

Should Christians Keep the Sabbath Day?

Are Christians required to keep the Sabbath Day? Should Christians worship on Saturday? Some Christian groups insist that the Old Testament law of the Sabbath is still in force today and that Christians must worship on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. The purpose of this brief article is to explain why Christians worship on Sunday rather than on the Sabbath (Saturday).

Definitions

It may be helpful for the sake of clarity to define the terms *sabbath* and *Sabbath Day*. The word *sabbath* is a Hebrew word that means *cease* or *rest*. The *Sabbath day* refers to the Jewish day of rest that is prescribed in the Ten Commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8. All Scripture quotations are from the *New King James Version*). The Sabbath Day is observed on the seventh day of the week (from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday), because it was on the seventh day that God *ceased* or *rested* from the work of creation (Genesis 2:2-3).

The Position of the Church of God

The Church’s official position is found in the *Church of God Practical Commitments*:

Sunday is the Christian day of worship. As the Lord's Day, it commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead (Matthew 28:1) and should be employed for worship, fellowship, Christian service, teaching, evangelism, and proclamation (Acts 20:7; Romans 14:5, 6; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Colossians 2:16, 17).

The first published listing of the Church of God Teachings cites Hosea 2:11; Romans 13:1-2; 14:5-6; and Colossians 2:16-17 as evidence that Christians are not obligated to keep the Sabbath (*Church of God Evangel*, August 15, 1910, p. 3). The position of the Church of God that Christians are not required to observe the Sabbath is supported by the teachings of the New Testament and by Church history.

The New Testament Teaching on the Sabbath

The New Testament teaching on the Sabbath can be considered from three perspectives: 1. The Old Testament ceremonial laws, 2. Specific references to the Sabbath, and 3. Examples of Christian worship.

1. The Old Testament ceremonial laws. The question of the Sabbath is directly related to the overall Christian use of the Old Testament ceremonial laws. Although Christianity arose from Judaism, the Sabbath Day (along with the sacrifices, circumcision, and food laws) is part of the

ritual law from the Old Covenant that was fulfilled in Jesus Christ; and, therefore, is not required for Christians. It has been argued that the Sabbath requirement precedes the Law, but that argument is clearly false. Although God “blessed” the Sabbath Day in Genesis 2, He gave no command to observe the Sabbath, rest on the Sabbath, or worship on the Sabbath until Exodus 20:8. In any case, the practices of sacrifice and circumcision both preceded the law of Moses, and these are not binding upon Christians because they too have been fulfilled in Christ (Galatians 6:15; Colossians 2:11).

The decision to abandon the requirements of the ceremonial law came early in Christian history. When a significant number of Gentiles began to convert to Christianity, disputes arose about whether the Gentile Christians would be required to observe the Jewish laws about circumcision, dietary restrictions, Sabbath observance, and so forth. Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, and other Church leaders met in Jerusalem and decided, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that it was not necessary for Christians to observe the Sabbath rules and other aspects of “the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5-29). The decision of the “Jerusalem Council” is confirmed by the book of Hebrews, which declares that the Old Covenant has been replaced by the New Covenant, for the Old Covenant has passed away (Hebrews 8:13).

Although Christians are not “under the law” as a means of salvation, we are still required to live righteously (Romans 6) and to keep God’s commandments (1 John 5:2). The New Testament instructs believers to obey all the Ten Commandments except for the commandment to keep the Sabbath Day. The Sabbath commandment is the only one of the Ten Commandments that is not repeated in the New Testament.

Even after the decision of Acts 15, the Church experienced disputes about the Jewish rituals. Jewish believers tried to force everyone to obey the law of Moses, but Paul states clearly and repeatedly that Christians are not required to keep the laws regarding special days, kosher foods, and sacrifices. He goes so far as to rebuke Peter when he acquiesced to Jewish pressure (Galatians 2:11). Paul takes issue with the Galatians by asking, “But now after you have known God ... how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?” (Galatians 4:9). What was the evidence of their turning back? Paul accused them, “You observe days and months and seasons and years” (Galatians 4:10). Paul also addresses the Sabbath in his letter to the Romans. In his discussion of Christian liberty, he deals with such issues as acceptable meats and drinks, and he also mentions the Sabbath question. Paul

insists that Christians are free to observe or not observe the Sabbath according to their consciences. Paul states,

One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks (Romans 14:5-6).

It is no longer necessary for believers to practice the Old Testament rituals because they have been fulfilled in Christ. They are the “shadow,” but Christ is the “reality.” We read in the Book of Hebrews: “For the law, having a *shadow* of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect” (Hebrews 10:1).

