

# THE SABBATH QUESTION

By Dr. Frederic M. Martin

## Just One Question

The conversation begins simply enough. Your Seventh Day Adventist friend asks you, "Why does your church worship on Sunday?"

"Oh, I don't know," you respond. "I've never really thought about it. I was brought up going to church on Sunday."

"Have you ever looked at what the Bible says about the Sabbath day?"

That seems like an easy question to answer. "Well, sure. I know that the Ten Commandments say that we are to keep the Sabbath day holy. We are supposed to worship God on one day out of every seven. We do that at our church. Every Sunday we meet together to worship. We're doing what God tells us to do."

"But that's not what the Bible teaches," your friend explains. "The Bible teaches that it is on the seventh day of the week and not on the first day of the week that you are supposed to worship God. The idea of worshipping on Sunday is just a tradition and not the actual teaching of God. Sunday worship is just another example of how people replace a divine command with a human tradition."

When you get home that evening, you decide to check this subject out for yourself. What does the Bible teach about the Sabbath? Could it be that your church has been deceived on this subject of when God wants to be worshiped?

You start your search with the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:8-11 contains the fourth commandment.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Your friend was right. The fourth commandment does specifically teach that the Sabbath day is the seventh day of the week.

But Exodus 20 is not the only place where the Ten Commandments are found. What about Deuteronomy 5? The wording is not quite the same. This passage does not refer to God's creating the world in seven days. Instead Deuteronomy 5:15 bases the fourth commandment on God's rescue of Israel from its captivity in Egypt. But that doesn't affect the day of the Sabbath. God says, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God" (Deut. 5:13-14a). Exodus 31:1-18 also reinforces this message about the Sabbath being on the seventh day.

The truth is slowly dawning on you. Your church has been deceived. Or worse yet it is intentionally disobeying God's will. The Ten Commandments clearly teach that the Sabbath Day is on the seventh day and not the first day of the week. Why doesn't the pastor of your church teach on this subject and correct the tradition of Sunday worship? If the pastor refuses to lead the church in obedience to such an obvious biblical teaching, what other errors might your pastor be teaching? Could it be time to find a church that wants to obey God's word instead of human traditions?

### The Plot Thickens

We all learn sooner or later in life that appearances can deceive. Some things are not quite as simple as they first appear. Could it be that the Sabbath question is one of those cases? Could it be that there is more involved in this issue than first meets the eye?

The Old Testament does teach that the Sabbath is on the seventh day of the week. But the Old Testament also teaches a lot of other things. In Leviticus 19 God told Moses to give the Israelites the following commandments:

"Each of you must respect his mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the Lord your God.

"Do not turn to idols or make gods of cast metal for yourselves. I am the Lord your God.

"When you sacrifice a fellowship offering to the Lord, sacrifice it in such a way that it will be accepted on your behalf. It shall be eaten on the day you sacrifice it or on the next day; anything left over until the third day must be burned up. . . .

"Do not steal.

"Do not lie.

"Do not deceive one another. . . .

"Do not hate your brother or sister in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so that you will not share in the guilt.

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

"Keep my decrees.

"Do not mate different kinds of animals.

"Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed.

"Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material." (Lev. 19:3-6, 11,

17-19)

What an assortment of commands! One of the things that is most surprising about them is that the Ten Commandments are combined with other commandments. No indication is given that the commandments about honoring parents and observing the Sabbath are more important than the commandment about eating your fellowship offering on the day it is offered. The commandment about loving your neighbor as yourself is not given any more emphasis than the one about not wearing clothes made of two different kinds of material.

This bewildering assortment of commandments represents well the way that all Old Testament Law is presented. Moses did not say which commandments were more important. All aspects of the Law are presented as a unit representing God's will for his people.

That simple observation raises a troubling question for Christians today: How do we know which of the commandments apply today and which don't? Is it possible that the one about not wearing clothes made of two kinds of material still applies today? Could it be that our neglect of that commandment is another example of human tradition taking the place of divine instruction? Maybe our wrinkle-free clothes made of cotton and synthetic materials are just another sign of our neglect of God's commandments.

The New Testament indicates that some of the Old Testament Law is meant for Christians. Paul quotes the commandment about loving your neighbor in one of his letters (Gal. 5:14). But Mark records how Jesus declared all foods clean thus changing the Old Testament dietary restrictions (Mark 7:19). Some of the Old Testament commandments continue to apply to God's people, but some don't. How can we know which ones do and which ones don't?

