

Sabbath, Sunday, Or...?

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Part I

Introduction

There seems to be great confusion over which commands of God to obey. Paul said, “Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (1 Corinthians 7:17). The thrust of the Old and New Testaments is to be obedient to God’s commands. The question is: What are the commands of God that the New Testament believer is to keep and obey? I first answered that question in the article “Which Law Does the Christian Obey?” found on the website www.bereanpublishers.co.nz under the heading “Important Issues.”

Nevertheless, the specific issue of whether to worship on the Sabbath (Saturday) or Sunday or some other day continues to arise so this article will attempt to fully explore this issue.

As part of this discussion we will look at the tradition of the early church. Unfortunately, many look at this quite differently, each drawing their own conclusion. Others point to the fact that it was first the Roman Emperor and then the Roman Catholic Church that dictated (commanded) that Sunday be the official day of worship and so claim it must be the wrong day because of the source of the command.

As in all our writings our source is neither tradition nor opinion. We simply seek to find what God said in his word – the Bible. This sometimes requires more than blindly following a given favorite translation. Sometimes it is necessary to revert to the Greek or Hebrew texts to plumb the depths of meaning. Or sometimes it is revealing to check several different translations and see how different Greek (or Hebrew) language experts chose to interpret the original texts. But, above all, it is the word of God that must explain which commands we are to follow.

Finally, as we examine the scriptural texts, let us keep in mind both the context and the persons to whom the passages were directed. Also, in this particular subject – the Sabbath – let us pay attention both to what is said and what is not said. If the Sabbath must be observed by Gentiles believers, then surely God will clearly specify that.

God's Command to New Testament Believers

As Jesus was about to ascend into heaven, he gave his last and most complete instruction to his followers about what they were to do after he left them:

Matthew 28:18 “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

If we are to teach new believers to obey everything Jesus commanded, then we should first study his teachings and commands to see what Jesus had to say on the subject of the Sabbath.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

At Matthew 12:8, Jesus said he was Lord of the Sabbath (see also Luke 6:5). Many scriptures record the frequent confrontations Jesus had with the religious rulers over Sabbath-keeping. Mark 1:21-28 records Jesus casting a demon from a man on the Sabbath. Matthew 12 tells of the disciples eating the heads of grain as they went through a field (see also Mark 2:22-23, Luke 6:1-2). The Pharisees accused them of doing that which was unlawful on the Sabbath. John 5:1-15 records the healing of the invalid at the pool of Bethesda. The entire 9th chapter of the Gospel of John is devoted to the story of a man born blind who was healed by Jesus on the Sabbath. Matthew 12 tells of Jesus healing a man with a shriveled hand (see also Mark 3:1-6, Luke 6:6-11). When the Pharisees objected, Jesus said:

Matthew 12:11 “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

Mark 2:27 “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Jesus Taught Healing (Helping) On the Sabbath

On a Sabbath Jesus healed a woman bent over who could not straighten up. The Pharisees were indignant and told the people not to come for healing on the Sabbath. But Jesus told them:

Luke 13:15 The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? ¹⁶ Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”

When eating at the house of a Pharisee on a Sabbath, Jesus saw a man suffering from dropsy and asked the Pharisees what they thought of healing on the Sabbath. Jesus healed the man and said:

Luke 14:5 Then he asked them, “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?” ⁶ And they had nothing to say. (See also John 7:21-24).

Jesus Admitted Working on the Sabbath

At John 5:17 Jesus said a most significant thing about both God and Jesus working on the Sabbath:

^{John 5:16} So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” ¹⁸ For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

Jesus admitted he was working – which was breaking the Sabbath rules and regulations. But he also said his Father – God – was also working and is always working.

Jesus went to the synagogue and often taught in the synagogues on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9, Mark 6:2, Luke 4:16, 31).

What have we learned? Jesus apparently respected the Sabbath and often went to the synagogue and taught there on the Sabbath. But he constantly did on the Sabbath that which the Jews considered unlawful. He declared that the Sabbath was made for man, not the other way around, and that he was Lord of the Sabbath. Finally, he said that both he and his Father were constantly working – not keeping the seventh day Sabbath.

What did Jesus not do? He did NOT command his followers to keep and observe the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship.

Is it significant that Jesus did not specifically command observance of the Sabbath for his followers? It would seem very significant, as we are commanded to teach new disciples to obey what Jesus taught and commanded.

Sabbatarian Arguments Defending Sabbath-Keeping

Sabbatarians Say Jesus is Author of Old Testament Law

Sabbatarians sometimes argue that Jesus' command at Matthew 28:20, “teach them to obey all that I commanded you,” includes the commands of the Old Testament because Jesus is the “Word” (John 1:1) and therefore the author of the Old Testament. This argument is without merit for several reasons.

First, Jesus was speaking to disciples who had been taught by him for 3 ½ years. Never did Jesus refer to the Old Testament as something he had authored and they were therefore to obey. The only thing the disciples could relate to when Jesus said to teach new disciples “to obey all that he had commanded them” was what Jesus had taught and commanded them over the prior 3 ½ years. The Gospel of John, revealing Jesus as the incarnate Word, was not written until much later, perhaps 50-85 A.D. The apostles and early church had no knowledge (from John's writing) during all those years of what Sabbatarians now claim.

Second, John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The human person of Jesus Christ – the only begotten Son of the Father – had not yet come into existence. Yes, Jesus is God – the Word – but he is also man, the son of Mary, born of a virgin, without sin. The God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the one who commanded his followers to make new disciples and to teach them “to obey all that he commanded them.”

Third, Scripture says it was the Holy Spirit who prompted the writers:

²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20).

Sabbatarians Say Jesus Said the Law Will Last

Sabbatarians say that Jesus told us at Matthew 5:18 that nothing whatsoever will disappear from the Law until heaven and earth disappear. Let's see what the Scripture says:

Matthew 5:18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Did Jesus say what the Sabbatarians claim? No, not really. He said the Law would last indefinitely until everything is accomplished! When would everything be accomplished? When the Law and the Prophets were fulfilled. What did Jesus say he came to do?

Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

Jesus said he came to fulfill them. Did he? I believe he did, but what does Scripture say?

At Matthew 26:56, Jesus said, ⁵⁶ "But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." When Jesus said, "It is finished!" (John 19:30) on the cross, I believe he was stating that the fulfillment of the law and the prophets was finished. For corroboration, consider what Jesus said at Luke 18:31: Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them,

"We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled." (Luke 18:31).

This much misunderstood passage, claimed to say that the Old Testament Law will last until heaven and earth pass away, is indeed misstated and misunderstood. The law and prophets, according to Jesus, have been fulfilled and accomplished. IT IS FINISHED!

Sabbatarians Say Blessings and Curses Show Law In Effect

The Sabbatarians argue that Jesus, at Matthew 5:19, spoke about those who break the commandments (Old Testament Law) and the blessings for those who practice and teach them. But is this so? The problem with this passage may be partly punctuation (not in the Greek) and the way it is set forth in the text of the various translations. Let's look at Matthew 5:19-20 in the NIV:

Matthew 5:19 Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

What was Jesus talking about in verses 19 and 20? Notice that in verses 17 and 18 (see verses in previous section) Jesus is talking generically about the law. There are no specific commandments mentioned. But in verse 19 he speaks of "these" commandments and "these commands." Jesus was teaching and giving specific commands (Matthew 5:1-16) to the crowd of listeners and continued to do so throughout the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:19-7:27). All of a sudden (at Matt. 5:18), it is though he turned aside to say he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it and that nothing will disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. (Remember he said, "It is finished!" All accomplished!)

Interpretation of verse 19 is easier to understand if we realize that “these” commands referred to what Jesus was speaking to the crowd, not referring back to an earlier statement about the Law.

Consider the opposite interpretation – that Jesus was referring to the Old Testament Law. If that were so, what commands was Jesus saying we would be blessed if we practice and teach them? Washing your hands? Animal sacrifice? That doesn’t make sense, does it?

