

The Sabbath

Christians disagree on what we should believe about the Sabbath. Is it Saturday, Sunday, or whenever? How should Christians apply the Old Testament to their present lives? These are questions that come up concerning the Sabbath. Let's review four views and compare them to Scripture.

The first view is called the Seventh Day view. Exodus 20:8-11 describes the Sabbath Law in the Ten Commandments. This view states that the Ten Commandments are still applicable today; therefore, we are still under the Sabbath Law. They also point out that Exodus 31:16 calls the Sabbath a covenant forever. Isaiah 56:2,6 mentions Sabbath keeping in an eschatological passage. Because of these facts they believe that we are still under the Sabbath Law.

Let's examine this position. First, those who say we are under the Sabbath Law usually state that it is required for Christians to worship on Saturday rather than Sunday. Some even call Sunday worship "the mark of the beast." One difficulty with this position is that even under the Old Covenant it says nothing about worshipping on Saturday rather than Sunday. The Sabbath Law calls for a day of rest on Saturday (actually Friday at sundown until Saturday at sundown). It never says anything about worship. The Old Testament people of God were not commanded to worship every week. They usually offered their sacrifices on the three festivals that required Jerusalem attendance. Weekly gatherings were never commanded. The Jewish practice of Synagogue worship on Saturday began sometime during the exile (after 586BC), but it was never commanded in the Bible. Second, the New Testament clearly teaches that at least in some sense we are no longer under the Law of Moses (Galatians 3; Romans 6:14-15; 1 Corinthians 9:20). Hebrews 8:13 states: "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." In Galatians 5:1-6 Paul specifically warns the Galatians concerning going back to the law after being saved by grace. He uses circumcision as an example, which was also called an eternal covenant in Genesis 17:13. Both Sabbath keeping and circumcision are called an eternal covenant with the ethnic people of Israel, but they are also clearly not commanded for the Church. The New Testament never commands the Church to obey the Sabbath Law. Of course we are under the moral law of God that has existed from the very beginning with Adam and Eve. God never changes His moral standards. Most of the Ten Commandments are moral commandments, but the Sabbath Law is simply not a moral commandment. In fact, in Revelation 21:25 we see that the Sabbath is no longer applicable in the new kingdom; if this is the case, then the Sabbath Law cannot be a moral law.

The second view is called the Christian Sabbath view. The Puritans held to this view, which states that the Sabbath Law was shifted from Saturday to Sunday without some of the legalistic trappings. They appeal to Acts 20:7, which reveals that the early church no longer followed the Jewish synagogue practice of gathering on Saturday. They gathered "on the first day of the week," which was Sunday to celebrate the Lord's Supper and hear Paul preach. John 20:19 and 26 reveals that believers began regularly gathering on Sunday even before Jesus ascended into heaven. The uninformed might not pick this up but on the first day of the week (v.19) the disciples were meeting, and then one week later they are found meeting again. Verse 26 says "eight days later," but the ancient Jews counted the current day whenever they counted days, which places this second meeting on Sunday again. 1 Corinthians 16:2 also reveals that the missionary giving was collected by the church on Sunday in order to be prepared for Paul when he came to receive the offering. In Revelation 1:10 it records that John received his revelation while "in the Spirit on the Lord's day," referring to Sunday, the day Jesus rose from the dead. Some

claim the Sabbath was changed from Saturday to Sunday by Constantine in the fourth century, but this is simply not true historically. The practice of the Church was immediately changed, probably in honor of Jesus' resurrection, to meet regularly for worship on Sunday; they even called it the Lord's day. All Church history documents, including the early Church Fathers, reveals that the universal practice of the Church was to meet on Sunday, not Saturday.

Let's examine this position. The Bible and early church history from the very beginning of the Church, not at the time of Constantine, reveals that the normal time the Church met for worship was Sunday. But does this mean that the Sabbath Law was changed to Sunday? I do not think so. Nowhere in the Bible are we commanded to meet on Saturday or Sunday. The Puritans did a disservice to the Church by putting shackles on the people that Peter admits even the Jews couldn't bear (Acts 15:10).

