

WHICH DAY IS THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH?

by David Kroll

Most Christians meet on Sunday to participate in worship services. Some meet on Saturday, and others meet on various other days of the week. Some Christians, such as Seventh Day Adventist's, Seventh Day Baptist's and various Church Of God Groups, meet on the seventh day of the week (Sabbath), believing it to be a commanded day of rest and assembly. Such groups believe that Sabbath observance is historically rooted in Divine imperatives and remains a commanded requirement to this day.

Many Christians who worship on Sunday believe that the Sabbath command is no longer a requirement under the New Covenant and they are free to worship on any day of the week or not meet at all in group worship. Other Christians believe that the Sabbath command given to Israel is still a requirement but more appropriately expressed through worshiping on the first day of the week in remembrance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Many believe the Sabbath was changed to the first day of the week and feel they are keeping the Sabbath when worshiping on Sunday. Scripturally, there is no evidence to show the Sabbath has ever been changed from the Seventh day of the week to the first day or any other day of the week. The Sabbath, by definition, is the seventh day of the week. For thousands of years the Sabbath has been observed on the seventh day of the week. To conclude that the Sabbath has been changed to Sunday or that Sabbath means one day in seven as opposed to the seventh day of the week does not square with scripture or historical observance of this regulation.

The Israelites were commended by God to observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath command is part of the Ten Commandments given to Israel and is a central part of the Covenant that was made between God and Israel. This Covenant between God and Israel is no longer operational. I recommend you read the essays: [Hebrews: A study in Covenantal Transition](#) and the series of essays entitled: [When Does Christ Return?](#), for a complete overview of the covenantal transition that took place in the first century A.D.

Since the Covenant made at Sinai has been replaced with a New Covenant which was established in the first century A.D. is there a requirement to keep the Sabbath under the New Covenant? Let's take a look at this issue:

SABBATH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

Genesis records God blessed the seventh day, made it holy and rested on this day. It is assumed by some that this rest was indicative of God establishing a seventh day rest for man from creation.

Genesis 2:3: 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.

This is the only scriptural reference to the seventh day until shortly after the exodus. Nothing in this specific passage of scripture speaks about the seventh day being established as a day of rest for man. There is no mention of Sabbath in Genesis. No reference is found in scripture as to the

patriarchs keeping the Sabbath. There is nothing here that would prove that a seventh day rest was established for man at creation. We don't again find the seventh day being mentioned in scripture until its association with the giving of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. Reference in the Ten Commandments to the Sabbath as relating to God's rest at creation does not establish the Sabbath as an ordinance commanded for mankind from creation.

God's instruction in Exodus 20 to remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy shows that remembering the Sabbath was accomplished by resting on the seventh day just as God resting on the seventh day made that day holy in the creation account. Sabbath, seventh day and rest become synonymous when we compare the creation account, the manna incident and the instruction associated with the Ten Commandments. For Israel, this was a physical rest from labor. There is no question that God required this rest on the part of Israel. Is such a weekly physical rest required under the New Covenant? This question will be answered as we proceed with this essay.

In the Exodus 16 manna incident, the Israelites were commanded to keep the Sabbath in the wilderness before reaching Sinai. Because Sabbath keeping for Israel preceded the giving of the Old Covenant, it is concluded by some that since it preceded the establishment of the Covenant at Sinai, it wasn't abrogated when that Covenant was done away.

What must be realized, however, is that ordinances such as circumcision, animal sacrifices and other regulations were also in force prior to Sinai. These regulations, along with Sabbath keeping, were incorporated into, and became part of the Old Covenant system. When the Old Covenant was terminated, it no longer stood as a contract between God and Israel. A Covenant is an agreement between two parties. The Old Covenant was an agreement between God and Israel. God promised to do certain things and Israel promised to do certain things. When this Covenant was terminated, the mutual obligations contained in that Covenant were abrogated.

We see from the requirements found within the New Covenant that the moral law of the Old Covenant was reestablished with even greater parameters of obligation than found in the Old Covenant. We do not see, however, physical circumcision as a religious rite, animal sacrifices and other pre and post Sinai regulations transferring over to the New Covenant. Neither is there evidence that Sabbath keeping transferred to the New Covenant.

In Exodus 31 the Sabbath was given as an identifying sign to set Israel apart from the other nations of the world. It is believed in some circles that the Sabbath continues to be an identifying sign for true Christians who are considered spiritual Israelites.

In Ex. 31:13-18, God tells Moses that the Israelites must keep the Sabbath as an everlasting covenant. As in the Ten Commandments, we find the keeping of the Sabbath tied to God resting on the seventh day in the creation account. We find Moses being given instruction about the Sabbath as an identifying sign at the same time he is given the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments. Therefore instruction about the Sabbath as an identifying sign is tied to the Old Covenant regulations given to Moses at Sinai.

