

WHY CHRISTIANS
SHOULD OBSERVE
A FIRST DAY SABBATH

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The primary argument for the observance of a first day Sabbath in the New Testament rests on the idea that our Lord Jesus Christ is the beginning of the new creation (Rev. 3:14, Col. 1:18), and that his resurrection is the first day of this new creation. A new creation requires a new Sabbath in which rest does not follow work, but work follows rest. In Christ we do not labor to enter into rest, but first rest from our sins and then, freed from the curse of Adam, work thankfully and without toil in the Lord's service.

I think we can clarify and reinforce that argument with some additional Scriptural material, especially as it relates to God's covenants. When he made his covenants with Noah, with Israel at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:7), with Israel again in the wilderness (Deut. 1:1), and with David (2 Sam. 7), the Lord also spoke of the Sabbath. And he did not simply renew the Sabbath commandment from Genesis 2, but also changed both its practice and meaning. Tracing these changes helps us to understand how such a significant change as moving the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first day of the week is possible and can be understood.

God Has the Right to Change His Own Laws

Before we begin to consider the changes God made to the Sabbath in the various covenants he established with his people, we should take the time to remember that he has the authority to change his own laws, and that he has, in fact, done so in some cases. Jesus abrogated Moses' permission of divorce (Matt. 19:8–9), and Hebrews 7:12 tells us that “the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law.” Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi or the family of Aaron. Jesus also replaced the bloody rite of circumcision with the non-bloody rite of baptism (Col. 2:11–12), and the Passover with the Lord's Supper. These, like the Sabbath, were signs of his covenant.

In general, this principle does not apply to the moral law. In the ten commandments the Lord says to us, “Be holy as I am holy” (Lev. 11:44, 1 Pet. 1:15–16). “You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). The moral law is a revelation of the unchangeable holiness and righteousness of God and imposes on us the obligation to imitate him (Eph. 5:1). Therefore, it does not change.

Nevertheless, it appears from the New Testament that the church changed its day of worship from the seventh day to the first day. How is that possible? The answer that many Christians in the New Testament have given is that the seventh day, but not the Sabbath, is ceremonial. The Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, says this in Chapter XXI, vii:

In his word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, [God] hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

Deuteronomy 5:15 explains why: the seventh day is a remembrance of redemption from Egypt. Its rest reminded Israel that God had given them rest not just from normal physical labor, but also from the cruel oppression and rigorous service (Exod. 1:13) of their bondage in Egypt. But we celebrate a greater redemption, accomplished for us by our Lord Jesus Christ and his resurrection. We do not neglect Egypt—it is a powerful reminder of what God has done for us—but we remember it as a type of the redeeming work of our Lord finished and sealed in his resurrection on the first day of the week.

God's Covenant with Noah

God worked six days in creating the heavens and the earth and rested the seventh day. He "saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). Therefore, God blessed and sanctified the seventh day as the Sabbath for man (Gen. 2:3). He laid on Adam, and in him all men, the obligation to work six days and rest the seventh.

When Adam sinned, real rest and proper observance of the Sabbath became impossible. God cursed the ground and cursed Adam with toilsome labor all the days of his life (Gen 3:17–19). Sin disrupted the creation pattern of work in God's service and rest in the enjoyment of the fruits of labor and God's blessing.

However, this did not mean that God abolished the Sabbath until the reinstatement of it at Mt. Sinai. He still required that men rest on the seventh day. The Sabbath, like marriage and work and exercising dominion over the earth, is a creation ordinance, and even Israel's observance of it was rooted in that truth. The Sabbath stood from creation to Mt. Sinai and stands also today.

The Scriptures give us no more direct information about the Sabbath until Exodus 16, when Israel was in the wilderness and the Lord began to supply manna for them. Nevertheless, there is one passage that shows us, at the very least, that the idea of the Sabbath persisted after the fall. It is found in connection with the Noahic covenant. In Genesis 5:29 Lamech (the good Lamech, not the bad one of Gen. 4:19f) prophesied about his son Noah. He chose the name Noah (or God commanded him regarding it) because it means "rest." The word is not the same word used in Genesis 2:2 (that's the word Sabbath), but it is a word from the same root that the fourth commandment uses when it says that "the Lord rested the seventh day" (Ex. 20:11). It's a word that is also associated with Sabbath rest.

