

"SHOULD CHRISTIANS KEEP THE SABBATH?"

By David K. Bernard

Groups such as the Seventh-Day Adventists have raised many questions about the Sabbath in the minds of Christians. Should we still keep the seventh-day Sabbath of the Old Testament? Should we keep Sunday as the Sabbath? Has Sabbath keeping been abolished under the new covenant? What meaning does the Sabbath have for us today?

The Command and Its Significance

The command to keep the Sabbath was first given in the law of Moses and is part of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). The word sabbath comes from a Hebrew root that means "to rest, cease, desist, leave off" (Gesenius). On the pain of death, the Israelites were not to do any work on the Sabbath-not even cooking, lighting a fire, gathering firewood, or traveling (Exodus 16:23-30; 20:8-11; 31:12-17; 35:1-3; Numbers 15:32-36). While the Sabbath was a day of worship, sacred assembly, and special sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temple ("an holy convocation"), for the average person it was primarily a day of rest at home ("a sabbath of rest...in all your dwellings") (Leviticus 23:3). Historians agree that synagogues and local Sabbath worship at them did not come into existence until after the destruction of the Temple in 721 B.C.

Several passages of Scripture disclose that the Sabbath was given uniquely to the nation of Israel: "Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you" (Exodus 31:13). (See Ezekiel 20:12-13.) "And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:15).

These passages also reveal a twofold significance for the Sabbath law. First, as we have already seen, the Sabbath provided a weekly day of rest from all work. It was instituted for people's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, not because the day itself was sacred. As Jesus said, "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). This provision of rest was especially significant to the Israelites, for the Sabbath was a constant, vivid reminder that God had delivered them from slavery and entered into covenant relationship with them.

Second, the Sabbath served to sanctify the nation of Israel, that is, to set it apart or separate it from all other nations, for no other nation observed the Sabbath. Along with laws concerning diet, farming practices, and clothing, the Sabbath law distinguished the Israelites from everyone else and identified them physically as YHWH's chosen people.

The Sabbath and the New Covenant

The church today is not under God's covenant with Israel as epitomized by the Ten Commandments, but under the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34-; Romans 7:5-6; Galatians 3:23-35; 4:-21-31). As a result, the church no longer observes the physical signs and ceremonies of the old covenant, such as circumcision (Galatians 6:15). God and His Word are unchanging, but some of His commands relate only to certain people or a certain time. While God's moral law never changes, Christians are not subject to the ceremonial law of the Old Testament (Mark 7:14--19; Acts 11:5-9; 15:1-29).

The Jewish Sabbath was part of that ceremonial law; the Sabbath is not inherently moral. In Isaiah 1:10-20 God contrasted ceremonial observances - including blood sacrifices, feasts, and Sabbaths - with moral standards, saying He detested the Israelites' keeping of the former because they did not live up to the latter.

If Sabbath keeping were a universal, eternal moral duty, God would not have expressed displeasure with it under any circumstances.

Similarly, Jesus compared the Sabbath to other ceremonial law, which could be superseded even under the old covenant in cases of higher moral need (Matthew 12:1-13). Jesus and Paul affirmed the moral law of the Old Testament; they referred to some of the Ten Commandments as stating eternal moral standards, but it is notable that they did not mention the Sabbath law in these references (Mark 10:19; 12:28-31; Romans 13:8-10).

God used the ceremonial law including blood sacrifices, dietary laws, circumcision, Sabbaths, and feasts-

as types and shadows of truth to be found in Christ and His gospel. Since we now have the substance, or reality, we no longer need to observe the types and shadows. "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ" (Colossians 2:16-17).

Other New Testament passages also show that Sabbath keeping is not a requirement of the new covenant. It is permissible to regard a certain day as special, but it is wrong to make it a moral duty for oneself or others. "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it...Let us not therefore judge one another any more" (Romans 14:5-6, 13). "How turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain" (Galatians 4:9-11).

Jesus observed the Sabbath because He was a Jew living under the old covenant. For the same reason, He was circumcised and observed the Jewish feast days. At the same time, Jesus claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath, indicating that He could apply or change it as He saw fit (Mark 2:28).

At first, Jewish Christians apparently kept the Sabbath as part of their culture. In Acts 10-11 Peter and the Jewish church were still adhering to Jewish dietary laws for the same reason. In Acts 21 Paul underwent a Jewish purification ceremony, which included a Temple offering, in order to reassure Jews that he was not trying to destroy their culture. He also attended synagogues often in order to preach to Jews. But in Acts 15 the Jerusalem Council ruled that Gentile Christians did not have to keep the law of Moses, except for four items that they listed in a letter to all the Gentile churches. Significantly, the Sabbath was not one of them.

Some people point to the creation story as proof that the Sabbath law is eternal. God "ended his work" of creation and "rested" on the seventh day; moreover, He "blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it" (Genesis 2:2-3). When God gave the Ten Commandments, He cited this precedent as justification for the Sabbath law (Exodus 20:11; 31:17).

