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# THE SABBATH

SHOULD CHRISTIANS KEEP IT?

BY ROBERT J. LITTLE

## THE SABBATH

What is the first reference to the Sabbath in the Bible?

Did Christ keep the Jewish (seventh-day) Sabbath?

Has the Sabbath been done away? If so, when?

Why did Paul preach in the synagogues on the Sabbath day?

Is Sabbath observance binding on the Church?

Why does the Church observe the first day of the week?

Is observance of "the Lord's day" the "mark of the beast"?

## **THE INSTITUTION OF THE SABBATH**

One of the chief points of contention between the Lord Jesus Christ and the Pharisees was the fact that He frequently performed miracles of healing on the Sabbath day. His view of the meaning of that day differed greatly from their view. And today the place of the Sabbath in the Christian economy is still the subject of much debate. What is the teaching of the Bible concerning the Sabbath?

### **God's creation rest broken by sin:**

The first reference to the Sabbath is found in the opening chapters of the Bible, though the day itself is not called by that name. God's rest was the climax of the creation, or the "making" of the earth as a habitation for man. We read in Genesis 2:2, 3 that God "rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it."

This Sabbath rest of complacency was broken by man's sin, and God began to work

again to form the new creation. Hence the Lord Jesus said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work" (John 5:17). It may be said that the Sabbath of God's creation rest was typical of the eternal day, when, the new creation being brought to accomplishment, God will enter into eternal rest. Hebrews 4:9 states, "There remaineth therefore a rest [or 'keeping of sabbath'] to the people of God." The context indicates that this refers to the eternal state.

#### **God's first law for Sabbath observance:**

There is no record that God ever gave the Sabbath as a law to anyone to keep, or that anyone kept it, prior to the Exodus from Egypt. Then we find that the observance of the Sabbath was enjoined in connection with the gathering of the manna (Exodus 16:26). Those who at that time tried to violate that law found that there was no manna on the seventh day, though no penalty was imposed upon them except the rebuke of the LORD (Exodus 16:27-30).

#### **The Fourth Commandment instituted at Sinai:**

Later, God's law was put into a code, and became the basis of a covenant relation between God and the people of Israel, and the Sabbath was incorporated in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11). After that, when a man was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath day, God commanded that he be stoned to death, because he had willfully violated the Sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36).

The giving of the Sabbath at that time was not a continuation of a previous custom, for there was no such observance before. In the prayer recorded in Nehemiah 9, we read the comment, in connection with the mention of the giving of the law at Sinai, "Thou . . . madest known unto them thy holy sabbath" (Nehemiah 9:13, 14).

## THE JEWISH SABBATH

### The Sabbath—"a sign" between God and Israel:

Of all the ordinances which God gave His people Israel, the Sabbath was chosen as "a sign." In Exodus 31:13 He said, "Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you." This is mentioned at the conclusion of the instructions concerning the Tabernacle. In verse 17 God reiterated, "It is a sign between me and the children of Israel forever: for in six days the LORD made heaven and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed."

This covenant was made with the nation of Israel. Thus the expression "forever" has to do with them, and does not make the ordinance of the Sabbath binding on the Church, to whom it was never given. In Israel's case it was rest after labor, and so it was the peculiarly suited symbol of the legal

code which was a covenant of works. On the other hand, the Sabbath does not have such appropriateness with regard to God's dealings with the Church, because in the covenant of grace the Church stands in relationship to Him on the basis of the finished work of atonement. Therefore, in the Church acceptance by God is "in the beloved" Son (Ephesians 1:6, 7). Thus it is appropriate that the first day of the week, and not the seventh, be observed by the Church. Is it not significant that the commandment to observe the Sabbath is the only one of the entire Decalogue which is not repeated in the New Testament as applying to the Church?

### **The Sabbath—a reminder of rest from Egyptian bondage:**

In Deuteronomy 5:15 God said, "And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God . . . commanded thee to keep the sabbath day." This experience was Israel's, and not that of any other nation. They were in bondage in Egypt,

and their redemption brought them under a new Master and included rest.

**Death—the penalty for breaking the Jewish Sabbath:**

There are those who believe we should keep the Sabbath even in this Church dispensation. These persons often do not realize what is involved in this. There were certain positive instructions about how the Sabbath was to be kept, and these should not be overlooked by those who would keep the Sabbath today. The violation of the Sabbath merited death, as we saw in Numbers 15. We are told in Jeremiah 17:21, 22 that no burden was to be carried from one's house on the Sabbath day, and no work was to be done. Exodus 20:8-11 extends this to one's family, servants, and cattle; and Exodus 35:3 states, "Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the sabbath day."

