totally inapplicable to either the Christian church or the rest of mankind. If Israel was meant to be a light to the nations (cf. Is. 49:6), then that light must be allowed to illuminate.<sup>32</sup>

Wright notes “the narrative framework in which they [the Old Testament laws] are set”<sup>33</sup> and provides a method for moving from narrative to principle and back to a modern situation. The goal is to see how the law functioned within Israelite society, and the general principle involved. The same law might function similarly in modern society, or significant modifications might be needed to achieve the same benefits today. The specificity of the Old Testament laws encourages us to seek practical specificity for the same principles today.<sup>34</sup>

In summary, the New Testament says that 1) certain laws are moral, holy, just and good; 2) certain Old Testament laws are obsolete; 3) the Sinai covenant and the Sinai Decalogue are obsolete in their legal authority; 4) however, specific laws remain valid; and 5) we can learn something about righteousness even from laws that are no longer valid.

When we study Old Testament ethics, the Decalogue is an important law code. It tells us basic ethical rules of what God gave those people back then. This is a major statement of the ethic that the Old Testament presents. But that is *descriptive for ancient Israel, not prescriptive for Christian ethics*. Christians have been told to look to Jesus Christ as a greater authority, a better ethical example and a better teacher of righteous living.

## Practical consequences

Since the Sabbath command has been rescinded in the New Testament, no one should preach or imply that the Decalogue is a valid ethical standard for Christians. It is not. It has an important exception in the middle of it, and it is confusing to say Ten when only Nine are meant. It is inaccurate and misleading. Moreover, Christians have a better ethical standard in the New Testament — a bigger body of literature with better ethical balance. We have the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Of course, the Christian church has used the Decalogue for centuries, from the second century onwards. But it is also clear that affirmations about the Decalogue have been turned into Sabbatarianism and legalism, and this shows that the traditional veneration of the Decalogue is a theological mistake. We should point people to Christ, not to Moses, for instruction on how to live like a Christian.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 8:13 and 2 Timothy 3:16. The New Testament does not say that the Old Testament *Scriptures* are obsolete. Rather, it says that the old *covenant* is obsolete. This distinction should be taken seriously, and intend to take both thoughts seriously.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of conservative views, see Wayne Strickland, ed. *Counterpoint: Five Views of Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). In general, Covenant theologians in the Calvinist tradition stress continuity; Lutherans and Dispensationalists give more emphasis to obsolescence.

<sup>3</sup> Willard M. Swartley uses the Sabbath as one example in *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1983), though without drawing conclusions about the Sabbath itself. This paper agrees with the majority Christian view that the seventh-day Sabbath is *not* required today. Some of the reasons will be given in this paper, but for a more detailed defense of this view, see “What Do the Scriptures Say About the Sabbath?”

<sup>4</sup> Such statements are found in the “Decalogue” articles of Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), Francesco Cardinal Roberti, comp., *Dictionary of Moral Theology* (London: Burns & Oates, 1962), and David J. Atkinson, ed., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> I do not use “prooftext” here as a pejorative term. There *are* certain key verses on which claims are built.

<sup>6</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *By This Standard: The Authority of God’s Law Today* (Tyler, Tx.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), p. 3. Bahnsen ignores many New Testament scriptures that weaken his view: Acts 15, 2 Corinthians 3:7-11, Galatians

3:15-4:31; Colossians 2:16; Hebrews 7:12, 18; 8:13. Some of these are not even in his index; others are dismissed in a single sentence or paragraph.

<sup>7</sup> Mark W. Karlberg traces the history of this concept back to Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin (“Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1980) 1-57). Calvin wrote, “The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in mode of administration” (*Institutes* II.10.2, cited in Karlberg, p. 16). The Westminster Confession 7.6 describes the Mosaic and Christian administrations in this way: “There are not then two essentially different covenants of grace, but one and the same covenant under different dispensations.”

<sup>8</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 41. I believe that “successive” is the wrong word here. The Davidic covenant came after the Mosaic covenant and was in continuity with it, but was not its successor in the sense of replacing it. The Davidic covenant made promises to the line of David, but the Mosaic covenant remained, and was dominant. However, distinctions between various Old Testament covenants are only marginally relevant to this paper. We will focus on the distinction between the Sinaitic covenant and the new covenant brought by Jesus Christ.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41; similar phrases are on pp. 281-282 — “essentially the same law.” Robertson defends the continuing validity of the (Sunday) Sabbath on pp. 69-74. Space does not permit point-by-point refutation.

<sup>11</sup> William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker and Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1993), pp. 178, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 84. Dennis E. Johnson, although in the Reformed tradition, says that Jeremiah 31 “clearly implied the obsolescence and inadequacy of the Mosaic covenant” in his article “The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Mosaic Penal Sanctions,” in William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 183. The text of Jeremiah 31 may be interpreted with either emphasis, and we must look to the New Testament to see whether the laws of the new covenant are identical to those of the old, and whether all Ten Commandments are valid.

<sup>13</sup> Willem A. VanGemenen, “The Law Is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 29-30. The Westminster Confession 19.2-3 also equated the Ten Commandments with the moral law.

<sup>14</sup> “May We Use the Term Theonomy...?” in William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 35.

Knudsen would probably phrase this differently if he were arguing against Sabbatarians instead of theonomists. It illustrates the Calvinist emphasis on continuity.

<sup>15</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Making Sense of the Old Testament: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> The Sabbath command focuses almost exclusively on the avoidance of work as the essence of keeping the Sabbath. Worship is not the focus. Leviticus 23:3 says that the seventh day is a day of “holy convocation,” but this involved only a portion of the Israelites. Most lived too far from the sanctuary to assemble there each Sabbath. After synagogues were developed, the Sabbath was used for worship, but this was a later development.

<sup>17</sup> Walter C. Kaiser expresses this view: “This command is mixed: it is both moral and ceremonial: moral in that it requires of men and women a due portion of their time set aside for rest, for worship, and service of God; ceremonial in that it fixed that day as the seventh day” (*Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991], p. 89). However, the Decalogue says nothing about the Sabbath being a day for worship.

<sup>18</sup> This approach also appears to make arbitrary distinctions between moral and ceremonial. If the day of the week is a ceremonial matter, why not the length of the cycle? Would one *hour* out of every seven be sufficient? Would it be more moral to rest one day out of every six, and less moral to rest one day out of every eight?

<sup>19</sup> Some exegetes deny that these verses have anything to do with the weekly Sabbath. Space does not permit a more detailed defense.

<sup>20</sup> Douglas Moo makes a similar point when he writes, “I am not denying that the Mosaic law, especially the Ten Commandments, contains principles and requirements that reflect God’s eternal moral will. My point, rather, is that the Mosaic law is not identical with this eternal moral law” (“Response to Willem A. VanGemenen,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, p. 84).

<sup>21</sup> “There is no evidence that Jesus isolated the Ten Commandments from the rest of the Mosaic law and put them in a separate category” (Moo, p. 87).

<sup>22</sup> As discussed above, scriptures proclaiming continuity in sweeping terms — Matthew 5:17, Romans 7:12, etc. — are so sweeping that they do not help us understand the critical question of *which* laws are valid and which are not. They do not describe a valid category in distinction from an obsolete category.

<sup>23</sup> *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), p. 44. Similarly, he writes, “the New Testament writers utilize such law for theological purposes, even though they see its legal function as over; it is still the word of God, even if it is no longer the command of God” (*Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], pp. 108-109).

<sup>24</sup> Kaiser, *Toward*, p. 313. Kaiser notes that the gospel may also be called a smell

of death, but then in a *non sequitur* he concludes from this, “Thus it is not the Ten Commandments per se that are a ministration of death” (ibid.).

<sup>25</sup> The logic of such statements is false for the Sabbath command, and the logic is therefore false. Saying “It’s in the Ten Commandments” proves nothing. It is only after that we learn which command is being discussed that we can ascertain whether the command is valid today, and we ascertain that by principles outside of and more authoritative than the Decalogue, most particularly the New Testament. So, why point to an inconclusive and secondary standard? It is better to point to the more authoritative principles from the beginning.

<sup>26</sup> “It is only as we look at the way that Jesus and the writers of the New Testament treat the commandments of the Mosaic law that we can know which ones continue to apply directly to us and which ones no longer do. The Mosaic commandments, then, are not directly applicable to us, but only as they are passed on to us by Christ” (Moo, pp. 87-88). Moo then cites the Sabbath command to illustrate his point (p. 88).

<sup>27</sup> It is true that Jesus referred to oral law (“You have heard that it was said...”), but in these cases the oral law was a direct quote of the written law. Jesus did not argue that the written law actually meant what he was teaching. Rather, he based his teachings on his own authority (“But I say unto you...”). See Douglas Moo for further discussion (“The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses,” in Strickland, pp. 347-356). However, even *if* Jesus merely interpreted Moses correctly, it would be poor practice to point people to the enigmatic original instead of the more complete interpretation.

<sup>28</sup> John G. Reisinger rightly asks, “If the Sermon on the Mount and the new covenant epistles do indeed teach a higher and more spiritual standard of holy living than the Law of Moses, do we not...lower the actual standard of holiness under which a Christian is to live when we send him back to Moses to learn ethics and morality?” (*Christ: Lord and Lawgiver Over the Church* [Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998], p. 16).

<sup>29</sup> John Goldingay points out additional respectful ways for Christians to read the Old Testament: as a description of faith in God, a story of salvation, and a witness to Christ (*Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*). For ethics, his chapter 2 is most appropriate: “The Old Testament as a Way of Life” (pp. 38-65).

<sup>30</sup> Moo notes that “the detailed stipulations of the Mosaic law *often* reveal principles that are part of God’s word to his people in both covenants, and believers continue to profit from what the law teaches in this respect” (p. 376, emphasis added). But this validity is to be argued on New Testament principles, not assumed in advance.

<sup>31</sup> In viewing Old Testament laws “neutrally,” we are beginning with a bias toward discontinuity. We do not begin by assuming the law to be valid, but by saying that we do not consider it valid until it is proven to be valid. Thus, even though the New Testament does not specifically repeal the laws of tassels and mezzuzim, we do not consider them required. Bestiality provides an opposite illustration. Even though the

New Testament does not reaffirm this particular Old Testament law, we believe the prohibition to be valid — not simply because the Old Testament says so, but because we believe that principles within the New Testament itself lead to this conclusion.

<sup>32</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 43-44; see also pp. 175-180. He also describes a typological approach, which is similar, for application within the church.

<sup>33</sup> Wright, *Eye*, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> “At the very least it will keep us earthed, by showing that general principles must have particular outworking and affect the local, culture-bound specifics of human life.... If our ethics are all vague generalities, then we have not listened to Old Testament law” (*ibid.*, p. 159). Wright shows the importance of seeking principles behind the laws: “You will not find a section of ‘moral law’ denouncing slavery, not even in the Ten Commandments. But you do find a moral *principle* operative within the civil law, which, when put alongside other Old Testament passages on the subject...questions and undermines the whole institution” (p. 154).

## **A SIGN FOREVER**

By Gary W. Deddo

Signs are important. We could hardly get along without them. We have signs for road safety, for identifying stores, indicating dangers like poison, radiation or high voltage wires, for finding geographic destinations, or merely navigating our way through an airport or sports stadium.

Signs were also important in the ancient world, including the ancient nation of Israel. The God of Israel gave signs to his people and used them for their benefit. One of the most notable was, of course, the rainbow after Noah's flood. Another was the Sabbath rest on the seventh day of the week. This sign was given to Israel "forever" (Exodus 31:17).

Some have thought the particular sign of the Sabbath rest given to Israel was so important that we are today under the same obligation. After all, some argue, it was given "forever." So why shouldn't this old covenant instruction hold for today?

The important thing to recognize here is that what is eternal is called a "sign." Christian pastors and teachers down through history have given great consideration to signs, as we find them referred to in both the Old and New Testaments. It is widely recognized and important to understand that the purpose of a sign is to point to something else, something greater than itself. For example, when no cat is in sight, the word "cat" spoken or written refers our minds to a particular kind of animal. We think of it, even though it's not there in front of us. Much of our ordinary language involves the use of signs to point to something that exists but might not be currently available for viewing. It could be said that signs point to what they signify, to the things themselves.

We find in the Bible that the signs God first gave to Israel all pointed to something greater to come, often to God's invisible character or to his future actions. So the word of the Lord comes to Israel: "I will be your God and you shall be my people." "I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt."

Many theologians down through the ages have recognized a pattern. The signs God gives are often promises. And what is promised is the thing signified. Israel was given the promise of a land. The promise wasn't the land, but it pointed forward to and anticipated its fulfillment, when Israel would

enter the Promised Land. The sign was the promise; entering the land was the fulfillment. Furthermore Christian teachers have recognized again and again that the signs given in the Old Testament (or under the old covenant) were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus himself was the fulfillment of the sign of the promised Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promise of deliverance, of salvation.

Now how does this apply to the eternal sign of the Sabbath? Jesus himself helps us answer. Some of the religious teachers of Judaism in his day accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath. How did Jesus reply? Does he say to them, "Well, you have your interpretation of this sign, and I have mine. The people will have to choose between our two interpretations as best they can." No, that is not what he said. Rather, he pointed out that he is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28; Matthew 12:8; Luke 6:5). He created the Sabbath. He was there to show them what the Sabbath was really all about. He is the source of our Sabbath rest. In fact, it turns out that Jesus himself fulfills the promise of Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:1-11). He is our Sabbath rest as we are joined to our Eternal Great High Priest. The sign of the Sabbath pointed to its fulfillment in Jesus. He is the "thing" signified.

The entire Gospel of John is dedicated to help us see the radical difference between the signs God gave and the reality they point to, namely Jesus himself. John the Baptist is the sign, not the promised one himself. So he must "decrease" and Jesus must "increase" in significance. Jesus does not just tell us the truth, show us the way or give us life. Rather he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the light of the world, he is the bread of life, he is the water of life, he is the resurrection. He is "I am." All the signs given by God were meant to lead us to the Son of God incarnate. He is, in his own person, the fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus is both the Giver and the Gift.

We have already mentioned that the purpose of a sign in the working of God is to point us to the reality. Think of road signs pointing out the direction to a big city—say Chicago. Some of them are far away and pointing southward. Some are closer and pointing eastward. There's no limit to the number and position of signs directing you. But if accurate and clear, each one gives direction for locating the city of Chicago. No one confuses the signs with the reality, the city itself. But that does not make them of no importance. If you've never been to Chicago and don't know the way, accurate signs are helpful—for finding the destination, not loitering around the signposts.

Now think what happens when you reach the actual city, and perhaps

even “city center.” You’re glad for the signs and that they were accurate enough to get you to the city. But once you’re there, say at Millennium Park in Chicago, they are no longer important. The city itself, with its skyscrapers, parks, museums and lakefront, far exceeds anything those signs could possibly indicate about its true grandeur. And consider, of what further use are those signs? Not much, if any at all. Their job was to get you to the city. Once there, they have no further use—even though you remain grateful for them.

Now imagine someone standing smack-dab in city center and demanding that you show him a sign that pointed the way to Chicago. If he didn’t recognize that he was already in the city, would the sign help? Or suppose he protested that he could not possibly be in Chicago, since he saw no signs on the way that were anything like what surrounded him now. Thinking the city would be much the same as the signs pointing the way, Chicago should be like a huge flat panel, perhaps with huge, fancy letters, and lights illuminating them, spelling out in glorious brilliance the name “CHICAGO.” If that was what he was looking for, how would you answer? Might you be just a little exasperated?

If you actually produced something like he expected, pointing in some direction, would it be of any use? In fact, if he followed the direction of the arrow on even an impressive and imposing sign you produced for him, where would it take him? Toward Chicago? No. When you have arrived at the city center, an arrow pointing in any direction would lead you away from and eventually out of the city. That sign would actually be misleading! But those other signs still standing outside the city would be of useful service once again. They remain permanently helpful to those who have not yet arrived at City Hall. But they have relatively little meaning once you’ve reached your destination.

The theological signs of the Bible, whether to ancient Israel or those recorded in the New Testament regarding Jesus and the early church, function much like this. The signs pointed to the reality, where the promises God made were fulfilled in person. Those signs stand as permanent, even eternal, pointers to the reality. But once you’ve followed their lead and have met the reality—Jesus himself—they have fulfilled their purpose and are no longer needed. They are superseded by the reality. You could never confuse the sign with the far greater reality of what they pointed to.

Perhaps this is why, when asked, Jesus sometimes refused to give another sign. He told them they already had plenty of signs. No sign will help them recognize the reality when it’s standing there in front of them face to face.

## CHRISTIANS AND OLD TESTAMENT LAWS

So when we read that God has given us certain signs forever, this is true. They eternally point to the promised reality. But when you've met the Lord of All Signs, all others, having done their work, can now only have relative value—value relative to the Reality of their Lord.

## **DAYS DON'T MATTER — OR DO THEY?**

By Joseph Tkach

I have encouraged congregations to set aside old covenant customs, in keeping with the example set by Paul, in order to better reach the culture around us. I implied it would be better for us to have worship services on Sundays rather than Saturdays.

Some people asked: “Wait a minute. Didn’t you tell us that days don’t matter? Are you now telling us that they do?”

It’s a legitimate question, so let me explain a little further. The days we meet for worship don’t matter for salvation, but they do matter in practical ways. If you have to work on Sundays, then days matter. If your children have to go to school on Saturdays, then days matter. For most people in our society, days matter in concrete, practical ways, in terms of schedules and convenience.

In terms of pleasing God, days don’t matter. Sunday is not spiritually better than Saturday or Tuesday. But for practical purposes, Tuesday is not a very good day to have our weekly church services. It’s a practical matter, not a spiritual one.

### **Paul’s example**

We are in a culture that expects Christian worship services to be on Sundays. Some churches have services on Saturday evenings, but these are rarely the only service time that is offered. The main worship service is usually on Sunday mornings—even the unchurched know that. When I encouraged Sunday worship services, it was based on Paul’s missionary strategy as described in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22.

When Paul was with Jews, he acted like a Jew and kept Jewish laws. When he was with Gentiles, he did not adhere to Jewish customs and old covenant laws. Did customs matter to Paul? Based on his own testimony, they did. He kept certain customs in one society, but not in another. He was careful to be appropriate to the society he was in.

He adapted his behavior because *the customs mattered to the culture he was in*—and the reason that Paul could adapt his behavior was because he knew that those customs gained neither favor nor disfavor with God. Since God had given him freedom in regard to those customs, he adapted to culture in those matters because he was trying to reach people with the gospel.

