

IS THE LORD'S DAY THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH?:
A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION
by Pastor Steve Weaver

Introduction

In this paper I will argue that the requirements associated with the Sabbath are not binding upon believers who worship on the Lord's Day. I will support this thesis by arguing that the Lord's Day is not the Christian continuation of the Sabbath which was given to Israel. In order to accomplish this, pertinent Scriptures in the Old and New Testament will be consulted. Also, a brief survey of the various positions held on this issue throughout the history of the church will be conducted. First, let us begin where all theological discussions should, in the Scriptures.

The Sabbath/Lord's Day Issue in Scripture

As D.A. Carson has noted, this issue "demands close study of numerous passages in both Testaments of the canon."¹ Unfortunately, the scope of this paper will only permit a cursory glance at a few of the passages in question. However, the passages esteemed to be the most crucial in regards to the Sabbath/Lord's Day controversy will be treated as extensively and seriously as the space available and the author's ability may permit. We will attempt to trace this issue the way in which it has been received, in the order of the canon.

¹D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 16.

In the Old Testament

The two most important passages in the Old Testament in relationship to the Sabbath are Genesis 2:2-3 and Exodus 20:8-11. The first because it is often used to prove that Sabbath observance is part of the moral law of God as a “creation ordinance.” The second because it places the command to keep the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments along with nine other commandments deemed by most to be God’s moral law.

Genesis 2:2-3. This passage states that God rested after His six days of work in creation. Many suggest that the description of the Sabbath in these verses should be taken as a “creation ordinance.” This term is used when a “function, basic value and goal of a specific institution remain in principle the same throughout human history.”² However, Genesis 2:3 only states that God Himself ceased from His work and blessed this day. There is not a positive command for Adam and Eve even though other commands are given to them (See Genesis 2:16-17). There is not even an implied command here. We only see that the goal of God's creative activity is not man, but rather "that all creative activities of God flow into a universal rest period"³ which the writers of the New Testament understood to be fulfilled in the spiritual rest found in Christ (See Hebrews 3 and 4). Thus, Genesis 2 does not teach that the observance of the Sabbath is a “creation ordinance”. However, the Sabbath given to the people of Israel “was based on the creation account and became a sign of God’s redemptive goal for mankind.”⁴

²Otto Piper, *Christian Ethics* (London: Nelson, 1970), 188.

³Harold H. P. Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 29.

⁴*Ibid.*, 30.

Exodus 20:8-11. Because of its inclusion with the other nine commandments which together comprise the “Ten Commandments,” many argue that Sabbath observance is part of the eternal moral law of God which compels obedience by all men everywhere. One who held this view was A.W. Pink who wrote, “It should thus be quite evident that this law for the regulation of man’s time was not a temporary one, designed for any particular dispensation, but is continuous and perpetual in the purpose of God.”⁵ Others view the Ten Commandments as a distinct covenant made only with Israel at Sinai (See Exodus 34:27-28).⁶ While nine of the “Ten Commandments” are repeated in the New Testament and are therefore binding upon believers, the command to observe the Sabbath is not repeated. The question is then asked, “Why was the Sabbath included with the other commandments if it was not a part of the ‘moral law’ of God? The answer to this question is given by John Reisinger. He wrote, “Because the Tablets of Stone were a distinct covenant, they were accompanied with a specific ‘covenant sign’ The Sabbath was the *sign of the covenant and therefore it had to be* part of the covenant of which it *was the sign.*”⁷ Harold H. P. Dressler, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Northwest Baptist Theological College in Vancouver, B.C. agrees, “As a sign of the covenant the Sabbath can only be meant for Israel, with whom the covenant was made. It has a “perpetual” function, i.e., for the duration of the covenant, and derives its importance and significance from the covenant itself.”⁸ Thus, the command to observe the Sabbath was binding only upon those who

⁵Arthur W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 33.

⁶John G. Reisinger, *Tablets of Stone* (Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, Inc., 1989), 43.

⁷*Ibid.*, 55.

⁸Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” 30.

were under the covenant which was made with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai and is not morally binding upon all people everywhere.

