

# Should Christians Keep the Sabbath?

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Our studies in the subjects of authentic biblical worship and—most recently—the Church have reemphasized the importance and nature of corporate worship. We are reminded that we ought to be mindful of why we do what we do, including why we assemble regularly as a local church to worship—*and when*. A related question, that is not typically addressed, is "why do we meet on Sunday?" Some, in an effort to advocate obedience to the Decalogue (commonly referred to as the "Ten Commandments"), insist that Christians should worship corporately on Sabbath (Saturday on the Roman calendar). Stronger proponents of Sabbath keeping for Christians may even pose the question: "Where does the Bible say that Christian's should gather on the first day of the week and not the Sabbath (last day of the week)?" In an effort to address this question, please consider the following brief analysis:

## **The Church is not to be judged concerning the Sabbath\***

The Church is explicitly instructed to dismiss judgments concerning Jewish ceremonial observances.

**Colossians 2:16-17** - <sup>16</sup>Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— <sup>17</sup>things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

Here is a clear, unambiguous, New Testament command to the Church of Jesus Christ concerning Sabbath keeping, namely that we are not to be judged on the basis of such observances. The lateral comparisons in context ("a festival or a new moon") clearly demonstrate that the Jewish days of religious observance, including the Sabbath, were mere shadows of the greater substance, which is Christ. Since the Jewish Messiah—and Savior of the world—has come, the shadows have been eclipsed by the glory of the Son of God. Just as the Church is not obligated to observe the Jewish festivals ordained for Israel, so the Church is not obligated to observe the Jewish Sabbath, which was ordained as the sign of the Mosaic covenant given to Israel (Ex 31:13, 17). Likewise, the Church although a priesthood of believers, does not perform the ordinances of the Levites (cf. 1 Chr 23:30-31) concerning sacrifice and Sabbaths.

## **The Church is not to impose observance of the Sabbath**

Paul rebukes the Galatians for their resorting to "elemental things" of external, mechanical religion. Included in this rebuke (Gal 4:9-11) is the observance of certain days—undoubtedly inclusive of the Jewish Sabbath. At the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), the Apostles did not impose Sabbath observance upon the Gentiles. In Romans 14:1-6, Paul again teaches that everyday is alike and that if anyone observes the Jewish

Sabbath, they are forbidden to judge those who do not. The implication is clear, God has not commanded the Church to meet on a particular day for worship.

### **The Sabbath is not the only day of worship**

Worship is, and always has been, intended to be the *daily* practice of the true worshipper (cf. Rom 12:1-2; 1 Cor 10:31; 2 Cor 5:9; Col 3:17). With regard to a day appointed for corporate worship, no particular day of the week is required or forbidden for the Church.

### **The Church is to abide in Christ for “rest”**

With regard to the Sabbath as our “rest,” Hebrews 4:1-11 presents Christ as the fulfillment and offer of our true Sabbath “rest” (cf. Matt 11:28) and then draws attention to the heart and away from externals (cf. Heb 4:12-13). Hebrews 4:10 assures the Church that “the one who has entered His [Christ’s] rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His” and therefore *in Christ*, there “remains ... a Sabbath rest for the people of God.” (Heb 4:9). Lastly, we must keep in mind that Christ is “the Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28) and that He has come to fulfill the Law and not abolish it (cf. Matt 5:17), therefore by abiding in Christ we abide in the Sabbath rest that God has provided—indeed the substance that belongs to Christ.

### **The Church is not seen observing the Sabbath**

Although there is not any explicit command for the Church to meet on a certain day—appropriately so in light of the Scripture’s

teaching above—the Scripture records the Church as meeting on the first day of the week instead of Sabbath for corporate worship, distinctly for the “breaking of bread” (Acts 20:7). From the resurrection of our Lord, which was on the “first day of the week” (cf. Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), the Church is seen gathering together on “the first day of the week” (cf. Act 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2) and not on the Jewish Sabbath.

It is striking, at the least, to note that the Hebrew Scriptures refer to “Sabbath” no less than 116 times, while the New Testament epistles—the writings most proprietary to the Church—refer to Sabbath only twice (Col 2:16 and Heb 4:9). Whereas nearly half of the references in the Hebrew Scriptures are prescriptive concerning Sabbath observance, both instances in the New Testament epistles are presented in the context of understanding the Church’s relationship to the Old Covenant. Instead of a command to observe Sabbath, the Church is commanded to “let no one act as your judge in regard to ... a Sabbath day” (Col 2:16).

### **The Sabbath is in class with other covenant law to the nation of Israel and not the Church**

The practice of animal sacrifices, worship at the temple, the Levitical priesthood, observance of the Passover, the Day of Atonement and other holy days, and other regulations concerning land, livestock, and indentured servitude are not commanded nor practiced by the Church in the New Testament (cf. Hosea 2:11). Since God “rested” (*shobbat*) on the seventh day of

creation, and the Sabbath (*shabbot*) was designated a day of rest, the LORD declared His pattern as the grounds for the sign of the covenant that the LORD made with Israel (cf. Gen 2:2-3; Ex 20:11). The message would have been profound, since the LORD had just delivered them from slavery without rest and promised them that they would find rest under His provision and protection if they only abide in the covenant (cf. Deut 5:15). Although Genesis records the seventh day as the day the LORD rested from all His work, and Exodus declares it as the basis of the Sabbath observance, explicit stipulations concerning observance of the Sabbath were only given by covenant to Israel as a nation. One of the key purposes was that it would serve to distinguish Israel from the pagan nations as belonging to the God of creation. It was a day of unified devotion and dedication to God and a reflection of God's goodness and provision for His people (cf. Ex 20:9-11; 23:12; 31:13-17). If the Church is under the same stipulation to observe the Sabbath positively, then the Church is also under all related stipulations concerning failure to observe the Sabbath (cf. Ex 31:14-15).

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\*There are only two occurrences of "Sabbath" (the English rendering) in the New Testament epistles (Col 2:16 and Heb 4:9); all other NT occurrences are found only in the Gospels and Acts.

\*\*The following early (pre-Roman Catholic) testimonies dismiss the claim that the designation of Sunday as the traditional day of Christian corporate worship was a later imposition on the Church by Roman order, and thereby reflects the mingling of pagan and truly sacred practice. Justin Martyr wrote the following sometime between A.D. 150-155: "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits;" (*The First Apology*, Chapter 67; Ante-Nicene Fathers - page 186). Secondly, Pliny the Younger, pagan governor of Bithynia, wrote in A.D. 112 the following to Emperor Trajan: " they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god..." (*The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, page 294). Though there is no explicit reference to "Sunday" it is clear that there was "a certain fixed" day that Christians assembled for corporate worship. Taking into account Justin Martyr's testimony, the evidence suggests a consistency in representation of Christian practice to meet on a designated day of the week known to the Romans as Sunday. It is also noteworthy that the Roman's did not see any relationship with the early Christian's assembling on Sunday (a day that they referred to as "the Lord's day" -- cf. Rev 1:10, which could be translated: *the day belonging to the Lord*) and the idolatrous worship of the pagan sun god.