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# The Worldwide News



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## Personal from...

JOSEPH W. TKACH

### New covenant: agreement with God

As I warned about in the April 17 member and co-worker letter, a large group of dissident ministers have now organized themselves into a competing church organization. While these former ministers claim that they "will not attempt to draw members away from other church organizations," many of them have already been, and continue to be, busy trying to do just that. The issue at stake is simple: what is the identifying sign of the Church of God? Their position is that the identifying sign of true Christians is observance of the seventh-day Sabbath and the Holy Days of Leviticus 23. But the biblical truth is that faith in Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit identify true Christians.

Jesus Christ inaugurated the new covenant in his own blood (Matthew 26:28). Christians are called to holy lives in Jesus Christ under the terms of that new covenant, not under the terms of the old covenant given to Israel. In this issue, I want to review some of the biblical foundations that we have for understanding the covenants and the Old Testament law. To help everyone see our foundations more clearly, I would like to review three major points, all of which converge with the conclusion that Christians are not required to keep the Old Testament law:

- 1) The old covenant is obsolete, and the new covenant has been established.
- 2) Christians are not obligated to keep "the law of Moses."
- 3) When Paul discussed "the law," he was often concerned with the entire law of Moses, and he wrote that Christians were not under the authority of that law. Our obligation to obey God is defined by a different law, a spiritual law, which in some cases overlaps Old Testament laws but in other cases supersedes them.

#### A better covenant

Let's examine each of these points and show that they all support the same conclusion. The New Testament is consistent. First, the matter of covenants. They are discussed in detail in the book of Hebrews, especially chapter 8. There, the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ is contrasted with the Levitical high priesthood. As we know, the ministry Jesus received is far superior to the Levitical ministry, and his covenant is far superior to the old covenant (verse 6).

But there was a problem with the first covenant—the people were not faithful and were not able to obey (verses 7-9). God therefore promised a new covenant, and "by calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete" (verse 13). The old covenant is obsolete—ended. The agreement or contract no longer has authority.

The writer of Hebrews says that the old covenant "will soon disappear," and indeed most of its operations ceased in A.D. 70 when Roman armies destroyed the Temple. Even though elements of the old covenant system continue to be observed in Judaism, the New Testament declares that the old covenant itself is obsolete.

Now, we must ask, just what was the old covenant? What laws are we talking about here? First, the core of the old covenant is the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13). We've always recognized that. For example, Correspondence Course Lesson 17, written in 1983, said this: "The covenant made at Mt. Sinai—called the 'Old Covenant' today—imposed upon the people of Israel certain terms and conditions to be performed. The people were to keep the Ten Commandments" (page 7, emphasis in original).

The old covenant included more than the Ten Commandments, of course. The people at Mt. Sinai agreed to obey all the laws in Exodus 20, 21, 22 and 23. "These additional laws thus became part of the covenant God made with Israel" (page 7). The covenant was then ratified with blood (Exodus 24:6-8).

This is the covenant that has been declared obsolete. Does that mean all of its laws are now invalid? Of course not. But the covenant as a package has no legal authority. We cannot argue for the validity of a law simply on the basis of it being in the old covenant—and that goes for the core of the covenant just as much as it does for the additional laws.

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## National Day of Prayer observed in Pasadena

By Sheila Graham

"One of the most important resources of our community are our religious institutions," said Mayor William M. Paparian at Pasadena's annual prayer breakfast May 4.

Quoting President Abraham Lincoln, Mayor Paparian said, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go."

### Pastor General recovering from surgery

Thank you for your prayers and get-well cards regarding my May 12 gall bladder surgery. The procedure went well, and I am now recuperating at home. Many thanks to my staff who assisted me, and to Herman L. Hoeh for giving the graduation address at Ambassador University. I wish I could have been there. Thank you all for your love and concern.—Joseph W. Tkach

The theme of the prayer breakfast was "Unity in Prayer." More than 150 churches were invited. After the breakfast, Rick Clark, a planning committee member, congratulated the Worldwide Church of God for its "courageous stand" for the gospel of Jesus Christ and expressed his concern for the Church during this time of change.