Paul lived according to Gentile customs when in Gentile society, so he could save some. If we apply this principle to our situation today, it suggests that most of our worship services ought to be on Sundays—not for spiritual reasons, but for practical reasons. Sunday is the day expected in our society, and usually the day that most people are free to meet. God gives us freedom to adapt our customs to serve the needs of the mission he has given us. He has commanded a mission, but not a day.

We are not requiring that everyone change. Some congregations have practical reasons for meeting on Saturdays. That's OK. But for most congregations, there is a practical reason for meeting on Sundays, and if circumstances permit, we should prefer that day, not because it is spiritually better for us, but because it is practically better for the mission in most segments of Western society. If we want to be successful in our mission, we need to throw off obstacles that confuse people.

Sunday is not a sure-fire formula for attracting new believers. There is no easy formula. The gospel takes work, and it takes time—all the more reason that we need to eliminate as many obstacles as we can. The mission also requires some sacrifice—and for some of us, it means a willingness to rearrange our schedules to better suit the people we hope to reach.

## **Days matter to people**

For some members, days matter a lot. For some, it is because of jobs; for others, it is a desire to reach people; and for a few, it is because they still think that God commands a particular day. We must therefore act in wisdom. We need to think about how we can be more effective in our mission, and for this, days and times matter. I believe that Paul's strategy of adapting to culture where he could is something that could help us in our mission today.

The gospel is already counter-cultural. It advocates humility and submission, not self-reliance. It advocates love, not selfishness. We do not need to make it more different than it already is. Our behavior does not need to imply something that the gospel does not teach.

For example, we do not dress like the Amish, because we do not want to imply that the gospel requires people to avoid color. Amish clothes are not ungodly, but neither are they required. They are permitted, and yet for the sake of the gospel, they are counterproductive. For the sake of the mission, we need to be flexible on the optional so we point people to the essential.

For similar reasons, we do not want to keep obsolete worship commands, because we do not want to imply that these commands are required. For a congregation to meet on Saturday because it is more practical is one thing;

for it to meet on Saturday because it believes it is doing something God prefers is quite another. We cannot endorse a wrong understanding of the gospel. We do not want to see congregations remain in a “Saturday only” configuration for wrong reasons.

The essence of Christianity is not in the days we meet, but in the message of grace. And it is self-contradictory to preach grace while pressuring people to keep one particular day, no matter whether it is Saturday or Sunday. We are not forcing anybody to do anything. All we are saying is that if we want to be more successful in the mission we have been given (and I hope we do), we need to apply the principle Paul has given us.

The gospel says that we should put aside our own interests and consider the needs of others. When it comes to our mission of sharing the gospel, we need to consider the needs of the people we hope to reach.

We do not wait until children show up before we begin to think about having lessons for children during our worship services. We do not wait for it to start raining before we think about repairing the roof. And in the same way, we do not wait until we have new believers before we begin thinking about what day might serve their needs the best.

This is a mission strategy, not a matter of being a “better” Christian. The mission can be done on any day of the week. The mission can be done by a Saturday-meeting congregation. But I believe that the mission will be done more effectively in America through worship services on Sundays—and I believe that this strategy is supported by the apostle Paul. Our mission and our motto is “Living and Sharing the Gospel.” If our church is full of unnecessary customs, that will hinder the gospel.

Paul said, “Though I am free and belong to no one, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (verse 19). Can we apply Paul’s principle in modern society? Though we are free, can we decide to serve others, so that we might win them?

Paul said, “To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law” (verse 21). The law of Christ says we should adapt to serve the needs of others. We need to consider what will help or hinder that mission. When we are in a Gentile society, should we not follow Paul’s example?

## **SHOULD WE MOVE OUR WORSHIP MEETINGS TO SUNDAYS?**

By Joseph Tkach

Jesus commanded us to make disciples. This is one of our core values. Another core value is to meet (as much as reasonably possible) the worship needs of our people. Most of our congregations meet on Sunday. Many in our culture find Sunday more convenient for meeting (especially for families with children involved in school and community programs on Saturday). But for those who meet on Saturdays and are thinking about switching to Sundays, we offer some considerations.

The new covenant does not demand or forbid any particular day for corporate worship. Since no one day is inherently better than another, the denomination does not require all congregations to meet on the same day. It is up to each local community of faith to decide on which day to meet for corporate worship. A number of factors may come up for consideration.

Since a primary purpose of the church is to preach the gospel, which day would be best for attracting new people in the community? Most Christian churches meet on Sunday in the U.S. It is the Christian norm, and therefore is most understandable to the “unchurched” people we would like to bring to Jesus and attract to church. On the other hand, many unchurched people do not have a preference.

In the U.S., many teens and children are involved in school and community projects, sports, etc. on Saturday, thus making it more difficult for these families to attend a Saturday meeting. Also, some of the adults work on Saturday. On the other hand, some may work on Sundays.

We want to serve the worship needs of our members, and some of our members may be unable to meet on Saturday or on Sunday. Some may have religious reasons for preferring Saturday, and some may have religious reasons for preferring Sunday.

Historical records from the first and second centuries show that Gentiles in the early church met for corporate worship on Sunday, perhaps because they saw a “new creation” in the day of Christ’s resurrection. This has been the most common explanation for the origin of worship on Sundays. The New Testament shows that the disciples met at least part of the time on “the first day of the week,” i.e. Sunday, for worship. Churches that have a tradition of meeting on Saturdays usually started that tradition through a legalistic

misunderstanding of what Scripture says.

Meeting facilities may be easier to lease on one day or the other.

We allow congregations to change meeting times, locations and days according to local needs. We encourage each congregation to meet on the day that serves its needs and purpose best. It is our intent to provide, as much as is reasonably possible, for the worship needs of our people — whether that be congregations who want to meet on Saturday, Sunday or, in certain situations, another day or evening of the week.

## **How can a change be done?**

In churches that have switched the day on which they meet, the best transitions have been achieved by the pastor first educating the congregation 1) that Scripture permits corporate worship on any day of the week, 2) that Sunday has been the primary tradition of the Christian church, and 3) that in the specific community and culture, it has various advantages as a day for corporate worship (including, perhaps, evangelism). After ensuring that everyone was informed, the pastor then surveyed the congregation to determine their needs and desires for the day of worship services.

Everyone's reasonable needs (not necessarily desires) should be provided for. Some are unable to meet on one day or the other due to work; others due to conscience. If only a few feel they must either stay with Saturday or move to Sunday, perhaps a house church or other worship opportunity could be provided for the minority.

If the congregation has two roughly equal portions desiring different days, several approaches can be taken: 1) create two congregations (some have done this, but hall rental and other expenses must be taken into account), or 2) give it more time, more discussion and, later, another survey to see if desires have shifted one way or the other.

## **Basic principles to keep in mind**

Can we remain together when members worship on different days? If Christ is in us, we can. This wars against our human nature, but with Christ it is possible — even imperative — to love people who have different opinions and practices on this topic. Let us point out some basic principles:

Paul says that worship days don't matter (Romans 14:5). That applies equally to Saturday as to Sunday. Neither of these days is so important that it should cause anger between members. If we have the "right" day of worship, but the wrong attitude, we gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

In Christ, we are free to meet on any day of the week, any day of the year.

But no matter when that is, we are to preach Christ, not the day. Our worship and our messages must focus on him, not on the day. We do not want anything in our messages to imply that people who observe one day are better or more obedient than those who observe another.

The focus is on Christ. We worship him, and we commemorate salvation in him. We want to lead people to Christ, not to a day of the week.

Old covenant days can be used to worship Christ, just as other days can be. The early church apparently worshiped at the temple on the Sabbath — with no complaint from Paul. He did not criticize the Jewish believers for any deficiencies in their understanding. Paul strongly objected to seeing the old covenant days as requirements for Gentiles, but he seems to have no objection to them as options. Paul felt free to go into the temple, and free to preach on Sunday.

We offer worship services according to the needs and desires of our members. Our desire throughout is 1) that Christ is preached, 2) that no one judges others because of the days they observe, and 3) that we consider the needs of those who do not yet fellowship with us.

Pastors should support and encourage those who wish to meet on either day, and will lead in such a way that Christ is honored, preached and taught. That means that pastors will not be teaching that a particular day is in any way required or expected, or that keeping it is more pleasing to God. Logistics and numbers may require some worship meetings to be held in homes.

It would be inconsistent to preach grace and freedom while forbidding worship on days that have origins that we don't like. Wherever and whenever we gather as God's people, we have an opportunity to preach and worship Christ!

Christ should be our focus. As we draw closer to him, as we become more like him in love, days on a calendar will decrease in significance. The days on the calendar are useful for worship, but they are not our primary goal. Our goal is not to force one day in, or to force another out — our goal is to lead people to Christ, and to let him live within us, to let his attitudes dominate us — attitudes of love, of respect for others, of humility, of being God-focused. Our sense of community, our devotion to fellowship within the church, must be based on these internal truths, not the external matter of considering one day better than another.

Suppose we could forget the past, and just start with Christ first, and his gospel. What are the most important things about Christ, and how do we celebrate those? Perhaps the most important thing about Christ is not days at all, but the manner in which we treat one another. How can we celebrate

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his love for us? How can we keep his greatest commandment, and his second-greatest commandment? How can we preach his message more effectively to the world that needs it? How can we be less concerned about ourselves and more about others?

## PEACE AT ANY PRICE?

By Joseph Tkach

“When I was with the Jews, I acted like a Jew,” Paul said. “When I was with people who thought they were under the law, I acted that way, too, even though I am not really under the law” (1 Corinthians 9:20, my paraphrase).

On the other hand, when Paul was with people who did not have the law (Gentiles), he acted like a Gentile (verse 21). This was part of his evangelistic strategy. What would it mean for Paul (a Jew) to say that he acted like a Gentile? It would not mean idol worship, adultery or sin, but what did it mean?

Both Jews and Gentiles recognized three primary customs that distinguished Jews from Gentiles: circumcision, dietary laws, and the weekly Sabbath. For someone to act like a Gentile, they would eat foods that Jews could not, and they would not observe the Sabbath. (It was not necessary to change their circumcision, but some even tried that.) Paul was not talking about the petty rules that Judean Pharisees were concerned about—he was talking about living like a Gentile.

When Paul was with Jews, he kept the old covenant food laws and weekly and annual Sabbaths. When he was with Gentiles, he did not. He sometimes acted differently from what he believed. Why? So he would “win” the people he was with, so he could help them accept the gospel without distracting them with questions about laws that were not important. He bent over backwards to make it easier for people to accept the gospel.

“To the weak I became weak, to win the weak,” Paul says in verse 22. He acted like he was something he wasn’t, “so that by all possible means I might save some.” He acted like someone weak in the faith—perhaps like someone worried about details of the law. Paul did what they did, kept the rules that they kept.

Paul did his best to avoid distractions and objections, so the gospel would get a fair hearing. He set aside his personal preferences for the sake of the gospel. He was seeking peace, and the price he paid was a little discomfort for himself. He explained his strategy to the Corinthian Christians as an example of how he did not demand his “rights” as an apostle, in order to serve other people (verses 15-19).

## Not always possible

Paul's approach may have been a good evangelistic strategy, but it would not be a good pastoral policy. When the congregation becomes a mixture of both Jews and Gentiles, the pastor cannot behave like them both—a decision must be made. A pastor cannot seek peace at any price, cannot always bend over backwards for people who are weak in the faith. At some point, a pastor must model freedom in Christ, not laws that are no longer valid.

Paul describes one such situation in his letter to the Galatians. In Antioch, Peter was eating with the Gentiles, but when some people from the Jerusalem church came to visit, Peter withdrew and began to eat only with the Jews (Galatians 2:12). Paul rebuked him, because he was “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (verse 14).

Some people might say, Peter was trying to do what Paul did—to act like a Jew when with Jews. But the situation was not quite that simple, because Peter was also with Gentiles. He was not only with people under the law, he was also with people who were not under the law of Moses. In such a situation, what does the law of Christ say? What does the gospel say?

The problem with Peter's behavior is that it sent the wrong signals. It implied that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians should live by different laws. It implied that the Jewish customs were really more proper. It implied that the Gentiles were not really as important to Peter as the Judeans were. Perhaps Peter was trying to hide the fact that he had been living “like a Gentile and not like a Jew” (verse 14).

The gospel says that Jewish believers and Gentile believers are part of the same group, the same family, and they live by the same rules. They are to fellowship with one another not on the basis of Jewish customs, but on the basis of laws appropriate for Gentiles. The gospel says that it was wrong for Peter to change his behavior back to being Jewish.

First-century Jews did not think that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath, and Paul was quite happy when Peter lived like a Gentile. He was right to break the old covenant laws that separated Jews from Gentiles. The gospel says that those laws do not have to be kept—not even Jews have to keep them. The gospel says that salvation, and our status as the people of God, is on the basis of faith, apart from laws that make us different. The gospel says that, although we can sometimes ignore our freedom in Christ for the sake of spreading the gospel, we cannot permanently live as though we did not have that freedom.

When we are in mixed company, we are to live like a Gentile, not give

priority to the old covenant. It would be wrong, especially for a leader, to permanently live as if the weak in faith were right. A leader must model freedom, not just talk about it.

## **Jews surrounded by Gentiles**

Now let's consider how Paul would deal with a Jewish congregation surrounded by a Gentile culture. Perhaps that could have developed in Philippi, for example, where the first people to accept the gospel were Lydia's household (Acts 16:14-15). Lydia was a "worshipper of God," probably a Gentile who had accepted Jewish beliefs. But as more people in Philippi accepted the gospel, the church would have grown from this Jewish core into a mixed congregation.

What would Paul's advice have been? Would he advise the Jews to separate themselves from the Gentiles, so the Jews could maintain their own customs? Certainly not—that was what he rebuked Peter for.

Would he advise the Jews to preach old covenant laws, so everyone would live the same? Not at all! Would he say that since this church started as a Jewish church, it should be forever Jewish, and everyone who wants to join it ought to start keeping Jewish laws? Certainly not!

Rather, Paul would have advised Lydia to follow his own example, and to live like a Gentile in order to win the Gentiles. He would have advised her, and other Jews, to set aside those aspects of the law that interfered with fellowship with Gentiles.

Christ brought peace between Jews and Gentiles not by requiring everyone to live by Jewish customs, but by *abolishing* the rules that separated the two groups (Ephesians 2:14-15). He would have told them to leave such rules behind, in order that Christ's peace might prevail.

## **Modern application**

In light of Paul's instruction, does Jesus want us to distract people away from the gospel with customs that mislead them about what it means to follow Christ?

We are not speaking about virtues like honesty and marital fidelity. We are not referring to humility, service and kindness. These customs might indeed separate us from segments of our culture, but they are part of the gospel message, part of the law of Christ, well documented in the New Testament. But observing the weekly Sabbath and the annual Sabbaths are not part of the gospel message.

Do we want the message of grace to be confused with laws that the gospel

specifically sets aside? Do we want our customs to give the wrong impression about the gospel, rather than to point people to Christ?

For some congregations, Saturday is the best day to meet, the best day to rent some space, or the best day for a pastor to visit the area. But in our hearts and actions we need to follow the example of Paul, who lived like a Gentile when he was in a Gentile culture, for the sake of the gospel rather than his own comfort.

We need to set aside the Jewish customs (unless you are in a Jewish culture)! And like Paul exhorted Peter, let those who are used to these Jewish customs not separate themselves from believers who live like Gentiles.

## **Annual observances**

It is important for us to leave behind behaviors that imply disapproval of Christian freedom and distract people from the heart of the gospel. For example, no one is puzzled that we encourage honesty and marital fidelity; these are consistent with the gospel. But if we say that people have to avoid all gainful employment on Saturdays, that will make newcomers wonder whether they have to do that to be a Christian. It confuses the gospel with something else. It is easy enough to answer the question, but Paul's point is that people shouldn't have to ask such a question. They shouldn't see a confusing example like that.

As another example, let's think of a person who refuses to take the Lord's Supper except once a year, on a specific day of the Jewish calendar. The bread is supposed to represent our unity in Christ ("We, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf"—1 Corinthians 10:17). What kind of message does it send when somebody refuses to partake of the bread? It implies some kind of division, perhaps a lack of faith; at least one foot stuck in the past. It is like Peter, pulling back from the Gentiles in order to revert to Jewish customs.

When people take their children out of school to attend an old covenant festival, does that support the gospel, or distract people from it? Does it cause unnecessary questions about the Christian faith? Our festivals are Christ-centered and gospel-focused, but what is the value of remaining tied to the dates of old covenant festivals? Does this choice of dates uphold the gospel, or does it uphold a familiar and comfortable custom that implies requirements that are in fact not part of the gospel?

Paul did not say that Jewish customs are wrong in themselves. It is fitting to keep them when we are in a Jewish culture, but when we live in a Gentile culture and want to bring the gospel to Gentiles, we should live more like the

culture we are in. We should not adopt their sins; but we should shed peculiarities from our past that distract people away from Christ.

When Paul preached tolerance for other customs, he did not encourage anyone to say, “You should accommodate *my* preferences and tolerate my opinions.” Rather, he urges people to say, “I will give up my preferences in order to help the gospel get a better hearing.”

When it is simply a matter of relations within the church, we are to be tolerant of different opinions and practices (Romans 14:1). But when we want to make the gospel attractive to a Gentile society, we need to eliminate customs that confuse the gospel with the old covenant law.

## **SABBATH AND SUNDAY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY**

A series by Michael Morrison

### **Introduction**

The earliest Christians were Torah-observant Jews in Jerusalem, who attended Jewish festivals and observed Temple rituals (Acts 2:1; 3:1; 15:5; 21:20). They observed the seventh-day Sabbath, too. However, in the second, third and fourth centuries we find that almost all Christians observed Sunday — sometimes as a Sabbath-like day of worship meetings and rest, sometimes as a day for worship and work, sometimes in addition to the Sabbath and sometimes instead of the Sabbath.

How did the change in worship day occur? This historical question is of interest to all Christians, but it is especially relevant for those who observe either the seventh day or Sunday as a Sabbath.

This paper examines the written evidence we have for the first and second centuries. It defends this thesis: Although the New Testament does not command a particular day for Christian worship, the earliest records we have show the vast majority of the Christian church rejecting the Sabbath and assembling on Sunday. Reasons for this development will be explored.