**Christ, born "under the law," kept the Sabbath:**

Our Lord Jesus Christ, in His manhood, was "made [or 'born'] under the law" (Gala-

tians 4:4), and so was obligated to keep the law, which included keeping the Sabbath. He interpreted its meaning differently from the Pharisees, and so was in constant conflict with them with regard to it. (See Matthew 12:1-8; etc.)

## **THE CHURCH AND THE LORD'S DAY**

### **The first Church Council said nothing about the Sabbath:**

The disciples, too, were of Israel, and were "born under the law," but they also lived to serve under the covenant of grace. Some of them seem never to have given up the idea that the law continued to be the standard for the life of the Christian, though it seems that it was not so much the Sabbath, as circumcision, which was the center of the contention. This difference of view led to the Church Council at Jerusalem, as a result of which a letter was sent to the Gentile believers, saying: "Forasmuch as we have heard that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: . . . for it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; that ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from

blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which, if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well" (Acts 15:24-29).

It will be noticed that there is no reference to the Sabbath in this list of "necessary things." While that was not the main subject of the conference, neither were the abstaining from things strangled nor indulgence in the sin of fornication. Yet these things are mentioned, and the Sabbath was not. Had the Sabbath been intended as a continuing "sign" for the Church, this would have been an ideal place to have said so.

### **Why Paul preached in the synagogues on the Sabbath:**

When Paul and others were dealing with the Jews, they went into the synagogues on the Sabbath days, as, for example, in Acts 17:2. There is no more reason to think Paul was observing the Sabbath than that he had returned to Judaism. He was simply taking advantage of the opportunity to reach those

Jews with the gospel message. The Sabbath service was the most convenient time to meet with them for that purpose.

**The Sabbath—a foreshadowing of the rest Christ gives:**

In Colossians 2:16, 17 Paul expressly teaches that the Sabbath was part of a system which was a foreshadowing of Christ. The Colossian Christians were not, therefore, to allow anyone to judge them with regard to it, since they were no longer under the instruction of the “shadow” but had the “substance” in Christ.

**The Sabbath law—not binding on the Church:**

In Romans 14:5 Paul speaks of those who, having been reared in Judaism, felt it a sacrilege to violate the Sabbath. He wrote, “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” Paul points out that both those who regarded the day, and those who did not, were equally conscientious before the Lord. This would

not have been so had the Sabbath law been binding on the Church.

**Observance of the first day of the week—not “the mark of the beast”:**

There are those who teach that the observance of the first day of the week is “the mark . . . of the beast,” mentioned in Revelation 13:16-18. The absurdity of this idea can be seen in a number of ways. For example, in the yet future time to which that passage refers “the mark” will be required for permission to buy or sell. Such a requirement has never been attached to the observance of the first day of the week as “the Lord’s day.”

Furthermore, Revelation 14:11 says, “And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.” It would be altogether preposterous, and totally unscriptural, to say that this verse applies to all who believe that God intends us to use “the first day of the week” in a special way in His service, and to worship Him.

### **One day in seven for rest—implied in the New Testament:**

There is no command in the New Testament to observe the first day of the week, but it is implied. In the law, God indicated a value in the observance of a break in the cycle of ordinary activity—one day of rest in seven (Exodus 20:8-11); and one year of rest for the land in seven (Exodus 23:10, 11; Leviticus 25:1-7). That year was also to be a time of release for Hebrew slaves (Exodus 21:2). The Sabbath, of course, provided the weekly break.

### **The first day speaks of resurrection:**

But there was also in Israel the observance, on occasion, of “the morrow after the sabbath,” as in Leviticus 23:11-14. This relates to the feast of first fruits, which corresponds with the resurrection of Christ, in the typical meaning of the feasts. (See I Corinthians 15:20-23.) Christ did rise on the first day of the week, in fulfillment of this type. So also the day of Pentecost was “the morrow after

the seventh sabbath” (Leviticus 23:16). This feast has become the very symbol of the Christian dispensation; and it was not a Sabbath, but “the morrow after the sabbath,” the first day of the week. Acts 2 shows that this was the day when the Holy Spirit came upon the believers, baptizing them into one body, forming the Church.

