

REMEMBERING THE SABBATH

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Sunday is a special day – a cherished day – for Christians. It is a day that is different, not because of our church-going, but because of something God did. Not only did God begin His work of creation on a Sunday (the first day of the week), but God raised Jesus from the dead on a Sunday (Matt. 28:1). That Resurrection Day is what really makes Sunday special. It was a day of new life for a world that was dead in its sins. It marks a new beginning – a new creation.

The early disciples recognized the importance of Sunday. We can trace that special designation for Sunday – “the Lord’s Day” – back to the apostle John (Rev. 1:10). Also, we read that New Testament believers held meetings on Sundays (Acts 2:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). And so, throughout Church history up to today, Sunday is the pre-eminent day on which God’s people gather for teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer. It is a time set apart from our everyday routine, bringing us back to our Centre, refreshing our souls, and realigning our walk.

However, there are some Christian groups that insist on worshipping on Saturdays. Messianic Judaism is one such example. Messianic Judaism encourages Christians to view Saturday as the Sabbath, and thus, the divinely ordained day of rest and worship. They cite the example of Jesus, who kept the Sabbath. They also cite the early disciples who continued to visit synagogues on Saturdays after Jesus’ ascension (cf. Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). Seventh-Day Adventism shares this view.

In response to such “Saturday-Sabbath” thinking, many (if not most) Christians will assert the “Christian Sabbath” view. These people whole-heartedly agree that we need to observe the fourth commandment. However, they will argue that Sunday has now become the Christian Sabbath because of the finished work of Christ. Everything that once pertained to Saturday-Sabbath observance now pertains to Sunday.

The story of Eric Liddell, immortalized in the movie “Chariots of Fire,” centres around this very issue. Liddell refused to race in the Olympics on a Sunday because, in his Christian convictions, it was the Sabbath. According to this Christian Sabbath tradition, the observance of Sunday is no less mandatory than is the observance of Saturday in Old Testament times. Unless we observe the Christian Sabbath, we will find ourselves compromising our faith and missing out on a blessing (so it is thought).

But is Sunday truly the Christian Sabbath? Must Christians observe the Sabbath at all? How are we to deal with the fourth commandment or the fact that Sabbath observance is so central to the Old Testament (cf. Ex. 31:13-17)? How can we reconcile

this with New Testament teachings that seem to make Sabbath observance irrelevant (cf. Rom. 14:5,6)?

If we would seek to be true to Scripture, obedient to God, and faithful in our worship, we need to give some thought to this issue. Let us not go to our churches next Sunday morning out of mere routine. As Christians, we need to understand why we do what we do. More importantly, we need to understand what God expects of us.

The Old Testament Sabbath

Any discussion of the Sabbath must begin with its roots in the Old Testament. There we begin to see that *Sabbath* is more than a day – it is a theme that runs throughout the entire Bible, starting in Genesis.

Gen. 2:1-3

In these verses we read that God finished all His work of creation. This work was completed over the space of six literal days (Sunday to Friday), each marked by an evening and a morning. The seventh day (Saturday) was a day of rest. Though God issues no commandment for people to rest, He does set the day apart as holy. We read: “God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.” (2:3). Interestingly, the word for “rested” (*shabat*) is the root for the word for “Sabbath” (*shabbat*).

It is pertinent that the seventh day of Gen. 2 is not designated by the passing of an evening and a morning, as the prior six days were. This does not mean that it was not a literal day. Yet this does imply that there is more to the seventh day than *just* an ordinary day. The seventh day also represents a *state*.^[1] God enters into this state with His good creation after all His work is completed, and as the intended goal of all His work.^[2] In this Sabbath-state, after God’s good creation, man possesses a divine rest until the time of his Fall. The later fourth commandment serves to call us back to this Sabbath-state – a state of rest in God.