### **The first century**

To begin our research into first-century Christian worship days, we look first at the New Testament. The Gospels report that Jesus had conflicts with Jewish leaders several times over Sabbath issues. Jesus rejected the restrictive traditions of the elders. He allowed his disciples to pluck grain, he healed, he taught, and he told a man to carry his sleeping mat (Matthew 12:1-12; Luke 14:1-6; John 5:1-18).<sup>1</sup> Jesus noted that priests worked on the Sabbath, that animals could be rescued or taken to water, and circumcisions could be performed (Matthew 12:5-6, 11; Luke 13:15; John 7:22). Jesus claimed to have authority over the Sabbath, to set people free on the Sabbath, and to work on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:12; Luke 13:16; John 5:17).

Jesus was born under the law and lived under the old covenant requirements (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 4:15). Since he did not sin, we conclude that he did not break the Sabbath. His activities broke Pharisaic rules, but not

the law of God. Early Christian writers did not claim that Jesus broke the Sabbath.<sup>2</sup>

The first disciples of Jesus were pious Jews in a Jewish culture. They apparently kept the Sabbath according to contemporary Jewish customs. Luke tells us that some female disciples rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment (Luke 23:56), and that the apostles taught in the temple courts (Acts 3:1; 5:12, 25). Paul customarily preached in synagogues on the Sabbaths (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2; 18:1-11).

However, we are also told that the disciples met daily (Acts 2:46), and that Paul preached daily (Acts 19:9). There is no record that Paul taught his converts to keep the Sabbath. He taught that Christians should not be judged about special days (Colossians 2:16), and he asked the Roman Christians to tolerate differences in worship practices having to do with foods and days (Romans 14:5).<sup>3</sup>

The New Testament gives us examples of Christians meeting on the first day of the week. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples on two Sundays (John 20:19, 26), but there is no mention that he gave any command for a weekly commemoration of the resurrection. Paul's traveling party once stayed seven days at Troas, and met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), but this was an unusual farewell meeting, not necessarily indicative of normal practice. Paul told the Corinthians to set aside an offering on the first day of each week (1 Corinthians 16:2), but this may also have been an exceptional practice rather than a normative one. John had a vision on "the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10), but some debate whether this is a reference to Sunday. Moreover, the verse does not say that this was a day on which Christians were meeting, or should meet.

None of the texts give any command for Christians to meet on or to avoid meeting on any particular day. None of the texts can be used to prove that Christians regularly met on any particular day of the week. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that some Jewish Christians, especially in Judea, continued to observe the Sabbath. This is shown in three ways:

1) Paul was accused of teaching Diasporan Jews to turn away from Moses (Acts 21:21), which implies that Judean Christians had *not* turned away from Moses. If Christians taught that the Sabbath should no longer be observed by Jews, the Jewish leaders would have criticized them for leading *Jews* away from Moses.

2) "Another indirect indication of the survival of Sabbath observance among... Jewish Christians is provided by the curse of the Christians (*Birkath-ha-Minin*), which the rabbinical authorities introduced (A.D. 80-90) in the

daily prayer.”<sup>4</sup> This curse was supposedly designed to identify Christians in the synagogues. Anyone who refused to pronounce the curse was suspected of being a Christian. This implies that at least some Jewish Christians were attending synagogues and may have been keeping Jewish customs such as the Sabbath.

3) Ebionites and Nazarenes, groups who claimed descent from the Jerusalem church, were keeping the Sabbath in the fourth century,<sup>5</sup> and their observance of Jewish laws goes back at least to the second century<sup>6</sup> and probably back to apostolic times.

The above evidence shows that it is unlikely that there was any apostolic authority for requiring a complete transfer of the Sabbath command to Sunday. Early Sunday observers did not claim any such authority.<sup>7</sup> The earliest Jewish Christians kept the Sabbath.

However, this conclusion is limited in two ways. First, it does not address Gentiles. Acts 21:21 implies that if Paul had taught Gentiles to ignore the laws of Moses, Jewish believers would not have cared. Acts 21:25 indicates that the Jerusalem decree (Acts 15:29) had already been enough. Was the Sabbath considered to be part of the law of Moses not required for Gentiles? The rabbis did not think that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath.<sup>8</sup> Although most of this rabbinic evidence comes from the fourth century, it likely reflects first-century attitudes as well.

Second, this says nothing about the possibility of a day *in addition to* the Sabbath. After the Christians heard the Law and the Prophets read in the synagogues, they would want to meet separately to discuss the Christian interpretation of the scriptures they had heard. They would also want to break bread together, encourage one another, and worship Jesus Christ. These Christian meetings could have been held on Saturday evenings, or on Sundays.<sup>9</sup> There is no direct evidence for either meeting time, which can be explained by the fact that neither practice would have created controversy. It would be possible to observe both Sabbath and Sunday (as fourth-century churches did).

Bacchiocchi says, “If Paul had been the promoter of Sunday observance, he would have met and answered objections from a Judaizing opposition,”<sup>10</sup> but his conclusion is too sweeping. Paul *could* have (whether he did or not is another question) promoted Sunday observance if it were in addition to rather than a replacement for the Sabbath. And he *could* have promoted Sunday observance among Gentiles, even to the exclusion of the Sabbath, without objections from orthodox Jews. Moreover, Colossians 2:16 and Galatians 4:10 *may* be Paul’s answer to Judaizers’ teachings about the Sabbath.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> These scriptures are addressed in more detail above, in “What Do the Scriptures Say About the Sabbath?”

<sup>2</sup> “Even Gentile writers of the second and third centuries never cite Jesus as a precedent for breaking the Sabbath commandment” (R.J. Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church,” chapter 9 in D.A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 257. “Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4:8:2; Tertullian, *Adv. Mar.* 4:12, are the earliest full discussions of the question of Jesus’ Sabbath conflicts. Both are concerned to argue, against Marcion, that Jesus’ Sabbath healings fulfilled rather than violated the Sabbath laws” (p. 289, n. 51).

<sup>3</sup> In Galatians 4:10, Paul warned his Gentile converts against observing special days and seasons, apparently meaning Sabbaths and festivals. These scriptures are addressed in more detail in “What Do the Scriptures Say About the Sabbath?” If any first-century document clearly commanded Sabbath observance, the Sunday-observing churches of the second and third centuries would probably not consider it canonical. This is indirect evidence that the New Testament does not command Sabbath observance (cf. Willard M. Swartley, *Sabbath, Slavery, War and Women* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1983), 92).

<sup>4</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, “The Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity,” chap. 7 in Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), 135.

<sup>5</sup> Bacchiocchi writes:

Eusebius...and Epiphanius...inform us that the church of Jerusalem up to the siege of Hadrian (A.D. 135) was composed of, and administered by, converted Jews. Eusebius describes a group of them, known as Ebionites, as being “zealous to insist on the literal observance of the Law.” Epiphanius adds that those Jewish Christians who fled from Jerusalem became known as the sect of the Nazarenes, who “fulfil till now Jewish rites as circumcision, the Sabbath, and others.” The fact that the Nazarenes, who represent “the very direct descendants of the primitive community” of Jerusalem, retained Sabbathkeeping as one of their distinguishing marks for centuries after the destruction of Jerusalem shows persuasively that this was the original day of worship of the Jerusalem church. (ibid.)

Eusebius reports that the Ebionites, in addition to keeping the Sabbath, also kept the Lord’s Day with other Christians: “like us, they celebrated the Lord’s Day as a memorial of the resurrection of the Saviour” (*Ecclesiastical History*, III 27.5).

<sup>6</sup> “They use the Gospel according to Matthew only, and repudiate the Apostle Paul, maintaining that he was an apostate from the law.... They practise circumcision, persevere in the observance of those customs which are enjoined by

the law, and are...Judaic in their style of life” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I 26.2 [Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1885, 1987), vol. 1, 352]). Eusebius reports that some of them denied the virgin birth and divinity of Jesus.

<sup>7</sup> “It is not very likely that our historical investigation will yield an authority for Sunday worship that the early church itself did not claim” (Bauckham, 233).

<sup>8</sup> “The children of Noah...were given seven Laws only, the observance of the Sabbath not being among them” (*Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:21 [Soncino ed., 23], as quoted in C. Mervyn Maxwell and Gerard Damsteegt, eds., *Source Book for the History of Sabbath and Sunday* [Berrien Springs, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1992], 75).

The Noachian laws are also listed in *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 16:6 (Soncino ed., 131), *Sanbedrin* 56 a, b; and *Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:2(5) (Soncino ed. 26-7) (*ibid.*, 74). Gentiles could be considered righteous if they observed these laws, which did not include the Sabbath. Nor did they include restrictions about pork. Rabbi Judah could say that there was a time for the “sons of Jacob when unclean beasts were still permitted to them” (*Hullin* 7:6, as quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, 74).

The rabbis did not think that the Sabbath had been given to Gentiles: “Why does it say, ‘The Lord hath given *you*’ (Exodus 16:29)? *To you* hath he given it [the Sabbath], but not to the heathen. It is in virtue of this that the Sages stated [*Sanh.* 56b] that if some of the heathen observed the Sabbath, then not only do they not receive any reward [but they are even considered to be transgressing]” (*Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 25:11 [Soncino ed., 314], quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, 74).

A non-Jew who observes the Sabbath whilst he is uncircumcised incurs liability for the punishment of death. Why? Because non-Jews were not commanded concerning it.... The Sabbath is a reunion between Israel and God, as it is said, ‘It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel’ (Exodus 31:17); therefore any non-Jew who, being uncircumcised, thrusts himself between them incurs the penalty of death.... The Gentiles have not been commanded to observe the Sabbath. (*Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:21 [Soncino ed., 23-4], quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, 75)

Further evidence of the antiquity of this rabbinic understanding comes from the second-century B.C. book of *Jubilees*: “The Creator of all blessed it, but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the sabbath thereon with the sole exception of Israel. He granted to them alone that they might eat and drink and keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth” (*Jubilees* 2:31, James Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, [New York: Doubleday, 1985], vol. 2, 58).

<sup>9</sup> Bauckham writes about Jewish Christians in Judea

(and probably many in the Diaspora too) continued to rest on the Sabbath and attend the temple or synagogue services, but they also met (as

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Bacchiocchi himself points out) as Christians in private houses to hear teaching from the apostles and to break bread together.... Their specifically Christian meetings had to occur at some time, and it is even arguable that precisely because they remained faithful in their attendance at temple and synagogue services on the Sabbath some other time had to be found for Christian worship. (Bauckham, 237)

<sup>10</sup> Bacchiocchi, 132.

## SABBATH AND SUNDAY IN THE EARLY SECOND CENTURY

### Early second century

Our earliest evidence from the second century comes from the letter of Pliny to Trajan, describing the practice of Christians: “They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light.”<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that the Christians met before sunrise (perhaps to avoid persecution and to allow work during daylight hours), but unfortunately Pliny does not tell us which day the Christians met on, or even whether it was weekly.

More substantial evidence is given by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, in letters he wrote c. 115. He warned Christians to reject those who “preach the Jewish law.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, “If we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace.... It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize.”<sup>3</sup>

More specifically about the Sabbath, Ignatius praised some who were “no longer observing the Sabbath.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, Ignatius did not observe the Sabbath. It is debated, however, whom he is praising. In the previous section, he was talking about the Old Testament prophets, but it does not seem likely that he would accuse them of abandoning the Sabbath, even though some patristic writers cited the prophets’ criticisms of Sabbath-keeping (e.g., Isaiah 1:13). More likely, he is praising Jewish Christians who had given up the Sabbath — “those who were brought up in the ancient order of things.”<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that all Jewish Christians had abandoned the Sabbath, but some had, and Ignatius was praising them to the Magnesians. The lack of extensive argumentation indicates that the Magnesians, like Ignatius, did not observe the Sabbath, but that Judaizers existed who advocated the Sabbath.

Furthermore, Ignatius praised some people for “living in the observance of the Lord’s Day.”<sup>6</sup> The meaning here is debated, since “day” is not in the Greek, and a textual variant exists. Space does not permit a detailed discussion,<sup>7</sup> but Ignatius’ attitude toward the Sabbath makes it likely that he was observing a different day, in a different way.

Our next evidence comes from the Epistle of Barnabas, which was probably written from Alexandria, perhaps as early as A.D. 70<sup>8</sup> or as late as 132.<sup>9</sup> He writes against Jewish sacrifices, fasts, circumcision and other laws. Those laws were types prefiguring Christ. He gives a figurative meaning for

unclean meat laws, and then a figurative meaning for the Sabbath: “Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, ‘He finished in six days.’ This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with him a thousand years.”<sup>10</sup>

Barnabas cites Isaiah 1:13-14 as criticism of the Sabbath, concluding, “Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world.”<sup>11</sup> He also mentions our present inability to keep any day holy by being “pure in heart,” concluding that we will be unable to keep the Sabbath holy until the eschatological new world, after we have been made completely holy.

In this passage, Barnabas does these four things, which will be repeated by later authors: 1) He interprets the Sabbath in terms of moral holiness, not rest, 2) He associates the Sabbath with the eschatological age, 3) He associates the new age with the eighth day — which he then associates with the eighth day of the week: “Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.”<sup>12</sup> 4) He associates the Christian day of worship with the resurrection of Jesus.

Barnabas, with antagonism against Jewish laws, transferred the Sabbath command entirely into the future and, since the future age was called not only the seventh but also the eighth, could view Sunday-keeping as likewise picturing the future. Thus first-day observance was only indirectly related to Sabbath observance.

## Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr gives us evidence from yet another location: Rome, c. 150. His comments probably reflect Christian custom in other cities, too, such as Ephesus, where he lived for a while.<sup>13</sup>

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read. . . . Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.<sup>14</sup>

Justin is clear: It was the widespread practice of Christians to observe Sunday.<sup>15</sup> “Perhaps there were some Gentile Christians who kept the Sabbath. . . . but if so, they found no spokesman whose writings survive.”<sup>16</sup> Maxwell concludes:

Many Christians were already honoring Sunday near the beginning of the second century.... Evidence is very strong...that many if not most Christians had given up the Sabbath as early as A.D. 130.... Just as Sunday observance came into practice by early in the second century, so among Gentile Christians Sabbath observance went out of practice by early in the second century.<sup>17</sup>

But this was not a replacement for the Sabbath:

Sunday was observed only as a day for worship, not as a Sabbath on which to refrain from work.... Sunday was not at first celebrated as a 'Sabbath.'... It was not observed in obedience to the fourth commandment.... Sunday was regarded by Christians generally not as a day of rest or holiness but as a day of joy.<sup>18</sup>

Justin gives a lengthy explanation of his understanding of the Sabbath in his debate with the Jewish teacher Trypho, who explained the Jewish way to be accepted by God:

First be circumcised, then observe what ordinances have been enacted with respect to the Sabbath, and the feasts, and the new moons of God; and, in a word, do all things which have been written in the law; and then perhaps you shall obtain mercy from God.... To keep the Sabbath, to be circumcised, to observe months, and to be washed if you touch anything prohibited by Moses, or after sexual intercourse.<sup>19</sup>

Trypho criticized the Christians:

You, professing to be pious, and supposing yourselves better than others, are not in any particular separated from them, and do not alter your mode of living from other nations, in that you observe no festivals or sabbaths and do not have the rite of circumcision.... Yet you expect to obtain some good thing from God, while you do not obey His commandments. Have you not read, that that soul shall be cut off from his people who shall not have been circumcised on the eighth day?<sup>20</sup>

And Justin replied that Christians were indeed obedient to God, even when obedience was extremely painful:

We too would observe the fleshly circumcision, and the Sabbaths, and in short all the feasts, if we did not know for what reason they

were enjoined you, — namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts. For if we patiently endure all things contrived against us by wicked men...even as the new Lawgiver commanded us: how is it, Trypho, that we would not observe those rites which do not harm us, — I speak of fleshly circumcision, and Sabbaths and feasts?<sup>21</sup>

Justin explained the reason Christians ignored the Jewish laws:

We live not after the law, and are not circumcised in the flesh as your forefathers were, and do not observe sabbaths as you do.... An eternal and final law — namely, Christ — has been given to us.... He is the new law, and the new covenant.... The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you.... If there is any perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so; if any adulterer, let him repent; then he has kept the sweet and true sabbaths of God.<sup>22</sup>

In Justin's view, the Sabbath command was an admonition to morality, and Christians, by behaving morally on every day, were in perpetual obedience to the purpose of the Sabbath.

Justin repeatedly said that the patriarchs Abel, Enoch, Lot, Noah and Melchizedek, "though they kept no Sabbaths, were pleasing to God.... For if there was no need of circumcision before Abraham, or of the observance of Sabbaths, of feasts and sacrifices, before Moses; no more need is there of them now."<sup>23</sup> Justin argued that, since Sabbaths and sacrifices and feasts began with Moses, then they ended with Christ, who was the new covenant.<sup>24</sup>

Not only do Gentiles not have to keep the Sabbath, Justin concluded that "the just men who are descended from Jacob" do not have too, either.<sup>25</sup> Trypho asked, Could a Christian keep the Sabbath if he wished to? Justin knew of some Jewish Christians who kept the Sabbath and replied, Yes, as long as he doesn't try to force other Christians to keep the law of Moses.<sup>26</sup>

Justin explained some typology between Old Testament rituals and Christian significance. Among these were a connection between circumcision and Sunday:

The command of circumcision, again bidding [them] always circumcise the children on the eighth day, was a type of the true circumcision, by which we are circumcised from deceit and iniquity through Him who rose from the dead on the first day after the

Sabbath, our Lord Jesus Christ. For the first day after the Sabbath, remaining the first of all the days, is called, however, the eighth.<sup>27</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96, Loeb 2:401-407, quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, 58.

<sup>2</sup> *To the Philadelphians* 6:1; ANF 1:82. The Ante-Nicene Fathers prints two versions of Ignatius' letters. I have quoted the shorter version. The longer version was apparently created in the fourth century.

<sup>3</sup> *To the Magnesians* 8, 10; ANF 1:62-3.

<sup>4</sup> *To the Magnesians* 9; ANF 1:62.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> R.J. Bauckham argues that "day" was not in the Greek text because *kuriakē* had already become a technical term for a day. He cautiously favors a reference to Sunday. Although *kuriakē* could have been a reference to Easter, it is not likely that a technical term would switch without notice from an annual festival to a weekly one, and *kuriakē* is clearly used for Sunday not many years after Ignatius. ("The Lord's Day," chap. 8 in Carson, *op. cit.*, 228-231).

<sup>8</sup> "Barnabas, Epistle of," in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1983), 134.

<sup>9</sup> Maxwell and Damsteegt, 60, and ANF 1:135.

