

The Sabbath Rest

Is it obligatory for Christians to observe one day a week of rest?

This brief paper will present the key texts in the endeavour to answer the question above . A few comments and a conclusion will be added. I believe that any debate on this issue will need to answer satisfactorily the issues raised by the Scriptures found below. May God lead us all into a fuller appreciation of His Word and of our Inheritance in Christ.

A: The Main Scriptures Used To Advocate Christian Sabbath Observance:

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

[Note: this is the foremost text in defence of Christian Sabbath observance: It is prior to the Law of Moses, universal not Israelitish, and mentions the LORD God as Himself observing a Sabbath. It is here creational and Creator-like]

2. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall do no work....For.. the LORD..rested on the seventh day.”

[Note: Here in the 10 commandments we have a Sabbath instruction. It's heightened value is seen by its presence amidst very clear moral commands. It is one of the moral requirements of the nation and, in this context, is not seen as a ceremonial or civic stipulation. It is very important when seen in the context of Exodus 20.]

3. “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” Mark 2:28

[Note: To some, this implies that the Sabbath still stands, but has now come under the Lord Jesus Christ.]

4. “Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath” Matthew 24:20

[Note: Many say that this verse only makes sense if the disciples were observing the Sabbath. In order to flee the destruction of Jerusalem the disciples could be torn between their need to flee and their need to obey their Sabbath custom.]

5. “When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome brought spices” Mark 16:1

“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away” Acts 1:12

[Note: These texts give the impression that the early disciples observed the Sabbath.]

So, the strength of the above is that the Sabbath is:

- Creational (‘as it was in the beginning’)
- Theological (God Himself observes it)
- Moral (in the 10 Commandments)
- Historical (it was practised in the NT by the early Jewish disciples)

[Note: the degree to which Jesus Himself observed the Sabbath is debatable. Some say he merely upheld God’s creation Sabbath (Genesis 2:2), others that he upheld the Mosaic Sabbath but all concur that he did not countenance the legalistic ‘traditions of the fathers’.]

B: The Main Scriptures for Christian Liberty Regarding Sabbath Observance.

This will be divided into significant silences, indirect texts and direct texts. “Significant silences” are observations on the silence of Scripture regarding the Sabbath *which would be strange if the Sabbath was morally imperative*. That is, if the Sabbath is truly so important, it is surprising that it is not mentioned in so many crucial contexts. This type of argument is used in the Bible itself (consider how Hebrews sees significance on the silence of Scripture on Melchizedek’s parentage, in 7:3). The silence speaks. Next, “indirect” evidences are Scriptures which do not *explicitly* mention Sabbath issues, yet they do have *direct* bearing on the matter at hand. Then “direct” texts are Scriptures which have *implicit* mention of Sabbath issues.

Significant Silences

1. As far as I can observe, nowhere in the OT are the nations ever rebuked for not observing the Sabbath. On the numerous times that the prophets turned to rebuke the nations, not once is the Sabbath issue raised (see esp Amos 1 & 2). Nowhere is it mentioned in the entire Scripture that any Gentile observed the Sabbath or is commanded to.
2. Abraham, the patriarch of both Jews and Christians, did not *apparently* observe the Sabbath. If creation-Sabbath observance is crucial and definitive, then it is very peculiar that the Scripture is silent in this regard. The same can be said of Job.
3. Acts 15 is a landmark chapter. Here the Jewish church in Jerusalem was considering how much of Mosaic Law the new Gentile churches had to submit to. James the Elder said: “it is my judgment that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues” (15:19-21). This proposal won the day. They then wrote a letter mentioning these things, adding that they ‘put no greater burden than those requirements’ on the Gentiles (vs 28). Significantly, *they did not mention the Sabbath issue at all*. Its non-observance was not seen as an offence to Moses.
4. Nowhere in the Acts of the Apostles is it mentioned that the Gentile church observed the Sabbath. On the contrary, the custom was to observe the first day of the week to the Lord, which itself was a working day for most Gentiles (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2).
5. In all of Paul’s letters, the apostle to the Gentiles does not once remind or mention Sabbath observance to his young converts. If it was crucial, we should expect a mention as he educates his pagan converts on how to live pleasing to God. Yet not one mention. Also, though most of the moral code enshrined in the 10 commandments occurs in one form or another, yet not once does he mention the Sabbath. In Paul’s letters we have the essentials of Christian ethics and practise, yet without reference to obligations to days, months, feasts or Sabbaths.
6. It is a fact that since the day of Pentecost no Christian is said to have observed the Sabbath nor been commanded to do so.

Indirect Texts

1. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart....and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:40)

“Love is the fulfilling of the Law” Romans 13:10

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” Galatians 5:6

“But if we are led by the Spirit we are not under the Law” Galatians 5:18.

“The righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us who walk, not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” Romans 8:4

[Note: In these verses, it is clear that if we 'love God and our neighbour' and if we 'walk in the Spirit' we will automatically fulfill the Law and do all the Law requires. We do not have to do anything else.]

2. “One is justified by faith apart from the Law”

[Note: if we are accepted by God apart from the Law, then our ongoing relationship to God is not maintained by Law-keeping, but by faith in Christ.]