Ex. 16:22-30; 20:8-11

In these verses, we find the first references to God’s Sabbath commandment. In 16:22-30, the Israelites are given a double portion of manna on Friday so that they will be able to stay at home, refrain from work, and rest on Saturday. Saturday is “a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD.” (16:23). This is further clarified in the fourth commandment (20:8-11), where God orders the weekly Sabbath rest: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...In it you shall do no work.” Later Scripture outlines the observance of Sabbath years as well (cf. Lev. 25). And so, from the Exodus onward, God’s people are to be distinguished by their Sabbath-keeping. They would later suffer divine wrath for their failure in this regard (cf. 2 Chr. 36:20,21).

The Place of the Law

How should we, in this Christian era, understand these Old Testament Sabbath ordinances? One answer comes from Tertullian. Tertullian suggested the Old Testament Law be divided into three parts: civil, ceremonial, and moral.^[3] The civil law contains regulations relating to national Israel, which passed away with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The ceremonial law contains types and symbols pointing to Christ, which were fulfilled in Him at His death. The moral law, however, is viewed as the eternal “kernel” of the Old Testament Law, which can never be set aside. The Sabbath, some Christians hold, is a part of this eternal moral law.^[4]

There are several problems with this view. First, it is notable that the New Testament does not emphasize the need to keep a weekly Sabbath day in the Old Testament sense. The Jerusalem Council did not require it of Gentile converts (Acts 15:20). Also, in the lists of sins which would bar one from the kingdom of God, Sabbath-breaking is conspicuously absent.^[5] As well, interestingly, the later Church fathers make no connection between the Old Testament Sabbath and the church’s accepted day of worship – the Lord’s Day.^[6]

Furthermore, there is a major flaw in Tertullian’s three-fold division of the Law. When we come to the text of Scripture, we do not find the Old Testament so neatly divided. In fact, all three “divisions” are intermingled and interspersed: it is impossible to delineate which laws apply to which division. For example, the Ten Commandments were portrayed as being in the category of “moral law,” and hence, still applicable today. However, the fourth commandment – the Sabbath law – deals with the observance of a day. As such, it seems more ceremonial than moral.

How then can we understand and apply Old Testament Law, and the Sabbath commandment in particular? Well, every commandment must be viewed as part of an irreducible complex of civil, ceremonial, and moral law that comprises the unity of the one Old Testament Law (*torah*). This Law can only then be interpreted in the light of Christ, who Himself fulfills the entirety of the Law (Matt. 5:17): “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” (Rom. 10:4). Thus, if we are going to gain a true understanding of the Sabbath law and its applications for today, we must look to Christ and the New Testament record of what He said and accomplished regarding it.

The New Testament Sabbath

Matt. 11:28-30

In these verses, Jesus makes a claim about Himself that is extremely pertinent to our understanding of Sabbath. He says: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (11:28). Though He does not use the word “Sabbath” here, the Sabbath theme is in view.

Christ, the ultimate authority on the meaning of “Sabbath” (cf. 12:8), is saying that He is the Rest-giver. Not only does He provide immediate rest for our souls – a spiritual

rest from sin – but also that ultimate physical rest which we will enjoy with Him in heaven. This makes the Old Testament Sabbath a *type* which points ahead to Christ Himself and our salvation in Him. His rest in the grave on a Saturday (the seventh day) lays to rest this old creation with its sins. It enables us to enter into a new Sabbath state with God in a new creation.

Col. 2:16,17

One of Paul's major concerns in Colossians was a heresy that advanced Jewish ritual and mysticism. Paul warns that such things do not elevate us to God, for the fullness of God can be found in none other than Jesus Christ (2:8-10). He asserts that the old rituals involving foods and festivals have been done away with. Paul goes so far as to include the Sabbath in this, saying, "let no one judge you...regarding...sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ." (2:16,17). Thus Paul sees the Sabbath as reaching its fulfillment in Christ and His saving work alone.^[7]

Heb. 3:7-4:13

The writer of Hebrews further clarifies the relation of Christ to the Sabbath. He begins by speaking of the Israelites who sinned in the wilderness. Those who were typified by unbelief fell under God's wrath, which entailed a *barring from His rest*. We read: "And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief." (3:18,19).

