

# Why do some Christians keep the Sabbath day?

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All Scripture references are quoted from the *New King James Version* © Thomas Nelson, Inc. unless otherwise indicated.

## ***Introduction***

*"Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy."*

As a child in the sixties our Sundays were special. In the early mornings we were busy with the donning of our "Sunday-best". That was, for my brothers and I, a starched white shirt complete with a tie around the neck and a few globs of hair oil to keep our short combed-back hair in place for most of the day. Sunday school and church took up our mornings and occasionally in the afternoon a beach mission found us down at the sea-side. In our church attire we sat quietly in the warm sand beside other boys and girls dressed in swimming-togs who licked on big dripping ice-blocks as they listened to the Bible stories. Our role was to sit still and look interested so that other children might be drawn in from the water to hear the gospel story. And so we did, being careful not to be too quick to answer the questions so that those young unsaved souls may have a chance to join in. Sinners they were for sure, for no Christian child would go to the beach on the Lord's day.

In Sunday school I was taught to honour Sunday, as the "Lord's Day". Although I dutifully kept the day holy, I never really knew why it was holy. We were taught that God rested on the seventh day and set it apart from all other days. We were told that the Jews kept the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week. We knew that our "sabbath" was now Sunday, but as to how this came about we were never told.

As I grew up I rarely questioned my parent's religious beliefs. Yet, in my heart, I felt a strange uneasiness every time I heard the Ten Commandments read. Each commandment was clear and true except for the fourth. That Sabbath commandment always needed to be added to or explained away to make it palatable. While studying for Scripture exams in a Methodist Sunday school I learnt to recite catechisms 71. and 75.

Quote. "71. "WHAT IS OUR DUTY TO GOD?" Our duty to God is contained in the first Four Commandments: .....

(iv) Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day

75. WHAT DOES THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT MEAN? God has set aside **one day** in seven so that we may rest from work and worship Him." Unquote. (Emphasis supplied)

True, God has set aside one day in the week, but which day? From what I knew of Scripture there was only ever one day set aside, that is the seventh.<sup>1</sup> Who was it then that blessed Sunday, declared it holy, and established it as the Christian's day of rest and worship? Surely you would think that such an important change would be recorded in the New Testament, but no record of a change can be found.

As a teenager I started attending a Baptist church. Some years later, I was baptised by immersion believing that my former sprinkling as a child failed to fulfil the requirements of God as set out in the Bible. Then after several years I came to a point in my life where I felt that it was necessary to rediscover for myself all the biblical truths that were instilled in me as a child. I

assumed that what I had been taught was true, but I wanted to be sure that the doctrines I held were firmly grounded in God's revealed truth. During the course of my study, the Sabbath became the topic in question.

Looking for reassurance that Sunday is the Lord's day, I studied some of the writings of those who support Sunday-keeping. I found that the strongest argument for Sunday observance was based on certain historical evidence that suggested that it had been observed for most of the recorded history of the "church".<sup>2</sup>

However, I wasn't satisfied with tradition as my principal basis for belief in the doctrine of the Sunday Sabbath. I searched again for a more biblical answer to the question. I found a disturbing division in the Protestant interpretation of the "Lord's Day". There are those who claim that God substituted the first day of the week, the "Christian Sabbath" for the old seventh day Sabbath of the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Others claimed that the Sabbath law was done away with on the cross, leaving no obligation to observe any day as a holy day of rest.<sup>4</sup> Still others recognize the validity of the commandment in part, believing that it applies spiritually to a life of rest rather than an actual weekly day. After studying the popular theories I was faced with a dilemma. Each position seemed to contradict the other. If the Sabbath commandment was "done away with" at the cross then the command to rest and keep holy could not be transferred to Sunday nor could it be spiritually applied to our lives on a daily basis. Should I choose one of them or to reject them all? I was forced to go back to the study of the Bible alone, and look at the Sabbath question more objectively.

What I found was not the reassurance I had originally hoped for. In fact what I did discover was almost totally opposite to my preconceived notions on the Sabbath.

It is unfortunate that many Christians never consider the question of the Sabbath. It is so easy to follow tradition and accept that tradition represents a true interpretation of the Scriptures.<sup>5</sup> The Bible is clear,

*And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.<sup>6</sup>*

If we are to adopt any position which stands contrary to this historical event the onus is on us to furnish sufficient proof that our stand is legitimate.

Each chapter of this booklet examines a common justification for the rejection of the Bible Sabbath. The booklet loosely follows the path of my struggle through the Sabbath question.

## ***Argument One***

*"Christ abolished the Law and in doing so rescinded the command to observe the Sabbath."*

As a young Christian I was often told that "... *We are not under law but under grace....*"<sup>7</sup> I was told that Christ did away with the Law, including the Ten Commandments, thereby relieving us of our obligation to keep them. But does this idea agree with the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ? Jesus said of the Law,

*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*<sup>8</sup>

Christ's purpose was to fulfil the written law not to destroy it.<sup>9</sup> It has been said that the written law of God is the agent that identifies those thoughts and actions that constitute sin. The Apostle Paul wrote, "... I would not have known sin except through the law..."<sup>10</sup> John wrote, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness."<sup>11</sup> However, sin is not merely a failure to comply with a predetermined standard. The law is more than a manual for right behaviour. It is a pattern of godly behaviour, a reflection of God's own character. When we break God's law and sin, we "fall short of the glory of God"<sup>12</sup> because we defy the revelation of the righteous nature of God. Christ, "the image of the invisible God"<sup>13</sup>, never failed to live according to God's righteous nature and character. He fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the law. His example adds a new dimension to the law.

In *fulfilling* the law, he could not have destroyed the law. The use of the conjunction "but"<sup>14</sup> here implies that destroying and fulfilling are opposed to each other and cannot mean the same thing. The word translated "fulfil" (*plreosai*), does not imply "putting an end to". The injunction against the one who "breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so" reinforces the obvious meaning. The weight of these words cannot be dismissed.

### **HOW DID PAUL DEFINE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW?**

For more light on Christ's fulfilment of the written law we may ask how the apostle Paul understood the fulfilment of the written law.

*Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.*<sup>15</sup>

Can you grasp the importance of those verses? Paul, speaking specifically about the Ten

Commandments, urges us to *fulfil* those laws by acting with love toward our neighbour. His reasoning is that commandment to *love your neighbour* includes all the written commandments pertaining to our relationship with others. Love does not exclude them. Paul quotes the very commandments that some say were destroyed to show how relevant they are to Christian love. We are expected to fulfil the law. Love toward God is the essence of the first four commandments and love toward your neighbour is the essence of the last six.<sup>16</sup>

If there are still questions as to what is actually meant by Christ's fulfilment of the law, then some further reading of Matthew chapter 5 should answer these. In this chapter, Christ's sermon gives several examples of the law and its 'fulfilment' or amplification and the relationship between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law is beautifully expounded.

## **DID CHRIST DO AWAY WITH THE LAW ON THE CROSS?**

It's claimed by some, that in his letter to the Colossians Paul taught that the law was abolished.<sup>17</sup>

*And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he has made alive together with him, having forgiven all your trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*<sup>18</sup>

Paul was writing to Gentiles. They were uncircumcised and dead in their sins even though they did not have the Law in its codified form. Here he tells them the good news that in Christ they were circumcised<sup>19</sup> and raised to new life, having been forgiven for all their sins.