What started off as a simple and straightforward Bible study has become a lot more difficult! Are there any guidelines that can help us sort out this difficult subject?

### A Walk Down Memory Lane

Church history can never be the final guide to what is right and wrong. Christians have made serious mistakes in their attempt to live according to the Bible. Nevertheless, looking at how other Christians have handled the Sabbath issue may give us some insight into what God expects of us.

The New Testament itself provides evidence for Christians gathering on Sunday (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2). Early in the second century, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, described Christians with a Jewish background as those who "have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in observance of the Lord's Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death." In the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr, mentioned Christian worship taking place "on the day called Sunday." The practice of Christians gathering on Sundays, therefore, started in the early centuries of the church's existence. At that time, however,

there is no evidence that Sunday was observed as a day of rest or that it was connected to the Jewish Sabbath.

Tertullian, who died around A.D. 200, was the first writer to instruct Christians to stop all labor on Sunday. He gave this instruction in order to preserve Sunday as a day of worship and not because of any Sabbath command. In fact, Tertullian went so far as to say, "We have nothing to do with Sabbaths or the other Jewish festivals."

Sunday first became a prescribed day of rest under the Roman Emperor Constantine in A.D. 321, and over the next few centuries it became associated with the Jewish Sabbath. Sunday eventually became known as the Christian sabbath, and its observance was based upon the fourth of the Ten Commandments.

During the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, both Martin Luther and John Calvin taught that Sunday was a day of rest and worship. They did not, however, think that it was the Christian equivalent of the Old Testament Sabbath. Reformers in England taught otherwise. The Westminster Confession of Faith taught that God had "appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him; which . . . from the Resurrection of Christ was changed into the first day of the week, which . . . is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath."

In England, Scotland, and some of the colonies in America, the observance of Sunday as the Sabbath became a prominent feature of religious practice. Furthermore, it flowed from the churches into the culture at large. Sabbath observance on Sunday was legally enforced; no work was to be performed by anyone regardless of religious affiliation.<sup>1</sup>

This quick survey of church history does not provide much help! Christians through the ages have arrived at different conclusions about the Sabbath. But perhaps that in itself does provide some direction. The fact that Christians have not been unanimous about their understanding of the Sabbath should temper our dogmatism on this issue. If the Bible is as clear about the Sabbath as some make it appear to be, it is surprising that such widespread diversity has existed within the church over such a long period of time.

### Two Dead Ends

Even a brief survey of church history demonstrates that we modern Christians are not the first believers in Christ to wrestle with the question of the Sabbath. What kind of solutions have other Christians proposed? Even if they did not convince all other Christians that their approach was the right one, they may have still been headed in the right direction.

One of the most commonly offered solutions to the Sabbath question proposes that we draw distinctions between the ceremonial law, the civil law, and the moral law. All Old Testament laws fit into one of those categories.

The ceremonial law no longer applies to the Christian because it has been fulfilled in Christ.

That's why we don't have to offer sacrifices to God. Jesus offered the complete sacrifice that was necessary for sin when he died upon the cross. No other sacrifice for sin is now necessary.

Old Testament civil law is likewise inapplicable today. The laws of the Old Testament were intended for the theocracy of ancient Israel. Since no modern nation occupies the unique role that Israel did, the civil laws of that nation cannot directly apply to the Christian today.

That leaves the moral law. God's commandments about adultery, stealing, and lying are all eternal moral law that applied to ancient Israel and apply to all people of all times. The Ten Commandments contain that moral law. Since the fourth commandment about the Sabbath is part of that moral law, it still applies today. Sabbath observance is still God's will for his people.

This solution is attractive. It is neat and tidy. The Old Testament laws can be divided into three categories, and only two of those categories are still applicable today. All that needs to be done is to determine the category into which each law fits. Then we will know if we are required to obey it.

Unfortunately this solution does not resolve the issue as neatly as it first appears. First, we should recognize that the division of Old Testament Law into ceremonial, civil, and moral law was not proposed until Thomas Aquinas suggested it in the thirteenth century.<sup>2</sup> If this is the correct approach to Old Testament Law, it does seem strange that no one realized it until his time.

A more serious problem comes, however, when the Old Testament laws themselves are examined according to this threefold division. Where in the Old Testament do we find laws labeled according to the ceremonial, civil, and moral categories? Many of them may appear to us to fit into one of those categories, but does the Old Testament itself label them in those terms? Does the New Testament ever divide the law according to those categories? Does the threefold division arise from the Bible itself, or is it something that Christian interpreters impose upon the text?

