

Why Christians Should Keep the Sabbath

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Most professing Christian Churches keep Sunday as their day of worship. Have you ever stopped to ask why? Where in the Bible is Sunday commanded to be kept as a weekly day of rest and worship?

On the other hand, if you are a Sabbath keeper, and have never been challenged on this question of Sabbath observance, you almost surely will be at some point in your life.

The Sabbath was set aside as holy time from creation (Genesis 2:1-3). It serves as a memorial of creation (Exodus 20:8-11). It was not made only for the Jews, as some allege. There were no Jews at that time. It was made for mankind (Mark 2:27-28).

The Sabbath is a test commandment. Requiring Sabbath observance is an important test (but not the only test) God uses to distinguish those who are willing to obey him from those who are not (Exodus 16:4-5, 13-30). One of the primary reasons God finally rejected the nation of Israel and sent them into captivity was their refusal to faithfully keep the Sabbath commandment (Ezekiel 20:12-13, 16, 19-20, 24).

Keeping the Sabbath was not only a test of Israel's faithfulness, but it was to be an identifying sign between God and the people he sanctified (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12, 20). It was to be kept by the people God had chosen, the Israelites, as a perpetual covenant, to teach them that it is God who sanctifies (Exodus 31:13-18; cf. Genesis 2:2-3).

Those under the New Covenant now constitute the true Church of God, also referred to in Scripture as the "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16; cf. Romans 2:28-29; Hebrews 8:8-13). Such are sanctified by belief in the truth, receiving the Holy Spirit upon repentance, and being forgiven of sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (John 17:17, 19; Acts 2:38; 26:18; Ephesians 5:26; 2 Thessalonians 2:12-13; Hebrews 10:29; 1 John 1:6-7).

Although the Sabbath command was given to the Israelites, along with the other commandments, it was never intended *only* for the Israelites, and certainly not *only* for the Jews. The tribe of Judah constituted only one of the thirteen tribes of Israel. The nation of Judah that emerged following Solomon's apostasy, included those dwelling in the lands allotted to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, along with most of the Levites (2 Chronicles 10:17; 11:13-14). Most of the members of the other ten tribes separated from Judah to form the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 11:31-35; 12:16-17). But some of these continued to worship in Jerusalem after the division (2 Chronicles 11:1, 16). The Sabbath continued to be obligatory for all the seed of Jacob (Israel), as far as God was concerned (Isaiah 58:1, 13-14).

In Scripture, the Sabbath is never called “the Jew's Sabbath.” The Sabbath is not referred to in Scripture as “Israel's Sabbath.” It is referred to as “the holy Sabbath to the Lord” (Yahweh, the Eternal, the Ever Living; Exodus 16:23, cf. Exodus 16:25, *et al.*), and “the Sabbath of the Lord” (Exodus 20:10; Leviticus 23:3; *et al.*). God calls them “My Sabbaths” (Exodus 31:13; Leviticus 19:3; Ezekiel 20:16; 44:24; *et al.*). Jesus said, “... the Son of Man [meaning himself, the Messiah] is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8).

The people of Israel were to keep the Sabbath, but the “stranger,” foreigner, or non-Israelites among them, were also specifically commanded to keep the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10). Israel, had it obeyed God, was to become a nation of priests, to be a model for all nations in how to serve God, and to teach them (Exodus 19:6; Psalm 67:1-7; 96:3-9; 98:2-3; Malachi 2:7). Even the failures of the ancient Israelites, and how God dealt with them, were to serve as examples for all of us (1 Corinthians 10:11). This includes the punishments they received for disobedience to the commandments of God (1 Corinthians 10:5-12; Hebrews 3:7-19; 4:1-11).

In Isaiah is a prophecy pertaining to our time, when God's salvation is near (Isaiah 56:1; cf. Matthew 24:22; Hebrews 9:28). In the context of our time, Scripture says, “Blessed is the man who does this, And the son of man who lays hold on it; Who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And keeps his hand from doing any evil” (Isaiah 56:2). And, “Also the sons of the foreigner Who join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him, And to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants -- Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And holds fast My covenant [the New Covenant] -- Even them I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Isaiah 56:6-7).

The true Church of God holds that the Christian Bible, including the Old and New Testaments, is God's revelation to man and is to be studied and obeyed as the word of God (2 Timothy 3:15; 2 Peter 1:20-21). The Bible teaches that Christians are required by God to order their lives according to God's word and obey it (Luke 4:4; John 8:31). Included is the obligation to keep the ten commandments, not only in the letter, but in the Spirit as well (Deuteronomy 11:1; Matthew 5:17-22, 27-28; 19:17-19; Romans 13:9-10; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Hebrews 8:10; James 2:8-12; 1 John 2:3; 5:2-3; 2 John 1:5-6; Revelation 12:17; 14:12).

Every single one of the ten commandments is confirmed in the New Testament as being obligatory for Christians (e.g., Ephesians 6:1-3; Colossians 3:5-9; Revelation 21:8). But of all the ten commandments, the commandment specifically mentioned more times in the New Testament than any other is the Sabbath commandment. And in no instance is there any statement or suggestion that the Sabbath is “done away,” or no longer binding.