He refers to the 'blotting out' of the "handwriting" that was against "us". Note that he says "us", purposely including both Jews and Gentiles. We can thus gather that whatever he was writing about it was not a set of ordinances that applied exclusively to Jews. Blotting these out, or nailing these to the cross would not have done a thing for Gentiles.

Mark's Gospel, Chapter 15 verse 26, implies that according to custom a criminal was crucified with his crime written on a sign and nailed to his cross. We are told that when Jesus was crucified *"the inscription of his accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS."* This sign was written in three languages so that it served as a deterrent to as many as would read it. His "inscription of accusation" was his alleged violation of Roman law, a crime of which he was not guilty. He was without sin! By contrast, against humankind and contrary to us, is a long list of valid violations of God's law. When Christ died he took those accusations and made them his own and suffered their penalty.<sup>20</sup>

The handwriting (Greek word *cheirographon*<sup>21</sup>) has been identified by scholars as a term used for a certificate of debt<sup>22</sup>. Dunn points out that this word was used in an apocryphal writing to explicitly denote *a record book of sins*.<sup>23</sup> Understood as our *inscription of accusation* the "handwriting of requirements that were against us" aptly fits the metaphorical picture that Paul is painting.<sup>24</sup> Until the death of Christ, the record of humankind's sin was a 'certificate of debt' that could only be paid by death. It stood in the way of our relationship with God. It was contrary to our hope for eternal life. This record of our sin was nailed to his cross and he paid the penalty for our sin, thus taking away our record of guilt and substituting it with blessed forgiveness.<sup>25</sup> What a wonderful Saviour!

There is yet another reason to believe that this passage is not referring to the law. It concerns the plural word (*dogmasin*) which is translated: requirements (NKJV), decrees (NASB), regulations (NIV), ordinances (KJV, ASV), and legal demands (RSV).<sup>26</sup> This word is important, for without it, a connection to the law could not be suggested. If we examine the passage we can see at least three things that Christ did with our 'certificate of indebtedness'. 1. He blotted *it* out. 2. He removed *it* from the midst. 3. He nailed *it* to the cross. Note that Paul did not say *them*. All of these actions pertain to the *cheirographon* (singular) not to the *dogmasin* (regulations) which is plural. They should not be automatically applied to the 'regulations'. It is our *debt* under the law of God which was nailed to the cross not the law itself.

The only way to get an 'abolished law' out of this passage is to confuse the debt of our sin with the law of God itself. If we do this, the connection with our forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ is lost (verse 13) and we make the cancelling of the law the means by which we are forgiven.

If the laws that prohibited idolatry, blasphemy, Sabbath breaking, disrespect to parents, adultery, murder, stealing, lying, and covetousness were cancelled, how could Paul speak later of the written law as being a valid means of knowing when we have sinned.

*...for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*

*What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."<sup>27</sup>*

Would Paul and James have undone the work of Christ and quoted from the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth commandments in their epistles if Christ through his death had abolished them?<sup>28</sup> If the law was abolished, how could the Gentiles be guilty of *trespasses* given that Paul also writes, "... sin is not imputed when there is no law".

The Law is eternal (Psalm 119:160) and it is only by breaking that holy law that we are guilty and deserving of death.

## **SACRIFICES**

Some may ask then about the Levitical sacrifices? Didn't they cease when Christ became the Sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Yes! It is true that the sacrificial system ceased at Christ's death. The levitical priesthood, tabernacle services and associated ceremony became superseded by the priesthood of Christ 'according to the order of Melchisedek'. But this didn't happen because the law was repealed. The animal sacrifices were merely ceremonial types that pointed forward to the day when the true Sacrifice would be offered. Once atonement for all has been made there is little point in offering sacrificial tokens of the Atonement that has already been effected.

*For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law.<sup>29</sup>*

The daily sacrifices were no longer required because the once-offered true Sacrifice had come. So then, the law of sacrifice stands and although the need for a sacrifice remains current, it is

perpetually satisfied in Christ's once-and-for-all-time sacrifice.<sup>30</sup>

## THE ENMITY OF THE LAW ABOLISHED

Another passage that is used to support the doctrine of the abolition of the law is Ephesians 2:14-16.

*For he himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of division between us, having abolished in his flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that he might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.*

In his letter to the Gentile Christians in Ephesus Paul explains that in Christ the enmity between Jew and Gentile is finished. The Mosaic laws excluding the uncircumcised Gentile from the temple-based worship of the one True God under the Levitical system are rendered powerless. *In his flesh* the uncircumcised are made circumcised, the unacceptable are made acceptable, and all are reconciled to God. The primary subject matter of these two verses is the broken walls of division between Jew and Gentile, and Paul refers to a change in this specific context only. Paul clearly made a distinction between “the law of commandments contained in ordinances” and the commandments of God. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:19,

*Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.*

It is also interesting to note that the Greek word *katargeo* translated "abolished" in Eph. 2:15 has the meaning to ‘render ineffective the power or force of something’.<sup>31</sup> The *middle wall of division* that was between Jew and Gentile was empowered by the racially based regulations that served to set the circumcised Jew apart from the uncircumcised Gentile. The particular laws referred to here are most probably the Levitical laws of ritual cleanliness and the traditional Jewish oral law relating to ordinances. These laws of segregation engendered enmity between Jew and Gentile and had been the cause of division in the early church.<sup>32</sup> Their purpose was to preserve Israel as a distinct nation. The most significant of them was the law of the ordinance of circumcision. The Jews believed that they could not even eat at the same table as the uncircumcised because of their uncleanness. This caused considerable hostility and was a hindrance to the spread of the Gospel. (Galatians 2:11-13) But for all its disadvantages, circumcision was *not* completely abolished in Christ, *rather*, the uncircumcised received circumcision in Christ.

*In him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ...<sup>33</sup>*

The laws of physical circumcision were reduced to inactivity because their power to cause justifiable enmity was cancelled by Christ *in his flesh*. When Jesus discussed the enmity between Jew and Gentile with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:20-24) he referred to a time when that enmity would give way to the true worship of the Father - no longer the worship of God at the temple in Jerusalem but the true worship of God in spirit and in truth. The believing Jews and believing Gentiles could now gather for worship on the Sabbath day as brothers and sisters in the family of God.<sup>34</sup>

## PAUL AND THE COMMANDMENTS

If Paul had advocated the abolition of the Ten Commandments in Eph 2:14-16 it would seem very strange that he used one of these 'abolished commandments' to instruct the church just four chapters later in the same letter where he wrote, (Eph 6:2,3 quoting Deut. 5:16)

*"Honour your mother and your father," which is the first commandment with a promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."*

Paul here acknowledges the existence of the Ten Commandments by referring to this commandment as 'the first with a promise'. For at least two reasons (apart from the obvious quotation) we can be certain that Paul is referring to the written law of the Old Testament rather than some intangible "law of Christ" or "law written on the heart". First, only laws that are listed or catalogued can have a numerical order. Second, only a verbally articulated law could have an accompanying promise. The very nature of a general promise demands that it be publicly stated. Paul uses the quotation from Deuteronomy 5:16 to support his conclusion that obedience to parents is right.<sup>35</sup>

In doing so he not only confirms that the Decalogue is still valid for Christians but goes further to imply that even the promises attached to those commandments apply to the Gentile Ephesians. It follows therefore that they still apply to us today. That is to say that all the blessings that come through obedience to God's Law are poured out today on those who obey his commandments. In this case, long life. In the case of the Sabbath commandment, blessing and joy. (Isaiah 56:2,7)

*Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come, And My righteousness to be revealed. {2} 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. Isa. 56:1-2*

*If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on my holy day, And call my Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the Lord honourable, And shall honour him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the Lord has spoken. Isa. 58:13*

It must be concluded that either Paul's attitude to God's Law was drastically inconsistent, or that we have misinterpreted his teaching. Can the concept of an "abolished law" be reconciled with these words from his epistle to the Romans?

*Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law. Rom. 3:31*

*Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Rom. 7:12*

*... for by the law is the knowledge of sin. Rom. 3:20*

If, as Paul writes, the law is holy law and it is by the law that we have the knowledge of sin, then it follows that we should acknowledge the law (including the Sabbath commandment) as being a

valid means of defining sin.

John wrote,

*Now by this we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says, "I know him" and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.<sup>36</sup>*

Close examination of the New Testament reveals that neither Christ nor Paul taught the destruction of the law. Whatever the source of this widely accepted doctrine, it is not the Holy Scriptures. If the Sabbath day is not valid for Christians today then it must be for some other reason. Let's look at another.

## ***Argument Two***

*"God has substituted Sunday for the Sabbath Day"*

When I first studied the Sabbath, I unreasonably put the onus on the Sabbath keepers to prove that the seventh day was relevant for the Christian today. I had assumed that Sunday worship was introduced by apostolic example and recorded in the Scriptures. I had throughout my life kept Sunday sacred, refraining from secular pleasures and interests in reverence to God. I had done all this without one word of commandment from God's word. I had, without authority, transferred the holiness of the Sabbath day to Sunday.

I later realized that God sanctified the seventh day at creation, and the principle of the holy rest was instituted at this time by the very example of God himself on the seventh day of creation. (Genesis 2:3)

If I was to be so bold as to hallow another day then the onus was on me to prove that God had indeed substituted Sunday for the Sabbath. As Christ's own example was to keep the Sabbath day, I looked to the apostles for their example.

To my dismay, I had to admit that if God did substitute another day for the Sabbath then he failed to leave a record of his doing so. Nowhere from Genesis to Revelation does the Scripture tell us to observe any day of the week in lieu of hallowing the seventh day Sabbath. In addition to this fact, if there was a substitution made, the disciples completely ignored it. For there is no record in Scripture of any Christian resting on Sunday or regularly keeping it as a day of worship. There is however ample evidence to show that the disciples continued to keep the seventh day Sabbath.

### **THE EXAMPLE OF PAUL**

Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:14,

*... went into the synagogue on the Sabbath Day ...*

On that occasion Paul was given an opportunity to speak. After they left the synagogue, many Gentiles asked Paul to preach again next Sabbath.(v.42). If Paul was keeping Sunday at that time, he could have invited them to hear him preach the very next day, but he waited till the next Sabbath.

Wherever Paul travelled, his custom was to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. When in a pagan city where there was no synagogue Paul went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made, but once again on the Sabbath day. (Acts 16:13)

*And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made.*

When Paul arrived at Thessalonica he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. (Acts 17:2)

*Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures*

In Corinth, Paul worked with Aquila and Priscilla who were like him, tentmakers. (Acts 18:4)

*And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks.*

When Paul was finally thrown out of the synagogue he went next door to the house of Crispus. He stayed on with Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth for eighteen months. (Acts 18:11) On leaving Corinth, they headed for Ephesus where Paul and Aquila and Priscilla once again worshipped in the synagogue. Paul spoke every Sabbath for three months in the synagogue at Ephesus. (Acts 19:8)

Did Paul simply use the Sabbath to reach the Jews and Proselytes and then later teach them to change their day of worship to Sunday? His later actions in Jerusalem do not support this view.

When Paul came to Jerusalem, he met with James and the elders of the Jerusalem Church, (Acts 21:20-24)

*And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many tens of thousands of Jews there are who have believed and they are **all zealous for the law**;*

*but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.*

*What then? the assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.*

*Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that **those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also follow the rules and keep the law.***

Paul's cooperation with his fellow Christians in this ritual was not a deception. Paul did keep the Law and was eager to prove this to his fellow Christians. This keeping of the Law (by implication) included Sabbath keeping.

Unfortunately, non-believing Jews stirred up trouble for Paul when he entered the Temple and had him arrested. When brought before Felix, Paul said in his defence, (Acts 24:14)

*But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, **believing all things which are written in the Law and the Prophets.***

Though the Jews brought many accusations against Paul, not one Jew ever brought an accusation of Sabbath breaking against Paul or any of the disciples.

The Pharisees were very quick to wrongfully accuse Jesus of Sabbath breaking when he healed

on the Sabbath. (John 9:16) It seems a little strange then that this same line of attack was never used on the disciples who supposedly rejected the Sabbath entirely.

Another disciple that continued to keep the law of God was Peter. When in a vision a voice from heaven commanded Peter to kill and eat unclean animals, Peter refused.

*"... 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.'*  
*Acts 11:8<sup>37</sup>*

It certainly seems odd that Peter would so strongly resisted the breaking of the Old Testament dietary laws if he had been accustomed to breaking the Sabbath commandment for several years. (Acts 10:14)

## **PAUL'S FAREWELL DINNER**

There is one particular gathering of disciples recorded in Acts 20:7-12 that is often held up as proof of Sunday worship. Luke only records it because on this occasion a miracle took place. The circumstances that led to this miracle are very important to the story and are related here.

*Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together.*

Paul was on his way to Jerusalem knowing full well that it could be his very last journey. (verse 25) He could stop in Troas seven days only. Imagine if Paul came to your local church for a week. Would you wait until his last day before you held a meeting and then sit up till daybreak listening to his teaching? It is far more likely that every night of that week the disciples gathered together after sunset and shared their meal together to listen to Paul's teaching. We know that they were fully prepared for a night meeting because there were *many lamps*. This was a special meeting. It was a farewell to Paul who knew that trouble would be in store for him in Jerusalem. Paul spoke until midnight at which time the young man fell from the third storey and "was taken up dead". After the man was healed they shared their meal. The meeting resumed and Paul spoke till daybreak. This format could hardly be typical of a first century worship service, yet some will assert that this isolated instance should be taken as proof of regular weekly Sunday worship!

If the church was actually in the habit of meeting on the Sabbath day (which concludes at sunset), then it is quite likely that they would have all gone home and brought food back for a last chance farewell meeting on Saturday night, the first day of the week. As "the first day of the week" can mean either Saturday evening or some time before Sunday evening, a Sunday meeting cannot be proved by these verses. The translators of the Good News Bible have acknowledged this fact in their translation of the verse, (Acts 20:7)

*On Saturday evening we gathered together for the fellowship meal.*

Note also that the term 'break bread' is used in its general sense of partaking of a meal. (Acts 2:46) There is nothing in this passage to suggest that this is anything more than a simple sharing of food.

Another verse that confuses some is 1 Corinthians 16:2. Paul is speaking to the Christians who

had believed during the time that "he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath". (Acts 18:4) When he was no longer welcome in the synagogue he held his meetings in the house next door. This action implies that he continued his Sabbath day preaching so that the synagogue worshippers would be attracted to his meetings instead or after synagogue. As a result, the ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, became a believer.