Direct Texts

1. “One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

[Note: Threshing grain was considered 'work' on the Sabbath. Precedent was that the 7th day was a solemn day of rest, and according to Exodus 16:22-26, Israelites were not to gather food on that day but prepare it beforehand. Here, the defence of Jesus implies a breach in the Mosaic-Sabbath stipulation, as much as David's act of eating consecrated bread was a breach of Pentateuchal Law. Jesus was breaching the Law of the Sabbath as much as David breached the Levitical Law. If Jesus' breach was merely of 'the traditions of the elders', his justifying use of the Davidic incident (when David broke the 'word of God') would have been excessive. Jesus' answer was that humanitarian concerns take priority over Sabbarian commands. It was not the interpretation of 'work' that was the issue for Jesus, but the intent of the Law: whatever enhanced men and woman was lawful on the Sabbath. So, here Jesus redefines the terms of Sabbath 'work', whilst still upholding the creation-Sabbath practise. Thus the 'letter of the Law' was broken but the 'spirit of the Law' was upheld.]

2. “Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.”... Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.”... This is why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.” (John 5:8-18)

[Note: The Bible says that Jesus did 'break' the Sabbath (vs 18). Also, God Himself was working on His own day of rest ('My Father is working until now'), and thus Jesus worked on the Day of Rest. One of the reasons He was hated was for His liberalising of the Sabbath. It can also be argued that if a Christian is reprimanded or persecuted for breaking the Sabbath, it could be confirmation that he is following in his Masters' steps.]

3. “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord...but the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord and gives

thanks to God..... Why do you pass judgment on your brother?... Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer” (Romans 14:5ff)

[Note: In the mixed church in Rome of Jews and Gentiles, holy-days (such as Sabbaths) were contentious issues. Paul's words are clear here that the Sabbath rest day is a matter of once own conscience. It is not binding on a Christian.]

4. “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain.” (Gal 4:9-11)

[Note: Paul was horrified that his converts were obeying certain Jewish days. The Judiazers were preying on his fledgling churches in Galatia. Along with circumcision, they insisted on observing special Jewish days, months and seasons. He warned the Galatians that if they came under these legal practices, they would fall from grace, be severed from Christ, and be obligated to keep the entire Law (5:3-4).]

5. “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival, or a new moon, or Sabbaths. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you..” (Colosians 2:16)

[Note: Here Paul addresses our issue directly. That he is referring to the cycle of weekly Sabbaths (thus plural) is clear in the declining temporal context: Feasts (= annual observance), new moon (= monthly observance), Sabbaths (= weekly observance). He says here that the believer in Christ is not to be judged according to the issue of Sabbath observance (as the false teachers in Colossae were apparently doing).]

6. “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of obedience.” (Hebrews 4:9-11).

[Note: the author of Hebrews speaks of entering God's rest by faith and by work. It is something which not every Christian automatically obtains (vs 3, 11). He is not speaking of ceasing from working on a certain day, for: the wilderness generation failed to enter it (though they observed one day a week's Sabbath), and Joshua did not give them the Sabbath rest of God. This Sabbath rest is a spiritual experience that one enters into after persistent faith and work, a rest which the author still holds out on offer for the people of God. It has to do with our inheritance similar to the promised land.]

C: Final Comments and Conclusion

Although the Old Covenant is replete with Sabbath requirements, the New Covenant brought in something radically new. Now that the Kingdom has come, the Christian stands in a different relation to the Law (thus the Mosaic Sabbath) and even the creation-Sabbath.

Paul especially, fought to uphold the conviction that the Mosaic Law (inclusive of the Sabbath) was in no way binding on the believer in Christ. Mosaic legislation has now fallen way due to a *superior righteousness* in Christ and a *superior power* in the Spirit. [“On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect) but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God” Hebrews 7:18-9]. Now that Christ, the Cross, the Spirit and faith have come, we are no longer under the rudimentary morality and stipulations of the Old Covenant. The book of Galatians is full of this. We are not sons born of Sinai (which enshrined the Sabbath) with its 10 commandments written in stone, but we are under our mother heavenly Zion, with the very Spirit of God written on our hearts.

Even the creational ordinances are relativised and transposed up into a different key in Christ. There is now a New Creation in Christ. This truth is symbolically seen in the fact that believers met on the 8th day or 1st day of a new week. Even marriage, which is a creation ordinance similar to the Sabbath, is now transcended in the New Covenant. Paul and Jesus were single and Paul even advocated celibacy! [this can be seen as disobedience to the clearly

revealed Word of God in Genesis 2]. In Christ, there is no male or female. Something has changed. The kingdom is now. The Heavenly man has come and brought us blessings that far transform and at times transcend even the most noble of creations provisions. The creation is not abolished but put on a different standing in Christ, where the future kingdom of heaven has arrived in part. We take our bearings no longer exclusively from the creation, backwards, but from the future, forwards. Something greater than marriage is here. Something greater than the Sabbath is here.

Yet, the creation ordinance is still here. The kingdom is not yet. The old is still with us, though in Christ all has become new. Genesis 2 speaks of the divinely given example of the human need for rest. We need a day a week when we can have rest. However, we need to remember that Jesus interpreted 'rest' as doing whatever is good for our humanity on that day (which will vary from person to person). Our maxim should be "The Sabbath was made for Man, not Man for the Sabbath". As long as we are in this body, we remain wired for a Rest day, for a day of personal enhancing. It is written into the genetic code of our humanity. But remember:

*For all things belong to you,
whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come;
all things belong to you,
and you belong to Christ,
and Christ belongs to God* (Paul to the Corinthians)

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