

The Sabbath

The Sabbath rest has been at the center of much controversy since the earliest times. Over the centuries numerous attempts have been made to resolve the argument surrounding which day of the week truly constitutes the Sabbath, and if such a day is even relevant any longer. The traditional view claims the New Testament substituted the seventh day Sabbath with Sunday, the first day of the week upon which Christ arose. Yet evidence for this position hasn't been forthcoming and no scholar has been able to clearly prove it with valid text. The now growing trend is to simply eliminate any type of physical resting day in favor of spiritualizing the Sabbath and its observation.

My own experience with the Sabbath has been rather interesting. I must admit that my understanding of it has vacillated considerably before I finally settled on a permanent position. I started off persuaded in keeping the Sabbath and aligned it with the seventh day chosen by God at the beginning of creation (Gen 2:2). I then encountered some convincing teachings that claimed a Christian was free from having to observe a physical rest as long as he entered the spiritual "rest" promised by God to all who rely on Jesus for salvation and not their good works (Heb 4:9). So I resolved to discard the physical observation and substitute it for the spiritual one instead, and this is what I did for several years. Yet more recently, the Lord had once again prompted me to reexamine the matter with much more prayer and searching of His Word. Now I've come to understand some very important facts about the Sabbath that I hadn't realized before, which I hope to share with you in the following study.

THE FORMULA

Evangelicals have long been using a particular formula to cancel out the Sabbath. Here is how they do it. They use the passages in Romans 2:13, 3:31, and 6:14-15, which reveal that the Believer is "no longer under Law, but under grace" to invalidate the application of the Law, thus making the Sabbath irrelevant or obsolete. In conjunction with these passages they then refer to Colossians 2:16, which states: ***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.*** This verse, they reason, is proof that God no longer judges us in respect to whether we observe a Sabbath or not. Afterwards, they will usually point your attention to the passages in Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2 in order to show you how the solemnity of the seventh day has been transferred by Christ to the first day of the week. And in case you still aren't fully persuaded they will typically

remind you of all the many times Christ healed on the Sabbath in direct variance to the practice and traditions of the Pharisees.

So let's take a close look at this formula to see whether it's valid or not.

NOT UNDER THE LAW

To start, we must ask the following question: What did Paul actually mean when attempting to show that we are no longer under the Law, but under grace (Rom 2:13; 3:31; 6:14-15)? Was he suggesting that the Law was inconsequential to the Believer? Was he claiming that we could live oblivious to the Ten Commandments or the other binding portions? Actually, not at all! Here are some Scriptures to prove it:

*Do we then **make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law** (Rom 3:31).*

*For not the hearers of the law are just before God, **but the doers of the law shall be justified** (Rom 2:13).*

***Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good** (Rom 7:12).*

*If then I do that which I would not, **I consent unto the law that it is good** (Rom 7:16).*

***But we know that the law is good, if a man use it legitimately** (1 Tim 1:8).*

*I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; **but with the flesh the law of sin** (Rom 7:25).*

Paul wasn't speaking out of both sides of his mouth here, and he certainly wasn't contradicting himself. What he meant by this statement is very simple. A Christian was no longer subject to **the curse and penalty of the Law** as long as he entered into covenant with God through faith:

*For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus **hath made me free** from the **law of sin and death** (Rom 8:2).*

But if the **ministration of death**, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was **to be done away** (2 Cor 3:7).

The penalty of the Law was its “**ministration of death**” and applied to any person who failed to keep **every part** of the Law **in its entirety**. He mentions this clearly in Galatians 3:10, where he says, *For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, **Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.***

Did you see that?? The Law pronounces a curse upon any who do not submit **perfectly to all of its dictates**. **In contrast, the New Covenant extends grace instead of condemnation to every born again Believer in the event they fail to uphold God’s Law.** Furthermore, we are no longer required to comply with the **full letter** of the Law since much of it has been abolished and nailed to the cross (Col 2:14-16). So what does this tell us? It tells us that we are free from the “**law of sin and death**”, BUT NOT FREE TO DISOBEY THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD AS REINFORCED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