2. *Specific references to the Sabbath.* The reference to the rituals as shadows leads naturally to Paul’s word to the Colossian church. It seems that, once again, Jewish believers were attempting to force Gentile Christians to obey the law of Moses. Paul writes, “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a *shadow* of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Colossian 2:16-17). Paul indicates clearly that Christians are obligated to follow neither the Old Testament food laws nor the Old Testament schedule of holy days. These laws are fulfilled in Christ.

As a good Jewish rabbi, Jesus obeyed all of the Old Testament laws. However, Jesus pointed out the legalistic attitudes of the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath Day. On one occasion, Jesus healed a lame man on the Sabbath and told him to take up his bed and walk (John 5:5-18). Jesus’ opponents seized the opportunity to criticize him:

For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God (John 5:16-18).

On another occasion, as Jesus and His disciples passed through a grain field on the Sabbath, the disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate them. The Pharisees accused them of breaking the Sabbath, but Jesus replied, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Jesus, therefore, taught that the Sabbath laws should not be a legalistic requirement or burden.

3. *Examples of Christian worship on Sunday.* The first Christians were Jewish, and for a short time they worshiped according to their Jewish laws and customs. We read in the Book of Acts that they worshiped in the temple (Acts 3:1; 5:21, 42) and the synagogues. Paul's attendance at the synagogue, however, was a result of practical rather than theological considerations. In order to preach to the Jews, he needed to attend their meetings (Acts 13:14; 14:1; 18:4). Outside of evangelistic efforts, Paul reports that early Christians worshiped on Sunday, and they did not attend the Jewish meetings. Sunday was chosen as the day of worship, because it was on Sunday that Jesus arose from the dead (Matthew 28:1). Because of the Resurrection, the Christians called Sunday the "Lord's Day." Also, the Church was established and the gospel was first preached in its fullness on Sunday (Acts 2). The following texts suggest that the earliest Christians worshiped on Sunday, the Lord's Day:

- "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight" (Acts 20:7).
- "On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come" (1 Corinthians 16:2).
- "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet" (Revelation 1:10).

Nowhere in the New Testament does it state that the early Christians met together for worship on the Sabbath Day (Saturday).

The Testimony of Church History

In addition to the New Testament references to Christians worshiping on Sunday, the earliest Christian document outside the New Testament affirms the practice of Sunday worship. Believers are given the following instruction: "And on the Lord's own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your transgressions ..." (*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 14:1). This text states that Christians should meet on Sunday, and the activities listed involve sharing in the Lord's Supper and confessing sins, as James instructed.

The early church fathers from the second and third centuries also report that Sunday was the Christian day of worship. Ignatius (c. AD 45-115), a disciple of the apostle John, wrote that Christians were "no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in observance of the Lord's Day" (*Epistle to the Magnesians*, 8). Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), another early church father, wrote

that Christians met for worship “on the day called Sunday.” The reason for Sunday worship, according to Justin, was that Sunday “is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead” (*First Apology*, 67).

There is no evidence that the early Christians met together for worship on the Sabbath Day (Saturday). Further testimony of reliable servants of God throughout Church history shows that Christians have consistently worshiped on Sunday. Several quotations regarding Sunday worship can be found in the appendix at the end of this article.

The Testimony of Pentecostal Believers

In an early issue of the *Church of God Evangel*, F. J. Lee (1875–1928), a leading figure in the denomination and namesake of Lee University, wrote a three-part article in which he argued against Sabbatarianism. Citing Hebrews 10:1, Lee stated, “The law is a shadow of good things to come.” He then turned to Colossians 2:16 and wrote, “So if the Sabbath is a shadow, and the real is Christ . . . , How important, that we turn away from the shadow and cling to the real.” According to Lee, a return to Saturday worship observance would be an act of backsliding and giving in to “the seducing spirit” (*CGE* 5:26 [June 27, 1914], p. 7). Lee continued—after examining Hebrews 3:18; 4:1, 3, 4, 10, he pointed out further that “it is plain enough, the [S]abbath was a shadow pointing to the time when people could be brought out of . . . bondage of sin, and into the Pentecostal Rest.” Lee explained that the law called for the observance of several special days, such as [P]assover, the [F]east of [T]abernacles, and the Sabbath. Each of these has teaching value, but they are shadows which are fulfilled in Christ (*CGE* 5:27 [July 4, 1914], p. 7).

Later in the same year, the testimony of L.B. Mosteller was published. Mosteller testified that his study of the Old Testament had “almost” convinced him to stop eating certain meats. He writes further, “With this seducing spirit, the keeping of the Sabbath was pressed upon me.” However, after much prayer and after attending the General Assembly, he states, “After being there and seeing the wonder working power of God the scales all fell from my eyes and I felt so free and sweet . . .” (*CGE* 5:50 [Dec 19, 1914], p. 4). Both Lee and Mosteller considered the requirement of Sabbath Day observance to be a dangerous practice that originated with a “seducing spirit.”

