

THE SABBATH CONSIDERED

From time to time the subject of the Mosaic Law and how it applies to the New Testament Christian comes to the forefront of Christian thinking and scholarship. There are two schools of thought on this subject. Those who embrace Covenant Theology understand the Mosaic Law to contain three parts: sacrificial, ceremonial, and the moral—and it is understood that the first two, sacrificial and the ceremonial, were done away with in the sacrifice of Christ. However, the moral aspect is understood to eternally continue as a means of measurement of spiritual life and growth. Those embracing Covenant Theology see the moral aspect of the Law as continuing into the present, while others agree that Christ fulfilled *all* the Mosaic Law. Both sides agree that the Law cannot justify. It now becomes the question as to whether the Law is a means of attaining and measuring the Christian's life in Christ. The purpose of this paper is to address one particular area of the Law, that being the Fourth Commandment: Keep the Sabbath holy.

With the consideration of the place of the moral aspect of the Law, comes the question of this Fourth Commandment, the Sabbath. This is a formidable hurdle to get over if the Law is intended for observance in the New Testament, while still in its Old Testament form. If the Law is to be kept as a means to measure sanctification, then keeping the Sabbath certainly must be considered as part of that process. The question is, “*Why was the Sabbath, as stated in the Ten Commandments, given? And is it in some way applicable for Christians today?*”

We begin our consideration of the Sabbath in Genesis 2 at the end of creation.

Gen 2:2-3 “And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”

It is important to note that this ‘rest’ is a rest of accomplishment and of satisfaction.¹ The creation ends with God being content in what He had done. This was God's rest. Less interest is placed on the six days when God created man and more on God's contentment and satisfaction in

¹ Tom Wells, *New Covenant Theology* (Fredrick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002), 212.

what He had done overall. It seems that with this statement Moses wants to let the reader know that human history finds its goal in God's rest.²

God's rest was short lived. Chapter 3 describes man's rebellion against God and instantly God begins to work. Divine rest was broken with the entrance of sin. When this rest was disrupted, God again began to work—a work toward redeeming humanity. This concept was driven home with Jesus' word in John.

John 5:16-17 "And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."

God is at work in the Holy Spirit, bringing creation back under His loving rule. It is the goal of His creation to see redemption accomplished in Christ. Keil and Delitsch's comment on the seventh day is interesting.

*"...was the beginning and type of the rest to which the creation, after it had fallen from fellowship with God through the sin of man, received a promise that it should once more be restored through redemption, at its final consummation (emphasis added)."*³

The goal of God is to bring creation back into its rest of faith with God. The God-given rest is accomplished in redemption. Gustav Ochler states that the harmonious God-given order that awaits the termination of creation is to be found in the Divine rest of the seventh-day of creation, which has no evening. This happening 'hovers' over the world's progress, that it may at last absorb it into itself.⁴

Aside from God's contentment and promise that creation will one day return to its God's rest, it seems that this setting aside of the Sabbath had as its goal Jesus. It looked forward in some way to Jesus' day.

Mark 2:27-28 "And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

² Ibid., 213.

³ Keil and Delitsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 70.

⁴ Gustav Friedrich Ochler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Publishers, 1978), 352.

The Sabbath was given to show how faith in God produced rest. Man was made to rest, but only in that right relationship with his Creator. Genesis 3:1-3 sounds the first eschatological⁵ note anticipating the rest of redemption that would be revealed throughout redemptive history, culminating in its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

As Israel's history unfolds, the principle of the Sabbath is revealed. When God's people were miraculously brought out of Egypt, they were fed manna, which was the bread from heaven. On the sixth day, double provisions were to be gathered by the people of God. The Sabbath is mentioned as the day in which they were not to gather manna. The Sabbath is for rest. It was God saying that with His presence comes provision for all we need. It was God's continual sign that rest is to be found in God.

Understanding the historical placement of the Sabbath theme is important. It was given at Sinai when God's Ten Commandments were given. Some contend for the moral aspect of the Mosaic Law stating that that "Law" was written in the hearts of individuals, which the commandments of God validate. That is not what the Scriptures say:

Rom 5:12-13 "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. (Emphasis mine)"

Death reigned from Adam to Moses. Some internal witness did not show sin to be sin. Sin was sin because death bore witness to its existence as promised by God. God's Word was broken and sin set in.

The Mosaic Law was given to Israel; to God's people and God's people only. It constituted them as a particular people set aside for God. These Laws revealed God's will and His character. It revealed how they were to treat one another and others. Jesus in the New Testament mentions the summation of this when He said.