Tom Lapacka, director of Church Relations, asked several men and women from headquarters to represent the Church. "The annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast in Pasadena offers the Worldwide Church of God an opportunity to present a positive presence in our community. What better way to honor our Lord than to join with others in our city in prayer before God," Mr. Lapacka said.

Attending the breakfast were Guy Ames, Pasadena A.M. pastor; Sheila Graham, *Plain Truth* managing editor; Jennifer McGraw, a *Plain Truth* assistant editor; Ralph Orr, managing editor of *News You Can Use*, a ministerial newsletter; Dennis Pelley, an associate pastor of the Pasadena P.M. church; Leslie Schmedes, Pasadena P.M. pastor; Norman Shoaf, managing editor of the Church's non-serial publications; and Susan Stewart, a *Plain Truth* assistant editor.

## Ministers' positive comments: a collection of encouragement

By Jeff Zhorne

What began in March as a small collection of positive comments about changes in the Church has snowballed into a compilation of encouragement shared by hundreds of ministers and others around the world.

The creator of the "Good News Grapevine," Ron Lohr, pastor of the Tulsa, Oklahoma, East and West churches, finished Volume 8 on May 15.

He has introduced each volume with, "The purpose of this project was to let the brethren in my care know that there were many very positive and enthusiastic ministers and leaders in spite of what some of them have been hearing from friends and relatives from troubled areas where very vocal dissent is disseminated."

According to his wife, Patty (who proofreads the GNG), the project was born out of a desire to stem negative comments from dissidents.

"Dave Gilbert, pastor of the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, church, called Ron one day after talking to another positive pastor, Don Lawson," she

explained. "It was so encouraging for Ron to hear Dave's positive words. At the time, Ron had been getting many calls from a previous church area under siege."

After the phone conversation, an idea was born. "Ron figured if he could be encouraged by a faithful minister and friend that he wasn't alone," Mrs. Lohr continued, "then he would solicit positive comments from

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Ron and Patty Lohr

# Personal: examining each law individually

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We cannot *assume* that any part of the contract is valid when the entire contract has been declared obsolete. Of course, if we have additional evidence that a particular law is still valid, then we must be ready to obey. And for some of those laws, we do have evidence of continuing validity, and Christians should obey such laws. But each law must be examined individually, since we cannot *assume* that any particular group must remain together.

## Sacrifices planned from start

The old covenant included much more than Exodus 20-23. For example, Hebrews 9:1 tells us that it also included directions for the tabernacle. Instructions for the altar, Levitical priests and animal sacrifices were given in Exodus 25-31. These were part of God's original plan for Israel. He knew very well that the people would sin and would need a tabernacle and regular burnt offerings. It was all part of the plan, part of his relationship with his people, part of his covenant.

We used to explain that the sacrificial laws were added "because of transgressions," as if sacrifices were not part of the original law. But this is not true. Moses told Pharaoh that the Israelites wanted to leave Egypt so they could offer sacrifices and burnt offerings in the wilderness (Exodus 10:25). Before the Israelites left Egypt, they sacrificed Passover lambs. Even within the old covenant, altars and burnt offerings were commanded (Exodus 20:24)—all this before the

covenant was ratified and before it had a chance to be transgressed.

When Galatians 3:19 says that the law was added because of transgressions, it is talking about the entire law—everything that was added 430 years after Abraham (verse 17). This law had a mediator (verse 19)—this law was the covenant. The entire covenant was added, becoming part of God's relationship with his people, because of transgressions.

The law is made for lawbreakers (1 Timothy 1:9). God gave rules for civil and religious behavior because the people, even before they got to Sinai, were disobedient—just as God knew that they would be. Sacrifices were not an afterthought—they were part of the original covenant.

## Obedience a primary concern

We used to misunderstand Jeremiah 7:22, which says that God did not at first speak to the Israelites about burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this flatly contradicts Exodus 10:25 and Exodus 20:24. Jeremiah 7:22 is

**One aspect of the new covenant is that the Holy Spirit writes God's laws on our hearts. This has already begun to be done. That is why Paul wrote that he was a minister of the Spirit, not of the letter.**

actually a Hebrew figure of speech indicating relative emphasis. When God brought the people out of Egypt, it was not because he wanted sacrifices and offerings.