In summary, neither Genesis 2:3-4 nor Exodus 20:8-11 provide sufficient evidence that observance of the Sabbath is morally binding on New Testament believers. Instead, both of these texts can be interpreted both adequately and, in my opinion, correctly as not having any intended commandment of Sabbath observance to mankind universally. There is no command at all in Genesis 2:2-3, only a description of what God has done. The context of Exodus 20:8-11, which is a distinct covenant document made with the people of Israel, implies that the commandment stated there was binding only to those who lived under that particular covenant. This understanding of the Sabbath in the Old Testament has been expressed clearly and concisely in the words of John F. MacArthur, Jr. who said:

We believe the Old Testament regulations governing Sabbath observances are ceremonial, not moral, aspects of the law. As such, they are no longer in force, but have passed away along with the sacrificial system, the Levitical priesthood, and all other aspects of Moses' law that prefigured Christ.⁹

In the New Testament

There are three main areas of importance in regard to the Sabbath/Lord's Day Issue in the New Testament. First, Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath is of the utmost importance in constructing a theology of the Sabbath. Second, the writings of Paul comprise approximately half of the New Testament. His instruction concerning the Sabbath is crucial since the Epistles give instruction to the New Testament Church. Finally, the attitude of the Apostles and the Early Church toward the Lord's Day is important in determining if it is now the day of worship for

⁹John MacArthur, Jr., "Are the Sabbath Laws Binding on Christians Today?" [on-line]; accessed 3 May 2003; available from <http://www.gty.org/IssuesandAnswers/archive/sabbath.htm>.

believers.

Jesus and the Sabbath. It seems clear from the gospels that Jesus kept the Sabbath.¹⁰ However, as D. A. Carson has observed, “One dare not conclude on this basis that Sabbath observance is still mandatory. The same argument would require that we continue to sacrifice in the temple.”¹¹ Jesus performed multiple miracles on the Sabbath and the statement from the lips of Jesus, “The Son of Man is Lord [even] of the Sabbath” is found in all three synoptic gospels. While it is true, as Walter Chantry has observed, that Jesus’ dispute with the Pharisees on these occasions was primarily over their “fundamental misunderstanding of the Sabbath law,”¹² Jesus also corrected improper temple worship (See Luke 19:46). Yet, no one believes that Christians are now obligated to sacrifice and worship at the Jerusalem Temple. In summary, as New Testament scholar Douglas J. Moo has noted concerning Jesus, “While he does not clearly teach the abrogation of the Sabbath command, he redirects attention from the law to himself, the Lord of the Sabbath, and thereby sets in place the principle on which the latter church would justify its departure from Sabbath observance.”¹³

Paul and the Sabbath. One key text in the Pauline corpus regarding the Sabbath will be explored in this section. It is Colossians 2:16-17 which reads as follows. “Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a

¹⁰D. A. Carson, “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Gospels,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene:OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 84.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Walter Chantry, *Call the Sabbath a Delight* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 45.

¹³Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 356.

Sabbath day -- things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (NASB). In this passage, Paul clearly sees the Sabbath as no longer morally binding upon believers. As D. R. de Lacey comments, “An individual may keep the Sabbath or not.”¹⁴ Paul “refuses to dogmatise one way or the other.”¹⁵ Another Pauline passage conveying this same sentiment is found in Romans 14:5 which states, “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind” (NASB). From these texts it is obvious that Paul doesn’t see the observance of the Sabbath as a morally binding precept for believers.

The Early Church and the Lord’s Day. Interestingly, the term “Lord’s Day” only appears in Scripture in Revelation 1:10 where the apostle John states “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” The title “Lord’s day” is all that is given in this passage. Because of its title this day is assumed to be the prominent day of Christian worship in the early church.¹⁶

There are two passages in the New Testament which seem to suggest that this day of worship was the first day of the week. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:2, “On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come” (NASB). Another passage of importance is found in Acts 20:7. Here Luke records the following meeting of believers in the early church, “And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart

¹⁴D. R. de Lacey, “The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 183-84.

¹⁵Ibid., 183.

¹⁶R. J. Bauckham, “The Lord’s Day,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 240.

the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight” (NASB). The first day of the week probably became the day of meeting for the early church because of its association with Jesus’ Resurrection from the dead.¹⁷ It is nowhere stated that the Lord’s Day has replaced the Sabbath and assumed all of its Old Covenant regulations. In fact, as R. J. Bauckham, at the conclusion of his extensive research on the Lord’s Day concluded:

Our study of the origins of the Lord’s Day has given no hint of properly sabbatical associations; for the earliest Christians it was not a substitute for the Sabbath nor a day of rest nor related in any way to the fourth commandment. It was simply, by the normative custom of the apostolic church, the day on which Christians met to worship.¹⁸

The Sabbath/Lord’s Day Issue in Church History

Various positions have been held on the Sabbath/Lord’s Day issue in the history of the church. It is beyond the scope of this paper to conduct an extensive survey of each and every position held through the centuries. The following survey of the three major periods in church history will be necessarily brief. The three periods are: the Post-Apostolic, Medieval, and Post-Reformation.