We should not exhibit the same unbelief, "since a promise remains of entering His rest." (4:1). That *promise of rest* is equated with the *Gospel* in 4:2. This rest is a part of the Sabbath theme – a theme fulfilled in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

As David Robinson explains, in Christ, we re-enter the Sabbath-state that God alone provides. This state existed in Eden, but was destroyed by Adam's sin. Israel tasted of this state in the Sabbath ordinances, but would not enjoy its fullness. However, with Christ's death and resurrection, an *eternal Sabbath* is established which no man can break. So, "There remains therefore a rest (*sabbatismos*; literally, "Sabbath 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." (4:9,10). Fred Zaspel asserts that the Old Testament Sabbath "pointed to a finished work of God in providing redemptive rest for His people through the death of His Son."^[8]

The Sabbath and the Lord's Day

In summary, "Sabbath" for the New Testament Christian has been fulfilled in Christ. Its ultimate meaning is realized in our state of salvation in Him. The day was part of an eschatological theme – a shadow of a better Day to come. Therefore, we cannot hold to the common Christian Sabbath or Saturday-Sabbath views. Neither Saturday nor Sunday is our Sabbath, because believers have an Eternal Sabbath in Jesus – a state of

salvation which can never be abrogated. This Jesus and His salvation *is* our Christian Sabbath.

However, do not miss the connection between the Old Testament Sabbath and the Lord's Day (Sunday). The Lord's Day celebrates the completion of Christ's work of salvation and, thus, our entry into the Eternal Sabbath. The Lord's Day looks *back* to the things which the Sabbath day looked *ahead* to. And so it would not be wrong to draw some parallels:^[9] Both days are linked to worship. Both are commemorative days observed by the people of God. Both are associated with rest – either physical or spiritual.^[10] The Lord's Day, while *not* the Sabbath, is a day to remember.

Today's Christian and the Lord's Day

How are you observing the Lord's Day? Certainly the first day has been appointed in a special way for Christians to gather, learn, fellowship, worship, and pray. But, are we distracted from the Person we worship by our day of worship? Or, worse, are we Sunday Christians, living for God only one day a week?

What about those like Eric Liddell or those in Messianic Judaism who hold to a Sabbatarian position? Certainly, Paul provides for differences among Christians over just such an issue: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. 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." (Rom. 14:5,6). Individual Christian conscience must always be considered. However, a strict Sabbatarianism should be rejected.

Also, we must remember that parallels do exist between the Lord's Day and the Sabbath. As well, the New Testament does set out principles regarding the Lord's Day. Christ's fulfillment of the Law does not mean that there is now no more Law at all! Rather, we must look to Him for the definitive interpretation.

The Sabbath has not been abolished, for "there remains therefore a Sabbath for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9). However, this Sabbath has been fulfilled in the finished work of Christ. We no longer need to observe a Sabbath day, but we must devote time to the Lord who gives us our Eternal Sabbath. It is the Lord's Day – Sunday – which provides this opportunity in a special way. It is the Lord's Day that helps us remember that we find our true rest in Jesus; that we have a new beginning in Him.

^[1] Based on a sermon by David Robinson, Grace Bible Church, Cambridge, Ontario, Feb. 16, 2003, 6:00 PM.

^[2] Fred Zaspel, “The Sabbath: A Test Case,” Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*, (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002), 214.

^[3] A. T. Lincoln, “From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: ‘A Biblical and Theological Perspective,’” D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1982), 380.

^[4] Douglas Allen Adams, *Sunday – The Christian Sabbath*, (TBS Thesis, 1977), 8,9.

^[5] Cf. 1 Cor. 6:9,10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5.

^[6] Lincoln, 385.

^[7] Lincoln, 368.

^[8] Zaspel, 232.

^[9] Lincoln, 398.

^[10] Cf. W. O. Carver, *Sabbath Observance*, (Nashville: The Broadman Press, 1940), 54-57.