Conclusion

Observation of the Sabbath was part of the Old Testament ceremonial law that is not observed by the Church. There is no record in Scripture of Jesus or His disciples instructing or teaching that the keeping of the Sabbath or any other Jewish custom is necessary for the New Testament believer. The New Testament and Church history supports the Christian practice of worshipping on Sunday, the Lord's Day.

Although the Church of God affirms Sunday as the "Christian day of worship," the denomination has consistently focused on the quality of worship rather than the day of worship. Jesus declared that the outward aspects of worship (such as time and location) are peripheral, but the essential aspects of worship consist in the following:

1. Worship must come from the heart (Mark 7:6), and
2. Worship must be "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

It is the quality of our worship, not the day and location, that will impact our witness to the world. The mission of the Church is to FINISH the Great Commission. We must not allow disputes over days and times of worship distract us from our commitment to Find, Intercede, Network, Invest, Send, and Harvest. Our deep spiritual worship will supply the inspiration, strength, and direction for our mission; and it will attract the lost who are hungry and thirsty for God.

FOR FURTHER READING

Carson, Donald A., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day : A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982).

Dawn, Marva J., *The Sense of the Call: A Sabbath Way of Life for Those Who Serve God, the Church, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

Church of God Practical Commitments. <http://www.churchofgod.org/practical-commitments/spiritual-example>.

APPENDIX

Consider the following quotations regarding Sunday worship:

The Letter of Barnabas

"We keep the eighth day [Sunday] with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead" (*Letter of Barnabas* 15:6–8 [AD 74]).

Tertullian

[L]et him who contends that the Sabbath is still to be observed as a balm of salvation, and circumcision on the eighth day ... teach us that, for the time past, righteous men kept the Sabbath or practiced circumcision, and were thus rendered ‘friends of God.’ For if circumcision purges a man, since God made Adam uncircumcised, why did he not circumcise him, even after his sinning, if circumcision purges? ... Therefore, since God originated Adam uncircumcised and unobservant of the Sabbath, consequently his offspring also, Abel, offering him sacrifices, uncircumcised and unobservant of the Sabbath, was by him [God] commended [Gen. 4:1–7, Heb. 11:4] ... Noah also, uncircumcised—yes, and unobservant of the Sabbath—God freed from the deluge. For Enoch too, most righteous man, uncircumcised and unobservant of the Sabbath, he translated from this world, who did not first taste death in order that, being a candidate for eternal life, he might show us that we also may, without the burden of the law of Moses, please God (*An Answer to the Jews* 2 [AD 203]).

The Didascalia

“The apostles further appointed: On the first day of the week let there be service, and the reading of the holy scriptures, and the oblation [sacrifice of the Mass], because on the first day of the week [i.e., Sunday] our Lord rose from the place of the dead, and on the first day of the week he arose upon the world, and on the first day of the week he ascended up to heaven, and on the first day of the week he will appear at last with the angels of heaven” (*Didascalia* 2 [AD 225]).

Origen

“Hence it is not possible that the [day of] rest after the Sabbath should have come into existence from the seventh [day] of our God. On the contrary, it is our Savior who, after the pattern of his own rest, caused us to be made in the likeness of his death, and hence also of his resurrection (*Commentary on John 2:28*” [AD 229]).

Victorinus

The sixth day [Friday] is called *parasceve*, that is to say, the preparation of the kingdom ... On this day also, on account of the passion of the Lord Jesus Christ, we make either a station to God or a fast. On the seventh day he rested from all his works, and blessed it, and sanctified it. On the former day we are accustomed to fast rigorously, that on the Lord’s day we may go forth to our bread with giving of thanks. And let the *parasceve* become a rigorous fast, lest we should appear to observe any Sabbath with the Jews ... which Sabbath he [Christ] in his body abolished (*The Creation of the World* [AD 300]).

Eusebius of Caesarea

They [the early saints of the Old Testament] did not care about circumcision of the body, neither do we [Christians]. They did not care about observing Sabbaths, nor do we. They did not avoid certain kinds of food, neither did they regard the other distinctions which

Moses first delivered to their posterity to be observed as symbols; nor do Christians of the present day do such things (*Church History* 1:4:8 [AD 312]).

[T]he day of his [Christ's] light ... was the day of his resurrection from the dead, which they say, as being the one and only truly holy day and the Lord's day, is better than any number of days as we ordinarily understand them, and better than the days set apart by the Mosaic law for feasts, new moons, and Sabbaths, which the apostle [Paul] teaches are the shadow of days and not days in reality (*Proof of the Gospel* 4:16:186 [AD 319]).