Rather, he wanted obedience, and the sacrifices were only a tool to help the people remember that they ought to obey. Obedience was the primary concern, even though the covenant also prescribed sacrifices for the inevitable transgressions.

(A similar figure of speech can be seen in John 12:47, where Jesus says he did not come to judge the world, but to save it. John 9:39, however, says plainly that Jesus *did* come to judge the world. The "contradiction" is explained by understanding that John 12:47 gives a contrast in emphasis, not in fact. Although Jesus came to judge, his primary purpose was to save.)

The point of this digression is that the old covenant included not only Exodus 20-23, but other laws as well. When the Sinaitic covenant was renewed with the next generation of Israelites, all the laws of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers were included as part of the covenant. But these laws were still considered the same covenant (Deuteronomy 1:1-5; 5:2-3). The book of Deuteronomy contains many additional laws, all considered part of the same covenant, the same basic agreement between Israel and God.

When the book of Hebrews says that the old covenant is obsolete, it is discounting the whole package of Old Testament law. Some individual laws, of course, are still valid, but the package as a whole is not an authoritative package.

We see this again in 2 Corinthians 3. In verse 3, Paul makes a contrast between the "tablets of stone"—a clear reference to the Ten Command-

ments—and the writing of God's Spirit on the hearts of Christians. In verse 6, he contrasts the new covenant with "the letter," which in context means the letter of the old covenant. Verse 7 talks about the law engraved on stones and the shining of Moses' face. It is clear that Paul is talking about the Ten Commandments, for those are the engraved stones Moses had when his face shone in glory and he had to put a veil over his face.

The old covenant was glorious, but it was "fading away," replaced by a covenant much more glorious. Paul was already administering the new covenant. The old was already obsolete, and was fading away. Although the sacrifices continued to be administered in Jerusalem, they would cease soon after Paul wrote.

Now, as we have always said, the old covenant has ended, and we should live by the terms of the new covenant. However, we used to believe that the new covenant has not yet been made. We said this because God's covenants are compared to marriage agreements, and we are only betrothed to Christ and the marriage has not yet taken place. However, marriage is only an analogy, and we must not let the analogy distort the reality!

## An agreement is a covenant

Do we have an agreement with God? Has he promised to give us certain things if we believe in and obey his Son? Yes, he has. We have an agreement, and an agreement with God is a covenant. We have a covenant with God, and it is the new covenant. Hebrews 8:6 tells us that Christ's covenant "is founded on better promises." It "was established," says the King James Version; the New American Standard says it "has been enacted." The verb is in the past tense, indicating that the new covenant *has been made*. An analogy cannot contradict the clear meaning of this verse. Blood has been shed, ratifying the new covenant (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 10:29).

We have not received all the promised blessings of the new covenant, of course, just as the Israelites didn't receive their physical promises until many years after their covenant had been made. The fact that the promises are still future does not mean that the covenant hasn't been made. In fact, the very existence of the promises shows that the agreement has been made. We do have a relationship with God.

One aspect of the new covenant is that the Holy Spirit writes God's laws on our hearts. This has already begun to be done. That is why Paul wrote that he was a minister of the Spirit, not of the letter. He was a minister of the new covenant, not of the old.

To summarize this section: 1) The old covenant was built around the core of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28). 2) The old covenant is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). 3) The new covenant has been established (Hebrews 8:6).

Next, let's examine the phrase "law of Moses." If we want to understand the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), we must understand what was being debated. "Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses'" (verse 5).

Traditionally, we have understood that the council concluded that gentiles did not have to obey the law of Moses. Our Sabbath booklet published 15 years ago, for example, clearly said: "Certain men had come down

from Judaea to Antioch, teaching that the Gentile converts there must be circumcised *and* keep the law of Moses to be saved.... At the conference at Jerusalem, James gave the decision.... He merely mentioned four prohibitions, and otherwise they [the gentiles] did not need to observe the law of Moses" (page 94). So anyone who suggests a new interpretation of this conference not only has to argue against our own history but also against major translations and Catholic and Protestant commentaries.