Even stronger proof is found in verse 20. The Pharisees kept the law to the jot and tittle (KJV) just as Paul said he did as a Pharisee – he said he was blameless. How could anyone have a righteousness that surpassed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law?

Jesus’ commands are of the heart and heart attitude (God looks at the heart). The external legalism of the Pharisees was a magnitude below the righteous behavior (of the heart) that Jesus taught. By following Jesus’ teachings and commands a person will indeed have a righteousness (of the heart) that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Is it any wonder the Lord Jesus commanded that his commands be taught to all new disciples? (Matthew 28:20).

“The Law” vs. Christ’s Law

Please note that throughout this article “the law” refers to the Old Testament law, NOT the teachings and commands of Jesus. Paul continually faced opposition from those who tried to compel the Gentile Christians to observe (obey) the Old Testament law – the Judaizers.

Jesus’ teachings and commands – Christ’s law – are what all Christians are to obey (see Matthew 28:20). Paul made the distinction between “Christ’s law” and “the law” when writing the Corinthians:

^{1 Cor. 9:21} To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.

Paul’s statement could be restated, “To those Gentiles not under the Jewish law, I became as one not having the Jewish law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the Jew’s law.

In 1 Corinthians 9:21, Paul equates “God’s law” with “Christ’s law.” Note that Paul has recognized that God’s law for the Christian church is the same as Christ’s law – the teachings and commands of Jesus, exactly what Jesus said we are to teach all disciples to obey (Matthew 28:20). Paul instructed the Galatians: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Using “word of Christ,” Paul said, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16). The continuous emphasis of the New Testament is on what Jesus commanded, on what Jesus said!

What Did New Testament Writers Say (and Not Say)?

Paul is the only New Testament writer to speak about the Sabbath. If Gentiles are required to follow the Sabbath practices of the Jews we should find strong admonitions to the Gentiles to keep and observe the Sabbath in the New Testament Scriptures.

Critical Question: Is the Old Testament Law Still In Effect?

This question is critical to our study and of utmost importance to Sabbatarians (Sabbath-Keepers). For Sabbatarians, the Old Testament Law must be still in force today because they know it is the ONLY authority they can point to for keeping the Sabbath. They have advanced many arguments over the ensuing years to show

why Christians must keep the Sabbath including, for example, that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance and that Israel is now the church. We'll examine each of their arguments to see whether they are founded in Scripture.

God Canceled the Written Code, Nailing It To The Cross

In the clearest statement about observing the Sabbath, Paul told the Colossians:

Colossians 2:13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

What did God do with the written code and its regulations? He took it away! He nailed it to the cross! Doesn't that seem transparently clear?

The problem is that Sabbatarians say the written code and its regulations which were abolished – taken away, nailed to the cross – do not apply to the ten commandments.

Let's take a closer look at vs. 16. The first part of the verse deals with the regulations pertaining to what can be eaten or drunk. Next it applies to the religious festivals. Finally it speaks specifically about the Sabbath. Surely that must be the end of the matter. It could hardly be more clear.

But no, again the Sabbatarians say this does not mean the 7th day Sabbath. They say it refers to the feasts that were special Sabbaths. Of course the text doesn't say special Sabbaths and the rule of interpretation of Scripture should always be to accept the plain, literal, and clear meaning of Scripture unless the context forces another interpretation.

Another writer advanced still a different idea, causing a complete misunderstanding of Colossians 2:14. His misunderstanding, from the King James Version, had to do with the term "handwriting of ordinances that was against us." The parallel in the NIV is "the written code, with its regulations."

Colossians 2:14 Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross [KJV]

Colossians 2:14 having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. [NIV]

The writer stated the "handwriting of ordinances" literally means a list of judgments or offenses – a sentence of guilt rather than a statement of the prevailing law.

I'm a lawyer. When I read ordinance I read law. I've always thought that is what it means. But since I'm not new at being wrong, I immediately checked Webster's dictionary to see what that learned document had to say. It defined ordinance as follows: 1(a): an authoritative decree or direction: Order; (b) regulation; 2: something ordained or decreed by fate or a deity; 3: a prescribed usage, practice, or ceremony.

Definitions 1 and 2 both fit all the laws and decrees of God, don't they? The King James Version does bring up an interesting point. Why would it say "handwriting" of ordinances? Could that point directly to the Ten

Commandments which were handwritten on stone by the finger of God? The NIV version is more likely the correct understanding – the written code vs. oral rules.

Christians are Released From the Law

In Romans 7, Paul used the example of being bound in marriage so long as the spouse is alive. But when the spouse dies, the person is released from the law of marriage. Using the example of a woman who marries again while the spouse is alive, he says such a woman is called an adultress. However, if the husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adultress even if she marries another man.

Paul says that is the example that is to apply to us – those who have died to the law through the body of Christ. He says, “But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” (Romans 7:6).

What Was the Purpose of the Law?

Paul, in particular, was the writer who discussed the question of the Jewish law and its applicability to the Christian. He was in a unique position to do so having been a Pharisee who had been taught by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), an esteemed teacher of the law.

There seem to be many reasons for the law. At Romans 3:20, Paul said “through the law we become conscious of sin.” At Romans 5:20 he wrote the Romans, “The law was added so that the trespass might increase.” At Galatians 3:19 Paul asked, “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.” At Galatians 3:24 Paul summarized the purpose of the law: “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”

Could “The Law” Make Men Righteous Before God?

Over and over, Paul answers this question. It must have been a hot topic of conversation in the days of the early church as the Judaizers tried to convince the new Christians to follow the Jewish law as well as Jesus. Paul did not mince words. He stated:

Romans 3:20 Therefore **no one** will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

Galatians 2:15 “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 3:11 Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.”

But some still seem to rely on observing the law to be regarded as righteous before God. This seems to be true of Sabbatarians. Paul crushed that notion when he told the Galatians:

Galatians 3:10 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”

Unequivocally Paul has established that rather than being declared righteous in God’s eyes by observing the law (imperfectly), law-keepers are under a curse because they cannot keep the law perfectly and rely on their efforts to obtain favor with God.

How Are Christians Made Righteous Before God?

Paul made this answer equally clear. Over and over he established:

Galatians 3:13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”¹⁴ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. . . .²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

Romans 5:9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!¹⁰ For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The capstone, of the argument between seeking righteousness through the law or being made righteous by God’s grace through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, is:

Galatians 2:21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

The Law Was Temporary

Is the law still valid as the Sabbatarians claim? That is really the crux of the matter, the heart of the question. If it is, we must observe the Sabbath. If it is not, why not, and what is the biblical authority that says it is not still valid? Paul explained:

Galatians 3:19 What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.

Galatians 3:19 asks the purpose of the law. Paul answers saying the purpose of the law was temporary – because of transgressions (moral failure which surely would be made known through the “moral law”). How long would there be purpose for the law? Paul said, “Until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.”

Who is the Seed? Paul told us:

¹⁶ The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ (Galatians 3:16).

Would Sabbatarians deny that the Ten Commandments were part of the law? They often call the Ten Commandments the moral law (even though the 4th commandment has no moral context). Consider what the following scripture describes:

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. ⁷ Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone. . . .

We know the Ten Commands were given to Moses on tablets of stone. No other law was engraved by God on stone. The above scripture must refer to the Ten Commandments. Paul is speaking of it as the same Law that has passed away, but this time is referring to it as “the ministry that brought death.” It seems totally justified, then, to say that the Ten Commandments are part of the “Law” to which Paul repeatedly refers. But as we have seen, and will see repeatedly, for the follower of Christ the Law is gone – it was nailed to the cross.

Galatians 3:24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are **no longer under the supervision of the law**.

Again Paul makes the point. There was a purpose to the law. It was to lead us to Christ, but now that faith has come we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Sabbatarians Claim No Real Change

Sabbatarians sometimes make the argument there is no real change between the Old Testament requirements and the New Testament. Of course they recognize that Christ came as a man, as recorded in the New Testament, but they claim him as the creator-God of Genesis and see his presence throughout the Old Testament. It is as part of that argument they claim that Jesus (as the Word of John 1:1) authored the Old Testament and thus the commands we are to keep (of Matthew 28:20) include the Old Testament commandments.