Examination of the previously quoted passage from Leviticus 19 demonstrates the problem that is typical of the Old Testament Law as a whole. The commandments of the Old Testament are frequently combined and delivered to the people without making any distinctions between them. What we consider a moral law like loving your neighbor stands right next to the commandment about not wearing clothing made of two kinds of material. Can we be sure that the latter commandment does not have the same moral force in God's sight as the earlier one? Who are we to say what is moral and what is just ceremonial? If God in his Word made that distinction, then we would know which laws apply today and which don't. But God does not draw distinctions in the Old Testament between ceremonial, civil, and moral law. What appears at first to be leading us to a solution to the Sabbath question turns out to be a dead end!

This threefold division of the law is often combined with the idea that the Sabbath day has been transferred from Saturday to Sunday due to Christ's resurrection.<sup>3</sup> It is suggested that the fourth commandment is still binding on God's people, but obedience to it comes now on the first day instead of the seventh day of the week. Jesus' sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection

were the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan. Such momentous events led the early Christians to remember them on Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection. According to this interpretation, therefore, the Sabbath commandment is still valid; the only change comes in terms of the day on which it is to be observed.

This approach at first seems reasonable and convincing. The New Testament does indeed portray Jesus' death and resurrection as the fulfillment of God's work in the Old Testament. No longer are animal sacrifices necessary because Jesus' death is the perfect sacrifice for sin.

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. (Heb. 10:11-12)

While this approach makes sense on a theological level, no direct evidence for it can be found in the New Testament. Where do any of the New Testament apostolic writers teach that the Sabbath is transferred to Sunday? If such a change had been introduced into the early church, there would have been some record of it. Observing the Sabbath on Saturday was such an integral part of first century Judaism that changing the Sabbath to Sunday would have unquestionably raised questions in some people's minds. Certainly the early Christians who had been raised in Jewish families and according to Jewish traditions would have asked for some explanation. And the Jewish opponents would have challenged the church on this innovation as well. But in the New Testament such a debate over the Sabbath cannot be found. In fact, the fourth commandment is never quoted at all in the New Testament epistles.

Could the idea that the Sabbath has been transferred to Sunday be a theological idea that later generations have read into their New Testaments but that does not arise from the Bible itself? Could it be something like the threefold division of the Law? It seems to make sense, but could it be a concept imposed upon the Bible rather than one that arises from the New Testament's teaching? Is there any solution to the Sabbath question that comes out of the New Testament instead of being read into it?

### What does Jesus say?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus makes a direct statement about his relationship to the Old Testament Law. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). In one brief statement Jesus explains his relationship to the Old Testament Law and the Prophets. In some way, he says, they point forward to him.

That idea is not hard to grasp when it comes to the Prophets. They made predictions about the coming of the Messiah, and Jesus fulfilled those predictions. But how could Jesus fulfill the Law? Jesus could obey the Law, but how could he fulfill it?

Jesus makes another intriguing statement about the Law in Matthew 11:13. "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John." In this verse Jesus talks about how the Law prophesied. That sounds strange to our ears. We think of laws as forbidding and commanding but not prophesying. The New Testament, however, does not approach the Law that way. It gives examples of how the Old Testament pointed to something that was fulfilled or completed in Jesus.

The Tabernacle. John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." This verse celebrates how God became an actual human being named Jesus. That is the main teaching of the verse, but John also hints at an additional idea. The word that John uses for "made his dwelling" is *sk\_vo\_*. This word comes from the Greek word for "tent." It is usually translated "dwell," but it more precisely means "to pitch a tent." Why does John use that word when he wants to describe how God has lived among his creatures as a human being? In the Old Testament the tent called the Tabernacle was the place where God first dwelled among his people. "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them" (Ex. 25:8).

So John does more than just state that God dwelled on earth in the person of his Son. Through the use of one word he presents Christ's coming in terms of the Old Testament background. God dwelled among his people in the Tabernacle, but with Jesus' birth he established a new dwelling place among his people. He now dwelled among them in his Son. In other words, Jesus fulfilled the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle pointed forward or predicted a greater dwelling of God's presence that would some day occur. The fulfillment took place when "the Word became flesh" in Jesus.

The idea that emerges from John 1:14 is not unique. The New Testament regularly treats elements of the Old Testament as signs that pointed forward to Jesus.