Now Paul was appealing to the Corinthians to help the suffering believers in Jerusalem. And he asked,

*On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.*

Why didn't Paul want to have a collection when he came? For the same reason that he did not want the collection done on the Sabbath! The matter of what and how much should be given was a personal concern for each one, in proportion to his capabilities. It involved an end of week stock-take, working out what were surpluses that could be stored up and what could be spared as an offering. The monetary system in those days was not as sophisticated as it is today. Most people worked on a day-to-day basis. They often didn't know what they would earn until they earned it. Only in hindsight could they work out what they could afford for an offering. It was something that could only be done at home, not at church. The offerings themselves most likely included non-perishable goods as well as money as more than one person was needed to convey the gift to Jerusalem. (next verse) It stands to reason that if drought was the reason for the saint's hardship then gifts of food, wine, and oil, would be far more valuable than gold. Is there evidence of a drought in those days? The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus tells of such a drought around this time and confirms that Queen Helena on her arrival in Jerusalem found many Jews dying for lack of food. She sent servants with money to Alexandria and Cyprus to purchase corn and dried figs. (Antiquities of the Jews. Book XX Ch II, 5) Acts 11:28-30 also confirms the presence of a drought.

*Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.*

*Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.*

*This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.*

The messy business of collecting these offerings was hardly an activity for a holy day. Even Paul's time with them was too precious to be wasted on such menial tasks. It was a chore fit for a common work day. The first day of the week was the first opportunity after the working week (excluding the Sabbath) to store up and make an assessment of the household needs. This verse does not suggest a meeting or a gathering of any kind on the first day of the week, on the contrary, it implies a keeping of the seventh day Sabbath.

Whenever Paul and the other writers of the New Testament (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) refer to the seventh day they give it the descriptive and revered title "Sabbath". The first day of the week is never given any special reverence or title. Its designation is solely derived from its relationship to the Sabbath day. These writers did not translate the name for the seventh day into the Greek language by using a Greek or Roman equivalent. They preserved the concept

of the special nature of the day by using the transliterated form *sabbaton*. Thus in Scripture the word continued to carry its meaning of "a day of rest" with all the connotations of its heavenly appointment. History shows that the first Sunday keepers were quick to adopt the title "Lord's day" for Sunday. If the sanctity of the Sabbath had been transferred to Sunday, then wouldn't you expect Paul to choose a more exalted title for the first day of the week, giving it at least the same honour as his old holy day?

## **THE DISCIPLE'S SUNDAY MEETING**

There is a record in John 29:19 of a gathering of the disciples on Sunday after the resurrection of Christ.

*Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews,...*

This was not a religious meeting held on Sunday to celebrate the resurrection, for some still doubted that there had even been a resurrection. It is evident that they were there simply hiding 'for fear of the Jews'.

There is no evidence in the New Testament to suggest that the disciples of Jesus kept Sunday as a regular day of worship or as a day of rest. There is no reference to the keeping of any day other than the Sabbath. Some Sunday keepers claim that Sunday is a memorial of the Resurrection, based on the belief that Christ rose on that day, but by whose authority do they speak? Although Jesus did command his disciples to celebrate his death, he never asked them to celebrate his resurrection.

Even if Sunday was a valid celebration of the Resurrection it does not automatically cancel the divinely appointed Sabbath. If a substitution did take place then it must be shown how the new cancels out the old. No event in human history regardless of its importance can change the fact that the rest and blessing of God on the seventh day of creation is the origin of the Sabbath. The significance of God's sacred rest day and its relation to the seventh day of each subsequent week was put in place by the word of the Almighty. The Bible does not establish every first day of the week as a celebration of the day of Christ's resurrection. The relationship presumed by some Sunday keepers is without the support of Scripture. The command to rest or to keep holy was never applied to Sunday. The solemnity of the Sabbath was never transferred to Sunday.

Proponents of the "substitution" argument at least acknowledge the fact that "a Sabbath day" still exists, even if they do believe it to be Sunday. They realize that a Christian needs a holy rest day, for both physical and spiritual refreshment.

*If you keep your feet from breaking and Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find joy in the Lord,....* Isaiah 58:13,14 (NIV)

Our impious society scorns the suggestion of the observance of a holy day. Man has no interest in the things of God. Worldliness within the Church has, in recent times, led to the erosion of the Lord's day from a day of worship to an hour of worship. God has been denied the portion of our time that has been declared holy and is owed to Him.



## ***Argument Three***

*"The Sabbath was given exclusively to Israel and was part of the Old Covenant"*

Most of us would agree that the Sabbath commandment (as one of the Ten Commandments) formed a part of the terms of the Old Covenant. But does the introduction of the New Covenant do away with the Sabbath Commandment? To answer that question we must look a little closer at the creation and implementation of the Sabbath. Fortunately for those who seek the truth, Christ spoke clearly about the subject.

Listen to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in Mark 2:27.

*The Sabbath was made for man ...*

Notice two things here. The Sabbath was *made*. It was the creation of Jesus Christ, for "All things were created through him and for him". Col 1:16. Secondly, when Jesus Christ made his Sabbath day he made it for man. When? After the seventh day of creation. (Exodus 20:11)

*For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it*

Now there was only one man alive at that time - Adam, the common ancestor of every human being on this earth. So the Sabbath day was created for the benefit of every man, woman and child on this planet. But how is a Sabbath day created? He created the Sabbath day by resting on that day. Genesis 2:3.

*Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made.*

There are three significant things to note in this verse. First, God blessed the seventh day. He singled out that particular day for blessing. In Genesis 27 Isaac could not rescind the blessing he bestowed on Jacob even though it was gained by dishonest means. Likewise, the Bible bears no record of the Almighty annulling the blessing of the Sabbath day or of His blessing another day.

Second, God sanctified the day. Sanctification is a declaration of holiness. This day was set apart for holy use. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we see examples of many things set apart for holy use. Many inanimate objects were set apart for use in the worship and service of the Lord. God ordained this day to be set-aside for men to worship and honour him. This sanctification was for man's benefit so that man might acknowledge this day as a time set apart for God.

Third, God rested from his work of creation on this day. It wasn't exhaustion that caused God to rest. His rest was an example provided for our benefit. The Sabbath rest, as explained to Israel, is an acknowledgement of the Creator's example of rest on the seventh day of creation. We have no mandate to rest on any other day.

There are the three features of the Sabbath, blessing, holiness and rest. Yet, at this point of time, we are thousands of years away from the birth of Israel and the Old Covenant! God had not yet written out his laws on tablets of stone but they did exist, not in letter but in Spirit. Affirming the view that God's Law existed before Sinai, Genesis 26:5 says, *"because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."*

## **SIN AND THE LAW**

Mankind first become aware of God's law in the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, the knowledge of good and evil was imparted to them. God said in Genesis 3:22, *"Behold, the man has become like one of us, to know good and evil."*

The knowledge to recognise good and evil is given through the means of law. Law is the tool for the discernment of good and evil. Armed with the knowledge of law, man is capable of choosing the action that he knows to be evil. Romans 7:7 and 8 says,

*... I would not have known sin except through the law." "..... But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead.*

Examine the actions of Cain in Genesis 4. Do his actions appear to be those of an innocent person? No. When he became angry, God warned him,

*If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it."*

Cain knew right from wrong. He knew that if he did right God would accept him. He knew that he could choose to sin or overcome the temptation. He chose to sin and knew he was guilty, for he tried to cover up his action by a direct lie. He knew the commandment *"You shall not murder."*

Other examples of the existence of God's law prior to Sinai are seen throughout the Old Testament. The law and the ideal of marriage date back to the creation week. Its validity and superiority over the written law of Moses is attested by the words of Jesus in Mark 10:2-9. The principle of making offerings to God was around in Abel's day. Noah clearly understood the distinction between clean and unclean animals. He was commanded to abstain from blood. (Gen 7:2) Noah's sons knew it was right to "Honour your father and your mother." Abraham gave a tithe to Melchisedek, priest of the Most High God. Sexual immorality was understood to be sinful, hence the destruction of Sodom and Gommorah. Pharaoh knew the law forbidding adultery. (Gen 12)

If God's eternal spiritual law was not the yardstick by which the wicked were judged, then by whose law were they judged to be guilty? But did the observance of the Sabbath day precede the establishment of the Old Covenant? Yes, and this can be positively shown from Scripture.