Is that what Scripture says? Let’s take a closer look.

The Apostle John, who identified Jesus as God the Word, a few verses later made clear the huge differences occasioned by the coming of Jesus:

¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

Contrary to the claim of the Sabbatarians, John was **not** saying that grace and truth were always present in the Old Testament through Jesus Christ who was then the Word. To come up with such an interpretation would require torturing the text into saying something it does not.

Not only did truth come through Jesus Christ, Jesus himself is the truth. Jesus not only claims to be the truth, but the **ONLY** way to the Father – the only way to be saved:

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Jesus said “no one” can be saved except through him. His coming marked a great change in God’s dealing with mankind.

Throughout the Old Testament, God had prophesied that he would send the Christ (the Messiah) and even gave the exact time at which he would come. Paul assured the Galatians:

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons (Galatians 4:4).

Were those under law redeemed (or able to be redeemed) before the coming of Jesus as the Redeemer and Savior? No! Pre-Christ the world was held a prisoner of the law. Jesus came to set the prisoners free. (See Luke 4:18-19).

Paul taught the Romans:

²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (Romans 3:21-22).

Contrary to the claim of the Sabbatarians, the thrust of these passages is that this righteousness from God, apart from law, had not been known before. It was only “when the time had fully come” that God sent his Son. “Now,” Paul says, a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known. All this occurred with the coming of Jesus.

Paul compared the people’s situation under the law before Christ and the change after Jesus came:

^{Galatians 3:22} But the Scripture declares that the **whole world** is a **prisoner of sin**, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. ²³ Before this faith came [pre-Christ Old Testament], we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed [through Jesus in the New Testament]. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Notice how vast the changes proclaimed by Paul. Pre-Christ the Jews were held prisoners by the law. Then faith was revealed. Now that faith has come, believers are no longer under the supervision of the law. Does that sound like the same law and salvation running through both the Old and New Testaments as claimed by the Sabbatarians? No. The Old Testament looked forward to the coming of Jesus Christ through hundreds of prophecies. The law was symbolic of what Jesus would fulfill as the lamb who was slain to bring redemption and atonement for the sins of mankind.

In his first scripture reading in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read:

^{Luke 4:18} “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

When Jesus said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” (Luke 4:21) was he speaking of freedom for the Jews held prisoner by the law (Galatians 3:23) and the whole world held prisoner by sin? (Gal. 3:22). This is a very reasonable possibility. And true to that interpretation, now that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ has come, we are no longer under supervision of the law – no longer prisoners of the law.

The law and the prophets looked forward to Jesus. Then he was born and the angels proclaimed, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord!” (Luke 2:11).

Burdened by a Yoke of Slavery

The Sabbath, perhaps more than any other law of the Jews, was extremely burdensome with many rules and regulations pertaining to its observance. Consider Paul’s admonition:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1).

Considering the context of all he is telling the Galatians, Paul says it is freedom from the requirements of the law that Christ has set the Galatians (and us) free. He calls it being burdened by a yoke of slavery. Which command was the most burdensome, the most like a yoke of slavery? It was Sabbath-keeping.

Paul's description of being under law is more than burdensome:

Galatians 3:23 Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.

How long were they held prisoners? Until faith should be revealed! There was a time limit on the usefulness of the law.

No One Is Justified Before God By the Law

Didn't the Old Testament law also justify by faith? Not according to Scripture. Paul said "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith" (Galatians 3:8). That was a future event, not something for the Israelites of the Old Testament era.

Repeatedly Paul tried to make sure the churches knew the great difference between the period before Christ and after Christ Jesus had come. He told the Galatians:

Galatians 3:11 Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."
¹² The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them."

Galatians 2:15 "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Romans 3:20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

The Greek verb for justified is also translated "declared righteous" with the same meaning. It is necessary for us to be declared righteous before God for us to be saved. But no one will be declared righteous by observing the law. We can only be justified – declared righteous – by faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If Led By the Spirit, You Are Not Under Law

Over and over Paul repeats the message to the Galatians that they must come out from under the law – that they are NOT under law. This time he refers to the Spirit to make his point:

Galatians 5:16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Living by the law is living by externals. The teaching of Jesus, corroborated by the New Testament writers, is that God looks at the heart. He wants a pure heart, one that seeks holiness and righteousness, not gratifying the

desires of the sinful nature. It is those who live by the Spirit who will accomplish that. But those who live by the Spirit, who are led by the Spirit are NOT under law.

Is it possible to be a Christian and not live by the Spirit? Paul spoke to the Romans about that:

Romans 8:9 You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

Salvation belongs only to those who have received and follow Jesus Christ as their Lord. It is those who pledge to obey Jesus as Lord who receive the Holy Spirit (see John 14:15-16. See also Acts 5:32). But if anyone does not have the Spirit, he does NOT belong to Christ Jesus our Lord and does not have salvation.

What About Those Who Insist on Following the Law?

What about those who have chosen to follow the law over grace, the law over faith, the law over the Spirit? Paul said:

Galatians 5:4 You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

The Galatians were turning back to the law under the influence of the Judaizers. Paul was incredulous:

Galatians 5:9 But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?¹⁰ You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!¹¹ I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

Paul was concerned that the Galatians may actually have left the faith by following the law, that all his work with them may have been in vain. Paul spoke about those who rely on observing the law:

Galatians 3:10 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”

We know that only one person was able to do everything perfectly, to be without sin. That person was the Lord Jesus. Everyone else (those who rely on observing the law) – but who do not continue to do everything (perfectly) – are cursed.

If such persons preach that following the law – in addition to follow Jesus – is necessary for salvation, they come under Scripture’s strongest curse. Paul said of the Judaizers:

Galatians 1:8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Paul’s Gospel was to receive a righteousness from God through faith in Jesus Christ. He repeatedly said that no one will be justified by following the law. Can the Sabbatarians deny that the Sabbath is part of “the law” – the most burdensome of all?

Sabbath Rest as a Type of Rest in Jesus

One argument the Sabbatarians make is that the items listed in Colossians 2:16 are qualified in vs. 17 as “a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” In a Seventh Day Adventist

article titled “Which ‘Sabbath’ Did Paul Rule Out?,” speaking specifically about Colossians 2:16-17, the author claims that the Seventh Day Sabbath is not a shadow of the coming reality found in Christ. But there the author errs.

In looking at the fulfillment of the Sabbath in Christ, we must determine what the Sabbath represented and was to be. It represented a rest from labor and was to be a rest from labor.

Let’s look at what Jesus said about himself. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28).

How perfectly Jesus fulfilled the type of the Sabbath. All our lives we struggle and work until we come to the Lord Jesus. Then we enter into the Sabbath rest that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let’s examine a corroboration for that interpretation. Beginning at Hebrews 3:7, the author speaks about rest. But is it a Sabbath rest in Christ that he speaks about? At 4:3, the author states, “Now we who have believed enter that rest.” Who is he referring to? It is surely those who believe in Jesus as Lord – true Christians. But, is it “the Sabbath rest” in Christ or some other kind of rest? The answer is found at Hebrews 4:9:

Hebrews 4:8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;¹⁰ for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

Putting Jesus’ teaching about himself as the source of rest together with the passage in Hebrews, we find that the Sabbath is indeed presented as a type of the rest which is found in Jesus for those who believe in him. Those who follow Jesus find rest for their souls. It is not the Sabbath that will give them rest. **It is Jesus:** “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

The Old Covenant is Obsolete

Another conclusive argument is found in Hebrews 8 where the author quotes the Lord, saying “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Hebrews 8:8). He went on to say, “It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt” (v. 9).

Those scriptures raise two questions pertaining to the issue we are discussing. When did God give Israel the rule of Sabbath worship and was that described by God as a covenant he made with Israel?