The Temple. After King David's reign, the Temple in Jerusalem replaced the Tabernacle as the place of God's dwelling. Jesus identifies himself with the Temple in a confrontation with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. (John 2:19-21)

In Matthew, Jesus compares himself to the Temple. Referring to himself, Jesus says, "I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (Matt. 12:6). What the Temple represented has now been surpassed by Jesus himself. The Temple had been the place to meet with God, but now Jesus himself is the one who brings God's presence to men and women.

Think of the Old Testament as a jigsaw puzzle. As you work on it you see a picture emerging. Even though there are a few key pieces missing, you can still tell that it is a picture of

the Temple in Jerusalem. Then the New Testament comes along and provides the missing pieces. You slip the missing pieces in and, lo and behold, what you thought was a picture of the Temple, is actually a picture of Jesus!

The Patriarchs. In Jesus' well-known encounter with the woman at the well, Jesus is asked to compare himself to the Old Testament patriarch Jacob.

"Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

Jesus answered, "All who drink this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:12-14)

Jacob provided God's people with water, but Jesus is able to give them something that is even more important than what Jacob gave. Jesus is able to give eternal life.

The Miracles. Jesus also compares himself to the Old Testament manna that God provided to the Israelites when they were wandering in the wilderness.

"Our ancestors ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life." (John 6:31-35)

The pattern is now becoming clear. Jesus describes himself in terms of the Old Testament. He does not just cite an Old Testament prophecy and then announce how he has fulfilled it. Instead he picks out something that the Old Testament Law commanded, some person in the Old Testament, or something that happened in the history of Israel. Then he shows how he has fulfilled and surpassed what that institution, person, or event represented.

The Feasts. The Old Testament commanded the Israelites to celebrate how God provided water during the forty years that the Israelites lived in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. On each of the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles the high priest carried water into the Temple. He poured it out at the altar while the choir sang praises for the way that God had provided water for their ancestors. In that setting Jesus makes a breathtaking statement.

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flowing from within." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.



(John 7:37-39a)

With those words Jesus is announcing that he completes that which the Feast of Tabernacles only anticipated. He is offering a kind of refreshment greater than the physical sustenance that God gave to the Israelites in the wilderness.

Israel. Psalm 80 uses the imagery of the vine to describe the nation of Israel.

You brought a vine out of Egypt  
     you drove out the nations and planted it.  
 You cleared the ground for it,  
     and it took root and filled the land. (Ps. 80:8-9)

This imagery is frequently used by the prophets (Is. 5:1-7; Ezek. 15:1-8; Hos. 10:1). Therefore, when Jesus announces in John 15:1 that he is "the true vine," he is, in effect, proclaiming himself as the true Israel. He is the one who accomplishes what Israel was originally intended to do.

This idea that Jesus is the new Israel also runs through the temptation narratives (Matt. 4:1-11). Jesus is tempted in the wilderness for forty days and is victorious over temptation; he accomplishes what Israel failed to do during its forty years in the wilderness.

This understanding of the Old Testament fulfillment is picked up and followed by the apostle Paul. Paul describes Jesus as "the seed" or offspring of Abraham (Gal. 3:16). Abraham's descendants were promised that "all nations will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18), but according to Paul the complete fulfillment of that promise is found not in the nation of Israel but in Jesus (Gal. 3:8).

Conclusion. When Jesus says in Matthew 5:17 that he came not to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them, he is saying that the whole Old Testament points forward to him. The above examples amply demonstrate that in the New Testament Jesus does not just fulfill specific predictions; rather, he is the one who fulfills "all the Scriptures" (Lk. 24:27). He completes the purposes of God that the Tabernacle, the Temple, the patriarchs, the miracles, the feasts, and even the nation of Israel itself foreshadowed.

### A New Approach to the Old Testament Law

Jesus has provided us with the key to interpreting the Old Testament as a whole, but how does this affect our understanding of specific Old Testament commandments?

The Old Testament Law demanded that the Israelites remember how God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. The eating of the Passover lamb was the annual celebration of God's work of deliverance.

"Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" (Ex. 12:24-27a)

This "lasting ordinance" to remember the Israelites' exodus from Egypt was obeyed from Moses' time down to the time of Jesus. When Jesus eats the Passover meal at his last supper with his disciples, however, he introduces a change. He provides the meal with a new meaning that becomes the standard interpretation for Christians.

