

# Christians and the Sabbath

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## Introduction.

In our assemblies and in our Bible classes, we often spend a lot of time discussing theoretical concepts from the word, even when those concepts don't have any immediate get-me-to-heaven application. Why does it matter, for instance, that human beings have free will, or that Christ is not going to return to earth and reign for 1000 years? The answer is that a misunderstanding on our parts of any portion of God's word has a ripple effect on the way we understand everything else. If I become convinced that I don't have free will, for example, then logically speaking, nothing I do can have any effect on my salvation, and I might as well just live however I want and not bother trying to obey God.

We see another case of this in the area of understanding the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. This is something that very few religious groups out there bother to understand correctly. They overlook the multitude of passages that make clear that the Law of Moses was nailed to the cross and died along with Christ. As a result, they mush the Old Testament together with the New Testament, quote one or the other depending on its usefulness to their situation, and don't have a systematic way of understanding the relationship between the two. They will turn to the book of Psalms to support their use of instrumental music, but they will ignore all that Psalms says about animal sacrifices, and they won't really have a clear explanation for why they support the one and reject the other.

One of the many false doctrines that has sprung up from this misunderstanding is the false doctrine of Sabbatarianism. These people believe that Christians should worship on the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath, rather than on the first day of the week, what we call Sunday. They spend too much time paying attention to what the Law of Moses says about worship, and it gets them into trouble. Let's learn why as we study Christians and the Sabbath.

## The Sabbath.

First, as always, we need to establish just what we're talking about by looking at what the Bible says about the Sabbath. The word "Sabbath" itself most likely comes from a Hebrew verb meaning "to cease" or "to rest." When we take that idea and apply it to a day, the result is that we end up with a day of cessation or a day of rest. We learn Biblically why the seventh day of the week would be selected as a day of rest from Genesis 2:1-3. This refers back, in fact, to God's creation of the world. He spent six days actually working, and then, on the seventh day, He metaphorically stepped back, surveyed His creation, saw that it was good, and rested from all that He had done. God then made sure that man would remember His labors in the beginning of time by consecrating it as a special or holy day. We don't know how men in the time of Abraham and Noah and the other patriarchs observed the Sabbath. In fact, we don't even know that they did observe the Sabbath. The next time that the seventh day of the week is referred to in Scripture is in Exodus 12, when Moses taught the children of Israel to observe the Passover. However, the Sabbath certainly had significance.

This significance is given much greater meaning in other parts of the Law of Moses. Most notably, the Sabbath is referred to in the fifth of the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20:8-10. Here, we learn for the first time what it meant to keep the Sabbath day as holy. The Israelites were not to work on it, nor allow anyone else in their land to work on it. In an agricultural society, this was a big deal. The Israelites only had a limited amount of days every year in which they could work their land, but the Sabbath excluded one-seventh of them. It would have been a strong temptation to disobey the commandment to keep the Sabbath, but those who did disobey were punished harshly. In Numbers 15, a man was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath, and God decreed that he must be stoned to death. Also according to God's word, even things like kindling a fire or carrying a burden out of the gates of Jerusalem were violations of the Sabbath.

By the time of Jesus, the concept of Sabbath-keeping had gotten out of control. The Pharisees had taken the commandment of God and carried it to ridiculous lengths. For instance, in Matthew 12, Jesus and His disciples were passing through a grain field on the Sabbath, and as they went, the disciples were idly plucking off heads of grain with their hands and eating them. I've done this myself. You pluck the head of grain off, rub it together in your hands to loosen the chaff, blow the chaff off, and eat the kernels of wheat. It's certainly not work, but the Pharisees saw it, got outraged, and insisted that the disciples were breaking the Sabbath by doing such a small thing. In other passages, like the beginning of Mark 3, the Pharisees even accuse Jesus of sin because He healed on the Sabbath. Now, logically, if Jesus was doing supernatural healing on the Sabbath, God must have been OK with it, but that didn't occur to the Pharisees. They had their own little weasel tricks on the Sabbath, but they were dead set against anybody else doing anything.

Of course, this entire superstructure of law concerning the Sabbath was done away with when Jesus died. Many passages in Scripture reveal this, but let's look particularly at Colossians 2:13-14. The point here is that the Old Law was nailed to the cross along with Jesus, and unlike Jesus, it was not resurrected. From the time of the crucifixion onward, the Law of Moses was repealed. As a result, unless some command from the Law is repeated in the New Testament, it does

not bind us today. Although nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in this way, the command to keep the Sabbath is not. Because this is so, Christians today are under no obligation to cease working on the seventh day of the week.