It should also be noted that Jesus gave many of the commandments of the Old Testament spiritual depth and meaning by demonstrating how hate and lust were the equivalent of murder and adultery (Mat 5:21). **In essence, the Law is now multi-layered, providing for both a physical and spiritual application. IT HAS NOT BEEN DISCARDED!**

So far we’ve shown that the Law’s ministry was one of death and condemnation. And we boldly affirm that Jesus came to usher in the New Covenant ministry of grace. **He came to deliver us from the penalty and curse of the Law. But the Law wasn’t removed.** This is obvious. It’s still there in our Bible in the event we must consult it as our standard of right and wrong (Rom 7:7). Moreover, through Christ, we now obtain mercy and are empowered to obey whatever God requires of us (Php 4:13).

Note: For reasons mentioned in our main article (Comparing God’s Covenants), we no longer consider the bulk of the ceremonial or civil rulings to be valid in the New Testament.

PROOF TEXTS THAT APPEAR TO BE ANTI SABBATH

The following passages are used erroneously to invalidate the Sabbath rest. Let's examine them to see exactly what they mean:

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 (Col 2:16).

One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. *Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind* (Rom 14:5).

For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world (Heb 4:3).

Colossians 2:16 doesn't in any way refer to the weekly Sabbath or seventh day. On the contrary, this verse specifically deals with the Levitical (ceremonial) portion of the Law, not the Ten Commandments. Rules relating to meat, drink, feast days (holydays), new moons, and "Sabbaths", were all specified under the ceremonial portion of the Law.

Many Christians are ignorant of the fact that the Jewish high holy days were designated as Sabbath resting days, even though they didn't fall on the weekly seventh day Sabbath and were altogether distinct from it. Here's proof:

*And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread unto the LORD:**ye shall do no servile work therein. ...It shall be unto you a sabbath of rest,** and ye shall afflict your souls: in the ninth day of the month at even, from even unto even, **shall ye celebrate your sabbath.** Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the LORD seven days: **on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a Sabbath** (Lev 23:6-39).*

In Romans 14:5 we find a similar misunderstanding. Christians are quick to assume that Paul is using his authority to void out one of the Ten Commandments—God's Law written in stone—TWICE? But this is not the case. Nowhere in the chapter is the Sabbath ever mentioned. The way to understand this text then is to simply examine the context around it:

Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.
*For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: ...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. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks. I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean** (Rom 14:1-14).*

From the very beginning, Paul makes it clear that he's about to pass judgment over **debatable matters**—the secondary issues and nonessentials of the faith we often bicker about. That is what he meant here by “**doubtful disputations**”. Scholars agree that the epistle of Romans was written to a primarily Jewish audience who understood the Law (Rom 7:1). None to whom this letter is addressed would have any reason to consider the seventh day Sabbath a debatable issue, let alone a dubious one. There was no doubt in anyone's mind how they were to observe a Sabbath rest. It was as clear as day (no pun intended). So I would have strong reservations about lumping any of the Ten Commandments into the category of **debatable matters**. Yet some Christians skip right over this fact as if it were non-existent. But what we do find being discussed here, instead, are matters pertaining to dietary laws (clean and unclean v.14) and the observance of **Jewish holydays**, all of which come under the **ceremonial rulings** of the Law. Paul settles the issue by giving each party freedom to follow their individual preferences without casting judgment on the other. There is no reason to misappropriate the information here as a legal passage for breaking one of God's eternal laws.

Hebrews 4:3 is the final passage to be examined. This passage is often quoted in an attempt to prove that the physical day of rest was substituted for a spiritual one instead. However, we will soon discover that such is not the case:

1 Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. 2 For unto us was the gospel preached, as well

as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it. **3 For we which have believed do enter into rest**, as he said, *As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.* **4** For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise, *And God did rest the seventh day from all his works.* **5** *And in this place again, If they shall enter into my rest.* **6** *Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief:* **9** *There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.* **10** *For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.* **11** **Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief** (Heb 4:1-11).