Lamech did not use that word for rest in the explanation that follows; he used another word that is similar (the root is found in the name Nahum) but means comfort: "He called his son Noah [Rest], saying, 'This one will comfort [naham] us concerning our work and the toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord has cursed.'" That adds another dimension to the prophecy but does not obscure the truth that by the flood the Lord gave some rest from the curse of Genesis 3. In his covenant with Noah, described in part in Genesis 8:21–22, the Lord said, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease." While the Noahic covenant did not change the Sabbath itself, it did restore a measure of rest. The destruction of the first creation which stood out of the water and in the water (2 Pet. 3:5) ushered in a new creation in which God made a better rest possible.

This better rest of the second creation points us to the perfect rest of the third creation in Christ, the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness will dwell. There the curse on man's work will give way to work without toil and abundant fruit. Our Lord himself made this connection in Matthew 24:37–39, and Peter did the same in 2 Peter 3:1–13.

God's Covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai

In the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai, God changed the practice of the Sabbath and greatly enriched it in a variety of ways.

1. He made observance of the Sabbath part of the moral law (Exod. 20:8–11). That he gave it a place in the ten commandments, rather than in the ceremonial and civil laws, is a clear indication that it is incumbent on men still today to observe it. He also gave us a reason for observing it: in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested. The observance of the Sabbath even today is a remembrance of God's first creative work and a structuring of our lives by work and rest in imitation of him.
2. He added many other sabbaths to Israel's life—the feast days, the new moons, the Day of Atonement in the seventh month (seven is the number of the Sabbath and of rest), the Sabbath (or seventh) year and so on. These additional sabbaths were part of the ceremonial law and are not to be observed in the new covenant. They were temporary changes in Sabbath practice.
3. He gave special sacrifices for the Sabbath day (Num. 28:9–10). This was also a change in practice.
4. Another change in practice was that the Lord made the Sabbath a day of holy convocation, of gatherings of his people for worship (Lev. 23:3). This was the beginning of the synagogue. The Sabbath was to be more than an individual resting from work; it became a day of corporate worship. At Mt. Sinai, God formed a people for himself and called them to live and worship together as one people. He has done the same for us in Christ.
5. He established a resting place for himself among them. "So it was, whenever the ark set out, that Moses said: "Rise up, O LORD! Let Your enemies be scattered, And let those who hate You flee before You." And when it rested, he said: "Return, O LORD, To the many thousands of Israel." (Num. 10:35–36). "Arise, O LORD, to Your resting place, You and the ark of Your strength" (Ps. 132:8). Both of the underlined words are from the same root as Noah's name. Not only did the Lord have a resting place among his people, but he also brought them into it to live with him in his rest. The furnishings of the Holy Place—the altar of incense where the priests offered the prayers of the people (Rev. 8:3), the table of shewbread, and the seven branched lampstand—signified their presence and the Lord's blessings on them there. This was an enormously important enrichment of the meaning of the Sabbath. By the sacrifices of the law the Lord opened a way for his people to rest from their sins and enter the place of his rest.
6. The Lord made the Sabbath a sign of his covenant with Israel (Ex. 31:12–17), another enrichment of meaning. We are also in that covenant of the Lord and should use the sign the Lord attached to it.

We still take seriously the sign of the Noahic covenant, the rainbow. We still have the promise of God to us and our children (Acts 2:39, 16:31) and use the sign that God attached to it, the sacrament of baptism which replaced the bloody sign of circumcision (Col. 2:11–12). Thus with the Sabbath. In the law he calls us to love him and our neighbors because he is "the Lord our God who brought us out of the land of Egypt." The Sabbath is the sign of that covenant.

Point 5 above also requires a little more explanation. Psalm 132 is a Messianic psalm. "There I will make the horn of David grow; I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed. His enemies I will clothe with shame, But upon Himself His crown shall flourish" (vv. 17–18). When the Lord says, "This is my resting place forever," we must hear the Anointed speaking about his resting place in Zion, about his crown and triumph, and about his priesthood (v. 16). His resting place is the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 11:11–15). That heavenly sanctuary has its beginning in the church on earth and its perfection in the glorious resurrection of the bodies of all the saints at the last day.

When the Lord first formed his people for himself (Isa. 43:21), he established a house and resting place for himself to which they could come to enter rest with him. This resting place has its fulfillment first in Christ's body, which he raised up again in three days (John 2:19–22), and then in the church to which he calls us so that we may join him there in his rest.

We should not see all these laws as burdensome. Believing Israelites celebrated the law as good and its observance as delightful. “Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97, see also Deut. 6:24, Ps. 19:7–9). Israel's Sabbath was a better Sabbath than that of Adam, Noah or Abraham. The law of God, including the Sabbath, is for our good (Deut. 6:24, Ps. 19:7–11). “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:27).