We find the answer to both questions in Exodus 31. It is the time that God was leading the children out of Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. In the 16th verse, God said, “The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever.” The answer is positive in both cases, showing the covenant of Sabbath observation was the Old Covenant. It further proves the point that the covenant was not a general one with all the people of God (forever in the future), but with the Israelites.

The author of Hebrews concluded his discussion of the New Covenant with this comment:

¹³ By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear (Hebrews 8:13).

Jesus is the author of the New Covenant. Neither his teachings nor commands endorsed Sabbath-keeping. He did make Sabbath worship obsolete, at least as to the non-Jew.

To Whom Was the Sabbath Command Given?

Following is the Sabbath command, given to the Israelites shortly after God delivered them from Egypt. Note who God spoke to:

Exodus 20:8 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Could “you” be referring to you and me, those of us who are New Testament Christians, mostly Gentiles? In Deuteronomy 5:12-14 the Sabbath command is repeated. But following, in vs. 15, Moses makes clear to whom the command is given and why:

¹⁵ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day (Deuteronomy 5:15).

This verse makes clear that it cannot refer to New Testament Christians, at least not to those who are Gentiles. Neither we nor our ancestors were slaves in Egypt. Neither we nor our ancestors were brought out of Egypt by God’s mighty hand and his outstretched arm.

Moses recites that God delivered the Jews (Israelites) from Egypt. Then Moses continued with “Therefore” – because of that – God has commanded the Israelites to observe the Sabbath Day.

Notwithstanding the clarity of Deuteronomy 5:15, Sabbatarians argue that Egypt is a type for the world and that God’s deliverance from Egypt is a type of God’s deliverance from the world when we became Christians. Therefore, they say, we should also observe the Sabbath. But the Sabbatarians fail to complete the typology. If Egypt and God’s deliverance from Egypt is a type, then we must see the Sabbath as a type as well. The Sabbath Day is also a type – of the permanent, day-by-day rest found by those who come to the Lord Jesus as the source of rest and believe in him.

Is there further corroboration that this is to pertain only to the Jews, the descendants of the Israelites who were taken out of Egypt by the hand of God? Jeremiah 17:19-27 is an exhortation by God (through Jeremiah) to the Jews to keep his Sabbath holy. God concluded by saying this:

²⁷ But if you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses” (Jeremiah 17:27).

Could this apply to Gentile Christians? Almost certainly not unless we were living in Jerusalem. God specifically applies this to the Jews and to their capital city.

Finally God called Israel back to Sabbath observance through Ezekiel. Note once again the emphasis God places on who is to observe the Sabbath. It is the people of Israel (vs. 13), “them in the desert” (vs. 13, 15).

Ezekiel 20:13 “Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the desert. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws—although the man who obeys them will live by them—and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert. ¹⁴ But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. ¹⁵ Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would not bring them into the land I had given them — a land flowing with milk and honey, most beautiful of all lands — ¹⁶ because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols. ¹⁷ Yet I looked on them with pity and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the desert. ¹⁸ I said to their children in the desert, “Do not follow the statutes of your fathers or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols. ¹⁹ I am the LORD your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

A Sign Between God and Israel

Perhaps the most persuasive scriptures to me are those where God says to the Israelites that the Sabbath is a sign between Israel and himself [God]. Both Moses and Ezekiel repeated God’s reason for giving them the Sabbath – that Israel may know that God is the Lord, who makes Israel holy.

Exodus 31:12 Then the LORD said to Moses, ¹³ “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.

“The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever” (Exodus 31:16).

Ezekiel 20:12 Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.

Ezekiel 20:20 Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.”

God is not suggesting nor commanding that the Sabbath be observed by all the world. The texts all specifically say who the command applies to: “Neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.” Aliens outside the gates are not affected. Gentiles are not commanded to obey. No, only Israel, its people, and those under its control and within its gates. The Sabbath is a specific sign and covenant for Israel!

Is the Sabbath a Creation Ordinance?

Sabbatarians also claim that the Sabbath Day is a creation ordinance. Naturally this is because of the language within the commandment: “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” This language refers back to Genesis 2:2-3.

Sabbatarians claim that this was an ordinance that was to be followed from the creation of the world and is to be observed forever – a creation ordinance.

Let’s look more closely. In all of Genesis and all the personalities described in Genesis, there was NO mention of the Sabbath (or a seventh day) as a day to keep specially for any reason. Nor was there even mention of a seventh day except as the seventh day of creation when God rested (at Genesis 2:2-3). Suddenly, at Exodus 16:23, when Moses gave God’s instructions for collecting manna, the term Sabbath is used for the first time:

Exodus 16:23 He said to them, “This is what the LORD commanded: “Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD . . . ²⁶ Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.”

Until explained in Exodus 16:26, there was not even an explanation that the Sabbath was the seventh day. Nor was it then connected to creation or God resting on the seventh day. It was only with the giving of the ten commandments, first recorded at Exodus 20:3-17, that the Sabbath connection was made to God as creator who rested on the seventh day. The first the Israelites (or anyone else as best we know) knew of a Sabbath was when Moses told them to gather twice the amount of manna because “tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD.”

Just as there was no mention of a seventh day in all of Genesis (except Gen. 2:2-3) nor in Exodus up to Exodus 16:26, nor the term Sabbath until Exodus 16:23, there was no mention of “week” until Genesis 29:27, 28, and then speaking only of a “bridal week” without defining what that meant. Throughout Genesis the concept of months and days were used, but never “week” defined as a seven day period, only twice as a “bridal week.”

The notion that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance is pure conjecture with no evidence whatsoever from the Scripture.

God Stated Purpose of Sabbath

Instead of a creation ordinance, God repeatedly said he gave Israel the Sabbaths “as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy” (Exodus 31:12, Ezekiel 20:12, 20), and “then you will know that I am the LORD your God” (Ezekiel 20:19), and to remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 5:15).

Instead of a creation ordinance that should be followed by all peoples at all times, it is very clear from Scripture that the Sabbath was given to Israel and only to Israel and to apply only to those under the control of Israel, their sons and daughters, manservants and maidservants, and the aliens within its gates. Nowhere is the Sabbath applied to anyone else. God sought to set apart Israel for himself, a unique people, holy and separated to God.

Paul Warns the Galatians

Judaizers had come to the Galatians and insisted that, in addition to following Jesus as Lord – the teaching that Paul had given them – the Galatians were also to follow the rules and regulations of the Jews. The Judaizers claimed the Gentiles were to have the flesh symbol of circumcision and observe rules and regulations of the Jews.

What was Paul’s response? He castigated them:

Galatians 4:9 But now that you know God — or rather are known by God — how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? ¹⁰ You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

“Special days and months and seasons and years!” sounds very much like the warning Paul gave the Colossian church. Though he did not specify Sabbaths by name to the Galatians, the parallel is similar to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day, all specified in the warning to the Colossians. Paul is making it very clear that the Galatian Christians are NOT to turn back and be enslaved by such rules and regulations.

Paul came into conflict with Peter at Galatia because Peter had pulled back from the Gentile Christians because of the Judaizers. Paul's response told us the Gospel and the place of the Jews' rules, regulations and commands for the Gentile Christian:

¹⁵“We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ ¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified (Galatians 2:15-16).

This is a strong response. And it is totally contrary to the Jewish thinking of his day. It is NOT by observing the law but through faith in Christ Jesus that we can be justified. Then even more strongly Paul states: “By observing the law no one will be justified.”

How is it, with language that strong and unambiguous, that Sabbatarians continue to claim that it is essential to observe the Jewish Sabbath?

Paul's Teaching On Accepting One Another

In Paul's day, as today, many have different opinions of what Scripture says or how they should honor God and obey his commands. In Romans 14, Paul is admonishing the Romans to be accepting of those whose faith is weak – those who eat only vegetables. First he speaks of food but then at verse 5 he speaks of days:

Romans 14:5 One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

If the Sabbath were to be observed by the Gentile believers, certainly this was the time for Paul to say so. Instead he speaks of one man who considers one day more sacred than another; another man who considers every day alike. Paul is totally neutral in his speech, neither praising nor condemning either person. He says both are acceptable to God. His point is only that they should accept one another even though they think differently because:

⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand (Romans 14:4).