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor. 11:23-25)

In the Lord's Supper we find the same pattern that emerged from our study of how Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. At the Passover meal with his disciples Jesus takes what is specifically called "a lasting ordinance" and infuses it with an additional meaning. The physical deliverance from Egypt that God provided the Israelites foreshadowed a greater deliverance that God would some day perform for his people. Jesus presents himself as the one who has performed that greater deliverance. In place of a physical Passover lamb, he is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; see 1 Cor. 5:7). Through his sacrifice he provides deliverance from sin. Therefore, Jesus says that his disciples are still to observe the old commandment of the Passover, but they are to do it in a new way--in remembrance of him.

### What about Those Clothes?

Even though our goal is to understand the Bible's teaching about the Sabbath, that instruction in Leviticus 19:19 may still be bothering some people. God told the Israelites, "Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material." That instruction presents the contemporary Christian with a dilemma when it comes to shopping. It also gives us a test case upon which to try out our understanding of Old Testament Law.

The specific instruction about clothing is part of a larger body of law that commands separation of various kinds. In fact, the verse itself begins with "Keep my decrees. Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seeds." Similar instructions are found throughout the Old Testament Law. Chapter 11 of Leviticus is the first of several chapters in that book devoted to explaining what was clean or unclean. Moses repeated the food regulations in Deuteronomy 14.

These instructions seem strange or almost bizarre to us today. Why was God so concerned about what animals the Israelites could eat? What could possibly be wrong with wearing clothing made out of two kinds of material? Leviticus 20:25-26 supplies the explanation.

You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground--those which I have set apart as unclean for you. You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and *I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.*

These laws of separation were given to the Israelites in order to make them distinct from the neighboring peoples. "I have set you apart from the nations to be my own." Even the smallest details of living were to remind the Israelites that God had set them apart for his own purposes. The entire structure of the society contained reminders that they were to live for God in every detail of their lives.<sup>4</sup>

What do we find when we come to the New Testament? As we have already seen, Mark 7:19 states that with Jesus a change in these laws takes place. "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean.'" In addition, the book of Acts records a turning point in the history of the early church that gives further insight into this change.

Acts 10 and 11 record how Peter comes to see that God's love in Christ is not limited to Jews. Prior to this time Peter along with the rest of the early Christians believed that the good news about Jesus was limited to Jews who trusted in him as their Messiah. But through the events of these chapters the early church is compelled to see that God's love in Christ extends even to the despised non-Jews, the Gentiles. The leaders in Jerusalem listen to Peter's experience and draw the correct conclusion.

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." (Acts 11:18)

What does God do to deliver this message to Peter? Acts 10 records the vision that God gives to him. What actually happens in the vision? God does not give him a vision of people from different races all sitting around a table enjoying a meal together. That picture might speak to us today about the value of every people and race, but God has a more powerful way of speaking to a first century Jew. God gives Peter a vision containing clean and unclean animals.

He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." (Acts 10:11-15)

What is the purpose behind this vision? To us today it may seem to be a message about eating animals, but Peter soon learns that it contains a different message. Immediately after receiving the message, Peter receives the request to come to Cornelius's house. Cornelius is a Gentile with whom Peter as a conscientious Jew will have nothing to do. But then Peter grasps the significance of the vision. He explains it to Cornelius and those gathered in his house.

"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean."  
(Acts 10:28)

This turning point in the apostles' understanding of God's purposes confirms our understanding of the Old Testament laws on separation. Their purpose was to teach the Israelites how they were to be distinct from the pagan nations around them. The details of their lives were constant reminders that they were to be holy and not follow the pagan idolatry of the neighboring peoples. But now in Christ the distinctions between Jew and Gentile have been broken down (Eph. 2:11-22). Therefore, such laws of separation are no longer necessary.

This means that we can breathe a sigh of relief as we put on our mixed blend clothes! More importantly, it shows that our understanding of Old Testament Law is true to the New Testament's teaching. The Law is fulfilled and thus transformed in light of Christ's coming.

### Back to the Sabbath

It may seem that this discussion has wandered far from a discussion of the Sabbath, so it is now time to bring us back to the question that set us off on this journey. The study that we have engaged in so far leads us to the following question: If Jesus fulfills the Old Testament and imparts new meaning into something even like the "lasting ordinance" of the Passover meal, is it possible that he could also fulfill the Sabbath and provide it with a new meaning?