This does not mean, though, that the Sabbath suddenly stopped being important in the New Testament. In the book of Acts alone, the word “Sabbath” is used eight times. However, this prominence of the Sabbath is due not to the value that the disciples of Christ placed on it, but to the value that the Jews who hadn’t become Christians still placed on it. We see a good example of the way that this worked in Acts 18:4-5. In the first part of this quotation, Paul was still having to work to support himself. He could only afford to take one day a week off to preach, and the day that he picked was the Sabbath. Why? Because then he could go to the synagogue and find a ready-made audience.

Just as Paul was, we are free to preach the gospel on the Sabbath. However, the Sabbath is neither more nor less suitable for preaching than any other day is, and we see this in Paul’s reaction to the arrival of Silas and Timothy here. We learn from other texts that Silas and Timothy brought financial support from Philippi with them. As a result, Paul was freed from the necessity of tent-making, and, instead of preaching primarily on the Sabbath, preached all the time. Thus, we’re not bound to preach only on the Sabbath. We can preach and teach whenever we have opportunity.

### **The First Day of the Week.**

However, even though the Sabbath is not set forth as a special day under the law of liberty, the first day of the week most certainly is. We see the event that gives Sunday its significance described in Mark 16:9. Just as the Sabbath was remembered under the Law of Moses for what occurred on that day, so too the first day of the week is remembered by Christians for what occurred on it. The early morning hours saw the resurrection of our Lord from the dead. Just as the Sabbath observance looked back to the time of the physical creation, our Sunday worship looks back to the time when we were all spiritually re-created, when Jesus was proclaimed beyond a doubt as the triumphant Son of God.

When we think about what happened on the first day of the week, it’s only logical that Christians should assemble then to commemorate that glorious day, and, in fact, that’s exactly what we see Christians doing in the Bible. There are two expressions of worship that Scripturally speaking occur on the first day and only on the first day. The first is the memorial of the Lord’s Supper. We learn that the early church remembered the death and resurrection of their Savior on the first day of the week from Acts 20:6-7. Pay special attention to Paul’s itinerary here. At this point of his journeys, Paul is in a big hurry because he wants to get back to Jerusalem by Pentecost. However, despite the pressure of time, he chooses to wait in Troas for seven days, until the first day of the week. He doesn’t do this because he had to wait to preach; as we’ve seen already, Paul felt free to preach the gospel any hour of any day. Instead, there’s something else he’s waiting for that he wants to share with the church in Troas. He’s waiting for the opportunity to break the bread of the Lord’s Supper with them, because the first day of the week was the only time the Lord’s Supper was celebrated. If we want to follow the pattern of the first-century church, we too must partake only on the first day of the week.

Likewise, the collection for the work of the church was also only taken up on the first day of the week. This we see from 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. This is actually an example of divinely inspired fiscal prudence. Lauren and I do a similar thing in our financial planning. We know that sometimes large unexpected expenses arise, so we have a rainy-day fund that we pay into bit by bit, so that if that big expense does show up, we’ll have the money on hand to pay it. Likewise, Paul is worried that if the Corinthians wait to prepare their collection for the needy saints in Jerusalem until Paul shows up, they won’t have enough money lying around to meet the need. Instead, he urges them to contribute to the church treasury bit by bit, every week, so that they will slowly accumulate the needed capital. This contribution was to occur on the day when the Corinthians were already coming together for worship—on the first day of the week. Paul also tells us that this wasn’t for the Corinthians only. He’d also taught other churches to do exactly the same thing. Today, we have many of the same goals in view. We still need financial resources to meet expenses and carry out the work of the church. We gather those resources not through raffles or Bingo nights or any other innovations of man, but by following the divinely inspired pattern of the early church. We contribute to the work on the first day of the week, and only then.

Of course, we are not bound to carry out every expression of worship only on the first day of the week. As we’ve already seen, preaching and teaching others can occur at any time. The command for us to pray together is not tied to a specific day, nor is the command for us to sing. Thus, we’re free to have a Wednesday night assembly in which we do all three. If the elders thought it advantageous, it’s equally allowable for us to have an assembly on Saturday to do those same three things. However, a Saturday assembly can never replace our Sunday assembly because of our partaking of the Lord’s Supper and our collection for the Lord’s work. We can only do those on the first day of the week.

To those who don’t properly understand the distinction between the two covenants, I can understand the appeal of Sabbath-keeping. After all, the fifth commandment says what it says. However, when it comes to the Sabbath, or any other element of the Law of Moses, we need to remember Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:17. We no longer follow those old things because they have passed away. New things have come in to replace them. God no longer expects us to keep the Sabbath. The first day of the week is the time He expects our service to Him.