Remain In the Situation You Were

Paul taught the Corinthians that they were to retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to them – that which they were in when God called them (see 1 Corinthians 7:17-20). Paul first uses the example of circumcision, that it is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. We've seen in the previous passages that circumcision and following the other rules and regulations of the law were almost always considered together. Likely that would be true here as well.

God was not taken by surprise by the move of Christianity to the Gentiles. It was God who engineered it. While a whole nation of Jews could easily follow the Sabbath command (if they chose to do so), it would be much harder or impossible for the Gentiles to do the same. Someone might be a slave to another and be required to work all seven days of each week. Would God cause his salvation to be nullified because he could not fulfill Sabbath worship and rest? It would appear that in his great and perfect foreknowledge, God knew fully the circumstances the Gentile believers would encounter. As a result, he nailed to the cross all the rules and regulations of the law. God replaced the Old Testament Law with the teachings and commands of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom he gave all authority in heaven and on earth.

Paul Regularly Went to the Synagogues

Some Sabbatarians claim that because Paul went regularly to the synagogue on the Sabbath that is proof of the practice of the early church to meet, worship, and observe the Sabbath. But is this so?

Why do you think Paul went to the synagogues? In virtually every case, wasn't he there to present the Gospel first to the Jews, telling them about the Lord Jesus as their Messiah? Acts 17:2 records, "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures" and Acts 18:4 states, "Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks." See also Acts 13;14, 42.

Paul Tried to Reach All Peoples By Being Like Them

¹ Cor. 9:21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.

Paul's statement could be restated, "To those Gentiles not under the Jewish law, I became as one not having the Jewish law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the Jew's law.

Is it likely that Paul tried to win the Gentiles (not under the Law) but then carefully observed the Sabbath? He says not! He says he became like one not having the law.

Instructions For the Churches

Seventeen years after his conversion, Paul made a trip to Jerusalem. He wanted to verify that the message he was teaching the Gentiles was the correct message. After a time of meeting with the leaders and fellowship with them, Paul describes the conclusion of his visit:

Galatians 2:9 James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. ¹⁰ All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

What did those leaders not do? They did not instruct Paul to teach the Gentiles to carefully observe the Sabbath. Surely, if Sabbath-keeping were important and applicable to the Gentiles that would have been the opportune time to remind Paul of that.

Later, because of the problems with the Judaizers who sought to compel the Gentile believers to accept the commands, rules, and regulations of the Old Testament, Paul and others sought guidance from the church in Jerusalem. After hearing from Paul and Barnabas how God was working among the Gentiles, the church elders wrote the following letter to the Gentiles:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings.

²⁴ We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵ So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul – ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell (Acts 15:23-29).

Again, if there were ever a time to command Sabbath worship of the Gentiles, if that is what God intended, it would be from this church council of the apostles and elders of the church, some of whom walked with Jesus and were personally taught by him. Yet the significant OMISSION of any reference whatsoever to Sabbath worship shouts at us. It can only be concluded that the apostles and elders recognized that the Old Testament requirement of Sabbath worship did not apply to Christian believers.

Even further, when the council said “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements,” they were doubtless referring to the rules and regulations of the Mosaic Law that the Judaizers had tried to impose on the Gentile Christians. Thus they established the rule that the Gentile Christians were not required to observe any of the rules and regulations of the Jewish Law except those items listed in verse 29 (see above).

A Second Time

The Holy Spirit reinforced that instruction by stating it again. The setting was another visit by Paul to Jerusalem. Note what the Jerusalem Christians heard about Paul:

They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs (Acts 21:21).

Paul’s writings to the churches taught that the Christians were no longer bound by the Old Testament Law. In fact he had made extremely strong statements in his letter to the Galatians against the Judaizers who attempted to add Old Testament Law to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus.

The church leadership wanted Paul to be accepted in Jerusalem among the Jews there. So the leadership told Paul they had four men who had taken a vow. They instructed Paul:

²⁴“Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law” (Acts 21:24).

Significantly, the leadership again said, ““But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 21:25, NKJV).

What is the “no such thing” the Gentiles Christians should not have to observe? It could be the purification rites Paul and the four men were engaging in. But that would seem unlikely as those rites were for a specific purpose and would have no relevance to the Gentile Christians as a group. It likely was “the law”, the last two words of the preceding sentence. Note the similarity with “not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements” the council had written to the Gentile Christians earlier (see Acts 15:28). Again the Holy Spirit emphasized that the Gentile Christians were free from the rules and regulations of the Law, including, of course, the requirement of Sabbath worship.

Love is the Fulfillment the Law of Christ

Paul described how the Christian is to fulfill the law (of Christ):

Romans 13:8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Notice the commands that Paul lists. They are all horizontal – man to man. The summary is that those who love their fellow man fulfill the law. Love is the fulfillment of the law. That certainly is not how the Jews viewed fulfillment of the Law of Moses.

Sabbath-Keeping As An Issue of Salvation

Tragically, Sabbatarians have often stated Sabbath-keeping as an issue of salvation. Often they do not do it directly (at first), but first gain acceptance of the fact that only those who are obedient will be saved. Then they proceed with the argument that keeping the Sabbath is the fourth commandment. How can we expect to be saved if we do not keep it?

In a Seventh Day Adventist paper I received recently, the author stated: “Just before the Second Advent when the issues are clear to all, such denial of God will be evident in denial of the Sabbath, and will constitute the Mark of the Beast.” Gradually the stakes are raised so that failure to keep the Sabbath will be cause for irrevocable damnation (see Rev. 14:9-11).

Continuing Activities/Sins That Will Deny Salvation

Let’s go back to basics. What are the continuing sins that Scripture says will prevent us from being saved? Several passages recite acts or ways of life that will prevent those who engage in those from having eternal life. At 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul states:

⁹ Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

In that list there was no mention of Sabbath-breakers. Let’s look at another example as Paul warns the Galatians:

¹⁹ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19).

Once again Paul lists sins of the sinful nature, but he made no mention of Sabbath-keeping or Sabbath-breaking as an activity, or breach, that could cause a person not to inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul then warned the Ephesians (at Ephesians 5):

³ But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. ⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. ⁵ For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person —such a man is an idolater — has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Therefore do not be partners with them.

Again Paul has listed sins of the sinful nature but hasn't mentioned a word about the Sabbath. This becomes especially significant because he had a meeting with the Ephesian elders as he was going to Jerusalem where he would be seized and ultimately sent to Rome. He told the Ephesian elders: "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27). Can we presume that Paul told the truth? If so, we should note what he did NOT say. He said nothing to the Ephesians about the Sabbath or Sabbath-keeping or Sabbath-breaking. Yet he said he proclaimed to them the whole will of God. Is it reasonable to assume that those who would tell us that keeping the Sabbath is part of God's will are simply WRONG? Paul, who proclaimed the whole will of God to the Ephesians did NOT mention the Sabbath. And he surely did not list Sabbath-breaking as a reason a person would not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

All the scriptures quoted in this section deal with the fruit of the sin nature of man. No longer in the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus, does the Christian deal with rules and regulations. God is revealed as one who seeks those who are obedient, righteous, and conformed to the likeness of his Son. We see this corroborated in the teachings of the Apostle John

Revelation 21:8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur.

Revelation 21:27 Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

In all those comprehensive lists of actions that will cause a person to lose salvation and go to hell – the fiery lake of burning sulfur – Sabbath-breaking is NOT listed, nor is any other regulation or observation of a day or week or a month or a year or a new moon.

Circumcision – A Parallel to Sabbath-Keeping

At Genesis 17 God made a covenant with Abraham:

Genesis 17:3 Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

Who does the covenant pertain to? Are you and I – Christians, often Gentiles – also part of this covenant?