What is the key idea behind the Sabbath in the Old Testament? The word, "Sabbath," comes from a root word meaning "rest." So when we first read about the Sabbath, it is the concept of "rest" that is described.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he *rested* from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he *rested* from all the work of creating that he had done.  
(Gen. 2:2-3, emphasis added)

The Ten Commandments also emphasize the idea of "rest" when giving the fourth commandment about the Sabbath.

On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your male and female servants may *rest* as you do. (Deut. 5:14b, emphasis added)

"Rest," however, is a broader concept than just something that is to be experienced on the Sabbath day. "The Lord said, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest'" (Ex. 33:14). The concept of "rest" is also tied to the Promised Land.

"But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you *rest* from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety." (Deut. 12:10, emphasis added; see also Deut. 3:20; 25:19)

When the Israelites did enter the Promised Land, the book of Joshua emphasizes the "rest" that was given to God's people.

"The Lord gave them *rest* on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. . . . Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled." (Josh. 21:44-45, emphasis added; see also Josh. 1:13, 15; 22:4; 23:1)

Does Jesus provide any teaching about "rest"? In one of his most quoted statements, he addresses this subject.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you *rest*. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find *rest* for your souls." (Matt. 11:28-29a, emphasis added)

It is worth noting that right after recording that promise in chapter 11, Matthew records in chapter 12 Jesus' teaching about the Sabbath. If it weren't for the chapter division which, of course, was added long after the writing of the New Testament, the connection between Jesus' teaching on "rest" and the Sabbath might be more evident. Could it be that Jesus is teaching that the "rest" given to the Israelites in their Sabbath day is fulfilled or completed in the "rest" that he supplies to those who trust in him?

The book of Hebrews contains the most extensive New Testament teaching about "rest." Throughout the book the writer encourages his readers not to return to Judaism but to remain loyal to Jesus. He argues that Jesus is better than the angels, Moses, the Jewish high priests, and the Old Testament sacrifices.

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. (Heb. 3:1)

Such encouragements to persevere are found throughout Hebrews. In chapter 4 the writer

encourages his readers in terms of the "rest" that they have found in Jesus.

Therefore, since the promise of entering his *rest* still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that *rest*. (Heb. 4:1-3a, emphasis added)

The writer expands on this concept by summarizing the Old Testament background.

For if Joshua had given them *rest*, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also *rest* from their own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that *rest*, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. (Heb. 4:8-11, emphasis added)

Joshua was not able to provide the complete "rest" that was needed. Another "rest" was necessary. That "rest" is found in Jesus, so the writer urges his readers to enter and remain in the "rest" that is available in Christ.

Once again we find the pattern that emerged from our previous study. A concept from the Old Testament is introduced, reinforced, and yet also transformed through the coming of Christ. Just as the Tabernacle, the Temple, the patriarchs, the miracles, the feasts, the nation of Israel, and the Passover are fulfilled in Christ, so now the Sabbath is portrayed as fulfilled in Christ as well.

What does the fulfillment of the Sabbath in Christ mean to the Christian today? Just as we no longer need to worship God in the Temple or observe the Feast of Tabernacles because they have been fulfilled in Christ, so we are no longer obligated to observe the Sabbath on the seventh day. Just as the Jewish Passover meal has been transformed into the Christian faith's Lord's Supper, so the concept of Sabbath "rest" has taken on new meaning in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Do Christians today observe the Sabbath? Yes! How? By trusting in Christ as Lord and finding their "rest" in him. Such "rest" is not limited to one day of the week or to any geographical locality. Every day Christians observe the Sabbath by resting in Christ.

### A Lingering Doubt

Before we discuss the practical implications of Jesus being the fulfillment of the Old Testament Sabbath, one question needs to be discussed. Our study has concluded that the Old Testament Sabbath finds its fulfillment in Christ. Therefore, strict obedience to the Sabbath commandment is no longer required of the Christian. We have, in effect, concluded that one of the Ten Commandments no longer applies in its most literal sense.

To say that some Christians would be surprised at that conclusion is probably an understatement! Most believers have been taught that the Ten Commandments contain God's eternal and unchanging moral law. Even many non-Christians acknowledge the Ten Commandments as the fundamental statement of right and wrong. Could that idea be wrong? Perhaps this study's line of reasoning about how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament makes sense, but to conclude that one of the Ten Commandments no longer applies in its most straightforward sense is hard to swallow. After all, we're talking about the Ten Commandments here!