The third view is the fulfillment view. Jesus said that He did not come to abolish the Law, but rather to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17-18). Some think this contradicts the Hebrews 8:13 passage quoted earlier, but it actually agrees completely with the author of Hebrews. He fulfilled the Laws in the covenant with Moses in different ways. The sacrificial laws are no longer applicable, because Jesus was the final sacrifice (Hebrews 9:12, 26; 10:1-14). It is interesting that those who say we are still under the Law do not practice animal sacrifices, when they are clearly commanded in the Law. Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial and Judicial laws by expanding the people of God to a transnational people. The ceremonial and judicial laws were only for the Jewish people for a particular time as a nation to separate them from the surrounding nations. Now we have the Holy Spirit who separates us, and so we do not need these extra laws. Galatians 3:19-26 makes it evident that the Covenant of Moses was only temporary as a "guardian until Christ came." It is interesting that those who say we are still under the Law do not think we should bring back all the judicial laws like killing a child who curses his mother or father (Exodus 21:17). The ceremonial laws that prohibited the eating of pork or catfish were rescinded by both Jesus and Peter because they were not moral laws. In Mark 7:19 Jesus declared *all* foods clean. For us to say some foods are not clean is to call Jesus a liar and sin the sin of legalism. Peter had to learn the hard way because of his thickheadedness by a vision from God, where God commanded him to eat unclean food along with a rebuke to not call unclean what God calls clean (Acts 10:9-16). Colossians 2:16-17 states: "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." We are no longer under the Sabbath Law or the new moon or festival laws, because they were only a shadow for a particular time period. We are commanded in this passage to not allow people to judge us concerning Sabbaths. Romans 14:5-6 states, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." He goes on to say that either position glorifies God. If we were still under the Sabbath Law Paul would have said that all of God's people must observe Saturday as a day of rest. The only type of law in the Mosaic Law that is still applicable are the moral laws, which I have already stated are eternal (e.g. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:19-21); all the other laws under the Covenant of Moses were fulfilled by Jesus in such a way that they are no longer necessary, because they were temporary for the Jewish people alone.

Let's examine this position. Most of the points come directly from the teachings of the New Testament. We find that those laws God wants us to still follow are repeated in the New Testament. Hebrews 7:12 states, "For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well." The context reveals that the change in the priesthood was from the Aaronic priesthood to the priesthood in the order of Melchizedek. It is interesting that those who say we are still under the law do

not demand the Aaronic priesthood as well. The one exception to this position is stated in the last position, which takes the Biblical teaching from view number 2 and 3, but does not completely throw away the concept of a Sabbath.

Finally, the fourth view is called the principle view. We are no longer under the law of the Sabbath as has been clearly shown above. But this doesn't mean we don't need a day of rest and worship. The early church changed the day for worship to Sunday to commemorate the resurrection, but this was not commanded and there is no hint that no work could be done on this day. We do need a day of rest, and we do need to gather together regularly for worship. So the principle of the Sabbath Law is still applicable, without making it legalistic. In Mark 2:27-28 Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." Jesus revealed that the principle was for our benefit. Israel needed the law as their "guardian," but the principle is still helpful. Hebrews 10:25 says, "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." The Greek word translated *meet together* is *episunagoge*, which refers to the worship service; the HCSB translates it "worship meetings." Notice it doesn't command it in a legalistic sense, but reveals that we need to regularly attend worship services, especially with the end coming soon. Christians should regularly gather together to worship God and hear His Word preached. Normally this worship meeting takes place on Sunday, but there is no law that says it has to be Sunday or Saturday. The Bible also indicates that the people of God gathered together in smaller meetings from house to house during the week (Acts 2:46-47; 5:12, 42; 20:20).

We have already seen that the New Testament Church immediately began to regularly gather for worship on Sunday, but what did the early church after Acts practice? The early church fathers unanimously advocated worship on Sunday. Ignatius, pastor of the church at Antioch who was martyred during the reign of Trajan (AD 98-117), wrote in his letter to the Magnesians 9:1 of the common practice of his church including Jewish believers, "No longer keeping the Sabbath but living in accordance with the Lord's day, on which our life also arose through him and his death." Notice for the early church the Lord's Day (Sunday) replaced the Sabbath (Saturday) as the normal day for worship. The *Didache* is an early church document dating within the first century AD shortly after Paul's death states in 14:1, "On the Lord's own day gather together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure." Justin Martyr (AD 110-165) wrote in his *First Apology* (ANF 1:186), "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits.... But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because...Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead." Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor of Bithynia-Pontus from AD 111-113 described a Christian worship service to the emperor Trajan saying, "On an appointed day, they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as to a god..." Notice an unbeliever is stating they met on "an appointed day;" this must be referring to Sunday because it says they met before daybreak. People worked on the first day of the week, which is why they gathered so early. Also notice that the early church from its very beginning worshiped Jesus as God. Two fallacies that are passed off as history on the Internet and perpetuated by ignorant people are silenced by this account: Some claim worship was not changed to Sunday until Constantine in 325 AD and others claim the deity of Christ was not embraced until Constantine – both are wrong. In the letter of Barnabas, dating between AD 70 and AD 132, he states in 15:9, "This is why we spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both arose from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended

into heaven.” Fragment 7 of Irenaeus (2nd century) takes for granted worship was on Sunday (ANE 1:569); the same can be said of Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215 in ANE 2:469, 545). I could go on, but it is clear historically that the Church worshiped on Sunday, not Saturday, from the very beginning and throughout its history.

This issue is very important. Some people are practicing what I call sheep stealing by convincing people to leave good, Bible teaching churches in order to attend their church all because they claim only Sabbath Churches are teaching the truth. The Kingdom is not advanced by sheep shuffling. Churches should be convinced on this position, but they should not attack other Bible churches in the process. The Scriptures are very clear concerning this matter. Also legalism kills; it does not give life. I have written a paper on legalism that can be found on the Harvest Fellowship website. Romans 6:14 says, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” We actually have power over sin when we get out from under the law, not when we submit to it.