## **THE SABBATH BEFORE THE OLD COVENANT**

Four hundred years of heathen Egyptian culture and many years of slavery had robbed the Children of Israel of their knowledge of God's way. This may well have included their

knowledge of the Sabbath. God called them out of Egypt, a type of God's calling us out of sin and this world. Once clear of Pharaoh's armies God tested them, "*whether they will walk in my law or not.*" *Exodus 16:4*

At this time God had not yet spoken His law from Mt Sinai or written the Ten Commandments into stone tablets by His finger. God said to Moses:

*"Tomorrow is the rest of the holy sabbath unto the Lord."* *Exodus 16:23 (A.V.)*

God tested Israel by providing manna to gather on every day except the Sabbath. On the Sabbath day they were to eat the surplus of manna that God gave them on the previous day. They were commanded not to go and gather it on the Sabbath. (the principle of rest from labour) Even though God had not yet commanded them to "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" He did not want them to gather on that sacred day, clearly suggesting that the Sabbath command already existed though not generally practised by Israel at this time.

*Six days shall ye gather it; but on the seventh day which is the sabbath, in it there shall be none. And it came to pass that there went out some of the people on the seventh day fore to gather, and they found none. And the Lord said unto Moses, How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and laws?* *Exodus 16:26-28 (A.V.)*

Some three chapters later in Exodus 20, you will read the first words of the Ten Commandments and the first mention of the covenant with Israel in chapter 19. The Sabbath was clearly in force before the Old Covenant was made and was part of the spiritual law that preceded the written law. It was this law that Moses was already teaching prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments. (Exodus 18:16)

The command to rest on the Sabbath was introduced prior to the Old Covenant being made. Had the Israelites never entered into a covenant with God they would still have known that God expected them to rest on His holy Sabbath day.

As Sabbath keeping was required of Israel before the conditions of the Old Covenant were made known to Moses it stands alone, and an annulment of the Old Covenant does not automatically revoke God's command to rest on the Sabbath.

## **THE SABBATH LAW FOR ALL**

Now let's look at the sabbath law in Exodus 20 verse 10.

*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 manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.*

The Sabbath day was not given exclusively to the Israelites but to every person, male and female, slave and free, Israelite or alien, and even to the cattle. God could not have made it clearer. The holiness of this day is for everyone. By contrast, there were laws there were exclusively for Israel. Compare the universality of the Sabbath laws with the more exclusive Passover laws.

*.... This is the ordinance of the Passover: No outsider shall eat it. But every mans*

*servant who is bought for money, when you have circumcised him, then he may eat it. Exodus 12:43,44*

*And when a stranger sojourns with you and wants to keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it. Exodus 12:48*

The Passover was only to be eaten by the Israelites or those who were admitted to the Israelite nation by circumcision. This is very clear and strong language. But listen to what Paul says to those uncircumcised Gentiles who have been 'circumcised in Christ' and have become adopted into the family of God. 1 Corinth 5:7,8

*For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast,...*

Gentiles in Christ are not excluded from the Passover.<sup>38</sup> In Christ the former racial distinctions are set aside and the converted Gentile is now absorbed into the family of God and extended the same privileges as the native-born Israelite. The prophet Isaiah spoke this of:

*I will give them an everlasting name That shall not be cut off. 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 to my covenant Even them I will bring to my holy mountain, And make them joyful in my house of prayer. Isaiah 56:5,6,7*

## **THE CIRCUMCISION CULT**

From our previous discussion of Acts it is evident that many of the early Gentile converts were Jewish proselytes who were contacted through their synagogue attendance. However, as the gospel spread, many rank pagans also came to know the Lord. These had not previously been schooled in the Law. When the Jewish believers confronted these converting Gentiles, a problem arose. It was a custom of the Jews that they did not mix with uncircumcised Gentiles. Some therefore remained separate and would not eat with them so as not to compromise their ritual cleanliness. The latter group, known as the 'Circumcision' insisted that these new converts be circumcised. It is likely that this requirement was partly motivated by a lack of understanding of the gospel in the Gentile context and partly by a fear of ritual defilement. A dispute arose between Peter, Barnabas and Paul due to the failure to clearly address this issue. (Gal 2:11)

## **THE JERUSALEM DECREE**

The issue became divisive, and a decision had to be made. The matter was referred to a meeting of the brethren in Jerusalem and the result was a ruling known as the 'Jerusalem Decree'. The decree allowed the Jewish Christian freedom to associate with the Gentile believers without risking defilement.

At that time Jewish Christians were able to worship at the Temple and so retain their customs and laws including various sacrifices and offerings. (See Acts 21:20-25). Some of these Jewish believers expected the new Gentile converts to become circumcised so that they too could participate in the Jewish religion according to the law of Moses. This was not the teaching of

Paul or the Apostles, especially Peter, who had learned through a vision as recorded in Acts 10-11, that the Jews should accept the uncircumcised Gentile believers just as God had accepted them.

Under the agreed terms of the decree certain basic requirements were recommended. The restrictions placed on the Gentiles were taken from Leviticus chapters 17 and 18. In chapter 17, verses 8,9,12,13 and 15, and in chapter 18, verse 26, indicate the need for sojourners and strangers in Israel to adhere to the abstinence from blood, offerings to idols and sexual immorality. The listed requirements are the minimum that the law requires of a person who chooses to live and fellowship in an Israelite society.<sup>39</sup>

One may be accustomed to regarding this decree as though, to make it easy for new Christians, only a few important rules were deemed to be of value while the rest of the law was to be ignored. However the decree does not furnish any proof that either Jews or Gentiles were no longer under an obligation to keep the Ten Commandments. Examined in its context it is actually an application of the Law to the specific needs of the early Church context.

*Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles, who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city being read in the synagogue every Sabbath. Acts 15:19-21*

Note the phrase, "are turning to God". This was not a letter written to all Christians but was penned exclusively for "those from among the Gentiles". This wasn't a universal ruling for all Christians but was specifically addressed to those who had no prior knowledge of God's law. The last sentence gives the reason why it was not necessary to rewrite the Moral Law in this decree. For the books of the law were read in *every city* in the *synagogue every Sabbath*. God's law could be heard every Sabbath at the public reading of the Scriptures in the synagogue.

If the Ten Commandments did not at that time apply to the new Gentile converts then it doesn't seem logical that these other laws would apply either. Common sense tells us that it would be of little use keeping away from things offered to idols, from things strangled, from sexual immorality and from blood if they were still cheating, lying, murdering, coveting and blaspheming. The apostles confidently relied on the reading of the law in the synagogue to educate the Gentiles in these areas.

