

Answers to Questions About The Sabbath Day

Did God make the Sabbath to be a sign for Israel only? Is the "Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4) the perpetual life of faith that Christians experience in Christ? Is the weekly Sabbath a bygone shadow? Does the New Testament put the Sabbath and animal sacrifices in the same category? Was the Sabbath established at creation? Or was it first instituted in the time of Moses? These questions have proven challenging for many. Let's see if the Bible provides answers.

by Vance A. Stinson

The Church of God, International is a Sabbathkeeping church. Since we live in a Sunday-observing world, it is not surprising that we receive many questions about the seventh-day Sabbath. Nor is it surprising that some of our readers send us anti-Sabbath material and ask for our response to it.

Obviously, we cannot write a full response to every book, booklet, tract, and taped message taking issue with Sabbathkeeping. But we can address some of the objections most often raised.

The following questions are a fair representation of the questions we most often receive on the subject, and of the objections most often presented by those who claim that the Sabbath is not commanded for Christians.

The Creational Sabbath

Question: The book of Genesis says that God "rested," or ceased, from His labors on the seventh day, and that He sanctified that one day. But the account does not say that every subsequent seventh day was to be observed as a holy day. Nor does it say that the seventh day had an "evening and a morning." Doesn't this indicate that the seventh day was not a literal day, but was the divine rest that Adam and Eve enjoyed with God until they committed sin? Further, we are nowhere told that any of the patriarchs before Moses kept the Sabbath. Doesn't this suggest that the Sabbath was established in the time of Moses, and not on the day God ceased from His work of creation?

Answer: The fact that the first six days of creation week have both "evening and morning" indicates that the seventh day also has both evening and morning. In other words, it is a literal day just like the preceding six days. Further, the wording of the Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8-11) shows that the Sabbath is a creational institution. God commanded Israel to work six days and keep holy the seventh, "for [i.e., because] in six days the LORD made heaven and earth...and rested on the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it." God was telling Israel to keep the Sabbath because He had blessed and hallowed it long before.

If you would begin reading in Exodus 16, the first place the Sabbath is mentioned after the creation account, and continue reading until you finish the last chapter of the Old Testament, you would find that large sections, which were written during times the Sabbath was being kept, do not so much as mention the Sabbath. Therefore, the fact that we find no example of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or any of the other patriarchs keeping the Sabbath does not mean that the Sabbath was not being kept.

References to the "week" and to cycles of "seven days" (Genesis 8:10, 12; 29:27,28) suggest that the

weekly cycle was known during the patriarchal period. Evidence that the weekly cycle was known during that period plus God's description of Abraham as one who "obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Genesis 26:5) is substantial evidence that the Sabbath command was included among the laws Abraham kept

The Sign Commandment

Question: The Sabbath was given to Israel as a sign. Therefore it is a sign of the Old Covenant. But Christians are not living under the Old Covenant. Therefore, isn't it wrong to say that the Sabbath is a sign for Christians?

Answer: To Moses, God said: "Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, 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....It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He rested, and was refreshed" (Exodus 31:13,17).

Indeed, the Sabbath was a sign for the nation of Israel. But does this mean that its function as a sign was exhausted under the Old Covenant?

No, not at all. The New Testament provides proof that the Sabbath is, and has always been, a sign of the *New Covenant!*

Before we see this proof, let's understand what the word *sign* means.

The Hebrew word translated "sign" in Exodus 31:13 is *oth*. The term is frequently translated "token" in the King James Version. A token is a symbol, or something that is indicative of some other thing. For the people of Israel, the Sabbath was a *symbol*, a reminder, of the fact that God had sanctified them. By observing the day God had *sanctified* (set apart) at creation week (Genesis 2:2,3), the Israelites were reminded, through observance of the seventh day, that they were a people set apart (sanctified).

So, since the Sabbath was indicative of the relationship between God and Israel, it was in that sense a sign of the Old Covenant. However, it is a mistake to assume that the Sabbath's function as a sign is limited to the Old Covenant.

Hebrews 4 reveals plainly that the creational Sabbath (verse 4) is a symbol (hence, a sign) of both the redemptive "rest" that Christians have entered (verse 3) and the ultimate rest they will enter in the future (verse 11) once the Kingdom of God is established in the earth. *The Sabbath, then, is a sign of the eternal relationship God's people will have with Him through Jesus Christ!*

Now, does that have anything to do with the New Covenant? Indeed, it does! Therefore, the Sabbath is a sign for God's people today, and it is a sign of the New Covenant. *Its function as a sign of the Old Covenant was temporary. Its function as a sign of redemption and ultimate salvation both precedes and supersedes the Old Covenant.*

The Sabbath For the People of God

Question: The book of Hebrews says that a Sabbath rest remains for God's people. But isn't this "Sabbath rest" the redemptive rest we have in Christ? Isn't it an ongoing, day-to-day rest, rather than a one-day-per-week rest? Wasn't the writer of Hebrews trying to show how Christ superseded Old Covenant observances? And aren't the "works" we have ceased from our own sinful works?