### **The first-day observance dates from apostolic times:**

Not only did our Lord rise on the first day of the week, but He met with His disciples that same evening (John 20:19), and again the following week (v. 26). The expression “after eight days” indicates the first day of the following week. Hence it is not surprising to find that the disciples formed the habit of meeting “upon the first day of the week” (Acts 20:7); and that the first day should be the time for laying aside the Lord’s portion of the believer’s income (I Corinthians 16:2).

In I Corinthians 14 the apostle Paul explained the nature of the meetings of the

Church, showing that these occasions gave opportunity for ministering one to another. Paul's letter also indicates that it was not uncommon for unbelievers to attend. So it is evident that the recognition of this as a day of worship dates from apostolic times, and was not an innovation of later days. It is not an imposition by the will of any man or men, but is definitely in the will of God for us, having its roots in the Old Testament, and finding its explanation and meaning in the New Testament.

#### **“The Lord's day”:**

The term “Lord's day” is found only once in the Bible (Revelation 1:10), and it is not defined. Christ said that “the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day” (Matthew 12:8), but this does not mean that the Sabbath was called “the Lord's day.” There is no record that it was so called.

On the other hand, since, as we have seen, the Sabbath observance was not carried over into the Church, and since the first day of the

week was observed, beginning with the day of our Lord's resurrection, there is good reason to believe this is the day to which the apostle John referred by his use of the term.

#### **The Lord's day—a time of service for Christ:**

Because the significance of the Lord's day is different from that of the Sabbath, the Church is not under the “law of the sabbath,” in the observance of the first day. Usually the first day of the week is used in the service of the Lord and, for many, is a very active day but not in the ordinary routine of a secular workday. There is a sense in which every day is to be fully devoted to the will of God. He says, “Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price,” and so we are “bond slaves” to God (I Corinthians 6:19, 20). Paul refers to himself in that way (Philippians 1:1; etc.). As such, we owe it to God to use every day for Him. Besides, Paul teaches in Galatians 4:9-11 that the ritual of feasts and fasts belongs to Judaism, and is not for the Christian. But the first day of the week has a special

significance for the believer in this dispensation. It is a symbol of our acknowledgment of the Lord; and the day, instead of being altogether a day of "rest," is rather one to be devoted to the service of the Lord.

### **The Lord's day—not a holiday:**

Those who do not see in it an opportunity to serve the Lord take advantage of its being recognized as a holiday to make it a day of pleasure; or oftentimes use it to do work around the home. For the true believer, this is a violation of the very purpose of the day. There are other days when such things can be done, especially when in many places there is only a five-day work week. The references in Acts 20:7 and I Corinthians 16:2 indicate that this was to be a day devoted to the Lord's interests.

One of the principles God gave concerning the Jewish Sabbath was this: Refrain "from doing thy pleasure on my holy day" (Isaiah 58:13). While in some respects, as stated above, the "first day of the week" differs in character from the Sabbath, yet this was the

mark, not specially of the Sabbath, but of any day which is considered "the holy of the LORD," as Isaiah 58:13 states. Hence this principle should characterize the Lord's day. Our Lord's example, as set forth in the Gospel records, indicates that works of mercy and necessity did not violate the intention of the Sabbath, and so could not be a violation of the Lord's day either.

### **When was the Jewish Sabbath done away?:**

There are those who think that if the Sabbath was done away, there should be some definite point where this took place, and that there should be a definite statement in Scripture to show this fact. Actually, there was such a time, and there is such a statement.

In Hebrews, chapters 5 to 10, we learn that Christ came as a Priest after the order of Melchizedek, and that His priesthood, connected with the *heavenly* sanctuary, supplanted the Levitical priesthood, which required the *earthly* sanctuary. Accordingly, Hebrews 7:12 says, "For the priesthood being

changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law."

The point of time is indicated in Hebrews 8:13: "In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away." This can be pin-pointed in Luke 22:20, where we read, "Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament [or 'covenant'] in my blood, which is shed for you." In speaking of the "new covenant," our Lord made the first old. The next day, at the hour of His death, the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51), and the Temple and all its ritual lost its standing with God.

**The Lord's day—a privilege and a responsibility:**

Romans 14, as has been suggested, deals with those who still felt that the Sabbath should be observed, because of their having been brought up under it; but this chapter does not deal primarily with the observance

of the first day of the week. Evidently that observance had become the custom, from the very day of our Lord's resurrection; and we believe it is intended that this day should be observed throughout this Christian dispensation. Let us not be drawn back to the legalistic Sabbath of the old covenant, nor yet ignore the privilege and responsibility of rightfully observing the first day of the week to serve and worship Him.

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