The fourth commandment states in the New King James Version: “Remember the

Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates" (Exodus 20:9-10). Scripture further states: "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings" (Leviticus 23:3).

Thus the Bible clearly teaches that the seventh day of the week, according to the Hebrew calendar, which has been preserved among the Jewish people for thousands of years, is a commanded day of rest and worship for Christians. In a prophecy pertaining to Christians near the end of this age, when the tribulation of the end time is about to begin, Christ admonished his disciples to "pray that your flight may not be ... on the Sabbath" (Matthew 24:20). Obviously, Jesus expects his disciples to be keeping the Sabbath at that time.

It's specifically stated: "Then *there* remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9, English Majority Text Version). The Greek σαββατισμός (*sabbatismos*) means Sabbath rest, Sabbath observance, or Sabbath keeping (*Greek - English Lexicon*, Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich; *Analytical Greek Lexicon*). The verse could just as well be translated, there remains Sabbath observance, or Sabbath keeping, for the people of God. The context shows that the Sabbath is a type of God's kingdom, and in keeping it we are prefiguring in a small way the kingdom of God.

From the standpoint of Scripture, and as the Jewish people have understood for millennia, biblical days begin and end at "evening," or when the sun sets (Genesis 1:5; Leviticus 22:6-7; Leviticus 23:32). So the biblical Sabbath coincides with Friday sunset to Saturday sunset according to the common civil calendar used in much of the world.

The original Christianity of the Bible is that taught and practiced by Jesus Christ and his apostles, as recorded in the Scripture. The record of Scripture is that Jesus and the New Testament Church kept the Sabbath (Luke 4:16; Acts 17:2; 18:4). There is no Scripture that indicates that the Sabbath command was altered or abolished. There are a few scattered references to the first day of the week in the New Testament, that some have tried to use as evidence of Sunday keeping, but on close examination none provides any real proof that the New Testament Church kept Sunday in place of the Sabbath.

One of these is found in John 20:19-20. The disciples were assembled "in the evening," from the Greek ὄψιλος (*opsios*), which can mean afternoon before sunset or evening after sunset. This was in the afternoon of the first day of the week. This was not a religious service to celebrate Christ's resurrection, as some allege, but they were gathered there behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. It would have been customary for them to be staying in Jerusalem during the Feast of

Unleavened Bread, or gathering there for meals during the Feast (cf. Deuteronomy 12:5-7, 17-18, 26-27; Luke 24:33). They did not even believe Jesus had risen until he appeared to them in their midst (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:34-41).

Luke recounts in a summary fashion some of the history of the early Church up to about 60 A.D. in the book of Acts. While the Sabbath is mentioned specifically nine times in the book of Acts, in ways that show clearly the Sabbath was being kept among Christians, the first day of the week is mentioned only once (Acts 20:7). Note they had come together to "break bread," in other words, to eat a meal (not the "Lord's Supper," Acts 20:11, cf. Acts 2:44-46). This was a special farewell meeting at Troas in Asia Minor for Paul and his party. The meeting occurred after the Sabbath, in the evening, because he was to leave the next morning (Sunday morning). The Greek *επαυριον* (*epaurion*) can mean upon the next day or upon the morning. The Greek word *αυριον* (*aurion*) is derived from a word which means "the morning air," or dawn (*Strong's Greek Dictionary; From Sabbath To Sunday*, Bacchiocchi, pp. 103-104). Paul stayed up all night eating and talking (Acts 20:11), and left after daybreak on Sunday. The most significant thing here is that Paul waited until Sunday morning to leave on his trip, implying that he kept the Sabbath the day before, as was his custom (Acts 16:13; 17:2).

In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, the Corinthians were asked to lay up in store each week on the first day provisions which would later be collected and taken to Jerusalem for famine relief. There is nothing in this Scripture that suggests public assemblies. The Greek in 1 Corinthians 16:2 reads "lay by himself," i.e., in his own home. Darby's translation reads "let each of you put by at home." The Analytical-Literal translation reads, "let each one of you be putting aside [something], storing up." The Green's Literal Translation reads, "let each of you put by himself, storing up whatever he is prospered." A. T. Robertson renders it "Lay by him in store.... By himself, in his home." (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*).

This has nothing to do with a collection at a religious service, but storing up goods at home to be later assembled for distribution. Paul wanted this to be done ahead of his arrival, so he would not have to wait for a collection drive to be made after his arrival, but simply be able to gather and transport the goods that had already been set aside immediately to Jerusalem. The fact that Paul designates the first day of the week to do the work of setting the goods aside shows it was not being kept as a day of rest.