Answer: Hebrews 4 certainly speaks of the present redemptive rest as well as the eternal rest God's people will enter when the Kingdom of God is established. But this by no means suggests that the writer of the epistle did not have literal Sabbathkeeping in view when he wrote: "There remains therefore a *Sabbathkeeping* [Greek: saba-tismos, a technical term for "Sabbath-keeping" in post-canonical Jewish literature] for the people of God. For he that is entered into His rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from His" (Hebrews 4:9,10).

Was the writer spiritualizing the Sabbath? Or was he pointing out that there remains *aliteral* Sabbathkeeping as a perpetual reminder of the present redemption and ultimate salvation available through Christ?

First, the epistle has been called the "Book of Hebrews" because it is obvious that the writer, whether Paul or someone else, is addressing a predominantly Jewish readership. It is well known that the early Jewish Christians continued steadfastly in their observance of the Sabbath, even long after the close of the first century. The writer's use of *sabatismos*, which his readers would have immediately recognized as a technical term for "Sabbath-keeping," could have only reinforced their belief that the Fourth Commandment was still binding.

Second, assuming that the "works" from which God's people cease when they enter His rest (verse 10) are "*sinful* works" leads to an unnatural interpretation of the verse. The verse says that the person who has entered God's rest has ceased from his own works "as God did from His." Did God cease from *sinful* works? Of course not! He ceased from His work of creation. Therefore, entering His rest through ceasing from our work every seventh day reminds us perpetually of the ultimate rest that awaits us.

The Shadow and the Substance

Question: In his epistle to the Colossians, the apostle Paul says the weekly Sabbath and annual festivals are a "shadow" of the reality, which is Christ. The epistle to the Hebrews uses identical language in describing the sacrifices of the Old Testament. Doesn't this mean that the Sabbath and sacrifices fall in the same category, and that both are bygone shadows?

Answer: The Sabbath and the sacrifices are shadows, meaning that they portray various aspects of Christ and His redemptive work. However, the fact that both the Sabbath and the sacrifices carry a "shadow" aspect does not mean that both fall under the same category. The ceremonial, sacrificial, and administrative laws associated with the Levitical priesthood are said to be "obsolete," "growing old," "ready to disappear," "set aside," and "taken away" (Hebrews 7:18; 8:13; 10:9). A "Sabbathkeeping," however, "remains for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). If the one is "obsolete" and the other "*remains*," they obviously do not belong to the same category.

The sacrifices of the Aaronic priesthood serve as a reminder of sins. For the person whose sins have been blotted off the record, those sacrifices are obsolete, for there is no need to remind a person of sins that are no longer on his account. In such a case, the Substance (Christ and His redemptive work) has filled the

shadow (the sacrifices), and the shadow is now obsolete.

The Sabbath, as a shadow, does portray the redemptive rest God's people presently experience in Christ; however, it also pictures that *future* rest (Hebrews 4:11) Christians will experience when Christ establishes His Kingdom on earth. The reality (the future rest, immortality in God's Kingdom) *has not yet filled the shadow!* It is therefore erroneous to consider the Sabbath a "bygone shadow."

In Colossians 2:16-23, Paul merely tells the Colossians to pay no attention to the asceticists who would judge them in eating and drinking and in matters pertaining to the Sabbath, the holy days, and the calendar. The trouble-makers would have the Colossians adding all kinds of rigorous, man-made regulations (verses 20-22) to the Sabbath. Knowing that adding burdensome regulations to the Sabbath and holy days caused the Jews of his time to miss the point of these observances, Paul endeavored to restore for the Colossians the original purpose of the Sabbath and festivals. They are, and always have been, a shadow. The "body," or substance, that casts the shadow is Christ, the Person, His teachings, and His work as Savior, High Priest, and King who will usher in the Kingdom.

Old Covenant Rules?

Question: Don't we have to admit that Paul's approach to the Sabbath and holy days radically differs from the Sabbath and holy day rules of the Old Covenant?