The New American Bible, for example, a Catholic annotated translation, says this: "The Jerusalem 'Council' marks the official rejection of the rigid view that Gentile converts were obligated to observe the Mosaic law.... Paul's refusal to impose the Mosaic law on the Gentile Christians is supported by Peter on the ground that within his own experience God bestowed the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household without preconditions concerning the adoption of the Mosaic law."

In verse 28, the apostles told the gentiles that they did not require anything beyond four particular restrictions. This did not mean, of course, that they were free to murder and blaspheme. What it means is that they were to avoid murder and blasphemy because of Christ, not because of the law of Moses.

## The law of Moses

Just what is the "law of Moses"? Just what is being discussed? The New Testament itself tells us what the law of Moses includes. This phrase is used six other times in the New Testament.

1) Luke 2:22: "When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord." So the law of Moses includes rituals regarding uncleanness after childbirth. It should be obvious already that it doesn't make sense to claim that Christians ought to observe the law of Moses. Neither Jewish nor gentile Christians have to observe these purification rituals.

2) Luke 24:44: Jesus, after his resurrection, said to his disciples: "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." In this verse, the law of Moses includes prophecies about the Messiah. It's not just ritualistic laws—it's the books of Moses, the Torah of Moses, the Pentateuch.

3) John 7:22-23: Jesus was talking to the Pharisees: "Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?" Here, the law of Moses includes the law of circumcision. Moses himself didn't originate the practice, but he wrote about it. It is in his law.

4) Acts 28:23, where Paul is in Rome: "They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets." Here again, the law of Moses includes prophecies about

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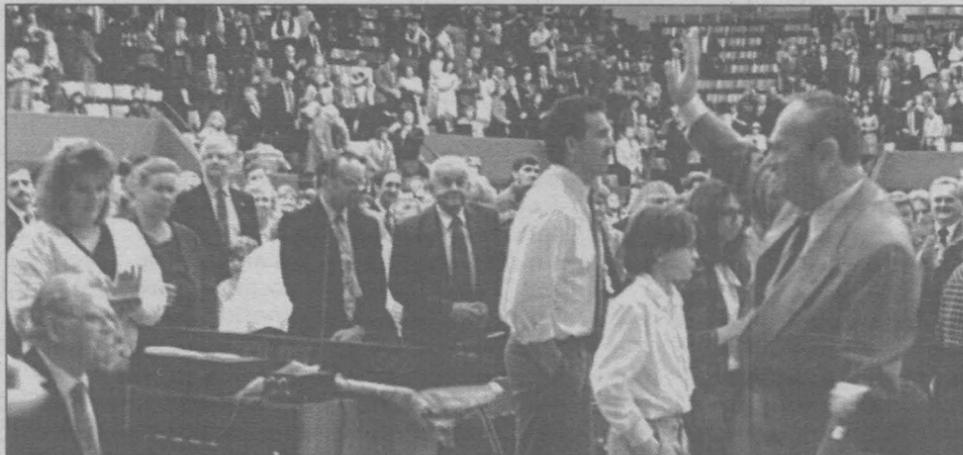
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# Pastor General visits...

SALEM, OREGON



## Trip Overview

Pastor General Joseph W. Tkach spoke to 1,260 brethren May 6 from Salem, Eugene, Bend, Albany, Medford, Klamath Falls, Coos Bay, Roseburg, Hood River and Portland East and West, Oregon; and Vancouver, Washington.

Hosts for the visit were Dan and Marilee Fricke, Portland West and Vancouver; Joel and Pat Lillengreen, Portland East and Hood River; Robert and Coco Bertuzzi, Eugene, Coos Bay and Bend; and Richard and Michelle Baumgartner, Medford, Klamath Falls and Roseburg. [Photos by Larry Conner]



## Personal: How valid are the laws of Moses?

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Jesus Christ. It is one section of the Old Testament.

5) 1 Corinthians 9:9: "It is written in the Law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.'" Here, the law of Moses includes civil laws. Paul could adapt the principle for the new covenant, but in the law of Moses it was a civil law.