<sup>10</sup> *Epistle of Barnabas* 15; ANF 1:146.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; ANF 1:147.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> His "assertion that all Christians meet on Sunday should be understood as coming from a man who had traveled widely and who was attempting to speak to the government on behalf of all Christians" (Maxwell and Damsteegt, 64); cf. ANF 1:160. Justin's evidence agrees with Ignatius of Antioch and Barnabas of Alexandria, showing that Sunday observance was practiced throughout the Roman Empire.

<sup>14</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 67; ANF 1:186.

<sup>15</sup> Additional evidence of the near-universality of Sunday comes from:

- Aristides of Athens (c. 160), who criticized Jewish Sabbaths (Bauckham, 267, citing *Apol.* 14).
- Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (c. 180), when quoting the Ten Commandments, omitted the Sabbath in *Apology to Autolytus* 3.9 (ANF 2:114).
- The Didache 14 (c. 180) instructed Christians to meet and offer the Eucharist "on the Lord's Day of the Lord" (Maxwell and Damsteegt, 108,

and Bauckham, 228.

- The *Epistle to Diognetus* (late second century?) criticizes Jews’ “superstitions about sabbaths” and other practices (Bauckham, 267)
- Hegesippus, a Judean-born Jew, traveled through many cities on his way to Rome (c. 180) and “found the same doctrine among them all” (Eusebius, *Church History* 4.19-22; Maxwell and Damsteegt, 85).
- Clement of Alexandria (c. 190) equated the Lord’s day and the eighth day in *Miscellanies* 5:14 (ANF 2:469).

<sup>16</sup> Bauckham, 269. Some might argue that pro-Sabbath documents would have been destroyed by the later church. But numerous pro-Sabbath documents survive from the fourth century. There is no evidence that the church tried to suppress the evidence.

<sup>17</sup> Maxwell, *op. cit.*, 136, 142. He writes:

What do we mean by “Sabbath keeping”?... A person must set aside the entire day as sacred from sundown to sundown, refraining from all secular work.... If we demand evidence for this kind of true Sabbath-keeping.... we have to say categorically that there is no evidence for any of it in the literature which has survived from the second and third centuries. This is not to say that no Christians anywhere did in fact keep the Sabbath.... we believe indeed that some did. It is to say, however, that we have no documentary evidence that any did so. (pp. 153-4)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 137, 139. Strand writes, “Sunday was not considered a substitute for the Sabbath.... When the Christian weekly Sunday first emerged, it continued to be a day of work, although it included a worship service” (*op. cit.*, 324, 330). As further evidence that Sunday was not a replacement for the Sabbath, Bauckham notes, “Few second-century writers compare and contrast the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday. Derogatory discussions of the Jewish Sabbath do not usually refer to the Christian Sunday. If Sunday were a recent substitute for the Jewish Sabbath, we should expect far more discussion of the superiority of Sunday to the Sabbath” (*op. cit.*, 271). Bauckham cites evidence from Tertullian, Jerome and others that Sunday was not considered a rest day (p. 286).

<sup>19</sup> Justin, *Dialogue With Trypho* 8, 46; ANF 1:198-9, 217. It is interesting that Trypho specified that one must be circumcised before keeping the Sabbath and other laws (cf. Ac 15:5). The prominence of new moons is also interesting (cf. Col 2:16).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10; ANF 1:199.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 18; ANF 1:203.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-12; ANF 1:199-200.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 23; ANF 1:204, 206. In section 46 (ANF 1:218), Trypho agreed that the patriarchs did not keep the Sabbath; this harmonizes with the rabbinic views in note 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 43; ANF 1:216.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26; ANF 1:207.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 47; ANF 1:218.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 41; ANF 1:215. Justin's argument seems to presuppose that Trypho knew that Christians observed the eighth day, i.e., Sunday.

## **SABBATH AND SUNDAY IN THE WRITINGS OF IRENAEUS**

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the last half of the second century, also gives us lengthy comments on the Sabbath, and his views probably reflect those of Asia Minor, since that is where he was from. He had also been in Rome and may have been influenced by Justin Martyr. Irenaeus, commenting on the grainfield incident (Matthew 12), notes that Jesus did not break the Sabbath, but Irenaeus gives a rationale that applies to Christians, too:

The Lord...did not make void, but fulfilled the law, by performing the offices of the high priest...justifying His disciples by the words of the law, and pointing out that it was lawful for the priests to act freely [Mt 12:5]. For David had been appointed a priest by God, although Saul still persecuted him. For all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank. And all the apostles of the Lord are priests.<sup>1</sup>

The implication is that, since all believers are priests, and priests are free to work on the Sabbath serving God, then Christians are free to work on the Sabbath. Regardless of the validity of Justin's reasoning, it is evident that he did not believe that Christians had to keep the Sabbath. Just as circumcision was symbolic, he says, the Sabbath command was, too, typifying both morality and eschatology:

The Sabbaths taught that we should continue day by day in God's service...ministering continually to our faith, and persevering in it, and abstaining from all avarice, and not acquiring or possessing treasures upon earth. Moreover, the Sabbath of God, that is, the kingdom, was, as it were, indicated by created things; in which [kingdom], the man who shall have persevered in serving God shall, in a state of rest, partake of God's table.<sup>2</sup>

Irenaeus, like Justin, said that the patriarchs before Moses did not keep the Sabbath.<sup>3</sup> But he also said that they kept the Decalogue and that Christians also had to!<sup>4</sup> This discrepancy can be explained in two ways. Bauckham suggests that Irenaeus used the term "Decalogue" loosely, as synonymous with the natural law, as suggested in 4.16.3.<sup>5</sup> Another possibility, which I prefer, is that Irenaeus considered a moral person to be *de facto* keeping the Sabbath command, as suggested in 4.16.1 and in another work: "Nor will he be commanded to leave idle one day of rest, who is constantly keeping sabbath, that is, giving homage to God in the temple of God, which

is man's body, and at all times doing the works of justice."<sup>6</sup>

As another item of evidence probably from the second century, let us consider the Gospel of Thomas 27: "If you do not fast as regards the world, you will not find the kingdom. If you do not observe the Sabbath as a Sabbath, you will not see the father."<sup>7</sup> The meaning here is debatable, since Gnostics often gave words unusual meanings. Everything needed an "interpretation."<sup>8</sup> This can be seen in Thomas 27. Fasting "as regards the world" does not mean ordinary fasting, but avoiding worldly sins. Similarly, it was not sufficient to say, "observe the Sabbath." The words "as a Sabbath" may suggest an esoteric meaning, such as cessation of sin.<sup>9</sup>

Tertullian wrote in both the second century and in the third. Space does not permit a detailed evaluation of his works, nor is it necessary, since he agrees completely with Ignatius, Barnabas, Justin and Irenaeus. He rejected the literal Sabbath,<sup>10</sup> said that the Patriarchs did not observe it,<sup>11</sup> interpreted it in terms of morals<sup>12</sup> and worshipped on Sunday.<sup>13</sup> He gives yet more evidence that second-century Christians had abandoned the Sabbath and observed Sunday as the day for Christian worship.

## The Lord's day

Almost all second-century Christians observed Sunday as a day of worship (not a day of required rest), rather than the Sabbath.<sup>14</sup> No matter what the original reason(s) may have been for meeting on the first day of the week, Christians could have easily seen a biblical significance to that day: It was the day on which the risen Lord appeared to the disciples.<sup>15</sup> Of all the days of the week, only the first and the seventh were ever considered, and Sunday was quickly understood as the day for Christian worship.

Although a few Christians observed the Sabbath, Sunday was more distinctively Christian. It became the day on which believers worshiped the Lord, and the day became known in the second century as "the Lord's day [*kuriakē hēmera*]."<sup>16</sup> The term was so well known that the word for "day" became unnecessary — if a Christian wrote about the *kuriakē*, readers would understand that Sunday was meant. This term therefore gives additional evidence that Sunday was the Christian day of worship in the second century.<sup>17</sup> Let us survey the evidence for this term.

In the late first century, John used *kuriakē hēmera* in Revelation 1:10, but the meaning there is debated. In the early second century, Ignatius used *kuriakē* alone, and textual variants cause the meaning to be debatable.<sup>18</sup> The Gospel of Peter 35 and 50 (middle second century) used *kuriakē* to designate the day of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>19</sup> Eusebius reports that Dionysius of Corinth (c. 170) wrote, "Today we have kept the Lord's holy day [*kuriakē hagia hēmera*], on which we have read your letter."<sup>20</sup> The Acts of Peter (last half of the

second century) “clearly identifies *dies dominica* (‘the Lord’s Day’) with ‘the next day after the Sabbath,’ and the Acts of Paul [also last half of the second century] represents the apostle as praying ‘on the sabbath as the Lord’s Day [*kuriakē* alone] drew near”<sup>21</sup> — both clearly referring to Sunday. Didache 14, which may date from the second half of the second century, referred to “the Lord’s [day] of the Lord [*kuriakē de kurion*].”<sup>22</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (c. 190) also gives clear evidence that *kuriakē* meant the eighth day, Sunday,<sup>23</sup> and he spoke of “keeping” the Lord’s day.<sup>24</sup> He quoted a Valentinian Gnostic who equated the *kuriakē* with the ogdoad, the eighth heaven.<sup>25</sup> “The same identification of *kuriakē*, the eighth day, with the ogdoad, the eighth heaven, is found in the antignostic Epistula Apostolorum [also second century].”<sup>26</sup>

In summary, evidence for the use of “Lord’s day” is clear for the latter half of the second century, but it is less clear for the first half. The terminology, however, is a secondary issue. The actual day observed by Christians is clear: Throughout the second century, all written evidence shows Christians rejecting the literal Sabbath and observing Sunday as the day for Christian worship.<sup>27</sup> Even in the early second century, Sunday-keeping was the norm throughout Christendom (except for Jewish sects) — with no trace of controversy or any evidence that the custom was a recent innovation. The church that began as a Sabbath-keeping group became a Sunday-keeping group that rejected literal Sabbath-keeping.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.8.2-3; ANF 1:471.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 4.16.1; ANF 1:481. He called the future kingdom “the seventh day...the true Sabbath of the righteous” in 5.33.2 (ANF 1:562).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4.16.2; ANF 1:481.

<sup>4</sup> “If any one does not observe [the Decalogue], he has no salvation” (4.15.1; ANF 1:479). “The righteous fathers had the meaning of the Decalogue written in their hearts and souls, that is, they loved the God who made them, and did no injury to their neighbor. There was therefore no occasion that they should be cautioned by prohibitory mandates, because they had the righteousness of the law in themselves” (4.16.3; ANF 1:481).

<sup>5</sup> “Extant example of early Christian paraenesis based on the Decalogue show that it was used with considerable selectiveness and flexibility, and normally with reference only to the second table.... The Decalogue is a less precise term than we expect it to be. It may be that Irenaeus and Ptolemaeus were so used to the flexible and selective use of the Decalogue in Christian paraenesis that the term suggested to them not so much ten individual commandments to be mentally listed, but simply the moral law” (Bauckham, 267-9).

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 96 (Joseph Smith, trans. Ancient Christian Writers [Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1952], vol. 16, 105). This passage in *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* illustrates Irenaeus' understanding of the law:

He does not wish those who are to be redeemed to be brought again under the Mosaic legislation — for the law has been fulfilled by Christ — but to go free in newness by the Word, through faith and love towards the Son of God.... We have no need of the law as pedagogue.... For no more shall the law say: “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” to him who has not even conceived the desire of another man’s wife; or “thou shalt not kill,” to him who has put away from himself all anger and enmity.... Nor will it demand tithes of him who has vowed to God all his possessions, and who leaves father and mother and all his kindred, and follows the Word of God. Nor will he be commanded to leave idle one day of rest, who is constantly keeping sabbath, that is giving homage to God in the temple of God, which is man’s body, and at all times doing the works of justice. (89, 95-96; ACW 16:103, 105)

The point is that if people do not lust, they do not need a command about adultery because they are already obeying it. Likewise, in Irenaeus' thought, if people are always acting justly, they do not need a command about the Sabbath, because they are always obeying it.

<sup>7</sup> James Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 129.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas 1; Robinson, 126.

<sup>9</sup> “The metaphorical sense of the logion in its surviving version depends entirely on the words *ton kosmou* [as regards the world].... By means of this emendation an originally literal requirement to keep the Jewish Sabbath has become a metaphorical command to keep some form of spiritual Sabbath” (Bauckham, 265).

<sup>10</sup> *Apology* 21; ANF 3:36 and *Against Marcion* 1:20; 5:19; ANF 3:285, 471.

<sup>11</sup> *An Answer to the Jews* 2; ANF 3:153.

<sup>12</sup> *An Answer to the Jews* 4; ANF 3:155.

<sup>13</sup> *Apology* 16; ANF 3:31; and *On Idolatry* 14; ANF 3:70.

<sup>14</sup> The Ebionites and Nazarenes were the primary exceptions. But they were heterodox — they rejected Jesus' virgin birth and the apostle Paul, and they required circumcision and other laws of Moses. The New Testament shows the early church fighting on two broad fronts: libertine antinomianism on one side and legalistic Judaizing on the other. In the second century, these groups are represented by Gnostics on the libertine side, and Ebionites on the Judaistic side. The Ebionites were spiritual, if not genetic, descendants of the Pharisee Christians who wanted Gentile believers to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:5). The Sunday-keeping majority cannot be called libertine. If anything, they tended to be strict.

<sup>15</sup> Bauckham writes: “Whether the choice of Sunday was originally a matter of

mere convenience or whether it was initially chosen as the day of the Resurrection, there can be no doubt that it was soon associated with the Resurrection, and only this can really account for the fact that worship on Sunday acquired normative status throughout the Christian world” (p. 240).

<sup>16</sup> The genitive form, “day of the Lord [*hēmera tou kurion*],” could not be used because it already had a different technical meaning in the Septuagint (cf. Bauckham, 225).

<sup>17</sup> “Another evidence of the early observance of Sunday is the fact that Christians frequently referred to it as the Lord’s day during the second century.... The designation ‘eighth day’ was very popular among Christians in the second and third centuries; however, the most common Christian term for Sunday was ‘Lord’s day.’ The term ‘Lord’s day’ was in wide use by the end of the second century and may also have been in use near the beginning of it” (Maxwell, 139).

<sup>18</sup> Neither Barnabas nor Justin use the term Lord’s day, “but they use instead the designations ‘eighth day’ and ‘Sunday’ for the first day of the week.... Their specific Sunday statements are in [apologetic] contexts that would preclude their use of this term even if they were acquainted with it” (Strand, 347).

<sup>19</sup> Bauckham, as with other texts, is cautious: “It is clear that *kuriakē* is already an accepted technical term and refers to a day, but the nature of the context makes impossible a final decision between Sunday and Easter” (229). Irenaeus may have used *kuriakē* in fragment 7, but it may not be his word, and it may refer to Easter (“Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus” 7, ANF 1:569-70; Strand, 346-7).

<sup>20</sup> Bauckham is again cautious: “A reference to weekly Sunday worship seems very probable but not certain” (p. 229, citing Eusebius’ *History* 4.23.11).

<sup>21</sup> Bauckham, 229, citing *Act. Ver.* 29.

<sup>22</sup> Maxwell, 106-8, and Bauckham, 227-8.

<sup>23</sup> *Miscellanies* 5:14; ANF 2:469.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:12; ANF 2:545.

<sup>25</sup> Exc. ex Theod. 63:1, quoted in Bauckham, 230; Irenaeus mentioned the Gnostic ogdoad in *Against Heresies* 1.5.3 (ANF 1:323). It is difficult to interpret their numerology: “The eighth may possibly turn out to be properly the seventh, and the seventh manifestly the sixth, and the latter properly the Sabbath, and the seventh a day of work” (*Miscellanies* 6:16; ANF 2:512).

Clement explained the “rest” of the Fourth Commandment as “abstraction from ills” and as impassibility in preparation for the eschaton (*ibid.*). In this, he agreed with his Gnostic opponents. Epiphanius said that the Valentinian Ptolemaeus taught that Jesus rejected the literal Sabbath and that Ptolemaeus interpreted the Sabbath as commanding “us to be idle with reference to evil actions” (Bauckham, 265-6, citing Epiphanius, *Pan.* 33:3:5:1-13). Clement also used a similar interpretation for the Lord’s day: “He...keeps the Lord’s day when he abandons an evil disposition” (*Miscellanies* 7:12; ANF 2:545).

<sup>26</sup> Bauckham, 274. On 223, Bauckham cites *Epistula Apostolorum* 18. He also cites

“Melito of Sardis, ap. Eusebius *HE* 4:23:12,” but I could not find this in an English translation of Eusebius 4:23:12, nor did Bauckham discuss this text in his chapter.

<sup>27</sup> Bauckham writes:

All second-century references to the Sabbath commandment either endorse the metaphorical interpretation or reject the literal interpretation as Judaistic or do both.... For all these writers the literal commandment to rest one day in seven was a temporary ordinance for Israel alone. The Christian fulfills the commandment by devoting all his time to God.... No writer of the period betrays any thought of its being a provision for needed physical rest (pp. 269, 266).

A Seventh-day Adventist agrees with this historical assessment:

It is unhistorical to say that the early fathers were “silent” about the Sabbath. They were not silent about it, and what they had to say was hostile to literal Sabbath keeping.... A careful analysis of the four most noteworthy authors who dealt with the Sabbath in the second and early third centuries, Barnabas, Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, reveals a great unanimity of attitude toward the literal Sabbath. To a man, they opposed it. This is very significant, partly because Barnabas and Justin represented Christian attitudes as early as the 130s, and partly because these four writers encircled the Mediterranean basin: Barnabas in Alexandria, Justin first in Asia and then in Rome, Irenaeus first in Asia and then in Gaul, Tertullian for a while in Rome and then in Carthage (Maxwell, 154-7).

