

The Sabbath – Currently Viable or Fulfilled at the Cross?

(Response to a Radio Bible Answerman's Challenge)

Introduction

The statement by many in the Christian world that there is no believer obligation to keep the Sabbath in the New Testament is at variance with Biblical teaching.

- **A key issue:** The Jews were the main pioneers of the early Christian Church. Paul even said that the gospel went first to the Jews (Romans 1:16). The seventh-day Sabbath experience was a way of life to them, as it was with Jesus: “*as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day*” (Luke 4:16). Therefore, the seventh day was a “given” to that early church.
- As Gentiles were added to that Church, a vast array of sins related to the other commandments had to be addressed by the New Testament writers. (i.e., Luke 18:20, Romans 13:9, James 2:11, II Peter 2:14). The Sabbath was part of the early church leaders’ thinking, especially with so many of the early worship meetings being held in the Jewish synagogues (i.e., Acts 13:14-15, 42; 17:10; 18:4; 19:8).

The phrase “Lord’s Day” did not come into the thinking of the early church until ±135 A.D. There are several early religious documents attributable to this era, two of which mention the “Lord’s Day.” These two are the writings of Justin Martyr in the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Didache*, which alleges to teach truths from the Apostles. Many have sought to include such early documents as part of the Bible or Canon, but they have been rejected because of erroneous teachings. The *Epistle of Barnabas* is strongly anti-Semitic – a spirit accelerating within the Roman Empire because of Jewish rebellions!

It is important to note that anti-Semitism rose very early, culminating in the “First Jewish–Roman War” (66–73 A.D.) and later, “the Bar Kokhba revolt” (132–135 A.D.).

- The Jews were “punished” by making it difficult for them to observe the seventh-day Sabbath and by the promotion of Sunday worship by 135 A.D., which came to be called the “Lord’s Day” – the first day of the week that honored the Roman Empire’s allegiance to the god Mithra.
- This form of anti-Semitism formally peaked when Sylvester I was the bishop of Rome and Constantine the Roman Emperor in the early 300’s A.D.
- During that era, the Roman “Christian” Church (ecclesiastical) and State (civil) created laws requiring the whole Roman Empire to honor Sunday worship and resist Saturday observance.

There were, however, Sabbath keepers for over a thousand years noted through history, especially in France and northern Italy (e.g., Waldensians and Albigenses).

There is no Scriptural authority in the New Testament to change the seventh-day Sabbath to the first day. Equally important, there are no references to a **sacred worship day** other than the seventh-day Sabbath. The first day of the week, in honor of the resurrection, came from extra-Biblical sources.

The Issue of Laws in the Bible

At Creation God established **two institutions** for mankind: (1) marriage and (2) the Sabbath! They address God's "original wishes," in defining mankind's relationships and man's to God. Would God change such divinely ordained ideals? God even noted later, in the fourth commandment written by Him in stone, that they were to "*remember*" the Sabbath day to keep it "*holy*" (Exodus 20:8). Then, in distinct and pointed language, He reminds us that it was the Sabbath of Creation (vs 11).

There is a danger in minimizing God's ideals and standards established in the antediluvian era. God informs us: "*For I am the LORD, I change not*" (Malachi 3:6). Approximately 1550 years after Creation, God destroyed the world by a flood (Genesis 6). Earth's populace knew of His standards, which they rebelled against. God said their hearts were "*evil continuously*" (Genesis 6:5). Evil is contrasted with non-evil, God's rules and ways. Jesus later said that "*as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be*" (Matthew 24:37). In turn, Paul notes, regarding the antediluvian Enoch, that he "*pleased God*" and was taken to heaven (Hebrews 11:5). A silver thread of divine standards of conduct existed between human beings and in man's relationship to God. These have remained unchanged.

At Sinai very crucial "legal" directives came into written existence. The premier moral codes of the Bible are the **Ten Commandments** [first spoken by God (Exodus 20:3-17), then written by His finger on two tables of stone (Exodus 31:18, etc.)]. This is the only part of the Bible in which God personally wrote His wishes – **and** it was in stone. Note the Bible words:

"And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables" (Exodus 32:16).