Answer: Paul probably had principles from the Old Testament in mind when he wrote Colossians 2:16,17. The shadow/substance (or form/substance) principle is clearly revealed in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 1:10-18 and in Isaiah 58, God expresses His displeasure with Israel for having neglected the substance while holding the form. The Sabbath, new moons, and feasts are described as burdensome to God. He *hates* them, and says they are worthless. Why? Because the Israelites observing these times are self-serving, unmerciful, unjust, and oppressive in their dealings with others. The Sabbath, the Day of Atonement, and all the other holy days, in one way or another, portray freedom from bondage, particularly the bondage of sin. Yet, here were "religious" Israelites who, while observing days that picture freedom from bondage, were putting a yoke of bondage on others. How? By driving their workers excessively, by neglecting the widows and orphans, and by living ruthlessly.

This is the same principle expressed in the New Testament regarding the Sabbath. Paul's approach to the Sabbath clearly reflects the mind of God as revealed through an Old Testament prophet. There is no radical difference between "Old Covenant rules" and Paul's instruction.

Question: But isn't it true that the prophets, through "the Spirit of Christ which was in them" (I Peter 1:11), prophesied of the grace that would come? And isn't that why they rarely cited Moses?

Answer: Indeed, the prophets, through the Spirit of Christ, foresaw the salvation that would come through Christ's redemptive work. But they saw no conflict between Moses and Christ. They referred many times to the Law, and prophesied of a time when the nations would be instructed from it.

Isaiah, for example, prophesied of a time when "many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: *for out of Zion shall go forth the Law, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem*" (Isaiah 2:3). The prophet foresaw a time when "all flesh," not just the Jews, would observe the Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23). He declared: "To the Law and to the Testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20).

Scholars have noted the emphasis on redemption and salvation in Isaiah. The *New Compact Bible Dictionary* states: "Isaiah is preeminently the prophet of redemption," and "has been called the evangelist of the OT..." (pp. 254,255). The prophet certainly foresaw the coming of Christ and spoke by the Spirit of Christ. Yet, interestingly, He *also emphasized the Sabbath!* If the Sabbath belongs exclusively to the Old Covenant, it seems odd that the "prophet of redemption" who spoke by the Spirit of Christ stressed its proper observance so strongly.

Through Isaiah, God pronounces a blessing upon anyone who "keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing evil" (Isaiah 56:2; cf. vv. 4,6). He says: "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour Him, not doing thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words [their "pleasure" and "words" involve binding heavy burdens on others, neglecting the oppressed, speaking vanities, and so on (vv. 6,7,9)]: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth..." (Isaiah 58:13,14).

To see how much emphasis the prophets placed on the Law and the Sabbath, simply look up these and related terms in a concordance.

The idea that the prophets deemphasized the Law as they anticipated the coming of the Messiah became popular in the early part of the twentieth century, but is generally rejected by scholars today. Unfortunately, it occasionally reappears.

Jesus and the Law

Question: Doesn't Matthew 5 show that Jesus radically reinterpreted the Law and even overturned many of its commandments?

Answer: Jesus said: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:17-19).

The term *fulfill* in verse 17 does not mean or in any way suggest "to bring to an end." On the contrary, it means to fill up, or "fill full." The terms *destroy* and *fulfill* (verse 17) correspond with the terms *break* and *do* (verse 19). Jesus did not come to break, but to do, the Law. He came to teach others to keep the Law, and in so doing He had to strip away the religious leaders' *perversions* of the Law. He came, not to contradict Moses, but to explain what the Law of Moses had meant all along. *That's what Matthew 5 is about!*

Each time Jesus said, "Ye have heard that it was said...But I say unto you..." He was not contradicting Moses, but taking issue with the way the religious leaders interpreted Moses. In so doing, He "magnified the Law, and made it honorable" (Isaiah 42:21).

One passage often cited as a contravention of Moses is Matthew 5:31,32, where Jesus appears to be overthrowing Moses' "writing of divorcement" law. However, upon closer examination of the text, and in view of the historical context, it becomes clear that Jesus is actually explaining the true meaning of the

Mosaic command.

Many of the Pharisees claimed that divorce for any reason was all right as long as the husband obeyed Moses' command to give his wife a "writing of divorcement." Jesus, however, ex-pounds the principle underlying Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (Moses' instruction regarding marriage and divorce). Moses allows divorce on the grounds of "some uncleanness" (verse 1). Christ explains that "some uncleanness" means "fornication" (Matthew 5:32), which includes all types of sexual improprieties. This is not a contravention of Moses, but an explanation of the principle underlying the Mosaic command.

Jesus' rejection of rabbinic perversions of the Law is also seen in His treatment of the Sabbath (see Matthew 12:1-13). In each example, Jesus restores the true purpose and meaning of the Sabbath, and even cites Old Testament examples for support (verses 3-5). Jesus was in complete accord with Moses and the prophets; the scribes and the Pharisees were not.

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