Romans 4:16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

Galatians 3:7 Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.

If Abraham is our father and we are his children, surely we are his descendants and are part of the everlasting covenant God established with Abraham. God told Abraham he must keep his covenant and gave him a sign of the covenant between God and himself:

Genesis 17:9 Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰This is my covenant with you and your

descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised . . . My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

Surely then, all males who profess faith in Christ Jesus must be circumcised as part of the sign between God and the descendants of Abraham.

But NO, all those rules and regulations were nailed to the cross. They were finished and fulfilled in Christ Jesus our Lord. There is now a new covenant. Jesus gave us the sign of the new covenant: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). Paul said, “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter [of the law] but of the Spirit; for the letter [of the law] kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6) [added].

Judaizers influenced the Galatians insisting they follow Jewish customs and regulations, including circumcision. The finished work of Christ – the new covenant in his blood – was not sufficient for the Judaizers. Paul corrected them:

^{Galatians 5:1} It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Amazing isn't it? It seemed so certain that the descendants of Abraham would have to be circumcised – if one is to follow Old Testament teachings – but Paul makes it clear that if one lets himself be circumcised he has lost Christ and is now obligated to follow the whole law.

Sabbath-keeping Similar to Circumcision

Sabbath-keeping is very similar to circumcision in that it was one of the things the Judaizers tried to force the Gentile believers to do. It was a burden of the law from which Christ Jesus set us free. Yet the Judaizers, and now the Sabbatarians, would try to fasten that yoke around our necks once again.

Note the extreme warning of verse 2. If you do this, Christ will be of no value to you at all. That means you won't be saved! You'll have chosen the law over grace and therefore must obey the whole law to be acceptable to God. No one but Jesus has ever done that.

Let's rewrite verses 2-6 in terms of our discussion concerning the Sabbath:

² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be coerced into Sabbath-keeping, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself become a Sabbath-keeper that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither Sabbath-keeping nor Sabbath-breaking has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

May we not lose our freedom in Christ by choosing the bondage of the law.

Do Sabbatarians Keep the Sabbath?

Do those Sabbatarians who believe they are to “keep the Sabbath holy” as instructed in the fourth commandment (of the ten commandments) really keep it holy as commanded by God in Exodus 35:1-3?

Moses assembled the whole Israelite community and said to them, “These are the things the LORD has commanded you to do: ²For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be your holy day, a Sabbath of rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it must be put to death. ³Do not light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day” (Exodus 35:1-3).

Do Sabbatarians have heat in their homes on the Sabbath? It would appear that if they have a heating system in their home (at least gas or coal or oil or wood or anything else that burns) that operates on the Sabbath they are violating the Sabbath. It matters not if a thermostat automatically turns on and fires the gas or coal or oil furnace. They have lit a fire in their dwelling and, according to the above scripture, must be put to death. Wouldn't electrical heat be the same – the heating of the wire coils by resistance to electric current causing them to become red hot? If there is any cooking – water heated for tea or coffee – or the water heater operated, isn't there a violation of lighting “a fire in any of your dwellings”?

³² While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. ³³ Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, ³⁴ and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. ³⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.” ³⁶ So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the LORD commanded Moses (Numbers 15:32-36).

Do Sabbatarians find it possible to heat their homes, drive their cars, buy gasoline, do shopping, have tea, coffee, and/or hot water, have an automatic watering system water their garden, have a newspaper delivered, go to a restaurant, etc.? If so, how do they excuse it on the basis of the fourth commandment and the above scripture? Are they able, somehow, to decide how much of the commandment they wish to follow and how much they deem inappropriate today?

Are burnt offerings made on the Sabbath as part of Sabbath-keeping?

⁹ “On the Sabbath day, make an offering of two lambs a year old without defect, together with its drink offering and a grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil. ¹⁰ This is the burnt offering for every Sabbath, in addition to the regular burnt offering and its drink offering (Numbers 28:9).

Can there be any doubt that the above scripture requires a burnt offering on the Sabbath by those who are Sabbath-keepers? The required burnt offering of two year-old lambs (and drink and grain offerings) are for every Sabbath. Is that being done? No, it is not. Why not? Are some observations of the Sabbath acceptable while others are not? Who determines which part of the commands of the Sabbath to keep and which to ignore and break?

Is the Seventh Day Sabbath the Only Sabbath Observed?

Just as the seventh day Sabbath is a Sabbath of rest, consider the following requirement:

Leviticus 16:29 “This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work—whether native-born or an alien living among you—³⁰ because

on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins. ³¹ It is a sabbath of rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance. ³² The priest who is anointed and ordained to succeed his father as high priest is to make atonement. He is to put on the sacred linen garments ³³ and make atonement for the Most Holy Place, for the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and for the priests and all the people of the community.

Leviticus 23:26 The LORD said to Moses, ²⁷ “The tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves, and present an offering made to the LORD by fire. ²⁸ Do no work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the LORD your God. ²⁹ Anyone who does not deny himself on that day must be cut off from his people. ³⁰ I will destroy from among his people anyone who does any work on that day. ³¹ You shall do no work at all. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live. ³² It is a sabbath of rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening you are to observe your sabbath.”

It would appear there is even more reason to observe the Day of Atonement Sabbath. The Scripture shown above repeatedly says it is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. Do the Sabbatarians observe this day? If so, on what grounds? If not, why not?

The Day of Atonement Sabbath does not apply to either Christians or Gentiles (except aliens living among the Jews) because it specifically speaks to the Jews – the Israelites. But the passages commanding obedience to the seventh day Sabbath also, in the same way, speak only to the Jews.

II. Sunday

The Early Church (from the Scriptures)

What day did the early church observe as a day of worship? The answer from Scripture alone is not compelling. There is mention of meeting on Sunday – the first day of the week. Luke said, “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight” (Acts 20:7). There is nothing to say whether this is a usual day for the Christians to meet, or whether it was just a send-off day for Paul who was leaving the next day. Combined with 1 Cor. 16:2 (see below), however, it would seem more likely that it was the usual day that the believers met to worship together.

Paul urged, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made” (1 Corinthians 16:2). If Paul was saying that the money should be set aside when the group met together on the first day of every week that would be persuasive that the early church’s custom was to meet for worship on the first day of the week. The text is not that specific. It could mean that each person should choose that day to set aside the sum he wished to give to aid the Jerusalem church. But that would be a strange interpretation. Why would Paul specify the first day of the week? If the purpose was just to set aside money, why that particular day? On the other hand, if the believers were accumulating a sum to give the Jerusalem church and would contribute as they met together in a weekly worship service (the more likely interpretation), then it would appear Paul’s designation of the first day of the week referred to their normal weekly worship meeting.

John records, at Revelation 1:10, that his revelation began on the “Lord’s Day.” The NIV note on that verse explains “the “Lord’s Day” is a technical term for the first day of the week – so named because Jesus rose from the dead on that day. However, John worshipping in the Spirit on that day is not compelling evidence of it being the day of worship for the early church.

Beliefs and Practices of the Early Church

Writings of the Early Church

David Bercot wrote: “Why are the beliefs of these early Christian authors important? Because early Christian testimony holds that many, such as Clement of Rome and Polycarp, personally knew the apostles of Jesus. They were approved by the apostles and appointed by the apostles to positions of church leadership. Modern students of church history must largely depend on these and other early Christian writers for information on topics of major import, such as who wrote the New Testament documents and how the Christian canon of Scripture came into being. Furthermore, these early Christians' interpretation of the Scriptures is among the most valuable commentary on Scripture anywhere. To be sure, none of these writers claimed divine inspiration; nor did they equate their own writings with Scripture. They did, however, claim that they were faithfully passing along the faith that the apostles had delivered to the church.”

As to the day of worship of the early church, Justine Martyr (c. 160 A.D.) stated:

On the day which is called Sunday we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or in the outlying districts, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as there is time.