This was a specific covenant between God and the physical nation of Israel. In the second century book of Jubilees written by Jewish Rabbis, it says "The Creator of all is blessed, but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the Sabbath with the sole exception of Israel". The Sabbath, along with circumcision, was the identifying signs of the Old Covenant agreement between God and Israel. Such an agreement was never made with any other group of people. This

agreement has been terminated and therefore the former identifying signs no longer have application.

Under the New Covenant, we have a new identifying sign. It is faith in Christ as expressed by our practicing the law of love.

John 13:34: A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Our acceptance of Christ's sacrificial payment of the penalty of sin and our response to that sacrifice by expressing love toward one another is the manner in which we are identified as New Covenant Christians. We express acceptance of the new agreement between God and man by how we behave before God and man.

It is assumed by many that the Ten Commandments, as a codified body of law, is as applicable to us today as it was to the Israelites to whom it was given. Since the Sabbath command is part of the Ten, it is felt that it must be obeyed. Those who understand that the Sabbath has never changed from the seventh day of the week to the first day, observe the seventh day as a perceived obligation. Those who believe that the Sabbath rest was somehow transferred to Sunday, will diligently observe Sunday as a day of rest and worship. Many others worship on Sunday but don't see it as a commanded obligation. What is our relationship to the Ten Commandments? If the Ten Commandments are still a binding obligation upon Christians, then all Christians are obligated to keep the seventh day Sabbath. There is nothing in scripture that teaches that the Sabbath was moved to Sunday or any other day of the week.

The Ten Commandments were the center piece of the Old Covenant system. The Old Covenant was a contract between Israel and God. God gave 613 laws that make up that Covenant. Ten of those laws were written on stone tablets and became the core of that covenant.

Exodus 34:28: And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

Deuteronomy 4:13: And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.

Deuteronomy 9:11: And it came to pass at the end of forty days and forty nights, that the Lord gave me the two tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant.

The Ten Commandments are part of the regulations that make up the agreement between God and Israel. This agreement has been terminated. When an agreement is terminated, unless otherwise specified, all that makes up such agreement is terminated. The scriptures reveal that a New Covenant with Israel was to replace the old. This New Covenant would also allow for Gentile participation. This New Covenant was to have God's law written in our hearts. The New Testament scriptures reveal that the New Covenant is founded on the law of Christ. The law of Christ is the law of love. The law of love is not made up of hundreds of individual laws as was true under the Old Covenant system. Nether does it have a core of ten. The law of love has two expressions. Love toward God and love toward man. Under the law of Christ the love of God is

shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit and therefore there is no need for a specific list of 10 laws, 50 laws or 613 laws such as was true under the Old System.

The second century theologian Irenaeus wrote that we have no need of the Mosaic regulations because under the New Covenant, God's law is written in our hearts. To paraphrase Irenaeus, he said that you don't need a law that says, "Thou shalt not kill" because you know intuitively not to hate or have enmity. You don't need a law against adultery because you know intuitively to love your wife or husband and have respect for your neighbor's mate. Regarding the Sabbath, Irenaeus indicated that there was no need to observe a specific day of the week to rest because we have entered the eternal spiritual rest of God's Kingdom. This leads me to the next consideration.

THE SABBATH REST IN HEBREWS:

Some who believe that Sabbath observance is a New Covenant requirement will point to the New Testament book of Hebrews where it is felt that the Sabbath command is reiterated in Chapter four verse nine, "*There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.*" Let's look at this verse within the entire context of Hebrews four.

Hebrews 4:1: 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.

The writer is addressing Hebrew Christians and telling them their forefathers had failed to follow Moses into the Promised Land, a land where they would be given rest from their physical enemies. Christ had now come to offer them rest from their spiritual enemy, spiritual death, facilitated by Satan (Heb. 2:14-15).

2 Corinthians 3:6: He has made us competent as ministers of *a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

Hebrews 4:2: 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.

The gospel preached to Israel in the wilderness was the good news of escape from Egyptian slavery into the rest of the Promised Land. The good news being preached to first century Jewish Christians was the coming out of spiritual slavery to sin and death and into the New Covenant rest in Christ.

Hebrews 4:3: Now we who have believed *enter that rest*, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world.

The Greek word for "enter" is in the present tense in Greek, which signifies that they were in the process of entering that rest (See translation from New Jerusalem Bible below).