Matt 22:37-40 "And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

⁵ Eschatology is the end. It is the termination of promises made. Jesus is the 'eschaton'.

The Mosaic Law showed them what sacrifice was needed to atone for sin. In addition, it showed the external nature of God and what He required as their Creator.

The Law, as given by Moses, stands in a long line of preexisting historical and revelatory events whose purpose was to foreshadow the redemptive purpose of God in the coming of Christ. The history of redemption unfolded progressively to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. These covenants intended to reveal the will of God and the character of God in a progressive manner.

These covenants served another purpose as well. The Noahic covenant **established** that the earth would last while redemptive history moved forward to its eschaton. The sign of that covenant was the rainbow. The Abrahamic covenant with its promises of a people and a ‘Seed’ **outlined** the course of redemptive history. The sign of that covenant was circumcision. The Mosaic covenant **regulated** the course of redemptive history with the establishment of a people with its laws as the revelation of God.⁶ The sign of that covenant was the Sabbath. The thing that distinguished the people of Israel was the “Presence” of God. This was His rest and He was allowing His people to participate with Him in this rest. These covenants with their purposes and signs all were **unfolding** and leading to a **future fulfillment**. None of them individually could give the picture of God and His purposes fully. The ultimate fulfillment in this eschatological realization was Christ!⁷

As the Old Testament progresses, we see that the Sabbath becomes the focal point for all of Israel’s feasts. This includes the Sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee. These feasts were always a reminder that in God one could find restoration, rest, and freedom. All of these days and festivals were given to Israel as a sign of God’s presence in restoring humanity to a rest that was to be found in Him. God’s rest always included His presence. In Exodus we read:

Ex 33:14 “And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

The tabernacle and later the Temple suggested to the Jewish people that God was with them. All of their appointed feasts were conducted in the Temple on the Sabbath as a reminder

⁶ New Covenant Theology, Tom Wells, 276.

⁷ Even with Christ, the New Testament promises that there is yet a knowing of Christ that awaits us. *1 John 3:2 “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”*

of God's Presence, the promise of rest and that one 'Day' God would wrap it all up in Messiah. The Sabbath as a word and a Divine principle speaks of God's grace, provision, and redemption.

As with all Biblical themes, the Sabbath finds its clearest definition in the New Testament. It is in Christ Jesus, the Eschaton⁸ that we find the types, shadows, feasts and images of the Old Testament filled full with meaning. It all comes together in Christ. The Feast, the Tabernacle, the Temple, Mosaic Law, Jerusalem, the Promised Land, and the Kingdom were pieces of a big puzzle. They were promises made by God and publicly presented in the God-man, Jesus Christ.

2 Cor 1:20 "For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory."

Paul reminds us that these articles of revelation given in the Old Testament have passed away. They have given way to that for which they spoke.

Col. 2:16 "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath."

2 Cor 5:17 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

When Paul made reference to what a person ate or observed as conscience, he always allowed it based on one's conscience. However, when Paul addressed it, he did so as to an individual whose conscience was weak and needed 'upgrading'.

Jesus is our fulfillment of Joshua who leads His people to rest. He is our year of Jubilee (Luke 4:16ff) and our rest to the weary (Matt. 11:28). Creation itself awaits the rest that one day will come (Romans 8:18).

I mentioned earlier that there has been an argument put forth that the Moral Law is an eternal law.⁹ Some have suggested that the moral law of God was written in creation and that it

⁸ Rev 22:13 "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

⁹ It needs mentioning that those following Covenant Theology teach that the Mosaic Law has three divisions. The suggestion is that two of the three divisions have been fulfilled but the moral aspect of it is carried over into the New Testament. There is no mention in Scripture of this division. If the Mosaic Law has been totally fulfilled in Christ then that includes the moral aspect as well as the sacrificial and governmental portion.

is a creation ordinance. Some important comments arguing against this belief are in order. First, had the Sabbath been an eternal law written in creation, Jesus would not have let his disciples eat on the Sabbath as they did (Matt. 12:1-8). As the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus stands above it and defines acceptable behavior. Second, if the moral law of God is eternal Gentiles would have to be judged because they have not kept the Sabbath in addition to the other nine laws. The Bible tells us that they are **already judged** for unbelief. Judgment hangs over all because of unbelief not by failing to keep the Law, much less not keeping the Sabbath. Third, the Moral Law is not eternal because the church moved the Sabbath from a Saturday (Jewish observance of the Sabbath) to Sunday. The church moved its day of worship to the day commemorating the resurrection of Christ. Had it been eternal the changing of one day for another would not have been accepted or practiced. The apostle Paul always met with the Jews in the synagogue on the Sabbath, sun down on Friday to sun down on Saturday. Paul recognized that to the Jews the Sabbath covered this period of hours. This is an Old Testament belief. It was early on in the church that the church moved away from the Old Testament keeping of the Sabbath to meet on the first day of the week, Sunday. All the Reformed creeds took liberty to move the Sabbath. That action serves to prove that the Law is **not eternal**.