Sunday, indeed, is the day on which we all hold our common assembly because it is the first day on which God, transforming the darkness and prime matter, created the world; and our Saviour Jesus Christ arose from the dead on the same day. For they crucified him on the day before that of Saturn, and on the day after, which is Sunday, he appeared to his Apostles and disciples, and taught them the things which we have passed on to you also for consideration.

Justin Martyr's comments also show the rationale of the early church when they decided on Sunday as their day of common assembly.

Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs

The following quotations are from *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*¹ by David W. Bercot (Editor). It is a reference guide to more than 700 topics discussed by the early church fathers. It is also intended to be an index to the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. It structures each topic as follows. The scriptures are cited first. The intent is not to include every biblical passage concerning the subject. Rather, they are some of the key texts used by the early church. Following the Scripture passages are quotations from early Christians, listed in approximately chronological order. The *Dictionary* does not include all of the works contained in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* because a number of those works are either spurious, post-Nicene, or Gnostic in origin.

Theological Bias

David Bercot wrote: “I have made every effort to make this volume as theologically neutral as I can. I have indexed and cross-referenced most topics under terms familiar to both Catholics and Protestants. Although the *Dictionary* does not purport to be exhaustive, I have attempted to include every significant quotation under each of the indexed topics. No essential quotation has been purposefully omitted.”

Scope of this Article

This article will include quotations from early pre-Nicene church writers. These are almost all of those found in the *Dictionary*, excluding those compiled post-Nicene, c. 390 A.D.

¹ David W. Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, Massachusetts 01961-3473), 1998. The book can be obtained from Scroll Publishing Co., PO Box 658, Lancaster, TX 75146, Fax: 903-597-4176 or see website: www.earlychurch.com.

Understanding the Early Church Quotations

First we shall review the conventions showing the source of the quotation and where to find it. We'll use the following quotation by Ignatius as our example:

. . . no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day. *Ignatius (c. 105, E), 1.62.*

After the quotation we find the name of the writer, in this case Ignatius. In the brackets is the approximate date at which the quotation was written, in this case circa 105 or about 105 A.D. The “E” stands for Eastern, which means the person had an Eastern mindset or way of thinking. Finally, the last term, 1.62, refers to volume 1 of the 10 volume set of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*; 62 refers to the page number of volume 1. The reader can look up the quotation there in context. Any underline in quotations is emphasis added by this writer to help the reader focus on key words and phrases.

Scriptures Cited by the Early Church Regarding the Sabbath

The following are some of the key texts from Scripture used by the early church:

Isaiah 1:13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
¹⁴ Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates.
They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

Galatians 4:9 But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? ¹⁰ You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

Ephesians 2:15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.

Colossians 2:14 having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. . . . ¹⁶ 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.

Most Early Christians Did Not Observe the Sabbath

Looking again at our sample, we note it was the earliest quotation from the early church writers. Ignatius wrote it about 105 A.D. and seemed to be simply describing what was happening in the Christian churches:

. . . no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day. *Ignatius (c. 105, E), 1.62.*

Justin Martyr seemed to have several occasions to write and argue with the Jews about their practices versus the practice of the Christians:

Is there any other matter, my [Jewish] friends, in which we Christians are blamed, than this: that we do not live after the Law ... and do not observe Sabbaths, as you do? *Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1. 199.*

Justin Martyr is certainly stating the same thing in 160 A.D. as Ignatius did in 105 A.D., that the Christians did not observe the Sabbaths.

Tertullian agreed – the Christian church did not follow the Jews with respect to the law – food, feasts, or Sabbath days:

We do not follow the Jews in their peculiarities in regard to food nor in their sacred days. *Tertullian (c. 197, W), 3.34.*

Over a period of almost 100 years, the message was the same from the early writers. Ignatius (105 A.D.), Justin Martyr (c. 160 A.D.), and Tertullian (c. 197 A.D.) all had the same message. The early Christians did not observe Sabbaths.

Early Church Believed Jews Were Wrong

A few years later, Aristides dealt more with the early church's understanding of the Jewish beliefs and practices:

However, [the Jews,] too, have erred from true knowledge. In their imagination, they think that it is God whom they serve. Actually, by their type of worship, they render their service to the angels and not to God. For example, they do this when they celebrate Sabbaths. *Aristides (c. 125, E) 9.276.*

Aristides claims Sabbath worship is not even worship or service to God, but to angels, at least as the Jews practiced it. The following from a letter to Diognetus continues with the early church's view of the Jews' practice and beliefs:

Their scrupulosity concerning meats, and their superstition as respects the Sabbaths, and their boasting about circumcision, and their fancies about fasting and the new moons ... are utterly ridiculous and unworthy of notice.... And to speak falsely of God, as if He forbade us to do what is good on the Sabbath-days – how is this not ungodly? *Letter to Diognetus (c. 125-200) 1.26.*

In the above quotation, Sabbath-keeping by the Jews is characterized as superstition. And the Jews' claim (likely from the Gospels in which Jesus was attacked by the Jews for doing good on the Sabbath) that one was not to do good on the Sabbath is treated as speaking falsely of God and ungodly.

Tertullian states the Holy Spirit rebukes the Jews:

The Holy Spirit rebukes the Jews for their holy days. He says, "Your Sabbaths, new moons, and ceremonies my soul hates." Yet some of us – to whom Sabbaths are strange (as are the new moons and festivals formerly loved by God) – are frequenting the Saturnalia! *Tertullian (c. 200, W), 3.70.*

Tertullian refers to Isaiah 1:13, a scripture frequently used by the early Christians in opposition to observance of the Sabbath:

¹³ Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your evil assemblies. (NIV)

Victorinus, circa 280 A.D., advanced the same argument also based upon Isaiah 1:13:

And let this become a rigorous fast, lest we should appear to observe any Sabbath with the Jews. For concerning [their Sabbath], Christ himself, the Lord of the Sabbath, says by His prophets that "His soul hates." In His body, he abolished this Sabbath. *Victorinus (c. 280) 7.341.*

Victorinus, in addition to simply not observing the Sabbath, didn't want it to even appear that the Christians observed the Sabbath. The early church seems to have considered carefully whether they should observe the Sabbath.

Christ's Law Requires a Perpetual Sabbath

Nevertheless, the early Christians applied lessons from the Jewish Sabbath and believed that the new law of Christ required a perpetual (constant) Sabbath:

You [a Jew] now have need of a second circumcision, although you glory greatly in the flesh. The new law requires you to keep a perpetual Sabbath. However, you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are godly.... The Lord our God does not take pleasure in such observances. If there is any perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so.... Then he has kept the sweet and true Sabbaths of God. *Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1.200.*

The early church writings show concern for living the life, not arguing over fine theological points. The prior scripture shows that. They said to let your "Sabbath" be shown to God by obedience to his commands.

Some Sabbatarians may choose to misunderstand the previous quotation because it speaks of a perpetual Sabbath which they claim is the way the Sabbath is to be kept – perpetually. They mean keeping the seventh-day Sabbath. But that is not the meaning at all – it speaks instead of having a Sabbath rest in the Lord each and every day – perpetually. It was the same author, Justin Martyr, who told the Jews that the Christians do not observe Sabbaths as the Jews do.

Tertullian made this point even more clearly:

We [Christians] understand that we still more should observe a Sabbath from all "servile work" always. This is not only every seventh day, but at all times. *Tertullian (c. 197, W) 3.155.*

Notice the many other statements by Tertullian which indicate early church refusal to observe the seventh-day Sabbath of the Jews.

A paper, showing a dispute by its name, reinforced the view of the early church that Christians had a wholly new and raised standard – a continuous rest – with no worldly work whatsoever:

The Lawgiver also desires that every individual among us should be devoted unceasingly to this kind of work, even as God Himself is. Consequently, He directs us to continuously rest from secular things and to engage in no, worldly sort of work whatever. This is called *our Sabbath*. *Disputation of Archelaus and Manes (L 320, E), 6.203.*

The early Christians found meaning in a concept of Sabbath rest but believed that for the Christian the standard was much higher, not a seventh day observance, but a continual rest from secular things.