Hebrews 4:3: We, however, who have faith, *are entering a place of rest, (New Jerusalem Bible).*

Hebrews 4:4-9: For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." And again in the passage above he says, "They shall

never enter my rest." (Psa.95).It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." 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;

The Greek *Sabbatismos* in Heb 4:9 occurs in this form only this once in the entire NT. It does not appear in other Greek literature of the time. Therefore the Greek Lexicons have little to say about this word other than it signifies some kind of rest. It is almost as if the writer made up this word as an offshoot of *Sabbaton* which is the word commonly used in the NT to signify the seventh-day Sabbath. In all other places in Hebrews where we find the word rest used, it is the Greek word *Katapausis*, which means "a putting to rest or place of rest." *Katapausis* is not used in conjunction with the seventh day Sabbath in the New Testament.

The rest that the Israelites failed to initially enter was the land of Canaan. This was a physical rest from their enemies and the slavery experienced in Egypt. This is contrasted with a new kind of rest now being offered to the Jewish Christians. A rest different from the rest Joshua gave to ancient Israel after the 40 years of wondering in the wilderness... This could not have been a seventh-day Sabbath rest. The seventh day Sabbath rest was in operation since Mt. Sinai. It was an integral part of the Old Covenant system which was being kept by the very Jewish Christians being addressed in this letter. There would have been no reason for the writer to be trying to convince these Jewish Christians to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. They were already doing this and had been all their lives.

First century Jewish converts to Christianity did not abandon the Sabbath, annual festivals or any of the other Mosaic regulations. They had come to accept Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah to Israel. They simply added Christ to the Mosaic system that they had kept all their lives. These Christian Jews didn't abandon the Mosaic system until the temple and priesthood were destroyed during the first century war with Rome. Thus ended the facilitation of the Old Covenant system.

Even the Seventh-day Adventist's understand this. In their Bible Commentary we find this explanation for Hebrews 4:9 on page 423:

"Certainly, in writing to Jews, the author of Hebrews would not consider it necessary to prove to them that Sabbath keeping "remained." If the conclusion of the extended argument beginning with ch. 3:7 is that Sabbath keeping remains for the people of God, it would seem that the writer of Hebrews is guilty of a non sequitur, for the conclusion does not follow logically from the argument. There would have been no point in so labored an effort to persuade the Jews to do what they were already doing -- observing the seventh- day Sabbath."

The very Israelites who left Egypt and were given the Sabbath at Mt. Sinai failed to enter God's rest. Now in the first century there were Israelites who kept the Sabbath but who were also in danger of failing to enter God's rest. The rest being considered here is not the weekly Sabbath.

Hebrews 4:10: For anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.

The writer is comparing rest from our work that comes from entering God's rest to God resting from His work. Our work would be our attempt to be perfect by keeping the law versus accepting the righteousness of Christ applied to us. The writer makes this clear in chapter seven.

Hebrews 7:18-19: The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

Hebrews 4:11-16: Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

The Israelites were given the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. The majority drew back and refused to enter out of fear that they could not overcome the enemy opposition who lived in the land. God was now offering first century Israelites the opportunity to defeat the enemy of death by responding to the gospel message that Christ brought. The writer is exhorting them not to make the same mistake as their forefathers. Their forefathers had failed to enter the physical rest of the Promised Land. They are now being exhorted not to fail to enter the spiritual rest that comes through Christ. This spiritual rest is freedom from spiritual death.

This passage in Hebrews, rather than validating the continuance of a weekly Sabbath observance, shows instead that it is through Jesus Christ we can have the rest of eternal life.

SABBATH KEEPING BY CHRIST AND THE EARLY CHURCH:

Those who maintain that we must keep the Sabbath will look at the New Testament narrative and see that Christ kept the Sabbath and so did the developing Christian Church of the first century. It's assumed that what they did was an example of what we should be doing.

Christ was obligated to keep the Sabbath. He was born under the Old Covenant system. He kept the entire Old Covenant law. He had to in order to be our perfect sacrifice. To violate the tenants of the Old Covenant before it was terminated would have resulted in sin. Christ never sinned. Much of the developing Christian community in the first century also kept the Old Covenant regulations. Christianity began within the Jewish community. Jews who accepted Christ as Messiah didn't suddenly stop keeping the Sabbath, holy days or everything else connected with the Old Covenant. The same was true for gentile converts to Judaism who accepted Christ as the promised Messiah.

The mistake that is made is not seeing that the New Testament Church was in transition. Covenantal transition was going on in the first century. It wasn't completed until the means to facilitate the Old Covenant was destroyed in A.D. 70. Many first century Christians did keep the Sabbath, holy days, food laws and many other Mosaic regulations.

Some look at all this and conclude that they were setting the standard by which we should live. This standard, however, was in transition. The standard was moving from the letter of the law to the spirit of the law. The spirit of the law called for a much broader application and expression of the moral code while at the same time seeing fulfillment in Christ of such worship regulations as the Sabbath and annual holy days.