Since Genesis was one of the five books of the law originally written for Israel, the creation story was naturally used to support the Sabbath command to Israel. While the Genesis account indicates the need for a weekly day of rest, it does not command Sabbath observance as such. The Bible nowhere states that people before the law observed the Sabbath as a day of rest or worship. Moreover, due to many changes in calendars over the centuries, it is impossible to say that the seventh day of Genesis 2 is the modern Saturday.

We should also note that the Bible nowhere indicates that the Sabbath has been changed to Sunday or that God intends for Sunday to be a new Christian Sabbath.

It should be pointed out that few persons keep the Sabbath law today. In order to do so, a person could not perform any work or light a fire. Thus he could not use any type of stove, heater, internal combustion engine, or electricity. Moreover, he could not cause anyone else to violate the Sabbath, which he would do if he ate in a restaurant or used utilities, the telephone, or the radio.

Worship on Sunday

Christians are to be faithful to local church meetings whenever they are held (Hebrews 10:25), and any day is appropriate for a special spiritual observance (Romans 14:5-6).

From the earliest times, Christians have usually conducted their main worship services on Sunday. Early believers chose the day of Christ's resurrection to emphasize that they were not under the old covenant, which the Sabbath symbolized, but under the new covenant, which His resurrection instituted. Thus the believers at Troas met on the first day of the week for worship (Acts 20:7), and Paul instructed the Corinthians to collect offerings on the first day (1 Corinthians 16:2). John was "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" when Jesus appeared to him in a vision (Revelation 1:10).

Jesus Himself established the precedent of meeting on the first day. Not only did He first appear to His assembled disciples on the evening of His resurrection day (John 20:19), but His next appearance to the group was on the same day one week later (John 20:26). ("After eight days" is reckoned in the ancient Jewish manner, counting both the starting and ending day.) And the Holy Spirit fell on the assembled

disciples on Pentecost Sunday.

Sunday was a normal work day in the pagan Roman Empire, so Christians usually met on that day in the early morning or in the evening. After Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal and then began supporting it, he proclaimed Sunday an official holiday. He did not originate Sunday worship but merely legalized and facilitated the existing practice. However, his action did encourage the view that Sunday was a new Christian Sabbath.

Spiritual Application

From the Sabbath law we can draw a principle of enduring importance and continuing application: the need to provide a time of rest for our bodies and our spirits. In addition, Colossians 2:16-17 speaks of a deeper significance, describing the Sabbath as a type or foreshadowing of a greater reality to be found in Christ. Like the Levitical sacrifices, the Sabbaths are fulfilled in Him.

In other words, the Sabbath points to the spiritual rest that Jesus promised. "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden," He invited, "and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Significantly, in the passage immediately after this statement, Jesus indicated that the Sabbath law was ceremonial in nature and asserted His lordship over it (Matthew 12:1-13).

It is specifically through the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the initial sign of speaking in tongues that we partake of the spiritual rest Christ provides. Isaiah 28:11-12 promises, "For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing."

The Apostle Peter apparently alluded to this promise when he preached in Acts 3:19, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord." The last clause of this verse describes the gift of the Holy Spirit, as shown by Acts 2:38, a parallel statement from another sermon of Peter's: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

We also receive sanctification, or power to separate from sin and identify with Christ, through the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2). Just as the physical Sabbath provided physical rest and sanctification for the Israelites under the old covenant, so the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, provides spiritual rest and sanctification for the church under the new covenant. Just as the Sabbath was a constant reminder of Israel's deliverance from bondage and of their covenant relationship with God, so the Holy Spirit is a constant reminder of our deliverance from sin and of our new covenant relationship with God. The Spirit gives us power over sin (Acts 1:8; Romans 8:4-), and the Spirit effects the new covenant in our hearts (II Corinthians 3:3; Hebrews 8:8-11). By living in the Spirit, we enjoy the true Sabbath every day.

The enduring significance of the Sabbath is beautifully described in Hebrews 3:7-4:11. Because of their unbelief, the Israelites did not enter into the rest that God provided for them, but the church today still has a promise of spiritual rest. And according to Hebrews 4:4-11, this spiritual rest is the true and ultimate fulfillment of God's rest on the seventh day of creation.

Hebrews 4:9 states emphatically, there remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God: The word rest here a translation of the Greek word sabbatismos, which literally means a Sabbath keeping or a Sabbath rest (Thayer). Does this verse refer to physical Old Testament Sabbath observance? No. The next verse states that our Sabbath consists of resting, or ceasing, from our works, just as God did from His (Hebrews 4:10). In other words, to enjoy true spiritual rest, we must renounce the works of the flesh and stop trying to earn salvation by our own works. Instead, we must exercise faith in Christ's work on our behalf. Through faith, we receive His Holy Spirit and live daily by the Spirit's guidance and power. The Spirit works in us to regenerate and sanctify, thus preparing us for the eternal Sabbath rest.

Of course, true faith is not passive; it is an active reliance upon God that issues forth in obedience. Thus Hebrews 4:11 admonishes, "Let us labour {be diligent, make every effort} therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief."

Yes, we have a Sabbath rest-the refreshing presence and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit that we enjoy every day. And, yes, the ultimate Sabbath rest awaits us still-eternal rest in the presence of the One to whom the Old Testament Sabbath points: Jesus Christ our Lord.

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