## SABBATH AND SUNDAY — ADVENTIST THEORIES

### **Bacchiocchi's theory**

Modern Sunday-keeping Christians often conclude that the apostles authorized or even commanded Gentiles to meet on Sundays instead of Sabbaths.<sup>1</sup> This conclusion is rejected by anyone who thinks that Christians should observe the Sabbath day.<sup>2</sup> Seventh-day Adventists have proposed ways in which the vast majority of professing Christians could have become deceived about the Sabbath. One authoritative SDA book claimed that the change from Sabbath to Sunday “was introduced at Rome about the middle of the second century.”<sup>3</sup>

In support of that position, Samuele Bacchiocchi argues that Sunday-keeping was a Roman Catholic innovation that achieved universality because of the authority of the Roman church.<sup>4</sup> Anti-Jewish sentiments were strong in Rome, and Gentiles became prominent in the church there. Since Hadrian fought against the Jews, his reign would be a possible candidate for the beginning of Sunday observance. Because of the need that arose to separate Christians from the Jews and their Sabbath, Gentile Christians adopted the venerable day of the Sun, since it provided an adequate time and symbolism to commemorate significant divine events that occurred on that day.<sup>5</sup>

However, Bacchiocchi's theory has numerous problems, as noted by Strand, who is also an Adventist.<sup>6</sup> Bacchiocchi argues that only a powerful church (i.e., Rome) could effectively switch the day of worship throughout the empire. Against his thesis, however, is the fact that Rome did not have that kind of power in the second century.<sup>7</sup> Although Rome could influence some areas of the empire, it would not have been able to change long-standing customs, especially in the East, without any visible evidences of controversy, especially when those customs were based on apostolic practice.<sup>8</sup>

Another major difficulty with Bacchiocchi's theory is that Sunday-keeping is documented before the reign of Hadrian and outside of Rome: Ignatius of Antioch was not a Sabbath-keeper and presumably observed Sunday, and the Magnesians and Philadelphians (and probably the other churches to which he wrote) probably agreed with him in this, and Barnabas gives evidence that Alexandrians were observing Sunday early in the second century. In no case is there evidence that the change in day of worship was recent. For Justin,

too, “there is significant evidence that Justin may have been an observer of Sunday long before A.D. 155 — and long before he visited Rome.”<sup>9</sup> If second-century Rome ever decreed that Christians should observe Sunday (there is no historical evidence for such a decree), it could have been effective only if the majority of churches were already observing Sunday.

Nor can Sabbath-abandonment be explained simply as anti-Jewishness. The early church went to great lengths, against Marcion, to keep the Old Testament Scriptures in their canon. They did not feel at liberty to simply reject the Sabbath. Rather, they re-interpreted it and claimed to be keeping its intent. Also, at certain times in history it would have been to the Christians’ advantage to be seen as a branch of Judaism, since Judaism was an accepted religion and Christianity was not. The complexity of the Christians’ attitude toward Judaism makes it highly unlikely that Rome could have convinced all Christians in all parts of the empire to change their day of worship. Many Christians would have had reasons to resist such a change.

Another element of Bacchiocchi’s theory is that sun-worship, such as Mithraism, influenced Rome to select Sun-day as the new day of worship.<sup>10</sup> There is no evidence for such a factor (Tertullian specifically rules it out<sup>11</sup>), it is historically unlikely, and the selection of Sunday can be explained without resorting to pagan precedents.<sup>12</sup> The early church resisted pagan practices. Christians would die rather than do something as simple as call the emperor “Lord.”

The theory of Roman initiation and enforcement is not historically credible.

## Other Adventist theories

Strand suggests that weekly Sunday observance grew out of an annual Easter observance. He gives a possible reconstruction for the origin of the Quartodeciman controversy, with some Christians observing Sunday and others a day of the month, both with roots in the Jewish calendar(s).<sup>13</sup> He then notes that some early Christians “not only observed both Easter and Pentecost on Sundays but also considered the whole seven-week season between the two holidays to have special significance.”<sup>14</sup> He suggests that Christians began meeting on every Sunday in that season, and then eventually to every Sunday every week: “Throughout the Christian world Sunday observance simply arose alongside observance of Saturday.”<sup>15</sup>

This theory, however, in addition to being entirely speculative, does not explain the universality of Sunday observance. Either we must suppose that this custom began before the Gentile mission did, or that it was so obvious

that Gentiles everywhere came to the same conclusion (and if it was that obvious, then it would have begun before the Gentile mission!). This theory does not work for the Quartodeciman Christians, and all evidence is that even the Quartodecimans observed Sunday.<sup>16</sup> Strand feels that his theory explains why Sunday is a “resurrection festival,” but no explanation for that is needed; it would be an obvious connection for anyone meeting on a Sunday.

Another Adventist book proposes a dual observance lasting centuries:

By the middle of the [second] century some Christians were voluntarily observing Sunday as a day of worship, not a day of rest. The church of Rome, largely made up of Gentile believers (Romans 11:13), led in the trend toward Sunday worship. In Rome, the capital of the empire, strong anti-Jewish sentiments arose.... Reacting to these sentiments, the Christians in that city attempted to distinguish themselves from the Jews. They dropped some practices held in common with the Jews and initiated a trend away from the veneration of the Sabbath, moving toward the exclusive observance of the Sunday.

From the second to the fifth centuries, while Sunday was rising in influence, Christians continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath nearly everywhere throughout the Roman Empire. The fifth-century historian Socrates wrote: “Almost all the churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this.”<sup>17</sup>

This theory also has deficiencies and inaccuracies, some of which we have already covered. First, it was in the early second century that some Christians were observing Sunday, and this was in Antioch and Asia Minor as well as at Rome and Alexandria. Rome did not initiate this trend, nor is there evidence that anti-Jewish sentiments motivated them to abandon customs they held in common with the Jews.

Moreover, second-century Christians were not observing two days, but only one. Second-century writers are uniformly negative toward literal Sabbath-keeping. There is no evidence that anyone (other than Ebionites) kept the Sabbath in the second century, as Maxwell concluded (see above). Maxwell also commented on the correct translation of Socrates:

Socrates did not say that the churches of Rome and Alexandria had ceased to observe the Lord’s Supper (the “sacred mysteries”) on the Sabbath, implying that once upon a time they had so observed it.

Instead, he said that the churches do not observe the Supper on the Sabbath, leaving the reader to conclude, if he wishes, that the church in these places never did so observe it.<sup>18</sup>

Socrates said, “Almost all the churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, do not do this.” He was commenting on fourth-century practices,<sup>19</sup> with no implications about what had been done in earlier centuries. His comment cannot be used as evidence about the second century, especially if it contradicts all the other evidence we have from second-century documents.

The Adventist book correctly notes that early writers did not cite any biblical command for Sunday worship.<sup>20</sup> So why did early Christians choose Sunday? The book suggests two reasons: 1) the resurrection of Christ and 2) “the popularity and influence that the sun worship of the pagan Romans accorded Sunday undoubtedly contributed to its growing acceptance as a day of worship.”<sup>21</sup> Although this may have played a role in later centuries, especially after Christianity became legal, it is unlikely to have played a role in the second century, for reasons given above.

Maxwell explains some of the reasons that contributed to Sunday observance:

(1) The extraordinary impact of the Resurrection. (This is the commonest reason given by the Christians themselves.) (2) The Christian desire to honor Christ in a special way. (3) The insistence of Gospel writers (including John in the later part of the century) on stating the day of the week when the Resurrection occurred. (4) The effect of following for some months, or even years, Paul’s request to set aside money for the poor on Sundays.<sup>22</sup>

## Maxwell’s summary

The simple fact that early Christians abandoned the Sabbath has dominated this paper, but the reasons they give for abandoning the Sabbath are also of interest. Maxwell (an Adventist) gives an excellent summary of the teachings of the second- and third-century writers about the Sabbath. On page 158, he details five areas of agreement among the church fathers. I will paraphrase them:

1) Sabbath eschatology — The Sabbath foreshadows an age of sinlessness and peace beyond this present age. 2) Moral typology — Living a godly life every day fulfills the purpose of the Sabbath commandment.<sup>23</sup> 3) The

Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments not binding on Christians. 4) The Sabbath is not a part of the natural law. 5) The patriarchs before Moses did not observe the Sabbath.

Maxwell concludes that second- and early third-century writers had basically the same negative attitudes toward the Sabbath. He then writes,

These writers taught that the new covenant had put an end to the old law — and that now the new spiritual Israel, with its new covenant and its new spiritual law, no longer needed the literal circumcision, literal sacrifices, and literal Sabbath. Barnabas observed that God “has circumcised our hearts.” Justin referred triumphantly to the new spiritual circumcision in Christ. Irenaeus taught that circumcision, sacrifices, and Sabbaths were given of old as signs of better things to come; the new sacrifice, for example, is now a contrite heart. Tertullian, too, had a new spiritual sacrifice and a new spiritual circumcision. Each of these writers also taught that a new spiritual concept of the Sabbath had replaced the old literal one....

This supplanting of the old law with the new, of the literal Sabbath with the spiritual, was a very Christ-centered concept for these four writers. God’s people have inherited the covenant only because Christ through His sufferings inherited it first for us, Barnabas said. For Justin the new, final, and eternal law that has been given to us was “namely Christ” Himself. It was only because Christ gave the law that He could now also be “the end of it,” said Irenaeus. And it is Christ who invalidated “the old” and confirmed “the new,” according to Tertullian. Indeed Christ did this, both Irenaeus and Tertullian said, not so much by annulling the law as by so wonderfully fulfilling it that He extended it far beyond the mere letter. To sum up: The early rejection of the literal Sabbath appears to be traceable to a common hermeneutic of Old and New Testament scriptures.<sup>24</sup>

Maxwell does not agree with the writers he summarizes, but I do. I also suggest that they, even though they were from various parts of the empire, have a “common hermeneutic” because that same hermeneutic was used in the Gentile mission ever since Acts 15: a mission that did not require Gentiles to keep the laws of Moses, including the Sabbath. It is unlikely that churches throughout the empire would, without controversy or written discussion, develop the same practice unless that practice had been present from the beginning. It is also unlikely that people throughout the empire would give the same reasons for their practice unless those reasons had also been present

from the beginning. Their “common hermeneutic” is further evidence of antiquity and, with antiquity comes the implication of apostolic authorization.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Historians even suggest that this decision was made before Paul began his travels:

Sunday worship appears, when the evidence becomes available in the second century, as the universal Christian practice outside [Judea]. There is no trace whatever of any controversy [excepting, perhaps, some New Testament scriptures] as to whether Christians should worship on Sunday.... This universality is most easily explained if Sunday worship was already the Christian custom before the Gentile mission, and spread throughout the expanding Gentile church with the Gentile mission. It is very difficult otherwise to see how such a practice could have been imposed universally and leave no hint of dissent and disagreement....

Paul was not responsible for policy in the whole of the Gentile mission field (note that Barn. 15:9, one of the earliest evidences of Sunday observance, probably comes from Egypt). The conclusion seems irresistible that all of the early missionaries simply exported the practice of the [Judean] churches. (Bauckham, 236)

Jewett (*The Lord's Day*) and Rordorf (*Sunday*) reportedly also consider that Sunday observance originated before Paul.

<sup>2</sup> It is theoretically possible that the apostles encouraged Sunday worship meetings in addition to requiring the Sabbath as a rest day. Such a theory would be particularly difficult to reconcile with Romans 14:5, Colossians 2:16, and Galatians 4:10, and it would not explain why the Sabbath would be dropped by all Gentile churches throughout the empire without a trace of controversy.

<sup>3</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Reviews and Herald, 1957) 166-7, cited by Swartley, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (FSS) (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1977), 211, and Bacchiocchi in Strand, op. cit., 136).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>6</sup> Presumably Strand does not argue against Bacchiocchi's theory because Strand wants to keep Sunday, but because he is convinced by the historical evidence that Bacchiocchi's reconstruction is unlikely.

<sup>7</sup> As evidence that Rome did not have such power, we can note:

- Ignatius does not greet a bishop of Rome.
- Irenaeus disagreed with the bishop of Rome regarding policy toward Quartodecimans.

## CHRISTIANS AND OLD TESTAMENT LAWS

- Polycarp and Polycrates acted as equals with the bishop of Rome.
- It was only with difficulty and recorded controversy that Rome pressured a change in the date of Easter for one area in Asia Minor.
- Even in later centuries, Rome was unable to force other cities to observe the seventh day as a fast day.
- In the fourth century, when many Eastern Christians began to observe the Sabbath as well as Sunday, Rome was unable or unwilling to stop the practice (Kenneth A. Strand, “From Sabbath to Sunday in the Early Christian Church: A Review of Some Recent Literature. Part II: Samuele Bacchiocchi’s Reconstruction,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (AUSS) 17 (1979), 96-99. Strand also notes that “Christian influences were still moving largely from East to West rather than vice versa” (*Sabbath*, 332, n. 22).

<sup>8</sup> Bauckham writes:

It therefore seems extremely unlikely that already in the early second century the authority of the Roman see was such that it could impose Sunday worship throughout the church, superseding [supposedly] a universal practical of Sabbath observance handed down from the apostles, without leaving any trace of controversy or resistance in the historical records.... Like all attempts to date the origins of Sunday worship in the second century, [Bacchiocchi’s theory] fails to account for the universality of the custom. Unlike the Sunday Easter and the Sabbath fast, Sunday worship was never, so far as the evidence goes, disputed. (p. 272)

<sup>9</sup> Maxwell, 138.

<sup>10</sup> Bacchiocchi, *FSS*, 236-268. He may have abandoned this aspect of this theory, however. In his chapter in Strand’s book, he writes, “The choice of the day of the Sun was not motivated by the desire to venerate the Sun-god on his day, but rather by the fact that such a day provided a fitting symbology” (p. 141).

Strand gives a convincing critique:

Just how likely a source for adoption of Sunday would Mithraism have provided to second-century Christians? Even during that century Mithraism was a rival oriental religion (later to become Christianity’s most dangerous rival and foe). Also, its spread in the Roman world was mainly by military legions.... Would it not be somewhat far-fetched to look to a pagan religion fostered mainly by soldiers in the Roman legions as the source for the Christian day of worship?... Why would Christians who were ready to give up life itself rather than to adopt known pagan practices (e.g., Justin Martyr, who did precisely this) choose an obviously pagan Sunday as their Christian day of worship? (AUSS 16:90).

<sup>11</sup> Apology 16; ANF 3:31.

<sup>12</sup> If early Christians wanted to reject the Sabbath and pick some other day of the

week, only one day could be found to have biblical significance in connection with Jesus Christ. His day of birth was not known, nor was his baptism, nor the Transfiguration. The only day of the week (other than the Sabbath) mentioned in the Gospels is the first.

<sup>13</sup> Strand writes,

It would be natural for [Jewish] Christians to continue a first-fruits celebration. However, they would not keep it as a Jewish festival. Instead, they would keep it in honor of Christ's resurrection.... Those who had been influenced by the Pharisees would hold their Easter festival on a different day of the week year by year, and those who had been influenced by the Boethusians or by the Essenes would hold their Easter festival on a Sunday every year. (Strand, *Sabbath*, app. B, 327)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 327, citing Lawrence T. Geraty, "The Pascha and the Origin of Sunday Observance," *AUSS* 3 (1965):85-96.

<sup>15</sup> Strand, *Sabbath*, app. B, 323.

<sup>16</sup> "The Quartodeciman controversy had nothing to do with Sabbath observance; the Quartodecimans appear to have observed the weekly Sunday like most other Christians did at the time" (Maxwell and Damsteegt, 96).

<sup>17</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe...: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1988), 259, footnoting as source Justin, Bacchiocchi, and Socrates 5.22.

<sup>18</sup> Maxwell, 142.

<sup>19</sup> "The Sabbath observance Socrates describes was probably more of a revival than a survival. In any case, it wasn't full Sabbath observance but only the celebration of the sacred mysteries" (Maxwell, 125). Maxwell and Damsteegt show many fourth-century documents that are favorable to the Sabbath, in sharp contrast to the previous two centuries:

A sudden change is seen when we lay aside second- and third- century documents and start reading references to Sabbath and Sunday in fourth-century documents. At once, for the first time, we discover statements that speak favorably about Sabbath keeping. Especially is the change noticeable in documents from the second half of the fourth century, that is, from around A.D. 360 onwards. (p. 146)

<sup>20</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 259. However, the early writers did cite biblical authority for abandoning literal Sabbath observance — Galatians 4:10 and Colossians 2:16 — as well as arguments about the new covenant superseding Jewish traditions such as the Sabbath.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Maxwell, 161C. Maxwell is not arguing for Sunday-keeping, but for honest use

of the second- and third-century evidence. He claims that the early church was apostate in this practice, and that the apostasy occurred sooner, and on a wider scale, than previous Adventists admitted. Whether this was apostasy or not must be determined on biblical grounds; all we are discussing here is the historical evidence that Sunday observance began very early and was very widespread. Maxwell gives an excellent summary of Ante-Nicene thought about the Sabbath, as quoted above.

<sup>23</sup> Maxwell writes,

Ironically, among writers who spoke harshly against the literal Sabbath, the idea persisted that true Sabbath keeping consisted in living every day like a true Christian. Justin's insistence on keeping "perpetual" Sabbath (that is, true repentance from sin) and Tertullian's doctrine of a "spiritual" and "eternal" Sabbath (a life devoted to the deliverance of the soul) are evidences that the concept of Sabbath as embedding something intrinsically good lived on in the second and third centuries. (Maxwell, 145)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-56.

## **SABBATH AND SUNDAY — A NEW HYPOTHESIS**

### **My reconstruction**

I agree with the reasons Maxwell has given, but I wish to add one: Jewish Christians had a *practical* need for meeting times that did not conflict with synagogue observance, as mentioned earlier.

The second-century writers show that the vast majority of Christians met on Sunday and did not keep the Sabbath. They give no clues that would suggest that Sunday was a recent innovation. This suggests that Sunday observance began in the first century. The widespread nature of Sunday observance also argues for its antiquity. The second-century church did not have the organization or communication that might enable them to mandate a particular day of worship without generating disagreement and controversy. Therefore it is likely that Sunday observance began before or during the early stages of the Gentile mission.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible that Sunday observance began *in Jerusalem*. Thousands of law-observant Jews came into the church. They attended temple and synagogue functions, yet they also wished to have more private meetings for believers only. They wished to discuss Scriptures, share meals, pray and sing Christian hymns. Initially, they met daily (Acts 2:46). Sabbath restrictions, however, might have made it difficult to prepare meals and gather large groups on Saturday evenings.

Sundays would provide opportunities for large Christian gatherings. Scriptures that had been read in synagogues the previous day would be discussed, especially if they had messianic significance. These discussions would be particularly interesting. Sermons would be given; Christians would celebrate Jesus as the Messiah. As Christianity spread to Jewish communities in Antioch, Alexandria and Rome, similar situations would foster the development of post-Sabbath Christian meetings.

When Gentiles began to be added to the church, they were God-fearing Gentiles who attended synagogue readings and would also need an after-Sabbath meeting time for Christian worship. Eventually Gentiles from pagan backgrounds were also added, e.g., in Alexandria, Ephesus and Rome. These converts were not in the habit of attending synagogue, but they would nevertheless meet with the others after the Sabbath.