This Jerusalem decision did not please everybody and so the Circumcision group lived on. Almost every epistle written by Paul warns the young churches to beware of those of the 'Circumcision'. The fact that the Circumcision group had such a wide area of influence is further proof that the young Gentile church, including the Roman church, observed the Sabbath in their early years. Had the Sabbath been replaced by Sunday no member of the fiercely legalistic Circumcision group would have had any cause to mix with Sabbath breakers on Sunday and this whole problem of fellowship would not have arisen.

## **SAVAGE WOLVES EMERGE**

As the believers were progressively expelled from the synagogue as prophesied by Jesus (John

16:2), the need for apostolic instruction increased. Letters from the disciples would have been helpful, but the lack of teachers of sound doctrine possibly played a big part in the loss of truth and in the infiltration of false apostles.

Before long, church after church fell prey to those who would lead the church into compromise with paganism. The extremes of the Circumcision group who wished to convert all to Judaism gave the 'mystery of lawlessness' (2 Thess. 2:7) an opportunity to allow false teachers to turn grace into licence (Jude 1). Instead of steering the new Gentile converts away from paganism into righteousness by faith, false teachers sought a compromise between pagan customs and Christian doctrine; hence the merger of Christianity and Paganism that we see today. False teachers 'christianised' the pagan festivals. They chose to worship and rest on the 'venerable day of the sun' rather than the Sabbath. They have ignored the commandments of God, worshipping idols and images. They have persecuted the saints of God, who keep his commandments.

Jesus said, *"If you love me, keep my commandments"*.

## ***Argument Four***

*"Every day is a Sabbath day because we rest in Christ. There is no need to keep any particular day of the week."*

It is a wonderful truth that we do rest in Christ. But can we keep the commandment of God in spirit by ignoring the letter? Can we for instance murder, as long as we don't become angry? Or perhaps it is right to commit adultery as long as we are not guilty of lust? (Matt. 5:21,28) How then is it possible to refuse to keep the Sabbath day and yet keep it in spirit?

Baptism is a fitting illustration of how the physical relates to the spiritual. The baptismal candidate should identify with Jesus Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. If he or she does, then God raises that person to new life in Christ. But the candidate's experience of baptism in its spiritual sense does not mean that water baptism becomes unnecessary. On the contrary, the candidate's spiritual experience will strengthen the desire for complete obedience.

Many Christians see the Ten Commandments as belonging to the Old Covenant only. They fail to see the relationship between God's Law and the New Covenant.

*... I will make a new covenant .... I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts;..... Jeremiah 31:31-33*

The New Covenant is about God's Law, including the Ten Commandments, being written in our minds and on our hearts. Now through the Spirit we can keep the law in the Spirit, as opposed to the keeping of the law in the letter though human endeavours.

*He is the mediator of the new covenant, by means of his death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. Hebrews 9:15*

One must transgress under the first covenant in order to be redeemed through Christ's death and become a partaker of the new covenant. Therefore the transgressions that necessitate our redemption are those we have committed under the first covenant. Transgression is breaking the law of the Old Covenant, the Ten Commandments.

The idea of keeping the fourth commandment in spirit only, presents quite a few problems in practice. Let's study the wording of this commandment. This commandment is fourfold. It is a command to remember, to keep holy, to labour and to rest.

*Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, Six days you shall labour and do all your work,*

How do you spiritually remember the seventh day by forgetting it completely? How do you spiritually keep the Sabbath holy by defiling it? And how is it possible to spiritually labour six days if you're supposed to be spiritually resting every day in the Lord. The command is to labour

as well as to rest! If the particular day that God chose is no longer holy to us, on whose authority do we declare the seventh day no longer holy? Only a higher authority than God can override God's declaration of holiness. Peter was warned against a similar thing in Acts 10:15. How does resting in the Lord eliminate our need for meeting together and worshipping God? How can we say that the day that God set aside for the purpose of rest, worship and separation from the secular things of life is no longer of any value to the Christian? If it is still of value to the Christian then why would God want to get rid of it?

## THE SABBATH REST IS A "TYPE"

The rest we have in Jesus in this life is not the only kind of rest of which the seventh day is a "type". Turn to Hebrews 3:14 and 4:1-12 in your Bible and read the whole passage. Only the key verses will be reprinted here.

Verse 14. *"For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end."*

Chapter 4 Verse 1,2,3 *"Therefore, since a promise remains of entering his rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest, as he has said: "So I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter my rest"*

Verse 4,5,6. *"for he has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works"; and again in this place: "They shall not enter my rest." Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience,"*

Verse 9,10 *"There remains therefore a rest for the people of God." For he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from his."*

Verse 11 *"Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone should fall after the same example of disobedience."*

Verse 12 *"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart."*

Notice that verse 9, when literally translated from the Greek reads,

**therefore remains Sabbath keeping (*sabbatismos*) for God's people.**

In the King James Version, 'sabbath rest for' is placed in the margin.

In Christ we have a foretaste of the coming rest of God when all our works will cease. The rest that is experienced through faith and trust in Christ is with us today in a very real sense. Yet the primary concern of this passage is the future fulfilment of the 'Sabbath' rest which will only be fully realised when Christ returns. Without denying the rest we have in Christ, these verses clearly associate the seventh day sabbath with the promise of our future rest. Disobedience will disqualify us from reaching our rest. Note verse 11.

*Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone should fall after the same example of disobedience."*

What particular act of disobedience could this be referring to? The answer is found in Ezekiel

20 where we read of this very same example of disobedience in the wilderness when God swore an oath that they would not enter the Promised Land. Note particularly verses 15 and 16.

*So I also lifted my hand in an oath to them in the wilderness, that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, flowing with milk and honey, the glory of all lands, because they despised my judgements and did not walk in my statutes, **but profaned my Sabbaths**; for their heart went after their idols."*

This is the example of disobedience that we should be careful not to fall by! They knew which day was the sabbath day, they knew what God required, but they wilfully disobeyed and follow their false gods instead. Should we continue to ignore the Sabbath day of the Lord?

*..... Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.  
"Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:  
'These people draw near to me with their mouth,  
And honour me with their lips,  
But their heart is far from me.  
And in vain they worship me,  
Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" Matt 15:6,7,8,9*

## ***Argument Five***

*"Sabbath keeping is legalism"*

Whenever people begin to discuss the issue of Sabbath-keeping the accusation of being a legalist will rear its head. The charge of legalism is freely bandied about as though the Christian has no right to allow his spiritual relationship with God to dictate his actions in the physical life. Such physical things as Sabbath-keeping, fasting, and tithing are not inherently legalistic although each can be abused and become no more than legalism. Since legalism is not a Biblical term it should be defined. Galatians 5:4 says,

*You have become estranged from Christ you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.*

To me, this is the definition and fate of the legalist. When a person takes their eyes off the Lord Jesus Christ and begins to trust in their own righteousness for salvation they fall headlong into the snare of legalism. But this is not what is advocated by the keeping of the Sabbath. Obedience is not legalism. Righteousness by faith is not legalism.

It is absurd to suggest that we should sin in order to prove our dependence on salvation by grace. (Romans 6:1)

### **WHAT IS SIN?**

There are many varied definitions of sin but simply defined from the Scriptures, *"Sin is lawlessness."* (1 John 3:4) What is lawlessness? "Lawlessness" is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as: *Disregard for the law.* Paul spoke of the mystery of lawlessness [disregard for the law] at work in his day. (2 Thess. 2:7) The Man of Sin, the son of perdition, is called the 'lawless one'. Lawlessness is his trademark!