God's Covenant with Israel in Deuteronomy

Before Israel entered the land of Canaan in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, God made another covenant with them. This covenant is found in the book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 29:1, 9), and contains not only a commandment to remember the covenant made with them at Horeb but also many laws for their life in the land of Canaan. This second covenant with Israel also enhanced the idea and blessing of the Sabbath.

1. God repeated the Ten Commandments but this time gave a new reason for observing the Sabbath day; “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15). The Sabbath became not only a reminder of God's work of creation but also of his work of redemption. The people not only rested from their labors, but they also found rest from their sins (Heb. 4:3–10).
2. The land of promise became the land of rest (Ps. 95:8–11). Moses told the two and a half tribes that received their inheritance to the east of the Jordan that they must fight alongside the other tribes until the Lord had given them rest too (Deut. 3:20). The Lord promised them rest from their enemies in the land (Deut. 12:9–10, 25:19, Josh. 1:13). God added rest from their enemies to rest from work and rest from sin. Since Canaan was a type of the better country, heaven is our land of rest (Heb 11:16), and we observe the Sabbath in anticipation of it.
3. The Lord promised to establish a central place of worship and rest (Deut. 12:5–14) to which his people were to bring all their tithes and offerings and where they were to rejoice before him. In the New Testament, the place of worship is the church, the dwelling place of God on earth. There we find rest.

Deuteronomy added a new reason for observing the Sabbath—God's great work of redemption—and enriched his people's rest by giving them the land of rest promised to their father Abraham and a permanent place to worship God and rest with him in covenant fellowship.

God's Covenant with David

In the years from the conquest of Canaan until the reign of David, the people of God never fully enjoyed the rest that God had promised. Enemies remained. But under David the people completed the conquest of the land, drove out their enemies and became the dominant power in that part of the world.

1. God finally gave them rest from all their enemies (2 Sam. 7:1, 1 Kgs. 5:4), and all the land (the land of rest) originally promised to Abraham came under their control.
2. David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and sang of it in Psalm 132. “Arise, O LORD, to Your resting place, You and the ark of Your strength... the LORD has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His dwelling place: ‘This is My resting place forever; Here I will dwell, for I have desired it’” (vv. 8, 13–14). Zion was the new and more glorious resting place.
3. Solomon, a type of our Lord Jesus Christ, was a man of rest (1 Chron 22:9, 18, 23:25) because the Lord had given peace and quietness in his days.
4. Solomon built a new and more glorious place of rest for the Lord (1 Chron 28:2). In it the Lord gave his people new blessings. One of the clearest indications of that is that the singing of psalms became a part of their worship under the direction of the Levites whom David appointed (1 Chron. 25). There was no singing in the tabernacle. That also was of enormous importance; for the first time in their public worship, God’s people offered songs of praise, the calves of their lips giving thanks to his name (Hos. 14:2).

In summary, then, the old covenants of God teach us a lot about the Sabbath. From the Noahic covenant we learn that in the new creation Christ gives us rest from the curse of Genesis 3:17–19. That creation began with his resurrection from the dead. From the covenant at Sinai we learn that observance of the weekly Sabbath is part of the moral, not the ceremonial, law; that God made the Sabbath a day for corporate worship for his people; that the house of God (the church) is God’s place of rest; and that the Sabbath is a sign of God’s covenant with us that he will sanctify us to enter his rest with him.

Deuteronomy teaches us that another reason for observance of the Sabbath day is the redeeming work of Christ, and that we anticipate perfect rest in heaven though we have it even now in God’s place of rest on earth. And in David and Solomon God shows us Christ as our “man of war” and “man of rest” giving us rest from our enemies and peace and quietness in his land of rest, the inheritance he has promised us.

The history of the Sabbath in the old covenant is a record of changes both to the practice and meaning of the Sabbath day for the people of God. It should not surprise us that the new covenant also brings changes to it.

The New Covenant

Christ established a new covenant in his blood (Matt. 26:28, Heb. 7–9). This covenant was the fulfillment of all the old covenants. Christ is the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (Jn. 1:29), the high priest who offered himself (Heb. 7:26–27), our Passover (1 Cor. 5:7), the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18) and the firstfruits of those who sleep (1 Cor. 15:23), the beginning of the new creation, the tabernacle (Jn. 1:14), the temple of God (Jn. 2:21), the son of David (Matt. 1:1) the warrior king who gives rest from our enemies, the man of rest in whom righteousness, peace and prosperity reign (Ps. 72), and the cornerstone of the new resting place of God, his church (Eph. 2:20).