In the Post-Apostolic Period. Although there was still no official recognition of Sunday as the day of worship for believers, the history of the early church finds Sunday to be “the regular and universal” day of worship. Bible teacher John F. MacArthur, Jr. has made the following observation from early church history:

The early church fathers, from Ignatius to Augustine, taught that the Old Testament Sabbath had been abolished and that the first day of the week (Sunday) was the day when Christians should meet for worship (contrary to the claim of many seventh-day sabbatarians who claim

¹⁷Ibid., 244.

¹⁸Ibid., 245.

that Sunday worship was not instituted until the fourth century).¹⁹

Little more can be said here in regards to space. Please refer to the Appendix which contains a series of quotes from the church fathers about this issue.²⁰

In the Medieval Period. It was in this period of church history that the shift from worship on the Lord's Day to observing the Lord's Day as a new "Christian Sabbath" emerged. On March 3, A.D. 321, the Roman emperor Constantine issued a law requiring complete, public rest from work "on the most honourable day of the Sun."²¹ This event immediately preceded the medieval period of church history. Following Constantine's edict of 321, regard for Sunday as a day of rest increased²² and continued through the Christianization of barbarian nations. Newly converted Germanic tribes recognized the similarities between the Jewish Sabbath and their own pagan taboo-days. They willingly accepted a Sabbatarian Lord's Day.²³ But the most important factor in the Lord's Day assumption of the requirements of the Sabbath came from the great scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas developed a method of distinguishing between the moral and ceremonial aspects of the fourth commandment which allowed the Christian to spiritually keep the Sabbath (with its moral aspects), without observing it on Saturday (the

¹⁹John MacArthur, Jr., "Are the Sabbath Laws Binding on Christians Today?" [on-line]; accessed 3 May 2003; available from <http://www.gty.org/IssuesandAnswers/archive/sabbath.htm>.

²⁰See Appendix, pages 12 and 13 of this document.

²¹R. J. Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 280.

²²R. J. Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Medieval Church in the West," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 302.

²³*Ibid.*, 303.

ceremonial aspect).²⁴ Aquinas also articulated a doctrine which linked the Decalogue with Natural Law which he saw as binding on all men everywhere.²⁵ As R. J. Bauckham notes, “The Thomist view of the Decalogue survived some challenges to become the prevalent view of late medieval and traditional Roman Catholic theology.”²⁶ This was the leading view heading into the Reformation.

In the Post-Reformation Period. The two major Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, each held different views on the Sabbath/Lord’s Day issue than did later Protestants. They broke with the Roman Catholic position on the Sabbath, but not completely. Neither “held that the fourth commandment requires Christians to rest on Sunday, but both held that, as a matter of convenience and order, a weekly day of rest for worship was needed.”²⁷

Those who came after Luther and Calvin tended to take a more Sabbatarian view of the Lord’s Day.²⁸ Chief among these were the Puritans. As Puritan scholar J. I. Packer has observed, “The Puritans created the English Christian Sunday – that is, the conception and observance of the first day of the week as one on which both business and organised recreations should be in abeyance, and the whole time left free for worship, fellowship and ‘good works’.”²⁹

One example of Puritan thought upon this topic can be found in the writings of Thomas

²⁴Ibid., 305.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 307.

²⁷R. J. Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Protestant Tradition,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 317.

²⁸Ibid., 318.

²⁹J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 235.

Watson. Watson wrote a classic Puritan treatment of the Ten Commandments. He began his discussion of the fourth commandment with the following words, “This commandment was engraven in stone by God’s own finger, and it will be our comfort to have it engraven in our hearts.”³⁰ He continued, “The Sabbath-day is set apart for God’s solemn worship; it is his own enclosure, and must not be alienated to common uses.”³¹ Watson then waxed eloquently for 23 pages with instructions on how to keep the Sabbath. At the conclusion of this discussion, Watson wrote “Christian, the more holy thou art on a Sabbath, the more holy thou wilt be on the week following.”³² This was a man who believed and taught that the Lord’s Day is the Christian Sabbath.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced the arguments in the Sabbath/Lord’s Day debate through the pages of Scripture and church history. It has been easily discernible that the command to observe the Sabbath was given only to the people of Israel and is not a “Creation Ordinance” or part of God’s moral law. The New Testament is clear that Christ is the Lord of the Sabbath and that Sabbath requirements are no longer morally binding on Christians. It is equally clear that the first day of the week is the “Lord’s Day” and is a day in which the Resurrected Christ is to be worshiped. This was the practice of the early church, until the medieval period when the shift was made to “sabbathage” the “Lord’s Day.” The Reformers did not repudiate Rome’s teaching on this issue clearly enough and the Puritans reverted whole heartedly into a Sabbatarian view of the “Lord’s Day.” Christians should make worship of Christ alone a requirement for this day!