Thus there were two groups of Christians: those who kept Sabbath and

also met after the Sabbath, and those who ignored the Sabbath and met only after the Sabbath. This dual development would have been common throughout the empire, since Jews lived in many cities, and evangelists preached to the Jews first. But the need for dual worship meetings would have ceased in most cities as Gentiles became the large majority. Anti-Jewish sentiment could have accelerated this development.

The custom of after-Sabbath meetings would have been spread by traveling evangelists, and the tradition would have been maintained even in areas without Sabbath meetings. Even in areas with synagogues, meeting on the Sabbath would become less important, since synagogue readings had to be interpreted, and the interpretations were given in the after-Sabbath meeting. The desire for attendance at the synagogue would become further reduced when Christian groups obtained their own copies of the Scriptures.

The Acts 15 conference had already concluded that Gentile converts did not need to keep the law of Moses and, judging by rabbinic writings, uncircumcised Gentiles were not expected to keep the Sabbath. Paul, writing to a church that contained both Jews and Gentiles, downplayed the significance of days (Romans 14:5). He explained that the Sabbath (like sacrifices) had typological significance and was not a matter for judging Christians (Colossians 2:16). And he criticized any observance of any days that were part of a legalistic obligations (Galatians 4:10). The writer of Hebrews explained that the Sabbath typologically prefigured the eschatological rest, and it is that latter rest that Christians should strive to enter (Hebrews 4:1-10). These New Testament scriptures indicate that questions about worship days did arise in the first century, and that they were resolved at an early stage in church history.

This hypothetical reconstruction explains how an initially Sabbath-keeping Jewish group could become a Sunday-keeping Gentile group within a generation, and it explains how this could have been done throughout the empire simultaneously with a minimum of controversy: It was part of Christianity from the beginning.<sup>2</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I am open to the possibility that Sunday observance began independently in Antioch and Alexandria. Similar factors operated in both locations, including the need for post-synagogue meetings and the association of the first day with Christ's resurrection, permitting parallel development. However, as Christianity spread to more areas, the chances for independent development of the same practice become slimmer.

<sup>2</sup> A Sabbath-keeper could agree with most of this reconstruction. The Sabbath-keeper could agree that Christians needed after-Sabbath meetings, and that this need existed from the very start. It would not be wrong to meet for worship on Sundays in addition to keeping the Sabbath. However, the Sabbath-keeper would disagree with the significance of the New Testament scriptures cited above, and the Sabbath-keeper would say that it was wrong for believers to eventually abandon the Sabbath and keep only Sunday. Whether this was apostasy is answered not by church history but by Scripture.

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## **THE ORIGINS OF SUNDAY WORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

A series by Thomas C. Hanson

**Thesis statement:** Although seventh-day Sabbatarians cite evidence that Jesus and the primitive church kept a seventh-day Sabbath, nevertheless first and second-century church writers show that some Christian communities began to meet on the first day of the week after Jesus' resurrection, and that worship began to shift from the seventh day to the first day of the week at that time. The early church gave warrants for making this shift from the Gospels and the Pauline writings.

### **Outline**

- I. Pauline churches — conflicts concerning the Sabbath and Judaizers
  - A. Galatians 4:10
  - B. Colossians 2:16-17
  - C. Romans 14:5-6
  - D. 1 Corinthians 16:2
- II. How each Gospel writer portrayed Jesus, the Sabbath and the first day of the week
  - A. Mark
  - B. Matthew
  - C. Luke and Acts
  - D. John
  - E. The first day of the week
- III. Second-century churches
  - A. Sunday worship now the norm
  - B. Epistle of Barnabas
  - C. Justin
  - D. Use of the term Lord's Day in second-century writings to refer to first day of week (as the term is used in Revelation 1:10)

### **Method of analysis and presentation**

We begin with a discussion of the main groups that made up first-century Christianity: Jewish Christians from Judea and Galilee, the Hellenistic Jewish Christians represented by Stephen, and the Pauline churches. We will then look at references Paul made to the sabbath and Sunday worship.

Then we will look at how the Gospel writers (including Luke-Acts) referred to the sabbath and the first day of the week. The recurring charge we will see against Jesus is breaking the sabbath. Next, we will move on to post-apostolic writings into the second century to look at the shift from worship on the sabbath to worship on Sunday.

## **The early Christian communities**

The apostolic faith took on many forms of expression in the first decades of its life as it responded to cultural, social, political and religious pressures.<sup>1</sup> We see in Luke's writing of Acts that the first Christians were Jews, and the earliest church is classifiable as a messianic sect within Judaism. The disciples are frequently found in the temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1-3; 5:21, 25, 42), and since they were held in high regard by the people (Acts 2:47; 5:13), it can be assumed that they continued to observe the law, circumcision, sabbath worship and the food laws.<sup>2</sup>

Those who met in Jerusalem for Pentecost were Jews and proselytes (Acts 2:10). Those Jews and proselytes who became believers were firmly attached to the temple, attending the daily hours of prayer (Acts 2:46; 3:1). Luke's account of the earliest period of the life of the new community ends with them not having stirred from Jerusalem and still largely focused on the temple (Acts 5:42).

In Acts 21:20 the Jewish Christian members, led by James, tell Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law." Paul's act of fulfilling the vow in the temple shows the continuing role of the temple in the lives of the conservative Jerusalem Christians.

However, Jewish Christianity was anything but a single, unified phenomenon. It was present in many locations throughout the Mediterranean world, and expressed itself in orthodox and heretical forms.

Following are other examples of Jewish Christianity.

## **The Judean Christian community in James**

Paul calls James one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9), and he notes that "certain people came from James," by their continued observance of circumcision and ritual purity, undermined the gospel of his Gentile mission in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-15).<sup>3</sup> Acts does not record that any of the Jerusalem church came to help Paul when he was arrested.

James and the elders gave this description of Jewish Christians: "how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all

zealous for the law” (Acts 21:20).

## **Hellenistic-Jewish community (Stephen’s circle and Antioch)**

When Stephen, a Hellenist, came on the scene in Acts 6:1-5, the church began to broaden while still within the confines of Judaism. Stephen was accused by what are referred to as “false witnesses” of speaking against the temple and the law (Acts 6:13). The speech Luke records in Acts 7 shows that this accusation was not entirely untrue. Stephen castigated the ancestors for not obeying Moses (7:39), a charge that they had leveled against him (6:11). Stephen said that the temple had limited importance and that “the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands” (Acts 7:48).

Stephen’s speech led to his martyrdom and ignited the first persecution of the church, of Jews by Jews. That the twelve apostles were able to remain in Jerusalem while the Hellenist members were forced to flee indicates that the persecution was not directed at the apostles, probably because they dissociated themselves from the views of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians.<sup>4</sup> As the persecuted Christians fled Jerusalem, they preached the gospel (8:4, 11:19-20), eventually reaching Antioch, the church that launched the Pauline mission to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-3).

When the church remained in the confines of Judaism, we see no evidence in Acts of sabbath controversies. It is assumed that Jewish Christians kept the sabbath. However, as the church moved out of the confines of Jerusalem and into Gentile areas, the sabbath became a matter of concern, as noted by references made by Paul in his writings.

## PART I: PAULINE CHURCHES — CONFLICTS CONCERNING THE SABBATH AND JUDAIZERS

We will now look at several places in which Paul discussed the sabbath and Jewish holy days.

### Galatians 4:10

The Gentile church in Galatia (4:3, 8) was being troubled by Christian Jews who came from the Jerusalem church and demanded the Gentiles<sup>5</sup> be circumcised and observe the law of Moses. In Galatians 4:9-10 Paul accuses the Galatians of returning to and being enslaved by “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” by “observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years.”

Based on the context of combating Judaizing opponents, we conclude that these terms refer to the Jewish calendar. The context does not indicate that these days would be pagan days. *Days* would refer to the sabbath, or maybe also special festivals of one day’s duration. *Months* would refer to new moons that mark the beginning of months. *Seasons* would refer to Jewish festivals that last more than one day, such as the Passover and Festival of Tabernacles. *Years* would refer to sabbatical years, the year of Jubilee or Rosh Hashanah, the start of the new year.<sup>6</sup>

### 1 Corinthians 16:2

Despite his advice to others in Romans 14, Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 16:2 that he did not consider every day alike. Paul appears to regard the first day of the week above the others, as he designated it in 1 Corinthians 16:2 as the day for the Corinthians to perform what he refers to in 2 Corinthians 9:12 (which deals with this ministry to the saints, cf. 9:1) as a ministry of service (*leitourgia*).<sup>7</sup> If regular systematic saving were all that Paul intended, one day would appear as suitable as another for this purpose.<sup>8</sup> When Paul refers to this collection as ministry of service (2 Corinthians 9:12), the designation of the day points to its religious significance.

If merely systematic giving were all Paul asked for, he would not have specified the day of the week. This verse indicates that Paul not only knew that Christians distinguished that day from others by using it for religious worship (the Galatian churches were also told to make this collection on the first day of the week, 1 Corinthians 16:1), but that he also approved of that

distinction by making it himself.<sup>9</sup> The reference to the first day of the week would have no significance unless Paul is assuming that this day was already a special day for the church.<sup>10</sup>

1 Corinthians 16:2 and Acts 20:7 are the only places in the New Testament outside of the resurrection narratives (Mark 16:2; Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19) where the term “the first day of the week” is used. The Corinthian church was aware (1 Corinthians 15:1-8) that the resurrection occurred on the third day and the first day of the week.<sup>11</sup>

## **Romans 14:5-6**

In Romans 14, Paul refers to the weak as those who eat only vegetables, and the strong (with whom Paul identifies himself) as those who eat anything. How does Paul relate these two groups to the question of observing days? Paul says in Romans 14:5-6: “Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.”

The problem is set in the context of tensions between the Jewish minority and Gentile majority in Rome (cf. Romans 11). A sabbatarian argument is that these days refer to pagan days, but the problem appears to have arisen because many Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians influenced by Jewish tradition regarded the continued observance of the Jewish sabbath and festival days as of continued importance because they viewed the new movement they were a part of as a fulfilled form of Judaism.<sup>12</sup> Here, though, Paul speaks both of the freedom to keep or not to keep the sabbath.

## **Colossians 2:16-17**

It can be argued that most of the Colossian members were Gentile converts because of 1) allusions to the pagan past of the letter’s recipients (see comments in the next paragraph), 2) a scarcity of Old Testament allusions, 3) distinctive Gentile vices mentioned in 3:5-7 (“these are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life”), and 4) and a near lack of references to reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles.

Evidence of the recipients’ pagan past is shown in the first chapter: the recipients are referred to as outsiders brought inside: 1:12: “who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints”; 1:21: “you who were once estranged and hostile in mind”; 1:27: “to them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery.” Further, they were said to be once “dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision

of your flesh” (2:13).

Paul tells the Colossians in Colossians 2:16: “Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.” The Colossian Christians had syncretistic practices that included ascetic regulations drawn from Judaism performed to appease the elemental spirits (*stoicheia*) of the universe (2:8, 20).<sup>13</sup> Paul’s use of “do not let anyone condemn you” about observing these days shows that Paul did not lay down any regulations over the use of the festivals; in other words, it was not required to keep the seventh-day sabbath or the other festival days.

## Conclusions about Paul and the sabbath

In these passages Paul is contending with the dangers of some obligations being placed on his converts. The harshest of his responses is in Galatians, where these requirements were not only linked with a return to the “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (*stoicheia*), but were being required for acceptance into the church. In Rome and Colossae, such requirements were used as a basis for judging fellow Christians (Romans 14:4, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another?”; Colossians 2:16, “Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths”).

Paul opposes any attempt to require the observance of festivals. In Paul’s view a person may keep the sabbath or not. In general, Paul would assume that a Jewish Christian would keep the sabbath and a Gentile convert would not (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23). It would seem unlikely that Paul pioneered in the observance of Sunday, because he is the only New Testament writer who warns his converts against the observance of days (Colossians 2:17; Galatians 4:10; Romans 14:6).

Had Paul introduced Sunday worship, he may have been accused of this in Acts 21:21, when he was accused of teaching against circumcision and against observing Jewish customs. However, Paul was not specifically accused of teaching against sabbath observance or promoting observance of the first day of the week at the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15. It can be argued that Paul found the custom already established among Christians when he began his Gentile mission, which would indicate that the custom originated among Jewish Christians.

## **PART II: THE SABBATH IN THE GOSPELS AND ACTS**

Next, we will look at the sabbath controversies in the Gospels to see how the Gospel writers portrayed Jesus in reference to the sabbath. We will examine these texts to see whether Jesus is shown to have broken the sabbath command as given in the Torah or whether he simply broke the halakic interpretations of the sabbath.

The Halakah was developed to guide the Jews in areas where the scriptural text was not explicit. The Halakah began to be developed after the Exile in the closing days of the prophetic movement (*m. 'Abot* claims that it goes back to Moses). With the lack of an authoritative word from God, the Jews could not always determine God's will on the basis of scriptural text alone. Thus, a need existed to interpret and apply the past revelation of God's will in various situations that confronted the Jewish community. As the process continued, the oral decisions of generations of Jewish teachers were codified in the Mishnah.<sup>14</sup>

The Torah was not explicit in many areas, especially when dealing with sabbath observance. Scripture gave little detailed guidance of how to keep the sabbath, and a substantial body of tradition developed that showed the Jews what they could do and could not do on the sabbath.<sup>15</sup>

### **Sabbath controversies in Mark**

#### **Mark 2:23-28**

This pericope along with the two preceding ones (2:15-17, 18-22) belongs to a complex of three conflict stories that involve Jesus, his disciples and the Pharisees.<sup>16</sup> The sabbath controversy involves the disciples plucking grain as they were going through the grainfields, and each of the synoptic Gospel writers includes the account.

This pericope is viewed as an apologetic for the early church's sabbath practices because the Pharisees question the behavior of the disciples, not Jesus. In other words, the disciples represent the reader, the church.<sup>17</sup> The church is seen to ascribe the justification of its sabbath customs to Jesus, and the church defends itself by appealing to its Master. This incident can also be seen with a Christological focus, that the Son of Man is greater than the sabbath.<sup>18</sup>

The Pharisees ask Jesus, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" (verse 24). The disciples' behavior on the sabbath was illegal.

The Mishnah (m. Sabb. 7:2) classifies proscribed work on the sabbath, which would include plucking heads of grain. Exodus 16:27 also says that those who gathered manna on the sabbath were refusing God's commandments and instructions.

Jesus gives scriptural proof for breaking the sabbath when he replies by asking whether they have read what David did when he and his companions were hungry (1 Sam. 21:6) and ate the bread of the Presence, "which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat" (cf. Leviticus 24:8-9). This also can be seen as a Christological statement about Jesus and his ministry rather than an apology for the disciples' (or later, the church's) sabbath conduct. Just as David had the right to eat the bread of the Presence illegally, and to give those with him to eat it illegally, so Jesus had the right to permit his disciples to eat food gathered illegally on the sabbath.<sup>19</sup>

If taken as an apology for sabbath conduct, the disciples were clearly breaking the Torah. Jesus says that if David could break the Torah and eat the bread of the Presence, the disciples of Jesus could break the Torah and pluck grain and eat.

Then Jesus says: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath"; and then he follows with a Christological statement: "The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (2:28), which declares the Son of Man's authority over the sabbath.

Jesus is hardly universalizing the sabbath to all humanity from Israel (contra the sabbatarian argument), which saw itself as specially gifted of God with the sabbath.<sup>20</sup> To universalize the sabbath would have created another sabbath controversy because the Pharisees did not view the sabbath as binding on all humanity. Jesus' statement can be viewed as compatible with, and not a departure from, Judaism.

In Jubilees 2, the sabbath is viewed as a gift from God to his people for their enjoyment. Jubilees 2:19: "I shall separate for myself a people from among all the nations. And they will also keep the sabbath. And I will sanctify them for myself, and I will bless them. And they will be my people and I will be their God."

Taking 2:27 and 28 together answers the Pharisees' question and explains the disciples' conduct not on the principle of freedom in 2:27 but on the authority of the Son of Man in 2:28.<sup>21</sup>

M.D. Hooker points out that Jesus' comments about David show how regulations made to safeguard something holy were set aside for David, who enjoyed a special position, and for those who were with him. In a similar way, regulations safeguarding the sabbath were here set aside for Jesus, in a special position, and those who were with him.<sup>22</sup>

Some argue that Jesus' statement that "the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" gives universal scope for the sabbath. However, to do this is to see something alien to the context. Jesus is here restricting the sabbath command, not broadening it. The context deals not with the universal scope of the sabbath, but the purpose of the sabbath rest.<sup>23</sup> The sabbath was created for the benefit of humans, and here Jesus is speaking against the burdensome requirements that the Jews had added to the original command. Jesus was not saying that the sabbath was made for all people — Jews and Gentiles. The Pharisees believed that the sabbath was for the Jews only. Had Jesus said that the sabbath was made for Gentiles, this would have created another controversy, but none is indicated here. The Pharisees were only concerned about Jewish conduct on the sabbath.

Though the Gospels do not show Jesus and his disciples generally violating sabbath law, the use of this passage by the early church to defend itself against the Pharisees shows that the early church continued to loosen the restraint of the sabbath and cited the example of Jesus to do so.

### **Mark 3:1-5**

In this account, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the sabbath. He precipitates a sabbath controversy by calling the man forward to perform the miracle. The controversy was whether it was lawful to heal a non-urgent malady on the sabbath. The Torah says nothing about healing on the sabbath, but the rabbis considered healing prohibited work based on Exodus 31:14 ("whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people"). The rabbis modified this rule to allow exceptions to save someone's life (m. Shab. 18:3; m. Yoma 8:6). However, Jesus did not do any work here, and the man's life was not in danger. Jesus simply spoke, and the man was healed. It is difficult to see how the Pharisees saw any wrong in this, and Mark records Jesus' anger (3:5): "He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart."

### **Sabbath conflicts in Matthew**

Matthew's community is predominantly Jewish, as evidenced by its interest in Old Testament fulfillment, in the Pharisees and in the general Jewish flavor of the Gospel.<sup>24</sup> Matthew is said to show the Jewish Christians' regard for the sabbath, as he alone says to "pray that your flight may not be...on a sabbath" (24:20).