Another Scripture often used to claim the Sabbath is done away is Colossians 2:16-17: "Let none therefore judge you in meat or in drink, or in matter of feast, or new moon, or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ" (Darby; the Greek has no word for "is" in this verse, thus it should read, "the body of Christ"). Note that Sabbaths *are* (not were) a shadow (Greek: *σκιά* [*skia*], shadow, outline), of things to come. "Are" is from the Greek *ἐστί* (*esti*), which is in the present tense, indicative mood, in this verse, which usually implies present and continuing action. The Sabbaths have prophetic significance, which is

often not well understood except by those who keep them. This does not tell us not to keep the Sabbaths, anymore than it tells us not to eat or drink. It's about not allowing outsiders to judge us in these matters, but the Church, whose head is Christ (Colossians 2:18-19; 1:18). The true Church will be keeping Christ's commands (Luke 6:46).

Paul wrote, "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). If this statement is to be taken as abrogating Sabbath observance, as is often alleged, then it would also mean no special significance should be attached to Sunday, either. Rather, the point is the Church does not enforce arbitrary fast days of human tradition (note the context has to do with eating). The Pharisees typically fasted on Mondays and Thursdays (cf. Luke 18:12). It became a custom in paganized Christianity not only to keep Sunday, but to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. "Canon 69 of the Holy Apostles designates that any hierarch or priest or deacon or subdeacon or reader or chanter who does not fast during Great Lent and Wednesday and Friday is to be deposed. If a layperson does not fast during these times (unless he cannot fast on account of bodily illness), he is to be excommunicated" [*Exomologetarion (A Manual of Confession)*, by St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite].

Among non-Christian religions that observe fasts at certain times are Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. The ancient Babylonians, Egyptians and others fasted in honor of Adonis and Osiris (Tammuz; cf. Ezekiel 8:14; *The Two Babylons*, Hislop, pp. 150-152, 170). Sir James Frazer in his work *The Golden Bough* documents a variety of pagan fasts.

Some Protestant commentators deny that Romans 14:5 has anything to do with the Sabbath. *Clarke's Commentary* states on this verse: "That the Sabbath is of lasting obligation may be reasonably concluded from its institution (See Clarke on Ge 2:3) and from its typical reference. All allow that the Sabbath is a type of that rest in glory which remains for the people of God. Now, all types are intended to continue in full force till the antitype, or thing signified, take place; consequently, the Sabbath will continue in force till the consummation of all things." Indeed, the Scriptures show clearly that when God's kingdom is established on earth, the Sabbath will continue to be kept (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 44:24).

Even many non-sabbatarian Bible historians admit that the Sabbath was kept by the early Church. For example, in his book, *The Story of the Christian Church*, Jesse Lyman Hurlbut states: "As long as the church was mainly Jewish, the Hebrew sabbath was kept; but as it became increasingly Gentile the first day gradually took the place of the seventh day" (1970, p. 36). Other scholars have shown that Sabbath keeping was common among Christians even in Gentile areas until well into the second century and beyond (cf. Acts 13:42-44). In fact, in every era since the founding of the New Testament Church, there have been Sabbath keepers among those professing to be Christians. Samuele Bacchiocchi, in his book

Sabbath to Sunday, offers evidence that the widespread abandonment of the Sabbath among professing Christians did not occur until the time of the Emperor Hadrian (117-138 A.D.), who severely persecuted the Jews and outlawed Sabbath keeping in the Roman Empire (p. 305). He also shows that the impetus for the abandonment of the Sabbath among professing Christians emanated preeminently from Rome (*ibid.* pp. 306-307). Faithful Christians, however, who were in the minority, continued to keep the Sabbath in accordance with God's command.

Some Catholic authorities have admitted openly that there is no Scriptural basis for Sunday worship, and that the sanctification of Sunday as a day of rest and worship rests solely on the authority of the Catholic Church. For example, Jesuit scholar John Gilmary Shea wrote, "... Sunday, as a day of the week set apart for obligatory public worship... is purely a creation of the Catholic Church" (*The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 8; cited in *Sabbath To Sunday*, p. 311 n.). The Catholic Cardinal James Gibbons wrote, "... you may read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and you will not find a single line authorizing the sanctification of Sunday. The Scriptures enforce the religious observance of Saturday, a day which we never sanctify" (*The Faith of Our Fathers*, sixty-third edition, 1904, pp. 111-112).

Jesus condemned the practice of "vain... worship," "teaching as doctrines the commandments of men," of religious leaders who "reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition," "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition" (Mark 7:6-13).

In accordance with the teaching of Scripture, members of God's Church are obligated to refrain from secular work on the weekly Sabbath (and annual Sabbaths listed in Leviticus 23, as well). Allowance is made for genuine emergencies or spiritual work, such as attending Sabbath services, teaching the Bible, praying and healing (Mark 1:21; Mark 3:4-5; Luke 4:16; Acts 13: 44; 16:13). However, the Sabbath law forbids routine work at a secular occupation on the Sabbath, and other activities not in keeping with the sanctity of the Sabbath (Isaiah 58:13-14).

To be in God's Kingdom, to be faithful disciples of Christ, we must strive to keep God's commandments, including the Sabbath (John 14:15; Revelation 22:14).

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