³⁰Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 93.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 122.

APPENDIX

QUOTES FROM THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS ON THE SABBATH/LORD'S DAY ISSUE

John Calvin on the Early Church Fathers on the Sabbath/Lord's Day Issue

However, the ancients did not substitute the Lord's Day (as we call it) for the Sabbath without careful discrimination. The purpose and fulfillment of that true rest, represented by the ancient Sabbath, lies in the Lord's resurrection. Hence, by the very day that brought the shadows to an end, Christians are warned not to cling to the shadow rite."

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:399-400.

5th Century

St. Augustine:

"The day now known as the Lord's Day, the eighth, namely, which is also the first day of the week." St. Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustine*, 55, Chapter XIII.

4th Century A.D. 306

Peter, Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt:

"But the Lord's Day we celebrate as a day of joy, because on it, he rose again." Canon 15.

3rd Century A.D. 270

Anatolius, Bishop of Laodicea, in Asia Minor:

"Our regard for the Lord's resurrection which took place on the Lord's Day will lead us to celebrate it." Chapter X.

3rd Century About A.D. 250

The Apostolic Constitution:

"On the day of our Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's Day, meet more diligently."
Book 2, sec. 7.

3rd Century A.D. 250

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in Africa:

"The eighth day, that is, the first day after the Sabbath and the Lord's Day." Epistle 58, section 4.

2nd Century A.D. 200

Tertullian in Africa:

"We solemnize the day after Saturday in contradiction to those who call this day their Sabbath."
Apology, Chapter XVI.

2nd Century A.D. 194

Clement of Alexandria, Egypt:

"He, in fulfillment of the precept, according to the gospel, keeps the Lord's Day, when he abandons an evil disposition, and assumes that of the Gnostic, glorifying the Lord's resurrection in himself." Book 7, Chapter XII.

2nd Century A.D. 140

Justin Martyr: "But Sunday is the day which we all hold our common assembly, because Jesus Christ, our Saviour, on the same day rose from the dead." Apology, Chapter LXVII.

2nd Century A.D. 120

Barnabas: "We keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day on which Jesus rose again from the dead." Chapter XVII.

1st Century A.D. 96

St. John on Patmos: "I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day." Rev. 1:10.

1st Century A.D. 60

Luke, Asia Minor: "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them." Acts 20:7.

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Books

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Chantry, Walter. *Call the Sabbath a Delight*. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991.

Written from the classic Puritan perspective, this book focuses on proving that the Sabbath commandment is right, holy, and good. Also contains a section with practical discussion of difficult cases of conscience concerning the observation of the Christian Sabbath.

Packer, J. I. *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990.

Great resource whose separate chapters explore different areas of Puritan thought by a renowned Puritan scholar.

Pink, Arthur W. *The Ten Commandments*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994.

Classic Reformed interpretation of the Ten Commandments. Considers them to be the moral law of God with application to all people of all times.

Piper, Otto. *Christian Ethics*. London: Nelson, 1970.

Textbook of Christian ethics treating various topics in ethics from a Christian perspective, including the definition of key terms.

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This article explores the views in the post-apostolic church related to the Sabbath and Sunday. Analysis of key statements by church father related to the Sabbath/Sunday issue are explored.

_____. "Sabbath and Sunday in the Medieval Church in the West." In *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson, 299-309. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999.

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Treats the attitude and teaching of Jesus concerning the Sabbath as found in the Gospels. Asserts that Jesus kept the Sabbath, but corrected false Pharisaic notions concerning this day.

de Lacey, D. R. "The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus." In *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson, 159-195. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999.

De Lacey explores the Sabbath/Sunday question along with the wider treatment of the Law in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Concludes that Paul was neutral concerning the observance of the Sabbath.

Dressler, Harold H. P. "The Sabbath in the Old Testament." In *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson, 21-41. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999.

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MacArthur, Jr., John. "Are the Sabbath Laws Binding on Christians Today?" [on-line]; accessed 3 May 2003; available from <http://www.gty.org/IssuesandAnswers/archive/sabbath.htm>.

Expresses an anti-sabbatarian view of the Lord's Day. Argues that Sabbath laws are no longer binding on Christians today.

Moo, Douglas J. "The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View." In *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland, 317-376. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.

Great treatment of the New Covenant view of the Law. Finds the Sabbath to be fulfilled in Christ. Christ's authority over the Sabbath is asserted.