Matthew's view of the law can be seen especially in his redaction of Mark concerning Jesus' comments about clean and unclean meats (Matthew 15:17-

20/Mark 7:18-23). Mark reads (but Matthew does not include the italicized words in the following): “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside *cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?*” (*Thus he declared all foods clean*)” (verses 18-20). Whatever Matthew means by Jesus saying he fulfilled the law, it is not to be understood as superseding it or leaving it behind.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, there is a striking anti-Judaism in Matthew, as he refers to “*their synagogues*” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 10:17); the reference to Jews in 28:15 concocting a story to explain the resurrection of Jesus (“And this story is still told among the Jews to this day”); and worst of all (because it is used to incite anti-Semitism): “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matthew 27:15).<sup>26</sup>

### **Matthew 12:1-8**

Matthew highlights the Christological significance to the story about the disciples plucking grain on the sabbath by adding the following to Mark’s account:

Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless. I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless. (Matthew 12:5-7)

The above is an argument from minor to major: if the priests in the temple profane the sabbath and are guiltless, how much more so the disciples of Jesus, because “something greater than the temple is here.” Matthew alone has Jesus telling the disciples to pray that their flight not be on the sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Also to help justify the disciples’ actions to his possibly sabbath-keeping community, Matthew adds that the disciples plucked grain because they “were hungry” (Matthew 12:1). Matthew’s addition of “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (12:7) is from Hosea 6:6. The sabbath command must be interpreted in terms of mercy, not strict unbending demand. However, this is not a relaxing of the sabbath law, but applying it in terms of love (22:34-40) and doing good on the sabbath in the following pericope (12:12).<sup>27</sup>

### **Matthew 12:9-14**

Matthew adds the following:

He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?”

How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:11-12)

Here Jesus is shown as an interpreter of the law for the church, which in Matthew’s community still kept the sabbath (Matthew 24:20).<sup>28</sup> In Matthew’s account, the sabbath law is superseded by concern for the life of an animal. If kindness can be shown to an animal on the sabbath, how much more so to a human being. In Matthew, Jesus does not challenge the sabbath law, but the interpretation of it, showing that the determining factor is love.<sup>29</sup>

## **Matthew 24:20**

Matthew alone records this saying of Jesus: “Pray that your flight not be in winter or on a sabbath.” Matthew was writing to a mostly Jewish audience still keeping the sabbath, and this statement should not be taken to mean that Jesus taught his disciples that any kind of travel, including escape, on the sabbath day was wrong. Jesus does not suggest that they refrain from fleeing on the sabbath, but if they were forced to flee, he tells them to pray that it would be on another day. Several things could slow them down when they fled: pregnant women or nursing mothers (verse 19); winter rains or cold weather (verse 20); or sabbath regulations, which included the shutting of gates and closing of shops.<sup>30</sup> Mark, writing to a Gentile audience, says merely, “Pray that it may not be in winter” (Mark 13:18).

## **Sabbath controversies in Luke’s writings**

### **Luke 6:1-5**

Luke omits Jesus’ reply in Mark 2:27: “Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.’” The final verse is an explicit comment from Jesus: “Then he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath’” (6:5).

Luke adds to Mark’s account that Jesus’ disciples plucked the heads of grain “and ate them,” thus apparently reassuring his readers that the disciples were not guilty of what was proscribed in Deuteronomy 23:24-25. However, the plucking (reaping) and rubbing (threshing) are both against Pharisaic regulations.<sup>31</sup>

Luke also adds the word “took” to the comment in this phrase: David “entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence” (6:4). This suggests that David assumed this authority; it was not given to him by the priests. So also the Son of Man, whom Luke shows is the Son of David (1:27, 32, 69; 2:4; 3:31; 18:38-39), is lord of the sabbath.

Commenting on Luke's account, Nolland notes that lordship here is the right to authoritatively represent the divine intention for the sabbath and a possible criticism of the Pharisees for making themselves lords of the sabbath.<sup>32</sup>

### **Luke 4:16-30**

This incident of Jesus speaking in the synagogue in Nazareth on the sabbath ended in confrontation. The anger of those in attendance had to do with comments made by Jesus about how God in two Old Testament cases took care of Gentiles while ignoring the plight of Jews. The crowd is angered to the point of almost committing murder on the sabbath.

Of interest to this study is Luke's statement that Jesus went into the synagogue on the sabbath day "as was his custom" (Luke 4:16). This is a reference to Jesus' synagogue teaching habits. It refers back to verse 15, where Luke writes that in Galilee, Jesus "began to teach in their synagogues."<sup>33</sup> Luke uses this expression in Acts 17:2, where he says that "Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures." The custom then is both Jesus (Luke 4:15) and Paul entering the synagogues to teach.

### **Luke 13:10-17; Luke 14:1-6**

In these tandem accounts, Jesus heals a woman in a synagogue on the sabbath day who had "a spirit that crippled her for eighteen years" (13:11), and he heals a man of dropsy while on his way to a sabbath meal at the home of the leader of the Pharisees (14:1-6). Jesus initiated the healing of the woman with the spirit that had crippled her. This and the fact that she had the infirmity for eighteen years shows that this was not an emergency case. The leader of the synagogue was indignant and "kept saying to the crowd" that there are six days in which work is to be done and to come on one of those days, not the sabbath, to be healed.

Jesus responds in similar ways to the Jews who reacted negatively to both healings. He reminds them that they give water to oxen and donkeys on the sabbath, and asks what is wrong with freeing a daughter of Abraham bound by Satan for eighteen years (13:15-16) and implicitly asks what is wrong with healing the man of dropsy on the sabbath. It is difficult to see how Jesus is guilty of breaking any precept in the Torah. Jesus does not claim that these are emergency cases, and therefore rejects the framework of the Halakah that forbade non-emergency healings on the sabbath.

## Luke 23:52-56

On the preparation day, Joseph of Arimethea asks Pilate for the body of Jesus, wraps it in a linen cloth, and lays it in a tomb. The women who had come with him from Galilee prepared ointments and “on the sabbath they rested according to the commandment” (verse 56). It would seem odd for these Jewish women to have done anything differently in a pre-resurrection setting.

## Acts

Now we turn our attention to how the sabbath is mentioned in the book of Acts. The sabbath is referred to in the following places in Acts.

**Acts 1:12:** “Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, a sabbath day’s journey away.”

**Acts 13:27:** “Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him.”

**Acts 13:42, 44:** “As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people urged them to speak about these things again the next sabbath.... The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.”

**Acts 15:21:** “For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

**Acts 16:13:** “On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.”

**Acts 17:2:** “And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures.”

**Acts 18:4:** “Every sabbath he [Paul] would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.”

Most of these scriptures show the apostles beginning to preach the gospel in the Jewish synagogues, both to the Jews and to Gentiles who had assembled there. It would have been natural for Jewish Christians to have remained in the synagogues until they were forced out, perhaps near the end of the first century.

Of interest here is the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 about what was required of Gentile converts. Sabbath observance is not listed among the requirements for the Gentiles that the Jerusalem conference decided upon (Acts 15:20). The requirements they decided upon are similar to the Noachian laws, which also did not include the sabbath. Josephus wrote in *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.3.8 that after the Flood this is what God required of Noah:

I require you to abstain from shedding the blood of men, and to keep yourselves pure from murder; and to punish those that commit any such thing. I permit you to make use of all the other living creatures at your pleasure, and as your appetites lead you; for I have made you lords of them all, both of those that walk on the land, and those that swim in the waters, and of those that fly in the regions of the air on high — excepting their blood, for therein is the life.

So we see that neither the sabbath nor the food laws applied to people after the Flood, before there were Jews and Gentiles. Later, after God made the Jews his chosen people, the sabbath was for them only.

Jubilees 2:19 says:

I shall separate for myself a people from among all nations. And they shall keep the sabbath. And I will sanctify them for myself, and I will bless them. Just as I have sanctified and shall sanctify the sabbath day for myself thus shall I bless them.

The reference in the Jerusalem decree to fornication may have its basis in the forbidden marriages of Leviticus 18:6-18, and the reference to not eating blood has its basis in Leviticus 17:10-14.

Gentiles were attracted to Judaism in varying degrees. Conversion to Judaism entailed three elements: belief in God (and denial of pagan gods), circumcision (and immersion/baptism) and integration into the Jewish community.<sup>34</sup> These were known as proselytes. God-fearers (cf. Acts 13:43; 17:4, 17) were linked in a formal way to Judaism and kept some of the commandments, without being proselytes.<sup>35</sup> Some kept the sabbath, festivals and food laws, but they did not see themselves as Jews and were not considered to be Jews by the Jews.<sup>36</sup>

## **Acts 20:7-12**

In this pericope we read that the disciples met on the first day of the week for the purpose of breaking bread (Acts 20:7a). This is the earliest text from which it may be inferred that Christians came together for worship on that day.<sup>37</sup> It is uncertain whether this was a Saturday evening service (based on Jewish reckoning) or a Sunday evening service (based on Roman usage). Evidence favoring a Sunday evening meeting is that in Gentile circles, time was reckoned according to Roman usage.<sup>38</sup> The only other place Luke uses the phrase “first day of the week” is in Luke 24:1, where the reference is to Sunday.

This paper argues that Sunday worship began as a prolongation and

adaptation (in the light of the resurrection) of the Jewish Sabbath, as early Jewish Christians attended Jewish worship services and then met by themselves for Christian worship. If this is so, this meeting in Acts 20 would have been on a Saturday evening. However, if the early church commemorated the post-resurrection Sunday meetings of Christ with his disciples (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-29), this service took place on Sunday evening.

The text says that they “met to break bread.” Luke uses the term “break bread” five times in Acts (2:42, 46; Acts 20:7, 11; and 27:35). “Break bread” is not the typical Jewish expression for eating a meal.<sup>39</sup> The verb for “met” (*sunago*, from the same root that forms the word *synagogue*) describes assembly for worship. Jewett argues that Luke is describing a structured Christian assembly, and that this is the earliest clear witness to Christian assembly for purposes of worship on the first day of the week.<sup>40</sup>

## Sabbath controversies in John

### John 5:1-18

In this account, Jesus heals a man by the pool of Beth-Zatha who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus heals the man and tells him to take up his mat and walk. When the man tells the religious authorities of the incident, they are angered not at the healing, but at Jesus telling him to take up his mat. This, though not clearly prohibited in the Torah, apparently falls under the 39 classes of work forbidden on the sabbath in m. Shab. 7:2.

Those classes of work are:

sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing crops, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, washing or beating or dyeing it, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying [a knot], loosening [a knot], sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches, hunting a gazelle, slaughtering or flaying or salting it or curing its skin, scraping it or cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing in order to write two letters, building, pulling down, putting out a fire, lighting a fire, striking with a hammer and taking out aught from one domain to another.<sup>41</sup>

Jesus tells the religious authorities, “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (verse 17). This angered the Jews even more “because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal with God” (verse 18). Here John is confronting

the chief Jewish objection to Jesus, that he makes himself equal to God. In verses 19-30 John shows what this equality means, that Jesus is totally dependent on God (not independent, as the Jews took it) and conscious of the Father appointing him to do works that the Father has the right and power to execute.<sup>42</sup>

### **John 9:1-41**

This is the account of when, on a sabbath, Jesus healed the man born blind. “He spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes” (verse 6). Jesus possibly broke several halakic rules by mixing (m. Shab. 24:3), kneading (m. Shab. 7:2) and smearing the clay on his eyes, possibly a prohibited anointing (m. Shab. 14:4).<sup>43</sup> This provoked a controversy between the Pharisees, the man and his parents. Some of the Pharisees said Jesus could not be from God because “he does not observe the sabbath” (verse 16). The Pharisees put the healed man out of the synagogue (verse 34).

### **Conclusions from the Gospel accounts**

The way the Gospel writers portray Jesus begins to show a shift away from sabbath observance. The way they portray Jesus’ attitude toward the sabbath in the sabbath controversies helps us see how his later followers saw the freedom to not keep the sabbath but to meet for worship on the first day of the week.

Though Matthew shows a high regard for the law and the sabbath, there is an anti-Jewish tone to the Gospel, too, and even here we can see a softening of demands for keeping the sabbath. From Mark, with less concern for the Jewish heritage, we see a relaxing of the food laws, a major pillar of Judaism, and the comment that Jesus is Lord of the sabbath. From Luke, we see Jesus performing his ministry regardless of whether it was the sabbath. From John’s account, we see the strongest statements against the sabbath. Jesus goes so far as to tell the religious authorities: “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (5:17). In John’s account alone, Jesus is explicitly accused of “breaking the sabbath” (5:18).

In the Gospel pericopes we studied, we see Jesus being confronted for healing on the sabbath. Though he is seen to break halakic regulations concerning the sabbath, the incident of his disciples plucking heads of grain on the sabbath is the closest thing to work for which Jesus’ disciples could be accused of sabbath breaking according to the Torah. In John 5:17-18, Jesus is also possibly admitting to breaking the Torah when he claims that he and his Father are working on the sabbath.

These accounts show the beginnings of a shift away from sabbath observance. Jesus' attitude toward the sabbath helps explain the freedom his followers subsequently showed toward its observance by assembling for worship on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day.<sup>44</sup> The fact that the Christian church no longer keeps the seventh-day sabbath can be traced back to the sabbath conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish leaders as reported in the Gospels. Before his disciples could have thought of worshipping God on any day other than the sabbath, they must have been convinced that Jesus did not require them to observe that day.<sup>45</sup>

The Gospels contain no explicit statements that the sabbath must be kept, and each of the accounts of the sabbath controversies shows Jesus lessening sabbath restrictions. In an even more substantial statement, Jesus' claim to be lord of the sabbath also raises the possibility of a future reinterpretation of the sabbath.<sup>46</sup> Jesus performed his messianic work irrespective of the sabbath, and (though we still see some Jewish Christians keeping the sabbath) this may have contributed to the erosion of commitment to the sabbath in some quarters of the primitive church.<sup>47</sup>

## **How Gospel writers portrayed the first day of week**

Each of the synoptic Gospel writers and John reported that the resurrection of Christ took place on the first day of the week (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). It was significant to them to include the day of the week when the resurrection took place, and this may have reflected the significance their communities attached to the first day of the week.<sup>48</sup>

In Matthew's account, the chief priests and Pharisees refer to Jesus' prediction that Jesus would rise "after three days" (27:63). Matthew refers to the resurrection as taking place "as the first day of the week was dawning" (Matthew 28:1) and that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on that day (verse 9).

In Mark's account, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome visit the tomb "very early on the first day of the week" (16:2). In 16:9, Mark says that Jesus "rose early on the first day of the week" (16:9). However, Mark does not mention the first day of the week when he refers to Jesus' appearance to the two disciples "walking into the country" (16:12), nor when Jesus appeared to the eleven (16:14).

Luke writes that the women visited the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week (24:1); that Jesus appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus "on that same day" (verse 13); and that Jesus appeared to the eleven that evening (verses 36-49).

In John, Mary Magdalene visits the tomb "early on the first day of the

week while it was still dark” (20:1). Jesus appears to the eleven minus Thomas on the evening of the first day (John 20:19); and he appears to the eleven including Thomas one week later, also on the first day of the week (20:26-29).

The fact that each Gospel writer mentions that the resurrection was on the first day of the week shows the importance of that day. As we saw a lessening of importance of the seventh-day sabbath in the sabbath controversies, we are seeing the rising importance of the first day of the week in the resurrection narratives.

### **Additional meetings on first day of week**

Although New Testament writings give no direct evidence that Sunday worship originated in the original Judean church, when evidence does appear in later Christian writings, Sunday observance is the universal practice outside of Judea, with no trace of controversy as to whether Christians should meet on Sunday. It would seem that Sunday worship was already a Christian custom before Paul’s Gentile mission, and that it spread throughout the growing Gentile church with the Gentile mission.

A major split between Jewish Christians and non-Christian Jews took place late in the first century. Christians were included among the heretics referred to in the twelfth of the Eighteen Benedictions that Jews recited daily and in every synagogue service. Since no heretic would pronounce this curse, it effectively banned Christians from the synagogue:

For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, and the [Nazoreans, so Martin] and the *minim* [which at least includes Jewish Christians] perish as in a moment and be blotted out from the book of life and with the righteous may they not be inscribed. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.<sup>49</sup>

The Jerusalem church continued to rest on the sabbath and attend Temple or synagogue services, and they also met as Christians in private homes to hear teaching from the apostles and to break bread together.<sup>50</sup> The reason for Sunday worship would have been a Christian need for a time of distinctively Christian worship. As Bauckham notes, once we grant that the Jerusalem church had Christian meetings in addition to the Temple or synagogue services, the Jewish Christian observance of the sabbath is not contradictory to Jewish Christian worship on Sunday.<sup>51</sup> After the Christians were removed from the synagogues, only these Sunday meetings would be left. As we see in Acts 20:7 (which pre-dates the Jewish Christians being expelled from the synagogues), Luke writes that the church in Troas was

meeting on the first day of the week for the purpose of breaking bread.

In the first firmly datable evidence of Christianity in Bithynia, Pliny writes to the emperor Trajan in A.D. 110 (Pliny, Ep. 10.5-96) that at the end of the first century, Christians were meeting before dawn and again in the evening of the same day. Pliny described the assembly: “The Christians came together before daybreak on a fixed day and bound themselves with a vow not to steal, commit adultery, and the like.”

Jewett argues that Pliny did not name the day of the week because he had no name at his disposal. The planetary week, from which we get the name Sunday, was not current in Pliny’s day, and it is unlikely that Pliny would be accustomed to using the seven-day division of time by which the Jews and Christians designated the day as the “first day of the week.” However, the Jewish sabbath was well known, and if this assembly had been on the Jewish sabbath it would seem that he would have mentioned it as such, since he was presumably familiar with it. The fact that he did not designate the day implies that no specific name for it was in general use (the name “Lord’s Day” would have been used only among Christians.)<sup>52</sup>

## PART III: SECOND-CENTURY CHURCHES

In the second century, Sunday worship was the norm, and fewer conflicts over the seventh-day sabbath are evident. The second-century references of Ignatius, Magn. 9:1; Gosp. Peter 35, 50; Barn. 15:9; and Justin, 1 Apol. 67 associate Sunday worship with the resurrection. In Barnabas and Justin, other reasons for the significance of Sunday are given first: Sunday representing the eschatological eighth day in Barnabas, and the day on which God began the creation in Justin.<sup>53</sup>

The second-century church was not a monolithic structure but a variegated group of churches with conflicting beliefs.<sup>54</sup> Legalist Jewish Christians, zealous for the law, believed that the whole law had to be obeyed for a person to be saved. Some Jewish Christians kept the sabbath as a matter of national standards, but did not require Gentiles to do so. Others felt they were free from the law, either citing Paul's writings that the sabbath was a shadow of things to come, or that the law was specifically for the Jews.<sup>55</sup>

### Second-century evidence for Sunday worship

Let us look at what several second-century writers said about Sunday worship.