*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons in your name, and done many wonders in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practise lawlessness!' Matt 7:21-23*

Lawlessness is also the trademark of the false Christian! The law, including the Sabbath, stands as a witness against these rebellious ones. (1 Tim. 1:9)

My own experience is that keeping the Sabbath does not create in one a sense of self-righteousness. If anything, the Sabbath serves as a reminder of one's inadequacy (in our own strength) to keep God's commandments. Try it! You will quickly find that keeping the things of God foremost in your mind throughout the day doesn't come easily. There are many distractions and inevitable hardships. (2 Timothy 3:12)

Sin is disregarding the law of God. How then can keeping the law of God be sin? Can there be any evil in doing what God commands just because, out of faith and love for Him, we want to please him?

The sin of legalism is one of trusting in one's own righteousness, rather than trusting in the righteousness of Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ kept the Sabbath. The disciples kept the Sabbath. There are still today those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Rev 12:17)

## **WHATEVER IS NOT FROM FAITH IS SIN**

Another verse that is worth looking at is Galatians 4:8-11 (NIV)

*<sup>8</sup> Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. <sup>9</sup> But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?<sup>10</sup> You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! <sup>11</sup> I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.*

The passage is speaking to former pagans who are in some way returning to the bondage of *weak and beggarly elements*. Although the Sabbath is not mentioned some have assumed that 'observing days' is an allusion to Sabbath keeping.

As the letter was written to correct certain misconceptions of the role of the law in the plan of salvation, it is argued that *days and months and seasons and years* refer to the biblical holy days and weekly Sabbaths. However, those who hold a Sunday Sabbath must reject this explanation for if Paul was berating the Galatians for keeping the seventh day as a Sabbath, then his disapproval of such practices would also apply to the first day of the week.

This is one portion of the letter that has a direct reference to the past pagan practices of the Galatians. Though not often translated as such, the statement could have been posed as a question.<sup>40</sup>

*Do you wish to be enslaved by them again as at first? <sup>10</sup> Are you observing days and moons and seasons and years?*

Astrology, predictions, superstitions about days, moons and seasons were an integral part of pagan culture. Each god had his/her own special day. The seasons and their meaning were very significant in pagan religion and mythology. The Scriptures warned against such practices,

*You shall not eat anything with the blood: neither shall ye use enchantment, nor observe times. Leviticus 19:26*

The letter to the Galatians counteracts the teaching that circumcision and observation of the law of Moses are necessary for salvation. Paul saw a parallel between the bondage of the superstitious observation of the elements of nature, (sun, moon stars, earth, water, wind and fire) from which these Gentiles had been delivered, and the bondage of the legalistic teaching of the Circumcision group. If this passage is taken to mean that Paul was condemning the observance

of all Jewish customs and biblical holy days then he is no more than a hypocrite, since Paul kept these himself. (Acts 18:18,21 KJV) His plea, "*Brethren, I urge you to become as I am ...*" becomes meaningless. (Gal 4:12)

On closer examination, it is evident that Paul's criticism focuses on their attitudes rather than to their actions. Their eagerness for the observance of the full spectrum of Jewish ritual was an enslavement to them. They desired to enter into favour with God via circumcision and conformity rather than accept the sufficiency of Christ for their salvation and sanctification. Paul deliberately reminds them of their former association with idols and superstitious observance of times to illustrate that their present mindset was merely substituting their faith in Christ for another set of powerless traditions. *Whatever is not from faith is sin.*<sup>41</sup> In their uncircumcised state these Gentile Christians had all they needed for salvation, yet they were not content with that. They seemed to want to walk by sight rather than by faith. Worship must come from the heart of faith. There were times in Israel's history, when God voiced His disapproval of the Israelites' worship when their motives were not pure.

*Your New Moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. Isaiah 1:14*

As an integral part of worship the Sabbath needs to be kept out of pure motives. A legalistic (works for salvation) attitude toward the Sabbath does not please God. An attitude of obedience to God is what is required. Jesus taught his disciples how to properly keep the Sabbath day. The Pharisees of Jesus' day had turned the joy and delight of the Sabbath celebration into a day of pedantic restrictions. As Lord of the Sabbath,<sup>42</sup> Christ understood and taught the true purpose of the significance of the day. He confronted the Pharisees' judgement of his disciples' actions and defended their innocence.

Paul also understood Christ's teaching on the Sabbath and defended the Colossians against those who criticised their manner of worship.

*Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, Colossians 2:16*

Although this verse has been used to infer that the Sabbath has been discarded, there is nothing to suggest this in the wording of the verse. Are the Colossians being criticised for the manner in which they were eating, drinking, and keeping feasts, new moon celebrations and Sabbaths or were they being criticised for their abandonment of food and drink restrictions, festivals, and Sabbaths? A clue is given in the identity of their accusers whose traits were: false humility, worship of angels, preoccupation with the supernatural world, holding man-made commandments and doctrines, false wisdom, self-imposed religion, false humility, neglect of the body. It would appear that these critics were not "Judaizers" but Ascetics who were trying to impose their oppressive rules upon the worshippers of God in the church at Colosse who were at that time keeping the Sabbaths according to the Scriptures. Douglas R. De Lacey writes,

*The 'judgment' seems to be criticism of the Christians' present practice, apparently of eating and drinking and enjoying Jewish festivals, in contrast to those whose watchword was "do not handle, do not taste, do not even touch" (Col 2:21)<sup>43</sup>*

## ESTEEMING SPECIAL DAYS

Now let's consider Romans 14:5-6 (NKJV)

*One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day (alike). Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. {6} He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.<sup>44</sup>*

This chapter is introduced as pertaining to doubtful things and is predominantly about matters of food. (Food matters are expressly mentioned in nine verses out of twenty three.) There is no direct reference to the Sabbath here. In fact a discussion of a topic as important as the Sabbath in vv 5 & 6a would seem somewhat out of place in this chapter as a change in the observance of the day of worship would hardly be a purely individual concern. It would be an issue seriously affecting the whole church.

The discussion of the significance of certain days can be understood as part of the discussion of food matters rather than as a digression. The observance of "days" would best fit the immediate context if the particular days being discussed concerned fasting.<sup>45</sup> It is conceivable that the problem being addressed was a dispute over the appropriate days for fasting. There was a tradition among the Pharisees that they should fast twice a week, on Monday and Thursday.<sup>46</sup> As the fasting mentioned here is a voluntary practice, Paul's exhortation, "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" is an appropriate response to the situation.

If Paul was referring to the Sabbath it is strange that he didn't just write, "He who observes the Sabbath etc". The fact that Paul did not specify an actual day could suggest that Paul was referring to a number of different days that had significance for Jews but not for Gentiles. The *Feast of Purim* and the *Feast of Dedication* (Hanukkah) are examples. It is evident that in addition to fasting days, other significant days qualify as the possible subject of Paul's response.

Protestant Christians who trace their roots to Martin Luther must ask themselves if Martin Luther came out of Catholicism completely. Baptists and those who believe in full immersion must acknowledge that Luther's understanding was not fully complete as Luther never opposed infant baptism. Is there now a need for yet another reformation? Could the major reformers have missed the truth of the Sabbath?