*B. B. Warfield writes, "It (Sabbath) belongs to Him. He is the Lord of it; master of it--for that is what 'Lord' means. He may do with it what He will, abolish it if He chooses."*¹⁰

Jesus Christ has ushered in a new age where the promises of the Old Testament are realized. The promise of rest (or Sabbath) as given in the Old Testament is given its anticipated fulfillment in the Messiah of the New Testament. It is not that the Moral Law is null and void but rather it is truer to say that the Christian will carry out the law of God as it comes to him through Christ.¹¹

Col 2:16-17 "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath . These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."

¹⁰ B. B. Warfield, *The Sabbath in the Word of God*, 310.

¹¹ Tom Wells, *New Covenant Theology*, 200.

Gal 4:8-10 “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! (Emphasis mine)”

Our ‘tracking’ of the Sabbath theme in the Old Testament to its fulfillment in Christ Jesus is affirmed in the book of Hebrews.

Heb 4:3, 6 “For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, ‘As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest, . . .’ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience.”

Interestingly, Jesus was taken down from the Cross just before the Sabbath. He was in the grave on the Sabbath as if to say this too is “finished.”

Mark 15:42-43 “And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.”

We have to be careful when we divide the Old Testament Mosaic Law into three parts. We can discern areas the Law addressed, but to divide it only encourages the setting aside of two and keeping of the one, when Scripture does not warrant any division at all. This arbitrary dividing of the Law presents a hermeneutical problem. The Mosaic Law was one legislative piece given to one people. Division of it allows us to tamper with the Davidic covenant. Perhaps we could assert that Jesus did not bring in the kingdom but that the kingdom is reserved to a millennium age. That assertion has indeed been made. Thus, to divide the Mosaic Law is bad hermeneutics.

The Mosaic Law was given to us as our “tutor” to show our sin against a Holy God. Its primary function addressed the external nature of sinful man. Christ’s lived perfectly by the Law, thus fulfilling the requirement that man must be perfect in order to enter the presence of God. God Himself is perfect and cannot tolerate sin. Christ lived the sinless perfect life for us as our representative. All that the Law required in its sacrifices, its conduct before others, and its moral obligations, Christ fulfilled. To divide the Mosaic Law and carry over the moral aspect of it is to “rob” Christ of the glory due Him for fulfilling in His life and in His death the requirement of a Holy God.

Where does this leave us? We find ourselves just like Israel, unable to keep anything that requires performance. The Law cannot perform as an agent of justification or sanctification.

“[A]nd; therefore, because it sees perfect obedience to the Mosaic Law as impossible, it denies that the Mosaic Covenant, in and of itself, performs any **soteriological** function other than convicting the reader of sin.”¹²

Christ has achieved our justification and our sanctification. All that we ‘achieve’ is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is the Spirit of the living God working in us to both will and do of His good pleasure. We can see the progress or lack of spiritual growth by the **fruit** that we produce. Jesus said people shall know that we are His disciples by our love. Additionally, Paul joins with Jesus in establishing the fact that Christ in us produces noticeable **fruit**.

Some have argued that a Christian who thinks like this is antinomian; without law. Howbeit, born again people are subject to Christ, ruled by His Spirit. We are ‘under’ the law of the Spirit of Life that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:2). Some would say, “that is too subjective.” No, Jesus Himself said that, “not all who say to Me Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of heaven but he who does My will (Matthew 7:22-23). “ The empowerment to do His will is given to the Christian by the indwelling Spirit.

Phil 2:13 “[F]or it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Whatever was required by way of performance like keeping the Sabbath, Jesus Himself did on behalf of all those that will call on His name for mercy. The Jews in their time missed it. Dr. Marytn Lloyd-Jones writes,

“The real trouble with the Jews at the time of our Lord was that they stopped at the **letter** and never arrived at the **spirit**. In other words, they never got at doctrine. They were content with a general familiarity with the **words** but they did not get the **Word**.” (Emphasis added)¹³

We cannot through the observance of days or works please God! Only Christ on our behalf can open the door of heaven and personally escort us in. As the Scriptures say

Zech 4:6 “Not by might , nor by power, but by my

¹² Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered*, 2006, p. 47)

¹³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God the Father, God the Son*, Vol. 1 (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1966), 7.