#### The Epistle of Barnabas

The author of the Epistle of Barnabas considers sanctifying the sabbath as an activity of such moral holiness that no one in this present evil age can attain. The following references are in chapter 15.

Barnabas writes that the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and said, "Sanctify ye the Sabbath of the Lord with clean hands and a pure heart." The author then writes about the sabbath in the creation account and says that "this implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years." When the Son returns again he will "destroy the time of the wicked man" and "then shall he truly rest on the seventh day."

He interprets Jesus' eschatological rest not as inactivity, but bringing an end to this world (at the end of six millenia) and bringing into existence the new world at the Parousia. In the eschatological sabbath, Christians will have been fully sanctified, and so will be able to keep holy the sabbath age and share in the eschatological rest of God. According to the author of the Epistle

of Barnabas, obedience to the sabbath command has nothing to do with a day of the week or physical rest, but is a matter of holy living in the future sabbath age that God will have made holy. Jewish sabbaths are therefore unacceptable to God.<sup>56</sup>

In contrasting the Jewish sabbath with the Christian Sunday, Barnabas writes, “Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me.... We keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.”

Barnabas writes:

Further He says to them, “Your new moons and your Sabbaths I cannot endure.” Ye perceive how He speaks: Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, [namely this,] when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. And when he had manifested Himself, He ascended into the heavens.

Bauckham says that Barnabas 15 is an attempt to reinterpret the sabbath command so to disallow its observance, not only by Christians but even by Jews before Christ. He opts for the explanation that the author, probably an Alexandrian Jewish Christian, writes against the observance of Jewish practices to discourage his fellow Christians from adopting them or persisting in them.<sup>57</sup> The epistle must have been written between A.D. 70 (because the author knows of the destruction of the Temple) and 200 (because Clement, who vanishes from the scene shortly after 200, knows Barnabas). He seems concerned to show that the Old Testament Scriptures are Christian Scriptures and that the spiritual meaning is their real meaning.<sup>58</sup>

## Justin

Justin (c. 114-165) was a Gentile born in Flavia Neapolis, a city of Samaria, the modern Nablus. His writings, according to Jewett, are the first detailed description of Christian worship written by a Christian. He is the first Christian writer to use the name Sunday.<sup>59</sup> Justin, one of the main apologists of the second century, responded to criticisms from cultured pagans that Christianity was a religion of barbarians who derived their teachings from the Jews, a primitive people whose best teachers never rose to the level of Greek philosophers.<sup>60</sup>

Justin writes in his *First Apology* 67:

On the day called Sunday all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen....

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior in the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 12, Justin comments on the Jewish sabbath:

The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you: and if you eat unleavened bread, you say the will of God has been fulfilled. The Lord our God does not take pleasure in such observances: if there is any perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so; if any adulterer, let him repent; then he has kept the sweet and true sabbaths of God. If any one has impure hands, let him wash and be pure.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 19, Justin claims that many righteous men in the Old Testament did not keep the sabbath. After discussing Adam, Abel, Enoch, Lot, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, he writes:

Moreover, all those righteous men already mentioned, though they kept no Sabbaths, were pleasing to God; and after them Abraham with all his descendants until Moses, under whom your nation appeared unrighteous and ungrateful to God.... And you were commanded to keep Sabbaths, that you might retain the memorial to God.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 21, Justin discusses how the Jewish sabbath originated:

Moreover, that God enjoined you to keep the Sabbath, and impose

on you other precepts for a sign, as I have already said, on account of your unrighteousness, and that of your fathers.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 47, Justin talks about the futility of keeping the Jewish sabbath:

But if some, through weak-mindedness, wish to observe such institutions as were given by Moses, from which they expect some virtue, but which we believe were appointed by reason of the hardness of the people's hearts, along with their hope in this Christ, and [wish to perform] the eternal and natural acts of righteousness and piety, yet choose to live with the Christians and the faithful, as I said before, not inducing them either to be circumcised like themselves, or to keep the Sabbath, or to observe any other such ceremonies, then I hold that we ought to join ourselves to such, and associate with them in all things as kinsmen and brethren.

But if, Trypho, I continued, some of your race, who say they believe in this Christ, compel those Gentiles who believe in this Christ to live in all respects according to the law given by Moses, or choose not to associate so intimately with them, I in like manner do not approve of them. But I believe that even those, who have been persuaded by them to observe the legal dispensation along with their confession of God in Christ, shall probably be saved.

From Justin's time, most Christians gathered on Sunday morning (though various sabbatarian groups met on Saturday), and from then until now is an unbroken historical sequence in the custom of Sunday observance.<sup>61</sup> When Pliny the Younger, who was governor of the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote to the Emperor Trajan in A.D. 110, he tells the emperor that Christians ceased to meet at the time of the evening meal at his command following through with the emperor's edict against all seditious assemblies (Pliny, *Epistolae*, 10:97). Jewett argues that it is possible that the edict was applied widely in the eastern part of the empire. After that time we hear of agape feasts in the evening having a charitable purpose, but with few exceptions losing their eucharistic character.<sup>62</sup>

## Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria (d. A.D. 215) was the main instructor in Alexandria at the end of the second century. He sought to assure pagans that Christianity was not the absurd superstition some claimed it to be.<sup>63</sup> He wrote

that the sabbath rest of the seventh day is merely a preparation for the true sabbath rest of the eighth day, because the eighth day is the first day and the first day is the Christ, the *arbhē* (beginning) of creation and the light of men.<sup>64</sup>

### **Use of the term Lord's Day in second-century writings**

The term Lord's Day (*kuriakē hēmera*) occurs only once in the New Testament, in Revelation 1:10, but its use there is significant in studying the origins of the weekly day of worship in Christianity.<sup>65</sup>

Baukhham notes thirteen times in first- and second-century writings where *kuriakē hēmera* or *kuriakē* (belonging to the Lord) by itself means the Lord's Day. Only two phrases with *kuriakē*- seem to have become stereotyped or technical phrases by the time of Irenaeus (ca. 130-ca. 200) and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215): *kuriakē hēmera* "Lord's day," and *kuriakai graphai* the "Lord's Scriptures."<sup>66</sup>

A Sabbatarian argument is that the phrase *kuriakē hēmera* is interchangeable with *hēmera (tou) kuriou*. However, the terms are not interchangeable, since by long-established usage the latter referred to the eschatological Day of the Lord.<sup>67</sup> For early Christians to use a new term for the eschatological day would cause confusion, and not long after Revelation was written, we see that *kuriakē hēmera* was an already established name for Sunday. The phrase *kuriakē hēmera* came into use because *hēmera (tou) kuriou* already meant something else, and a new term was needed. *Kuriakē hēmera* was so commonly used that *kuriakē* alone sufficed as the name of the day.<sup>68</sup>

### **Ignatius to the Magnesians**

Ignatius was the second bishop of Antioch early in the second century. Of his seven extant letters, one was to Christians in Magnesia, a town 15 miles from Ephesus. His letter is the sole second-century reference to Gentile Christians being tempted to observe the sabbath.<sup>69</sup> Magnesia was in an area of Asia Minor where Paul encountered his Judaizing problems (Galatians 4:8-10; Colossians 2:16-17). For Ignatius, the practice of Judaism was incompatible with the practice of Christianity.<sup>70</sup>

In Magn. 8:1, Ignatius wrote: "For if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace." In Magn. 10 he wrote: "It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize. For Christianity did not embrace Judaism, but Judaism Christianity."

Combating Judaizers, he wrote in Magn. 9:

For if we still go on observing Judaism, we admit we never received grace.... Those, then, who lived by ancient practices arrived at a new hope. They ceased to keep the Sabbath and lived by the Lord's Day, on which our life as well as theirs shone forth, thanks to Him and his death, though some deny this.... It is monstrous to take Jesus Christ and to live like a Jew.<sup>71</sup>

Ignatius draws a sharp contrast between keeping the sabbath and living according to the Lord's Day. Bauckham contends that this is noteworthy because the matter had not been previously explained like this in extant Christian literature. For Ignatius, the sabbath is a badge of a false attitude to Jesus Christ, while worship on the Lord's Day defines Christianity, as salvation by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This puts Ignatius as an early witness of the dissociation of Christianity from Judaism, which is characteristic of the second century and a wholly negative attitude to sabbath observance.<sup>72</sup>

## Gospel of Peter

The following are from the Gospel of Peter, which was written between A.D. 70 and 150. It contains a fragmentary passion and resurrection narrative with parallels to the four canonical Gospels, plus the theme of Christ preaching to the dead found in 1 Peter.

“And in the night in which the Lord's day was drawing on, as the soldiers kept guard....”

“And at dawn upon the Lord's day, Mary Magdalene...took her friends with her and came to the sepulchre where he was laid.”

In these verses, *kuriakē* replaces *mia ton sabbaton* (“the first day of the week”) used in the narratives about the resurrection in the Gospels.<sup>73</sup>

## Later second-century writings

A passage in the Acts of Peter (Act. Verc. 29) identifies *dies dominica* (“the Lord's Day”) with “the next day after the sabbath,” and the Acts of Paul has the apostle praying “on the sabbath as the Lord's Day drew near.”

Some argue that the earlier references are to Easter, not to Sunday, noting that Easter is an annual celebration of the resurrection, which occurred on Sunday, and that the annual celebration of Easter preceded the weekly celebration of Sunday. This reasoning is flawed because, although there is unambiguous evidence that beginning in the second century Sunday was called *kuriakē*, no unambiguous evidence exists that Easter was ever called

simply *kuriakē*.<sup>74</sup>

From the later second century onward, the evidence shows that Sunday was the regular day of Christian worship everywhere, and no controversy is recorded about whether worship should take place on Sunday. The universality of the custom argues for an early origin. Would a custom that originated in the time between Ignatius and Justin have spread so rapidly and completely that the only evidence of any group not worshipping on Sunday was an extreme wing of the Ebionites?<sup>75</sup>

Bauckham concludes that in Ignatius and the *Gospel of Peter*, the word *kuriakē* is a technical term in fairly widespread use at least in Syria and Asia Minor, showing the first day of the week as the Christian day of regular corporate worship. Based on this, it also becomes likely that *kuriakē hēmera* in Revelation 1:10 also means Sunday.

## Conclusion

Now that we have demonstrated that the first day of the week was the Christian day of regular corporate worship in the church in Asia at the end of the first century, we can chart a course backward from Revelation 1:10 to see where this practice began.

If we view Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:1 in the light of second-century writings discussed above, it is likely that they can be viewed as evidence that Sunday worship was the normal practice in the Pauline churches.<sup>76</sup>

We can then take this trajectory back further. Although no early Christian document explicitly identifies the origin of Sunday worship in the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, the Gospel writers considered it important to mention that those appearances took place on the first day of the week and that Jesus met with his disciples on that day.

When the Gospel accounts were written, Sunday was the day of Christian worship and was apparently understood to be a memorial of the resurrection. When Sunday worship was the practice, Christians must have connected it with the Lord's resurrection on a Sunday.<sup>77</sup> This may have also influenced the way the Gospel writers treated the sabbath controversies as they showed that Jesus was superior to the sabbath and that his actions offended the sabbath-observing Pharisees.

We can then take that trajectory back to the time of the historical Jesus and see that his messianic work superseded the seventh-day sabbath and that as his disciples began to meet on Sunday they could look to the example of Jesus and not feel bound to observe the seventh-day sabbath.

## Endnotes

1 Ralph Martin, *New Testament Foundations* Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 6.

2 D.A. Hagner, "Jewish Christianity," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 580.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 R.N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary: Vol. 41 (Waco: Word, 1982), lxxxviii to xcvi. The various two-front theories of Jewish Christians on one hand and Gentile agnostics on the other is rejected because Paul speaks of his opponents as a homogenous group, and certainly their main contention was that Gentiles be circumcised.

6 Longenecker, 182.

7 P.K. Jewett, *The Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 77.

8 Ibid., 68.

9 Ibid., 68, 77.

10 J. Laansma, "Lord's Day," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 680.

11 Laansma, 680.

12 Dunn, Romans 9-16, 805.

13 17. A. T. Lincoln, "From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective" in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 367. J.D.G. Dunn, *Colossians*, NIGTC, argues for Judaizing opponents, as in Galatia. Whichever way is viewed does not alter the thesis argued in this paper.

14 Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 4.

15 Ibid.

16 Guelich, 127.

17 Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 350.

18 Guelich, 120.

19 Ibid., 123.

20 Guelich, 123-124.

21 Ibid., 127.

22 M.D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967), 97-99.

23 Jewett, 36-38.

24 S. McKnight, "Matthean Community" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1997), 727. See also S.

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McKnight, "Matthew, Gospel of," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1992), 526-541.

25 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 246-247.

26 Hagner, 581.

27 Arland J. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 112.

28 Ibid., 187.

29 Hagner, 333.

30 Carson, 73-74.

31 Nolland, 255.

32 Nolland, Luke 1-9:20, 258.

33 Ibid., 195.

34 Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 55.

35 P.R. Trebilco, "Diaspora Judaism," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 292.

36 Cohen, 55.

37 F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 384.

38 Jewett, 61.

39 Laansma, 681.

40 Jewett, 60-61.

41 Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 106.

42 Beasley-Murray, 74.

43 Danby, 106, 113, 120-121.

44 Jewett, 35-36.

45 Ibid.

46 Carson, 66.

47 M.M. B. Turner, "The Sabbath, Sunday and the Law in Luke-Acts" in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 107.

48 Paul says that Jesus was raised "on the third day," which agrees with the Gospel traditions that Christ would rise on the third day.

49 C.K. Barrett, ed., *The New Testament Background* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 210-211.

50 Samuele Bacchiochi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1977), 212.

51 R.J. Bauckham, "The Lord's Day," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 237.

52 Jewett, 70.

53 Bauckham, 240.

54 Ibid., 255.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 263.

57 Ibid., 262.

58 Maxwell Staniforth, trans., *Early Christian Writings* (Penguin Books: London, 1968), 157.

59 Jewett, 71, 114.

60 Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Vol. 1: the Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 51.

61 Jewett, 69.

62 Ibid.

63 Gonzalez, 71.

64 Bauckham, 276.

65 Ibid., 222.

66 Ibid., 222, 224.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 225.

69 Ibid., 259.

70 Ibid., 259-260.

71 Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 96-97.

72 Bauckham, 261.

73 Ibid., 229.

74 Ibid., 230-231.

75 Ibid., 231.

76 Ibid., 233.

77 Ibid., 236.

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**Michael Morrison** received a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006. He is Dean of Faculty and Professor of New Testament for Grace Communion Seminary. He is the author of numerous e-books and several printed books.

**Joseph Tkach** has been, since 1995, the president of Grace Communion International. He earned a D.Min. degree from Azusa Pacific Graduate School of Theology in 2000.

## **ABOUT THE PUBLISHER...**

Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshipping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in North Carolina. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at [www.gci.org](http://www.gci.org).

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings – there's no obligation. You are a guest.

To find a congregation, write to one of our offices, phone us or visit our website. If we do not have a congregation near you, we encourage you to find another Christian church that teaches the gospel of grace.

We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

Our work is funded by members of the church who donate part of their income to support the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news, and that is what we strive to do in our literature, in our worship services, and in our day-to-day lives.

If this book has helped you and you want to pay some expenses, all donations are gratefully welcomed, and in several nations, are tax-deductible. If you can't afford to give anything, don't worry about it. It is our gift to you. To make a donation online, go to [www.gci.org/donate](http://www.gci.org/donate).

Thank you for letting us share what we value most – Jesus Christ. The good news is too good to keep it to ourselves.

See our website for hundreds of articles, locations of our churches, addresses in various nations, audio and video messages, and much more.

## GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL

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800-423-4444

### **You're Included...**

Dr. J. Michael Fezell talks to leading Trinitarian theologians about the good news that God loves you, wants you, and includes you in Jesus Christ. Most programs are about 28 minutes long. Our guests have included:

Douglas A. Campbell, Duke Divinity School  
Gordon Fee, Regent College  
Cathy Deddo, Trinity Study Center  
Steve McVey, Grace Walk Ministries  
Paul Molnar, St. John's University  
Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network  
Robin Parry, Wipf & Stock  
Andrew Purves, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary  
Andrew Root, Luther Seminary  
Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews  
David Torrance, Church of Scotland (retired)  
Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University  
N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews

Programs are available free for viewing and downloading at [www.youreincluded.org](http://www.youreincluded.org).

### **Speaking of Life...**



Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to

[www.speakingoflife.org](http://www.speakingoflife.org).





## Grace Communion Seminary

### Ministry based on the life and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit

Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of people engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the church.

Why study at Grace Communion Seminary?

- **Worship:** to love God with all your mind.
- **Service:** to help others apply truth to life.
- **Practical:** a balanced range of useful topics for ministry.
- **Trinitarian theology:** a survey of theology with the merits of a Trinitarian perspective. We begin with the question, “Who is God?” Then, “Who are we in relationship to God?” In this context, “How then do we serve?”
- **Part-time study:** designed to help people who are already serving in local congregations. There is no need to leave your current ministry. Full-time students are also welcome.
- **Flexibility:** your choice of master’s level continuing education courses or pursuit of a degree: Master of Pastoral Studies or Master of Theological Studies.
- **Affordable, accredited study:** Everything can be done online.

For more information, go to [www.gcs.edu](http://www.gcs.edu). Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, [www.deac.org](http://www.deac.org). The Accrediting Commission is listed by the U.S. Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency.

## **AMBASSADOR COLLEGE OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY**

Want to better understand God's Word? Want to know the Triune God more deeply? Want to share more joyously in the life of the Father, Son and Spirit? Want to be better equipped to serve others?

Among the many resources that Grace Communion International offers are the training and learning opportunities provided by ACCM. This quality, well-structured Christian Ministry curriculum has the advantage of being very practical and flexible. Students may study at their own pace, without having to leave home to undertake full-time study.

This denominationally recognized program is available for both credit and audit study. At minimum cost, this online Diploma program will help students gain important insights and training in effective ministry service. Students will also enjoy a rich resource for personal study that will enhance their understanding and relationship with the Triune God.

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For more information, go to [www.ambascol.org](http://www.ambascol.org)