When we look at the writings of early Church leaders, it becomes obvious that the Christian

community had from early on begun to meet on Sunday as a day of collective worship. The Epistle of Barnabas, written late first century or early second century A.D. says, "Wherefore, also, we keep the eight day with joyfulness, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead." The eight day was another designation for the first day of the week.

Justin Martyr, who wrote in the middle of the second century said, "On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read. Sunday is the day on which we hold our common assembly because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on that day raise from the dead."

In a late first or early second document written by Christian Jews called the Didache, we find Christians meeting on the first day of the week for worship services.

There is controversy in Christianity as to the exact day Jesus Christ rose from the dead. The fact remains, however, that the early Christian community believed He either rose from the dead on the first day of the week or at least made His first appearance to others after His resurrection on that day. These Christians subsequently translated that belief into choosing to meet on the first day of the week in celebration of this event.

A careful analysis of the writings of second and third century Church leaders Barnabas, Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian show that they all taught against a keeping of the Sabbath. These men were the leadership of the Christian community after the death of the original apostles. Rome did not make any official proclamations about Sunday worship until the fourth century.

It is obvious, from a review of both Church and secular history, that the Christian community was, by and large, meeting for worship on Sunday from early on. The accusation that Sunday worship was an accommodation to pagan sun worship does not hold up under close historical review (See article by author Ralph Woodrow entitled, *Did Sunday Worship Come From Paganism?*, at linked website www.ralphwoodrow.org/articles/sunday-worship.pdf). Christians met on Sunday from early on because that is the day they believed Christ was resurrected or at least made His resurrection known by appearing to His followers.

At the Jerusalem conference as recorded in Acts 15, it was concluded that the gentile Christians did not have to keep the law of Moses. Later rabbinic writings show the Gentiles were not expected to keep the Sabbath or any other Mosaic regulations.

In the fourth chapter of the letter to the Galatian Church Paul criticized any observance of days that were part of legalistic obligations. To the Colossian Church Paul explained that the Sabbath had typological significance and was not to be used as a measurement of righteousness.

Colossians 2:16-17: 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.

Paul clearly shows that the Old Covenant worship regulations were designed to look forward to their fulfillment in Christ. Once that fulfillment had come, there was no longer the need to begin or return to these observances. The New Testament documents clearly show that there was great

pressure being placed on Gentile converts to Christianity to add Mosaic requirements to their acceptance and worship of Christ. Many Gentile churches had Jewish converts to Christianity within their assemblies. Paul had to constantly address the problem of Jewish converts insisting that Gentile converts follow Jewish customs.

In chapter 14 of his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul writes that some were considering one day more sacred than another while others were considering every day alike. Paul said everyone should be fully convinced in his own mind and behave accordingly, not judging others or trying to impose their will on those who believe and do things differently. The Roman church, like many first century congregations, was made up of Jewish converts to Christianity, Jewish proselytes (Gentile Jews) who became converts and Gentile converts to Christianity. Many Jewish converts continued to keep the Sabbath and other Mosaic regulations. This would have been true of Jewish proselytes as well. Gentile converts, on the other hand, would not have been keeping these Old Covenant days. Paul is pointing out that the keeping or non-keeping of certain days and the eating or non-eating of certain foods is not what is important to God. Paul concludes his discussion of these matters by saying: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

CONCLUSION:

The title of this essay is, *Which Day Is the Christian Sabbath?* The answer is that no day is the Christian Sabbath. The Sabbath was assigned by God to be a seventh day of the week observance. This observance was part of the worship regulations of the Covenant made with Israel at Sinai. This regulation is fulfilled in the New Covenant. The rest of the Sabbath was to point to the rest we now have in Christ. Our rest in Christ provides freedom from eternal death and obligation to express the law of Christ in our behavior. The law of Christ involves the many moral imperatives that we find in the teachings of Christ and the expression of those teaching in the writings of the New Testament authors.

Under the New Covenant, we are free to meet for worship on any day we choose. We meet in community of worship not by command but by a desire to participate with others in the worship of God. Meeting together with others of like mind is a common human activity. When done in reference to worshiping God, it becomes an opportunity to share this experience with others. Such gatherings provide opportunity for training and development in Christian living and the addressing of needs that others may have. Above all, such meetings provide the opportunity for bringing in new people to share in the gospel of Christ.

Most of the Christian community meets on the first day of the week in continuing affirmation of the resurrection of Christ. It is on the first day of the week that Christ was first seen after His resurrection. Whether one chooses to meet for community of worship on Sunday or some other day, the important thing to remember is that whatever day we choose, it is not to be observed as some display of righteousness on our part, but as an opportunity to share in the worship of our creator and provide opportunity for others to come and be enlightened as to the gospel of Jesus Christ.