That is awesome – just amazing! It suggests that they originated as divine imperatives, **and** they are "*fixed in stone*" – never to be changed!

Something else came out of Moses' 40 days and 40 nights in that mountain, totally fasting (Exodus 24:18; Deuteronomy 9:18):

- God gave him a vast array of regulations to govern/guide the millions of Israelites as they were forming a "theocracy" – a nation with God as its head.

- Moses wrote those down (Exodus 24:4, 34:27). These are called the Mosaic Laws or The Laws of Moses, and they are referenced in many ways in Scripture. Those laws, recorded by Moses, were divided into several parts (key areas):
 1. Ceremonial – regulations that governed their worship experience. Most pointed to Christ and the Cross. They would be done away with when Jesus came and died. They were also called “*ordinances*.”
 2. Civil laws, called “*judgments*,” that governed that God-centered society and its administration.
 3. Statutes – which explained in detail the meaning of and how to apply the ceremonial, civil and moral laws. Additional regulations were added in several areas, such as scheduled Feast celebrations.

When one refers to Biblical **laws**, it is important to try to ascertain which ones God is referring to. It is true that at times, especially in the book of Romans, it is difficult to understand specifically! Context, however, helps in most areas.

Focusing on the Sabbath in Specific Textual Areas

Genesis 2:1-3: “*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.”*

It is correct to say that God didn’t have to *rest* physically, as we understand it. God ceased or rested from His work of Creation. It was then that God defined the week as seven days. That was unrelated to any celestial orbit, such as the sun or moon. That number, seven, is noted hundreds of times in the Bible, including in prophecy within the book of Revelation. At the “seventh” (in numerous places) something happens to man and his relationship with God (seven Seals, seven Trumpets, seven Vial Plagues, etc.). On the seventh day of Creation, God made *time holy* – sacred. “Time” is intangible. But, through a **relationship experience**, it would become a **tangible bonding** with Him.

Some say that from the first Creation week on, God didn’t command man to keep the Sabbath until the time of the Israelites, implying that it ceased to be important. There is **no** document or Biblical record to support that! That statement or argument suggests that the seventh day wasn’t important after God sanctified it! If something is holy because God made it that way, there would have to be another God-given declaration to **change** such a sacred time. The Sabbath was never changed!

Exodus 16:23-25: Even before the Decalogue or Ten Commandments were given, God directed the Israelites to keep the Sabbath. They had just crossed the Red Sea when they ran out of food. “*Manna*” was then found each morning for them to gather for their meals. For Fridays, this counsel was given: “To morrow is the rest of the holy sabbath unto the LORD: bake that which ye will bake to day, and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning. And they laid it up till the morning, as Moses

bade: and it did not stink, neither was there any worm therein. And Moses said, Eat that to day; for to day is a sabbath unto the LORD: to day ye shall not find it in the field."

No manna fell on the seventh day. The manna directive was to highlight God's continued interest in the Sabbath. It was not a Jewish institution (as some say), but a divine convention. Those people had been in Egypt for over 400 years. They had forgotten much of the wonders about God and His relationship to man. God was beginning to "re-establish" who He was and the standards mankind were to live by, including the Sabbath, to His chosen people, the seed of Abraham. "Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Genesis 26:5).

Hebrews 7:12: "For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law."

- This change of the law has nothing to do with the Ten Commandments! The Mosaic Laws providing guidance for the priesthood were for the Aaronic Priesthood, based upon Moses' brother, Aaron, being the High Priest. When Jesus became our High Priest, those laws no longer applied. They were part of those old Mosaic Laws.

It is true that when Christ ascended to heaven Jesus took His place on the right hand of God – on His throne. It is also true that a new order of priesthood, noted as the Melchizedekian priesthood (Hebrews 7 – a wonderful study), began with Christ as its "high priest" (Hebrews 8:1). Until He comes again as "KING OF KING AND LORD OF LORDS" (Revelation 19:16), it is incorrect to say that His work was finished at the Cross! As our High Priest, He serves us in redemptive work:

- "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (I John 2:1).
- "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (I Timothy 2:5).
- "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

The issue of sin by the Decalogue remains. Man still requires an advocate, a mediator and an intercessor.