Athanasius

“The Sabbath was the end of the first creation, the Lord's day was the beginning of the second, in which he renewed and restored the old in the same way as he prescribed that they should formerly observe the Sabbath as a memorial of the end of the first things, so we honor the Lord's day as being the memorial of the new creation” (*On Sabbath and Circumcision* 3 [AD 345]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

“Fall not away either into the sect of the Samaritans or into Judaism, for Jesus Christ has henceforth ransomed you. Stand aloof from all observance of Sabbaths and from calling any indifferent meats common or unclean” (*Catechetical Lectures* 4:37 [AD 350]).

Council of Laodicea

“Christians should not Judaize and should not be idle on the Sabbath, but should work on that day; they should, however, particularly reverence the Lord's day and, if possible, not work on it, because they were Christians” (Canon 29 [AD 360]).

John Chrysostom

[W]hen he [God] said, ‘You shall not kill’ ... he did not add, ‘because murder is a wicked thing.’ The reason was that conscience had taught this beforehand, and he speaks thus, as to those who know and understand the point. Wherefore when he speaks to us of another commandment, not known to us by the dictate of conscience, he not only prohibits, but adds the reason. When, for instance, he gave commandment concerning the Sabbath—‘On the seventh day you shall do no work’—he subjoined also the reason for this cessation. What was this? ‘Because on the seventh day God rested from all his works which he had begun to make’ [Ex. 20:10-11] ... For what purpose then, I ask, did he add a reason respecting the Sabbath, but did no such thing in regard to murder? Because this commandment was not one of the leading ones. It was not one of those which were accurately defined of our conscience, but a kind of partial and temporary one, and for this reason it was abolished afterward. But those which are necessary and uphold our life are the following: ‘You shall not kill ... You shall not commit adultery ... You shall not steal.’ On this account he adds no reason in this case, nor enters into any instruction on the matter, but is content with the bare prohibition (*Homilies on the Statutes* 12:9 [AD 387]).

You have put on Christ, you have become a member of the Lord and been enrolled in the heavenly city, and you still grovel in the law [of Moses]? How is it possible for you to obtain the kingdom? Listen to Paul's words, that the observance of the law overthrows the gospel, and learn, if you will, how this comes to pass, and tremble, and shun this pitfall. Why do you keep the Sabbath and fast with the Jews? (*Homilies on Galatians* 2:17 [AD 395]).

The rite of circumcision was venerable in the Jews' account, forasmuch as the law itself gave way thereto, and the Sabbath was less esteemed than circumcision. For that circumcision might be performed, the Sabbath was broken; but that the Sabbath might be kept, circumcision was never broken; and mark, I pray, the dispensation of God. This is found to be even more solemn than the Sabbath, as not being omitted at certain times. When then it is done away, much more is the Sabbath (*Homilies on Philipians* 10 [AD 402]).

The Apostolic Constitutions

And on the day of our Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's day, meet more diligently, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus, and sent him to us, and condescended to let him suffer, and raised him from the dead. Otherwise what apology will he make to God who does not assemble on that day ... in which is performed the reading of the prophets, the preaching of the gospel, the oblation of the sacrifice, the gift of the holy food (*Apostolic Constitutions* 2:7:60 [AD 400]).

Augustine

Well, now, I should like to be told what there is in these ten commandments, except the observance of the Sabbath, which ought not to be kept by a Christian ... Which of these commandments would anyone say that the Christian ought not to keep? It is possible to contend that it is not the law which was written on those two tables that the apostle [Paul] describes as 'the letter that kills' [2 Cor. 3:6], but the law of circumcision and the other sacred rites which are now abolished (*The Spirit and the Letter* 24 [AD 412]).

Pope Gregory I

It has come to my ears that certain men of perverse spirit have sown among you some things that are wrong and opposed to the holy faith, so as to forbid any work being done on the Sabbath day. What else can I call these [men] but preachers of Antichrist, who when he comes will cause the Sabbath day as well as the Lord's day to be kept free from all work. For because he [the Antichrist] pretends to die and rise again, he wishes the Lord's day to be held in reverence; and because he compels the people to Judaize that he may bring back the outward rite of the law, and subject the perfidy of the Jews to himself, he wishes the Sabbath to be observed. For this which is said by the prophet, 'You shall bring in no burden through your gates on the Sabbath day' [Jer. 17:24] could be held to as long as it was lawful for the law to be observed according to the letter. But after that the grace of almighty God, our Lord Jesus Christ, has appeared, the commandments of the law which were spoken figuratively cannot be kept according to the letter. For if anyone says that this about the Sabbath is to be kept, he must needs say that carnal sacrifices are to be offered. He must say too that the commandment about the circumcision of the body is still to be retained. But let him hear the apostle Paul saying in opposition to him: 'If you be circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing' [Gal. 5:2] (*Letters* 13:1 [AD 597]).

Respectfully submitted by Lee Roy Martin (D.Th.) to the Church of God Doctrine and Polity
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