Is there any other New Testament evidence that the Ten Commandments have somehow been fulfilled and thus transformed by Jesus? Let's compare the fifth commandment in its Old Testament and in its New Testament forms. Deuteronomy 5:16 says, "Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the Lord your God is giving you today." Ephesians 6:1-3 states, "Honor your father and mother"--which is the first commandment with a promise--"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

Notice the different ways that the promise is stated.

#### Deuteronomy 5:16

... so that you may live long and that it may go well with you *in the land the Lord your God is giving you* today.

#### Ephesians 6:3

... that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life *on the earth*.

In Deuteronomy the Israelites were promised that obedience to this commandment would bring rich benefits to them in the Promised Land. But in Ephesians the apostle Paul says that the promise of the fifth commandment applies to Christians in whatever land they may be living. Why can Paul expand the promise in this way? Paul universalizes the promise because he understands what Christ has accomplished. Through Christ the non-Jews or Gentiles have been allowed to become God's people.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth . . . were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. . .

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners or aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. (Eph. 3:11-12, 19-20)

Through Christ the fifth of the Ten Commandments has been expanded. If that commandment has been transformed through Christ, then it should not be surprising to see the fourth commandment in a different light due to Christ's coming either.

What are the Ten Commandments after all? Are they actually a set of timeless and unchanging moral laws? That is the way that they have been traditionally presented, but does the Bible itself present them in that way?

The Old Testament presents the Ten Commandments as part of the covenant that God established with his people.<sup>6</sup> When God gave them to Israel, he did not say, "Here are some laws that should be obeyed by everybody at all times and in all places." Instead he tied the Ten Commandments specifically to Israel's history. They begin with this declaration: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me . . ." (Exod. 20:2-3). Later descriptions of the giving of the Ten Commandments also tie them to God's covenant with Israel.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. . . . And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant--the Ten Commandments. (Exod. 4:27-28)

He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. (Deut. 4:13)

To be true to God's Word, the Ten Commandments should not be separated from the covenant that God made with Israel. To understand their function biblically we have to interpret them within the covenant that God made with that nation.

What was their function within that covenant? They did have a special status. They were the Ten Commandments (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4). They alone were inscribed on stone by God and placed inside of the ark. But what was their function? The best way to understand their function is to see that the Ten Commandments represented the entire covenant that God made with Israel. They were a miniature of the whole Mosaic covenant. They were a part that stood for the whole.

Let's look at it negatively. What were the Ten Commandments not? As presented in the Bible, they were not more important than any other Old Testament laws. We don't find regular references among the Old Testament prophets to "The Ten Commandments" as if they were more important than any other of God's laws. In fact, there is no explicit literal repetition of the Ten Commandments beyond Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Neither were the Ten Commandments presented as a summary of the moral law of the Old Testament Law. This is a frequent approach that is taken by Bible teachers, but it cannot hold up to even a brief examination. For example, how can you derive the laws about clean and unclean animals from what is stated in the Ten Commandments?

The Ten Commandments were also not presented as the moral code that was to guide all nations. They were not presented as a timeless moral code that just happened to be embedded in



the historical covenant that God made with Israel. We cannot detach them from the covenant with Israel.

Having looked at them negatively, we need to be sure to look at them positively too! The Ten Commandments do deal with areas of life that are of extreme importance. While they were not presented to Israel as timeless moral law: nevertheless, they do contain moral laws that will be beneficial to all people if obeyed. For example, obedience to the commandment against adultery will strengthen marriages in every culture and every generation. The Ten Commandments should not be thought of as old-fashioned and irrelevant commandments! They do contain many instructions that are wise and relevant, but that was not why they were originally given. While many of their basic moral principles will benefit people of every culture (and even every religion), they were originally given to the Israelites as part of their covenant with God. They need to be understood first from that perspective.

### The Christian and the Sabbath

So where does this study finally lead us? What should followers of Jesus Christ do with the fourth commandment about the Sabbath? Should we just forget it because it is irrelevant to contemporary Christian faith? Or does it still contain some valuable lesson?

While our study has shown that the Sabbath commandment is not binding upon Christians today, that does not mean that it is irrelevant to the Christian life today. "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good" (Rom. 7:12). As we have seen, Paul takes the commandment about honoring parents and transforms it in light of Christ's coming, but he does not dismiss it as no longer teaching anything of value to Christians.