6) Hebrews 10:28: "Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses." This is also talking about a civil law, the administration of the death penalty in ancient Israel.

The law of Moses included civil laws, religious ceremonies and prophecies. It referred to everything that Moses wrote, the books of Moses, the Torah or the Law.

The law of Moses includes everything in those books, and that's what the Jerusalem council was about. Some people claimed that the gentile Christians had to be circumcised and to keep all the laws of Moses. The council concluded that they did not have to keep all those laws. Instead, they gave only four prohibitions.

This is brought out again in Acts 21. Paul had returned to Jerusalem, and rumors swirled that he had been teaching Jews to abandon the law of Moses (verse 21). The rumors were false. Paul had not been teaching any such thing. Although the rituals were not required for Christians, neither were they forbidden. Jewish Christians were free to participate in their traditional customs. To make this point clear, the Jerusalem elders suggested that Paul participate in such a ritual himself (verses 23-24).

In chapter 21, the controversy centered on whether Paul taught Jews to abandon the law. There was no ques-

tion about the gentiles, since they had already been given the four prohibitions (verse 25). Everyone accepted the fact that they did not have to keep the law of Moses. This is made even more clear in the Greek text used by the King James and New King James translators.

The elders wanted Paul to demonstrate "that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that *they should observe no such thing*," except for the four prohibitions they had already been given (verses 24-25, NKJ). Gentiles do not have to abide by the customs of Moses. They do not need to live like Jews in order to be Christians.

So, to summarize this section, we see that 1) The law of Moses contains all the laws that Moses wrote. 2) Some Pharisees thought that gentile Christians ought to keep the law of Moses. 3) The Jerusalem Council declared that they did not have to. The writings of Moses do not have authority over Christians. Some of the laws, of course, are still valid, but they are not valid merely because God gave them to Moses. Rather, if they are valid, they are valid for other reasons.

Next, let us examine some of Paul's statements about the law. No doubt you all know that portions of his epistles are difficult to understand. One reason is that he uses the word *law* with different meanings. That should caution us, but it should not prevent us from trying to see what he meant. We do not want to distort his writings to our own destruction by assigning meanings to his words that he didn't intend. We have to study the epistles to see what he meant.

Consider the phrase "under the law," for example. Does it mean under the penalty of the law, or does it mean under the authority of the

law? Let's see how it is used:

Romans 2:12: "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law." The contrast here is between Jew and gentile. Jews are under the authority of the law, and gentiles are not.

Romans 3:19: "Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." The law speaks

to those who are under its authority.

1 Corinthians 9:20-21: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 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."

Jews were under the law, so Paul, in See Personal, page 4

## Collection inspires ministers

Continued from page 1

the ministers he knew to be preaching the new covenant approach taught by Mr. Tkach."

Mr. Lohr compiled the comments for use in the Tulsa East and West churches. He then got approval from Joseph Tkach Jr., director of Church Administration, to send the compilation back to respondents for their use in sermons and Bible studies.

"Well, the project mushroomed!" she exclaimed. Ministers who sent messages mentioned others who might want the positive comments. Now the mailing list of those who have contributed is up to 235 ministers, Ambassador University faculty and Church employees.

Those who assisted Mr. Lohr include Dave Gilbert, Tom Smith, Grant Spong, Jeff Barness, David Carley, Mark Cardona, Gene Nouhan, Leonard Holladay, Neil Matkin, Dan King, Lynn Hebert, Stan DeVeaux, Stan Bass, Randy Bloom, Ken Wil-

liams, Randy Hall, Fred Bailey and Dexter Faulkner, and Dave Smith and David Evans from Pasadena.

"From the very beginning, Ron and those helping him wanted to be very sensitive to the feelings of those who were struggling to grasp the new teaching," Mrs. Lohr said. "Bearing one another's burdens and showing compassion has been of greater importance than the doctrine itself."

Mr. Lohr said: "I, as the compiler, realize that God does not need our endorsement and that numbers in favor do not reflect our understanding of church government."