But still we must ask why. Why must the Sabbath change from the seventh day to the first? How does all that we have seen point us to the first day of the week as the Christian Sabbath?

Let’s begin with just the idea that the Sabbath continues in the New Testament. There are three main arguments for that. 1) It is a creation ordinance, like marriage, work and exercising dominion over the earth. 2) It is part of the moral rather than the ceremonial law. 3) The Old Testament Sabbath involved the rest of both God and his people in his house, the tabernacle and later the temple. God now rests with his

people in the church, which is his house in the New Testament. Coming to his house to worship is an entering into rest with him.

This last point makes it impossible to deny that there is a day of rest in the New Testament. Public worship is rest by definition. When God formed Israel to be his people, he appointed the seventh day Sabbath as the day of holy convocation. It would be very strange if there were no day of holy convocation for the New Testament church.

The second point we need to understand is that God has a right to change his law. 1) he has changed various Old Testament laws: among them the law concerning the priesthood and the abrogation of Moses' permission of divorce. 2) He has changed other signs of his covenants. Baptism replaced circumcision, and the Lord's Supper the Passover. 3) He has changed the Sabbath in the past, especially at Mt. Sinai. All these indicate that he had the right to change the Sabbath again for the New Testament period.

The third point to grasp is that the Scriptures indicate in various ways that the day of rest in the New Testament is the first day of the week, rather than the seventh.

- 1) The New Testament church worshipped on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day (John 20:19, 26, Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2). John calls it the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10) because it is a day that belongs especially to him.
- 2) The covenant with Noah is prophetic of the new creation and its rest. That new creation began on the day of Christ's resurrection. He is the firstborn over all creation and the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:15–18).
- 3) Christ is the man of rest who fulfilled the rest promised to the Old Testament saints and typically fulfilled in David and Solomon.
- 4) Christ entered into his rest on the first day of the week. During his earthly ministry, in his suffering on the cross, and in his lying in the grave for three days, he was doing the work that his Father had given him to do. His resurrection is the confirmation that he has finished his work. He rose with a heavenly body, and from that moment on his proper place was in heaven, the land of rest.
- 5) In Deuteronomy 5, the Lord made the Sabbath a sign of Israel's redemption from Egypt. That redemption was a type of our redemption from the bondage of sin. Our redemption was accomplished on the day of Christ's resurrection, the day of his conquering death.

In summary then, the fulfillment of all the Old Testament signs is in Christ: the new creation; the dwelling place of God; the Sabbath as a sign that the Lord our God sanctifies us; rest from work, enemies and sin; redemption from bondage; and worship of the God who has established his covenant with us. The turning point from promise to fulfillment was not the seventh day but the first, the day of our Lord's resurrection. Celebrating a seventh day Sabbath is a denial of what Christ has accomplished. Rejecting the Sabbath altogether comes perilously close to the same thing and leaves us with no Scriptural ground for weekly worship. If there is no Sabbath in the New Testament, why should we not worship once a month, or every tenth day, or every one of us according to his own pleasure?

Our heavenly inheritance is ours now in the church and still to come in the new Jerusalem. Our rest is also now in the general assembly and church of the firstborn and with the spirits of just men made perfect, and still to come when we join them in heaven. On the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath, as new creatures in

Christ and raised with him (Col. 3:1), 1) we celebrate his resurrection, his entering the eternal rest, 2) we use the sign of the covenant so that God may sanctify us and make us fit for his house and resting place, and 3) we rest from the toil of the curse (Gen. 3:15–17), from our enemies and from sin. On the same day and in the same house of rest, we look for the perfection of these things in the consummation of all things: 1) life with Christ in heaven, the glorious resurrection of our bodies, and eternal rest, 2) the fulfillment of his covenant in perfect sanctification, and 3) the end of all toil, of all conflict with enemies, and of all sin. We rest now on the Sabbath day and look for the better rest that our God has promised.

The blessing of rest is not yet complete. There remains a rest for the people of God (Heb. 4:9). “Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’” ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them’” (Rev. 14:13). All the blessings of rest revealed over hundreds of years in the old covenant will be ours forever when Christ Jesus our Lord has fulfilled completely all the promises of both old and new covenants. Then we will have perfect rest from toil, from enemies and from sin, as well as unbroken fellowship with God in Christ by the Spirit. Who could ask for more than this most blessed rest

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