Even the law about not wearing clothes made of two kinds of cloth can still teach Christians today. While we need not consider it binding on us, it does remind us of the importance of godly separation. We do not separate ourselves from all contact with people who follow other religions, but we should be careful to separate ourselves from following an example of sinful activity that would diminish our walk with Christ. If that commandment can still teach us an important principle of the Christian life, then surely the Sabbath commandment still has relevance as well.

As we have seen, the major idea behind the Sabbath commandment is rest.

. . . but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your male and female servants may *rest* as you do. (Deut. 5:14, emphasis added)

The original purpose behind the fourth commandment is humanitarian. God knows the way that he has created us. We are not made to work every day of the week. So he commands us to rest.

While we are no longer obligated to observe this commandment on any particular day of the week or in a legalistic manner, it is still wise for us to take time apart to allow our bodies and minds to rest. This commandment has particular relevance for living in a hectic society that seems to crowd every minute with activity. Even church activities can consume us. We need to remember that God gives us his commandments for our good. We need to allow ourselves the rest that God wants us to have.

In the New Testament we find that the Sabbath is also used by the Jewish people for religious gatherings at the synagogue. Jesus himself regularly follows that custom (Luke 4:16). Using a particular day for an extended amount of time to think about God and praise him for his goodness is not demanded of Christians. Nevertheless, it is a wise discipline to practice. How easy it is for even Christians to become so caught up in busyness that God is pushed to the fringes of life. If we do not regularly invest time with God, we fall prey to the idea that life should always live up to our expectations and that everything in life depends upon our efforts.

To set Sunday (or any other day) aside as a special time with God is not only worthy of him, but it also reminds us of how God wants to provide us with all of our daily needs. Try using that special day as a time in which you will not make any purchases. Use that day to spend extra time reading your Bible or some other good Christian literature. Enjoy your family or friends instead of spending endless hours in front of the TV watching some sports event that you will probably not even remember a week later. None of that needs to be done in a legalistic matter. It is not morally wrong to buy a carton of milk or to enjoy some kind of sporting activity! But don't allow your genuine Christian freedom to rob you of the benefits of spending time with God.

### A Final Word

Church history amply demonstrates that Christians have disagreed on their understanding of the Sabbath. It is unlikely that a consensus is going to be reached in the near future. Therefore, we need to be careful how we interact with Christians who take a different viewpoint on the fourth commandment.

While Paul's words to the Roman Christians in the first century are not aimed at precisely the same situation we face today, they still provide us with the proper approach.

Who are you to judge someone else's servants? To their own master they stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some consider one day more sacred than another; others consider every day alike. Everybody should be fully convinced in their own minds. . . .

Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. (Rom. 14:4-5, 13)

With the Sabbath question, let every Christian study the issue and become fully convinced of what he or she thinks that God wants done. If we come to different conclusions, we need not

feel threatened by someone else's different practice. There is no need to pass judgment on one another.

Paul also writes to the Colossians about some disagreements that have cropped up in their fellowship.

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. . . . They have lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. (Col. 2:16-19)

Let's be sure that we accept no substitute for Christ. Don't allow observance or non-observance of the Sabbath to become more important than devotion to the Lord Jesus himself! Let's be sure that we stay in "connection with the Head" because "the reality . . . is found in Christ."

## ENDNOTES

1. For a brief survey of church history, see H. Waterman, "Lord's Day, The" in Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), Vol. 3:961-972.
2. Ibid., 968.
3. An example of this approach is found in Walter Chantry's Call the Sabbath a Delight, 1991 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust). It is a common approach used by British sabbatarianists.
4. See Gordon J. Wenham, Leviticus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 269-270, 280.
5. Some Seventh Day Adventists recognize how the Sabbath concept of "rest" is fulfilled in Christ. Will Eva, editor of the Seventh Day Adventist magazine, Ministry, writes,
 

Law, including the moral law foreshadowed something or Someone more perfect or complete yet to come, namely the Author of that law, Jesus Christ Himself. . .  
 . . . He is our Sabbath, and He thus confirms and fully expresses whatever the weekly Sabbath was ever meant to portray.

See Will Eva. "Law, Sabbath, Gospel, and Jesus," Ministry, (May, 1997): 4.
6. See A.T. Lincoln's "From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective" in From Sabbath to Lord's Day, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 355-358. This article concludes and summarizes the entire book. It provides the basic understanding of the Sabbath that is followed in this booklet. For those who want to investigate this subject further, Lincoln's article and the entire book are highly recommended.