## *Conclusion*

Did you realize that the first day that Adam spent on this planet was spent in fellowship with God? Imagine the love and joy that was shared between the Man and his Creator as they fellowshiped together for the first time. That day was the seventh day of creation. God wants mankind to remember that day because He wants to bring us back into perfect fellowship with Him. Since the day of man's rebellion God has worked consistently to bring Adam's race back into the sweet fellowship of that blessed seventh day. This is the goal of the plan of salvation. This restoration is hope of Christ's death on the cross. Your Heavenly Father longs to renew the fellowship of that first seventh day. That is the significance of its holiness. The seventh day points back to creation and forward to the Day of the Lord. It is a bridge that spans the millennia between Adam's broken fellowship and our future glory. The Sabbath was a special sign to Israel because it was a promise of the rest waited for them in the Promised Land. Through disbelief they never entered that rest. (Hebrews 4:6) The Sabbath to the Christian is an even greater sign. It is a promise of eternal rest with God.

*Therefore, since a promise remains of entering his rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. Hebrews 4:1*

God, through Christ, created the Sabbath day on the seventh day of Creation by His blessing, resting and setting apart of that day. As this day was created for the benefit of mankind, God commanded man to observe the day by rest after his own example. Later, a written version of the Sabbath commandment was included in the Ten Commandments. At different times throughout the recorded history of Israel, the Sabbath was profaned and idolatry flourished. Periods of Sabbath indifference and apostasy were followed by periods of punishment and exile. When Jesus Christ came, both he and his disciples kept the Sabbath. The Lord Jesus, perceiving man's misconception of his Divine Purpose, categorically denied any intention of destroying the Law. Foreseeing the coming lawlessness, he clearly reproved anyone who "breaks one of the least of the commandments, and teaches men so". This is why Christians should keep His Sabbath day holy.

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### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:2-3

<sup>2</sup> See H.L. Ellison's candid comments in 'Sunday' in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Edited by J.D. Douglas, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 939.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Schaff, 'The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647' in *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 3:648.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Schaff, 'The Augsburg Confession' in *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 3:69. See also Luther's Small Catechism, third commandment.

<sup>5</sup> The history of Sabbathkeeping in the early church and the introduction of Sunday worship is not treated in this booklet. For those who are interested I recommend Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Gen 2:2-3 (NKJV)

<sup>7</sup> The catch-phrase is drawn from Romans 6:15.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5:17-19

<sup>9</sup> Reference to the 'Law and the Prophets' and "one jot or tittle" identifies the subject as the written law.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 7:7

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- <sup>11</sup> 1 John 3:4
- <sup>12</sup> Romans 3:23
- <sup>13</sup> Colossians 1:15
- <sup>14</sup> The Greek is *alla* an emphatic adversative.
- <sup>15</sup> Rom 13:8-10
- <sup>16</sup> It is to be noted that Paul doesn't mention the Sabbath commandment here. Paul is not speaking of love toward God but rather, love toward our neighbour. Hence he makes no mention of the first four commandments.
- <sup>17</sup> Norman Geisler, 'Colossians' in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*
- <sup>18</sup> Colossians 2:13-14.
- <sup>19</sup> Verse 11
- <sup>20</sup> 1 Peter 2:24
- <sup>21</sup> E Lohse writes, "**cheirographon**. 1. A document is written in one's own hand as a proof of obligation, e.g., a note of indebtedness. 2. The meaning in Col. 2:14, then, is a "promissory note." God cancels the bond that lies to our charge. This bond is not a compact with the devil, as in some patristic exegesis. It is the debt that we have incurred with God. The forgiveness of sins (v. 13) through identification with Christ in his vicarious death and resurrection means that this note is cancelled; God has set it aside and nailed it to the cross." Kittel, Gerhard, and Friedrich, Gerhard, Editors, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) 1985.
- <sup>22</sup> Moulton-Milligan, "The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament" (Massachusetts:Hendrickson Publishers, 1929) 687.
- <sup>23</sup> James D.G. Dunn, 'The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text' in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).
- <sup>24</sup> F.F. Bruce makes this connection. Interestingly Bruce does not mention the law as an alternative in his commentary on the *cheirographon*. F.F. Bruce, 'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians' in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1984) 108-109.
- <sup>25</sup> Paul often used the metaphorical crucifixion of the "flesh" to explain the way in which a believer having *died* to his old life enters into a new life *in Christ* Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20, 5:24.
- <sup>26</sup> Of these major translations only the *New International Version* implies that the law is the subject of the Christ's actions. It does this by translating *cheirographon* as "written code".
- <sup>27</sup> Romans 3:20, 7:7.
- <sup>28</sup> Romans 7:7, Ephesians 6:2, James 2:11.
- <sup>29</sup> Heb 7:12 (NKJV)
- <sup>30</sup> Hebrews chapters 9 & 10
- <sup>31</sup> Louw, Johannes P. and Nida, Eugene A., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989).
- <sup>32</sup> Acts 15.
- <sup>33</sup> Eph 2:11.
- <sup>34</sup> Some may argue that the Sabbath Commandment is an example of a law that served to segregate Jews and Gentiles. The notion of the "Jewish Sabbath" will be examined in "argument three."
- <sup>35</sup> Eph. 6:1 *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right*. F.F. Bruce concludes that "The chief point of the quotation of the fifth commandment may be to confirm that obedience to parents is "right" because it is enjoined by the law of God." F.F. Bruce, 'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians' in *NICNT*, 397-398.
- <sup>36</sup> 1 John 2:3,4
- <sup>37</sup> Cf. Acts 10:14
- <sup>38</sup> It is true that the feast referred to here is the Feast of Unleavened Bread but as the two feasts are inseparable a keeping of the Passover is implied.
- <sup>39</sup> Everitt Harrison, 'Some Patterns of the New Testament Didache' *Bibliotheca Sacra* Vol 119 No.474 Apr 62, 127.
- <sup>40</sup> See J.J. Griesbach, *Diaglott*.
- <sup>41</sup> Rom 14:23
- <sup>42</sup> Matthew 12:8
- <sup>43</sup> Douglas R. De Lacey, 'Holy Days', *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. 1993) 403.
- <sup>44</sup> The supplementation of the word *alike* changes the entire meaning of the sentence. The Greek word

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*krino* - judge, is translated "esteems" and *phroneo* – think or have understanding, is translated "observe". This introduces the connotation of religious observance which may not be accurate. More literally, the translation could read:

"On the one hand, in one's judgement a particular day is more appropriate than another, on the other hand, in another's opinion, every day is appropriate. Let each one be fully assured in his own mind. The one understanding the day, by the Lord understands it, the one not understanding the day unto the Lord does not understand it; and the one eating, to the Lord eats, for he gives thanks to God; and the one fasting, fasts unto the Lord and gives thanks to God."

Although the Greek word for fasting is not expressly used here, the term "not eating" is a logical substitution for the sake of literary style in order to highlight the contrast made here. (Cf. Zechariah 7:5-6)

<sup>45</sup> The format of the chapter may be interpreted thus:

About the Eating of Meat - verses 1-4

About Fasting Days - verses 5-6

Do Not Condemn Each Other - verses 7-13

About Clean and Unclean Foods - verses 14-19

Responsibilities to Each Other in Matters of Diet - verses 20-23

<sup>46</sup> R.D. Linder writes, "Moreover Jewish Christians apparently followed the Jewish custom of fasting and prayer on Mondays and Thursdays until around the end of the first century when Wednesdays and Fridays were observed, probably in reaction against the Judaizers." 'Fast, Fasting' in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* edited by Walter Elwell (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1984) 406. See also reference to the appropriate days for fasting in the *Didache*.