Before the Law Righteous Men Kept No Sabbath

The early Christian writers also argued that righteous men who preceded the giving of the law, perhaps referring to those listed in Hebrews 11, did not observe the Sabbath:

All those righteous men already mentioned, though they kept no Sabbaths, were pleasing to God. *Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1.204.*

Irenaeus agreed, using Abraham as an example, and added a new dimension, using the argument that man is not justified through the law – as Abraham was not – but because he believed God:

"You will observe My Sabbaths; for it will be a sign between Me and you for your generations." These things, then, were given for a sign.... The Sabbaths taught that we should continue day by day in God's service.... abstaining from all avarice and not acquiring or possessing treasures upon earth.... However, man was not justified by these things. Rather, they were given as a sign to the people. This fact is evident, for Abraham himself – without circumcision and without observance of Sabbaths – "believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness." *Irenaeus (c. 180, EIR9, 1.481.*

Tertullian made the argument using Adam, Noah, Enoch, and even Melchizedek as examples of holy, righteous men, approved by God, who followed neither circumcision or Sabbath-keeping:

Let the one who contends that the Sabbath is still to be observed as a balm of salvation.... prove to us that in times past righteous men kept the Sabbath, or practiced circumcision, and were thereby made "friends of God." God created Adam uncircumcised and non-observant of the Sabbath.... Also, God freed from the deluge Noah, who was uncircumcised and did not observe the Sabbath. Enoch, too, He transported from this world, even though that most righteous man was uncircumcised and did not observe the Sabbath.... Melchizedek also, "the priest of the most high God," although uncircumcised and not observing the Sabbath, was chosen to the priesthood of God. *Tertullian (c. 197, W), 3.153.*

Sabbath Was Temporary

The early church also argued that the Sabbath was temporary and the need for the Sabbath was past:

There was no need of circumcision before Abraham. Nor was there need of the observance of Sabbaths, or of feasts and sacrifices, before Moses. Accordingly, there is no more need of them now. *Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1.206.*

Just as the abolition of fleshly circumcision and of the old Law is demonstrated as having been consummated at its specific times, so also the observance of the Sabbath is demonstrated to have been temporary. *Tertullian (c. 197, W) 3.155.*

It was not with a view to its observance in perpetuity that God formerly gave them such a law. *Tertullian (c. 197, W) 3.156.*

We've seen scriptures earlier that clearly stated that the law was fulfilled in Jesus and was not needed any longer. Apparently the early Christians were aware of these teachings.

Choose Unity When Possible

Apparently there were those, as today, who insisted on following the law of Moses, not understanding which law the Christian is to follow. Justin Martyr examined the question of being in fellowship with such people:

If some, through weak-mindedness, wish to observe the laws given by Moses.... yet choose to live with the Christians and the faithful, as I said before, not inducing the Gentiles either to be circumcised like themselves, or to keep the Sabbath, or to observe any other such ceremonies, then I hold that we should join ourselves with such persons. *Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1.218.*

Note how similar this is to Paul's writing of weak Christians – vegetarians – at Romans 14:2. Justin Martyr agreed that such persons who sought to follow the Lord Jesus and associate with Christians could do so if they did not try to induce others to follow their weak-mindedness.

Kneeling in Prayer

Apparently there was a practice of kneeling in prayer except on certain designated holy and/or worship days. Though this seems a strange practice, Tertullian's observation further establishes the practice of the early church:

Prayer is also subject to diversity of observance in the matter of kneeling, through the act of some few who abstain from kneeling on the Sabbath [i.e., Saturday].... We, however, have received this practice: that we refrain from kneeling only on the day of the Lord's resurrection. In fact, we not only refrain from kneeling, but also from every posture and office of solicitude. *Tertullian (c. 198, 97), 3.689.*

Tertullian admits that there are a few who still observe the Sabbath by refraining from kneeling in prayer. He then states the Christian practice as he knows it – that “we” observe this practice only on the day of the Lord's resurrection.

Sunday Was Established By Secular Order As the Christian Day Of Worship

Roman Emperor Constantine issued the first civil Sunday law on March 7, 321 AD that required people in the cities to rest and all workshops to be closed.

III. Or . . . What Does Scripture Say?

A Seventh Day Adventist friend of mine wrote: “The essence of Sabbath keeping is the consecration of time. It is a demonstration of our priorities – of the way we use our time. It is a statement that God counts in our life. It is a defining expression of relationship with God – that we have entered God's rest (Hebrews 4:10).”

While my friend's statement is laudable, indeed a higher standard than we see in the usual churchianity involving an hour or two of attendance at church on Sunday, the biblical standard of Christ Jesus is much, much higher.

In our earlier discussion of the Sabbath, we saw that the Lord Jesus is a type of the Sabbath and that those who truly believe on him enter into a Sabbath rest. Is this a one-day-a-week Sabbath rest? No! We saw that Jesus said that all that are weary should come to him and he will give them rest. Will he give them rest just one day a week? No, the rest we can have in Jesus is continual – seven days a week or as long as we come to him for rest.

To my great surprise, Justin Martyr, A.D. 160, said the same thing 1840 years ago:

You [a Jew] now have need of a second circumcision, although you glory greatly in the flesh. The new law requires you to keep a perpetual Sabbath. However, you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are godly.... The Lord our God does not take pleasure in such observances. If there is any perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so.... Then he has kept the sweet and true Sabbaths of God. *Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1.200.*

Lest any argue that Justin Martyr's use of the terms “perpetual Sabbath” means differently than stated above, consider the following by Tertullian 37 years later:

We [Christians] understand that we still more should observe a sabbath from all "servile work" always. This is not only every seventh day, but at all times. *Tertullian (c. 197, W) 3.155.*

Then what is this higher standard that qualifies us for the continuing Sabbath-rest in Christ Jesus our Lord? We find it stated in Scripture. Paul explained it to the Colossians:

Colossians 3:1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Once we die to the things of the world, our life is different – hidden with Christ Jesus in God. Our hearts and our minds will be set on things above, not on earthly things where chaos and confusion reign, but on things above where we rest in our Lord.

What kind of life-style (and witness) will we have if we have set our minds and hearts on things above, having died to the things of the world? Paul describes such a person:

Colossians 3:12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Can't you see, feel, and taste the peace, joy, love, and rest in such a lifestyle? That is what each of us who claims a saving relationship with the Lord Jesus is to have.

Just how dedicated are we to be? Wholly dedicated! Our lives – every moment of them – are to be dedicated to the Lord. Paul described it this way:

Colossians 3:17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it **all** in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:23 Whatever you do, work at it with **all** your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, ²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Just how Christ-centered must we be? Jesus told us:

Luke 14:26 “If anyone **comes to me** and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? ²⁹ For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

³¹ “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, any of you who does not give up **everything** he has cannot be my disciple.

Jesus is using the Jewish method of expression, not intending we hate those close to us, but showing how much we are to love him compared to how much we love those close to us.

Luke 14:26-33 defines the standard for those who would follow Jesus. This is not an easy walk-down-the-aisle, pray the sinner's prayer and be forever saved. No, this is a lifestyle that must persevere. Jesus said, "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:13, Matthew 10:22. See also Matthew 24:13).

What then is the answer to our question? When should Christians rest in the Lord? All the time! Paul said the Christian should "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

What about the day for a regular meeting of believers for corporate worship? When should that take place? Any day you choose. Most will likely choose Sunday as it is the usual day of worship in western nations and some find special meaning in the first day of the week as the day on which our Lord was resurrected from the dead. Some may find special meaning in meeting together on Saturdays. Others may choose any other convenient day of the week. Jesus didn't say. Paul didn't care. You may choose.

The bottom line is this: Enjoy continually the Sabbath rest to be found in the Lord Jesus by being wholly devoted to him, with your heart and mind on things above, doing all in the name of the Lord Jesus, as working for the Lord. It is the Lord Jesus Christ you are serving, who brings rest to those who love him with all their hearts, souls, strength and minds.