Deuteronomy 5:14-15: "But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou. **And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.**"

It is true that Deuteronomy 5 is another iteration of the Ten Commandments. The additional verse that is noted does not alter that meaning of those directives in stone! God is adding something important – that the Sabbath now also symbolizes “deliverance.” The children of Israel were now ready to enter the land of Canaan. God reminded them to make the Sabbath a “remember time” – not only of His authority as Creator – but that He was also their deliverer from bondage. This is profound. That is for us now, at the end of time!

In great symbolism, Egypt represents the “wicked world” to God’s last-day people. There is a deliverance message in the Bible (noted in many areas – one in Daniel 12:1) when we will become part of God’s family forever and then be on our way to join Him in the air, when we begin spending eternity with our Savior, our King. Isaiah notes:

- *“And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD”* (Isaiah 66:23).
- Wow – the Sabbath will still be kept in that heavenly future. Might we then continue to “remember” that it was Jesus who made our deliverance from “Egypt” (this sinful world) possible? We aren’t told, but I would like to think so, based upon the wonderful new insight that Deuteronomy 5 gives us.

Matthew 28:20: *“Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”*

Jesus told the disciples to teach all nations (the world) all things that He commanded them. What He commanded are all the things that He taught. One of those things was the Ten Commandments: *“If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments”* (Matthew 19:17). Many scholars who specialize in the book of Matthew recognize this as referencing the Decalogue.

Paul notes that:

“For by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20).

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

These two verses are mentioned to simply note that there is a forever standard that relates to our future. The Ten Commandments is that premier document, in stone, that lays out with pristine clarity our obligation to God (the first four commandments) and to man (the last six).

Matthew 5:17: *“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.”*

The word “*fulfil*” has often been used to “show” that the law has been done away with. “*Fulfil*” (*plerosai* – Greek) could mean that something came to its end. But note the next verse:

“For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (vs 18).

Plerosai has other meanings. Here, Jesus came to “reveal the fullest depth of its meaning” that the law was intended to hold. He came to affirm it.

Jesus now becomes directive, so we won’t misunderstand what He said:

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

Romans 14:5-6: *“One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it.”*

The word Sabbath is not mentioned in these verses. Many assume that when it refers to a “day,” it refers to the seventh-day Sabbath. That is not the context. Albert Barnes (*New Testament Commentary*) has analyzed this at great length, and has concluded that it refers to the Feast Days and how people see them differently.

Overview of all texts/illustrations where Jesus seemed to violate the Sabbath

Jesus never violated the Sabbath! He came to affirm it, to reveal its higher purpose and how it should be kept. The leaders of Israel had tacked on hundreds of legal requirements to its observance, making it impossible to keep. Jesus came to show how the Sabbath could be and should be beautifully kept. By His example He was teaching us what the Sabbath meant. It was to be elevating, practical, spiritual and just a pleasure to keep. The claim that Jesus violated the Sabbath came from those Jewish leaders, and has been since used by many to *reject* Sabbath keeping.

In Matthew 12:11-12 Jesus noted that it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath. That was a continued clarification of how the Sabbath should be *used and honored*. “*Doing good*” did not “tarnish” its sacredness.

Some have argued (and this is actually fearful logic) that since we can do good on other days, any day could be the Sabbath. That is circular reasoning and steps out of the boundaries of the teaching of God’s Holy Word. The Sabbath is a period of time that God made and declared holy – and is not holy because of what deeds man performs!

Prophecy of the End of Time

In Matthew 24 and Mark 13 Jesus gave us an “end-time template” of several last-day world events. Then, right in the middle of those chapters, He noted that, for the rest of the story, one must go to Daniel where it talks about the “*abomination of desolation*” (i.e., Matthew 24:15). That is in Daniel 8–12.