The above passages are being employed by the writer of Hebrews to encourage Believers not to fall into the same pattern of unbelief as the ancient Israelites. They failed to enter the Promised Land, a **type** of Sabbath rest, and perished instead in the wilderness because of unbelief. In verse 3, we see that all who call upon Christ through faith have entered into **a similar type of rest** by ceasing to depend on their own works for salvation. Finally, verses 9-10 encourage us to continue to **“labor” to maintain our faith so that after this life we may qualify to enter God’s eternal rest yet to come. These analogous passages do not in any way suggest that we are free to break the Sabbath.**

THE SABBATH

GOD’S FIRST INSTITUTION

The Sabbath existed long before the Mosaic Law came to be. In fact, it was the very first institution erected by God as a memorial to testify of creation week. While many theories exist to explain the purpose of the Sabbath, here’s what the Scriptures tell us:

And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made (Gen 2:2-3).

As noted in the above verse, God Himself took rest on the Sabbath (v.3). This is important to understand. Yet we must recognize that the Sabbath is not about a physical rest. God is unlimited and requires no rest. His action was therefore used to

acknowledge the Sabbath and forever memorialize His creative powers. The Sabbath **signaled to man** that none else was Creator, but Him alone. Essentially, the Sabbath became **God's seal of authority** as CREATOR OVER CREATION. Those who observe the Sabbath must realize that they are making a statement about God's infinite authority over the universe.

THE SABBATH WAS MADE FOR MAN

Mark 2:27 is a passage that has often confused me. It conjures up the idea that the Sabbath is subservient to man. I cannot tell you how often I've heard it used to justify breaking the Sabbath and minimizing its authority. But I just recently came to understand its true meaning. Before I explain, let's examine this passage:

And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath (Mar 2:27).

No one can argue with this definitive statement. Jesus, **it would seem**, places the Sabbath under man's authority, and not the other way around, right? No, wrong!! The confusion here comes from the poorly translated word, "for"—*The sabbath was made **for** man...* This word appears in the Greek as *dia*. It simply means, "on account of", "because of", "by way of", or, "by reason of". Allow me to show you how we should understand Christ's statement. I'll use the analogy of the common "stop" sign. The stop sign is employed everywhere on our roads in order to improve driving conditions and prevent fatal crashes. **The stop sign is there to serve man**. It regulates his driving and affords him the protection he needs while navigating through traffic. But it also represents the authority of the law or government over the roads. One would be foolish to think they are able to choose when and how they will obey the stop sign. So while it exists to protect man and safeguard the roads from potential hazards, and even while **it serves man**, the stop sign is man's authority, not the other way around!

The same principle can be found in the Garden of Eden. When God placed the "tree of knowledge" at the center of the Garden, He did so on account of /because of man (for man). Yet it was there to test man's resolve to comply with God's rule and authority. It served man in the sense that it continually reminded him that there was a supreme and omnipotent Being designated as his Sovereign.

In the same way, the Sabbath is also our servant. It was made specifically for us. It doesn't govern the animals, the angels, or anyone else, but **us**. It represents our

authority (God), and it's there to test our resolve to submit and comply with that authority, in deference to God's rule, not our own.

DID JESUS REALLY BREAK THE SABBATH?

Many have attempted to use Christ as the perfect poster child for crusading against the Sabbath. Jesus is made to look as if He spent most of His time deliberately breaking the Sabbath and teaching others to do so also. The logic behind this theory is actually more damaging than one realizes. If we truly believe that Jesus broke the Sabbath in His lifetime, He would have essentially made Himself out to be a fraud. But we are told otherwise:

*For he hath made him to be sin for us, **who knew no sin**; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2Co 5:21).*

*For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, **yet without sin** (Heb 4:15).*

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Mat 5:19).

These verses clearly teach that Jesus was without sin. Now if Jesus was sinless, and the Bible defines sin as the "transgression of the Law" (1 Jn 3:4), then it must be that Jesus *never once* broke the Sabbath. Perhaps, then, it's time to modify our way of thinking. Instead of looking at Christ as the perfect lawbreaker, we must acknowledge Him as our perfect example of true Sabbath observance. We must learn how to keep Sabbath the way He did, and not like the Pharisees, whom He often condemned.

