

Are the Sabbath laws binding on Christians today?

Scripture: Colossians 2:16–17; 1 Chronicles 23:31; Nehemiah 9:14; Acts 20:7

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We believe the Old Testament regulations governing Sabbath observances are ceremonial, not moral, aspects of the law. As such, they are no longer in force, but have passed away along with the sacrificial system, the Levitical priesthood, and all other aspects of Moses' law that prefigured Christ. Here are the reasons we hold this view.

1. In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul explicitly refers to the Sabbath as a shadow of Christ, which is no longer binding since the substance (Christ) has come. It is quite clear in those verses that the weekly Sabbath is in view. The phrase "a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day" refers to the annual, monthly, and weekly holy days of the Jewish calendar (cf. 1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; 31:3; Ezekiel 45:17; Hosea 2:11). If Paul were referring to special ceremonial dates of rest in that passage, why would he have used the word "Sabbath?" He had already mentioned the ceremonial dates when he spoke of festivals and new moons.
2. The Sabbath was the sign to Israel of the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 31:16-17; Ezekiel 20:12; Nehemiah 9:14). Since we are now under the New Covenant (Hebrews 8), we are no longer required to observe the sign of the Mosaic Covenant.
3. The New Testament never commands Christians to observe the Sabbath.
4. In our only glimpse of an early church worship service in the New Testament, the church met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7).
5. Nowhere in the Old Testament are the Gentile nations commanded to observe the Sabbath or condemned for failing to do so. That is certainly strange if Sabbath observance were meant to be an eternal moral principle.
6. There is no evidence in the Bible of anyone keeping the Sabbath before the time of Moses, nor are there any commands in the Bible to keep the Sabbath before the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai.
7. When the Apostles met at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), they did not impose Sabbath keeping on the Gentile believers.
8. The apostle Paul warned the Gentiles about many different sins in his epistles, but breaking the Sabbath was never one of them.
9. In Galatians 4:10-11, Paul rebukes the Galatians for thinking God expected them to observe special days (including the Sabbath).
10. In Romans 14:5, Paul forbids those who observe the Sabbath (these were no doubt Jewish believers) to condemn those who do not (Gentile believers).
11. The early church fathers, from Ignatius to Augustine, taught that the Old Testament Sabbath had been abolished and that the first day of the week (Sunday) was the day when Christians should meet for worship (contrary to the claim of many seventh-day sabbatarians who claim that Sunday worship was not instituted until the fourth century).

12. Sunday has not replaced Saturday as the Sabbath. Rather the Lord's Day is a time when believers gather to commemorate His resurrection, which occurred on the first day of the week. Every day to the believer is one of Sabbath rest, since we have ceased from our spiritual labor and are resting in the salvation of the Lord (Hebrews 4:9-11).

So while we still follow the pattern of designating one day of the week a day for the Lord's people to gather in worship, we do not refer to this as "the Sabbath."

John Calvin took a similar position. He wrote,

There were three reasons for giving this [fourth] commandment: First, with the seventh day of rest the Lord wished to give to the people of Israel an image of spiritual rest, whereby believers must cease from their own works in order to let the Lord work in them. Secondly, he wished that there be an established day in which believers might assemble in order to hear his Law and worship him. Thirdly, he willed that one day of rest be granted to servants and to those who live under the power of others so that they might have a relaxation from their labor. The latter, however, is rather an inferred than a principal reason.

As to the first reason, there is no doubt that it ceased in Christ; because he is the truth by the presence of which all images vanish. He is the reality at whose advent all shadows are abandoned. Hence St. Paul (Col. 2:17) that the sabbath has been a shadow of a reality yet to be. And he declares elsewhere its truth when in the letter to the Romans, ch. 6:8, he teaches us that we are buried with Christ in order that by his death we may die to the corruption of our flesh. And this is not done in one day, but during all the course of our life, until altogether dead in our own selves, we may be filled with the life of God. Hence, superstitious observance of days must remain far from Christians.

The two last reasons, however, must not be numbered among the shadows of old. Rather, they are equally valid for all ages. Hence, though the sabbath is abrogated, it so happens among us that we still convene on certain days in order to hear the word of God, to break the [mystic] bread of the Supper, and to offer public prayers; and, moreover, in order that some relaxation from their toil be given to servants and workingmen. As our human weakness does not allow such assemblies to meet every day, the day observed by the Jews has been taken away (as a good device for eliminating superstition) and another day has been destined to this use. This was necessary for securing and maintaining order and peace in the Church.

As the truth therefore was given to the Jews under a figure, so to us on the contrary truth is shown without shadows in order, first of all, that we meditate all our life on a perpetual sabbath from our works so that the Lord may operate in us by his spirit; secondly, in order that we observe the legitimate order of the Church for listening to the word of God, for administering the sacraments, and for public prayers; thirdly, in order that we do not oppress inhumanly with work those who are subject to us. [From *Instruction in Faith*, Calvin's own 1537 digest of the *Institutes*, sec. 8, "The Law of the Lord"].

For further study, see D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

1982).

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