The word “*abomination*” is God’s *emotional* term for a specific sin. That sin is identified in Daniel 8:12-13 as “*the transgression (be·pesha – Hebrew) of desolation.*” That sin means rebellion against God’s authority (as Creator), His Law (the Decalogue, where His Creatorship is seen in the Sabbath commandment) and His covenant (recognizing the Sabbath as its sign – Exodus 31:13 (cf. Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13)). It is incorrect to identify the rich understanding of Exodus 31 for the Jews only; it is for all races. Principles regarding the Sabbath in those verses are apropos to the very end of time and are affirmed in this Danelic prophecy.

The antichrist will promote a false Sabbath through a law at the end, noted in Daniel 11–12. In Daniel 11:30 the antichrist has hatred for God’s covenant within this context of resistance to God’s holy Sabbath. To understand prophecy is to grasp the deepest meaning of truth, and it is where God puts His priorities. Since Jesus ties his Mount of Olives discourse (Matthew 24 and Mark 13) about the end of time with Daniel **and** the Sabbath, it becomes a solemn issue – one that Christians are to address.

Colossians 2:8-18 (14, 16-17 quoted here): *“Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; ... Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”*

These verses are used to “peg” the Sabbath as belonging to an ordinance or a ceremonial law. Focus especially on verses 16-17: In Greek, the word for sabbath has no article, like “the,” before it. Thus, it is bonded to the words “*holydays*” and “*new moon.*”

These three together, sabbath, new moon and holyday, was a regular Jewish way of speaking of the Jewish feasts or festivals that were observed over a seven-month period (I Chronicles 23:31, Nehemiah 10:33, Isaiah 1:13-14).

The next verse (17) clearly reveals that these were “*a shadow*” of things to come – future to the Old Testament. The seventh-day Sabbath is not part of the Mosaic, or ceremonial, laws.

Hebrews 4:4-9:

This chapter is used in many ways. One of the world's greatest scholars on the Sabbath, the late Samuele Bacchiocchi, wrote numerous books on that sacred day. One, in which he affirms that the seventh-day Sabbath continues as part of God's great plan for humanity, used Hebrews 4 for its validation in the book *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*.

Up until verse 9 the Greek word for "rest" is *katapausis*. It says in verse 1 that this is even "his rest," referring to Christ. It means that there is a time when God wants us to "leave behind" or "abandon" the cares of life and enjoy a rest with Him. **Then** we can rightfully ask: "What does that 'rest' mean?" In verse 9 comes the explanation: "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). Stunning – the Greek word for "rest" now changes. It is, yes, *Sabbatismos*, referring to the seventh-day Sabbath!

Summation Thoughts

Is every day a holy day? That is not in the Bible. Sacred Hebrew words are used to identify the seventh day, beginning right at Creation. Is the Sabbath a festival, like the other Jewish feast days? No. They actually come under the ceremonial laws, a different set of laws, in the Mosaic system. Though it might seem that the Ten Commandments are not given to any other people than the Jews, it is clear from prophecy that those who are identified as God's people at the end of time will be keeping the Sabbath (Revelation 12:17)!

We are additionally told that the saints will "keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12). This text is rich in spiritual meaning and ties to the saints in Revelation 12:17).

A very wise professor of theology, the late Hans K. LaRondelle, wrote a book called *Our Creator Redeemer, An Introduction to Biblical Covenant Theology*. In it he persuasively shows how all of the covenants God made with man had the law at its center. It was not just the Sinai Covenant.

The debate regarding whether a law is ceremonial or moral is too often subjective. It is better to view and identify whether a "law" refers to the Ten Commandments or the Mosaic System of Laws and then study how they were purposed.

Because circumcision was done on the eighth day, and could fall on the Sabbath, it doesn't mean that that rite takes precedence over the Sabbath! It only means that God is helping us to see what things can be considered appropriate in keeping the Sabbath. Christ's teachings and example is our guide. When rightly understood, the Sabbath does not bring man into bondage, but as expressed in Hebrews 4, it is the "rest" that is elevating and wonderful, and separates us from the weekly cares of life – really – an experience of weekly freedom.

The Sabbath is a forever reminder of our Creator and re-Creator/Redeemer, in whom we can spiritually rest.

The seventh day remains the true Sabbath of God. It is totally Biblical and was never changed by God, who introduced it!

Whoever minimizes the Law aims to overthrow the authority of its Author.

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