LORD OF THE SABBATH

*And he said unto them, **That the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath** (Luk 6:5).*

When attacked by the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus responded by reminding them of His authority. He was "Lord of the Sabbath". **As the "Lawgiver", who was better qualified to define what was truly right or wrong, than He?**

The Pharisees were wrong for condemning Him, and even more wrong for doubting the authority by which He operated.

But Christians often deduce more than they should from this text. They quote it as though Jesus was waving his credentials around so that He could justify breaking the Sabbath. Not so! **Jesus was Lord over all the commandments, not only the Sabbath.** If He thought someone should be killed, He could execute that person on the spot and be completely justified in doing so. And if He felt a particular individual should be liberated from their wealth, He could easily do so. Because as Lord of the universe all was rightfully His anyway. So just because Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath doesn't mean He used His power **to live above the Law!**

SUNDAY OR SATURDAY?

No one can argue the fact that Jesus arose on the first day of the week. **He kept the Sabbath holy all the way until He ascended to be with His Father. He rested in the tomb until the Sabbath was fully accomplished and the first day of the week had already dawned:**

***Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week**, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils (Mar 16:9).*

Besides the clear evidence that Jesus kept Sabbath, several scriptures exist to prove that the first-century Church also kept Sabbath. Ironically, these very same passages are employed as proof text in favor of transferring the solemnity of the seventh day rest to the first day of the week. But allow me to demonstrate why such claims are erroneous and contrary to the actual meaning of these verses. Notice:

***And upon the first day of the week**, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight (Act 20:7).*

***Upon the first day of the week** let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come (1 Cor 16:2).*

The Sabbath was observed by all of the disciples bar none. If these same Jews contended strongly against eating with Gentiles and fought to preserve the practice of circumcision

(Act 10:45; 11:2), we may correctly assume they were zealous Sabbath keepers as well. But while they had to be corrected for their error in regards to circumcision and eating with Gentiles, **nowhere were they told to denounce the Sabbath**. So why did they meet together on the “first day of the week”?

It was Paul’s practice to enter the synagogues on the Sabbath in order to preach the Gospel to the Jews: *And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures* (Act 17:2). Paul did this throughout the book of Acts (Act 13:14;42;44;17;2). So then it would be wise to assume that the other Apostles, being Jews and having friends and relatives who frequented the synagogues, were also predisposed to meet there faithfully every Sabbath. This is why they chose the very next day, the *first day of the week*, for holding their own Christian gatherings. They did not wish to prevent a predominantly Jewish congregation from meeting with their own on the Sabbath.

Likewise in 1 Corinthians 16, we find that the Church collected money on the first day of the week. But why did they choose to collect relief funds for other Christians on the first day of the week? Maybe because it was unlawful to deal with money on the Sabbath and so they waited till after the Sabbath to engage in their financial affairs. This explanation is highly consistent with Scripture and history and should not be taken lightly.

MOSES OF OLD

*But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. **For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day*** (Act 15:20-21).

At the first council of Jerusalem, after careful deliberation, the Apostles drafted a list of prohibitions that were especially important for Gentile converts to observe. Now, of course, many point to this list in order to state the obvious—no Sabbath mention anywhere! If the Sabbath is so very important, then why didn’t the Apostles add it to their document, some contend. But what is also very obvious, yet conveniently ignored, is that the Apostles expected the Gentile Believers to faithfully meet in the synagogues every Sabbath in order to be taught the full council of the Scriptures: **For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day**. The few restrictions hastily drafted by the Apostles were only

meant to aid their new converts until they learned the rest of the Scripture's commandments from attending synagogue on the Sabbath. **But if this is true why have we decided that Sabbath keeping is so wrong? This question must be posed to all who divert others from observing Sabbath.**

THE HEADCOVERING ANALOGY

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul reveals a profound spiritual reality. He teaches about the order of authority within the Body: **But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God** (1 Cor 11:3). We are told that Christ is over man, man over woman, and God the Father over all.

The Anabaptist people have for centuries observed this spiritual principle by requiring their women to wear a head veiling. They have done well to comply with Paul's instruction as located in verse 4-16 of the same chapter. **However, many of the same people who teach us to spiritualize the Sabbath and observe it inwardly would never refrain from observing the principle of headship both inwardly and outwardly.** As demonstrated previously, all of God's laws have a spiritual and physical layer of application. If we were to teach God's people to adhere merely to the spiritual application of the Law, we might end up killing people without hating them. Such are the issues that must be sorted prior to annulling the physical Sabbath rest.

Yet the head covering is not the only matter to which we can apply this obvious principle. What about water baptism and communion? No Christian would ever imagine excluding the practical or physical application pertaining to either of those even though they are merely symbolic.

HOW SHALL WE KEEP SABBATH?

There are many examples throughout the Gospels in which Jesus healed on the Sabbath (Mat 12:10; Mar 3:2; Luk 13:14). He also instructed His followers that it was right to do "good" on the Sabbath (Mat 12:12). Christ exemplified this by permitting His hungry disciples to pluck grain on that day in order to satisfy their hunger even though it constituted a kind of "work". But by far the most controversial thing Jesus did was to heal a lame man on the Sabbath and then instruct him to roll up his bedding, collect his belongings, and be on his way (Jn 5:8-10). Although this was highly offensive and raised

many brows, Jesus knew the man had no choice if he was to avoid losing what he owned due to theft. His belongings had to go with him.

So what do these examples teach us? They teach us that there are certain exceptions to the rule (keeping Sabbath) such as when we evangelize, minister, serve the sick, and provide food for the homeless and hungry, even though we might otherwise take our rest. These are the things Jesus did without fail throughout the week, and since He's our chief example, we do well to follow His lead.

However, the Pharisees had their own ideas about keeping Sabbath. They consulted their Talmudic or traditional writings so as to observe it in the way *they* deemed proper. Jesus had to strip away all of their extra-biblical traditions in order to teach them how to keep Sabbath God's way. But God's requirements are much simpler. He designated the Sabbath as a resting day from all of our **weekly labors**. Yet He didn't command us to abstain from making meals, taking care of our children, congregating with others, or keeping up with our animals' basic welfare. Here's the instruction on the Sabbath as it appears in the Ten Commandments:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it (Ex 20:8-11).

So now that we understand that Jesus wants us to keep Sabbath without being legalistic about it like the Pharisees, we should perhaps tackle the next question. When does the Sabbath officially begin and end? Between what hours are we to take our rest? To answer this, we must first locate the definition of a true biblical day. According to Genesis 1:5, a day is defined as the interval of time between one evening and the next: *And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. ***And the evening and the morning were the first day**** (Gen 1:5). Unlike our typical modern day, which starts at midnight and ends at midnight, God's reckoning of time was considerably different. So we shouldn't be surprised that **God commanded the Israelites to keep Sabbath between evenings: *It shall be unto you a sabbath of***

rest... **from even unto even, shall ye celebrate your Sabbath** (Lev 23:32).

Therefore if we wish to observe the Sabbath the true and proper way, this would be a good rule of thumb to follow.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I'd like to encourage us to carefully consider the matters discussed in this writing. So far we've proven that the New Testament Christian is still very much under the Law, as contained in the Ten Commandments and elsewhere. We've demonstrated that the only part of the Law that was removed was its **curse and penalty** along with the many ceremonial and civil rulings. We've also demonstrated the error in taking Paul's writings to mean that the Sabbath no longer applies, when in fact this is an improper assimilation of his teachings. We've proven that Jesus rose on the first day of the week in order to comply with the Sabbath rest and that His disciples were in the habit of keeping Sabbath and teaching others to do so also. **This issue, to them, was so obvious that they didn't have to reiterate it over and again throughout their epistles.** Lastly, we now understand that Christ did not violate the Sabbath, but rather reprimanded the Pharisees for adding to it their own traditions. **Christ's example teaches all Christians not to keep Sabbath legalistically like the Pharisees, but rather in the freedom and aptitude of the Spirit.** Finally, I hope we understand that the Sabbath is a sign or seal of God's authority as Creator over creation. Therefore all who observe the Sabbath both physically and spiritually are making a clear statement to a godless society about the ONE they serve. For He alone is Creator and non other.

In Christ,
John A.