In Volume 2, he wrote: "I do not apologize for the length of this document in this time of crisis. The length is just the point. Contrary to the impression given by dissidents, many are joyful about the new covenant teachings of Mr. Tkach and are thankful for his courageous Joshua-like leadership."

A sampling of the comments appeared in the May 9 WN.

# Personal: Importance of the law of Jesus Christ

Continued from page 3

an effort to win them, acted in accordance with the law, as we see in Acts 21. However, Paul did not consider himself under the law that Jews were under. He was free to act like a gentile if he wanted to, and that's what he did when trying to win gentiles to the faith. He acted like a person who did not have the law. However, he makes it clear that he was under the law of Christ, God's real law, the spiritual and eternal law. But Paul was not under the authority of the law that separated Jews from gentiles.

Galatians 4:4-5: "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." Jesus Christ was born under the law—under its authority, not its penalty. Since he never broke the law, he was never obligated to accept its penalty. But by being born under the Jewish law, he was able to redeem Jews as well as those who do not have the law.

Galatians 4:21: "Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?" Paul is writing to Christians who were tempted to accept old covenant laws as requirements. They wanted to be under the authority of the old covenant. Which law is Paul talking about? The same "law" that says that Abraham had two sons (verse 22). It is the law that contains Genesis—the law of Moses, the books of Moses. Some of the Galatians wanted to be under that law, and Paul was arguing against it.

## Grace comes with obligation

In the above passages, "under the law" means under the authority of the old covenant law. That is also its meaning in the only other occurrence in the New Testament: "Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (Romans 6:14-15). We are not under the authority of the law, but under the authority of grace—but grace does not mean that we are free to do our own thing. Rather, grace comes with obligation—we are under the law of Christ. We must obey him.

We see another revealing discussion of law in Romans 7:1-4. Paul speaks to the Jews: "Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage.... So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God."

Paul says that we have died to the law—even the Jews have died to the law through identification with Jesus Christ. Therefore, the law no longer has authority over us, since we belong to Christ, not to the law. Christ is the one we obey, so that we can bear spiritual fruit. The law is contrasted with Christ, and it is the old covenant law that Paul is talking about—the Torah, the Law portion of the Scriptures. We can be under the law, or under Christ. Being under both is not an option.

Galatians 3 is also clear about the law. Verses 2 and 5 contrast faith with law. Paul is not talking about the eternal, spiritual law in this passage, nor is he talking about the sacrificial laws,

which could not be kept in Galatia. He is talking about the Torah, "the Book of the Law" (verse 10). It is the law added 430 years after Abraham (verse 17), which includes all of Exodus and Leviticus.

Abraham's covenant was based on faith (verses 6-7), and we are heirs of his promise (verse 29). The law was added to that covenant because of the transgressions of the Israelites (verse 19), but the law cannot alter the Abrahamic promises that we inherit. Rather, the law—the books of Moses—was a temporary measure until Christ, the Seed, came (verse 19). "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (verse 25).

## Christ supersedes Mosaic law

Here we see the same conclusion. The Scriptures are consistent. Christians are not required to obey the laws of Moses. They were glorious for a time, but their purpose has been superseded by Jesus Christ.

Paul was not against all law, of course. He talks often of the obligations that Christians have. Even in the book of Galatians, he concludes with exhortations about sins to avoid and righteousness to seek. These things are challenging—humanly impossible, in fact. We need to be led by God's Spirit and transformed in inner character into the pattern of Jesus Christ. He is the standard; the old covenant law is not.

We see more in the next chapter, with Paul's allegory of the covenants, Abraham, Hagar and Sarah. Hagar stands for the old covenant (verse 24), and Paul tells us to get rid of her (verse 30). Those who are under her covenant are slaves, whereas those under the authority of the new covenant have the full rights of children.

In Galatians 5, Paul makes it clear again. Although the old covenant law enslaves those who are under it, we have been set free from that law (verse 1). But if we submit to the old covenant law of circumcision, then Christ is of no value to us (verse 2). We are either under the new covenant or the old; we cannot be under both at the same time.

The basis of our relationship with God should be faith in Christ, not the law of Moses. But if we want to be under the old covenant, then we are "obligated to obey the whole law" (verse 3). Christians, however, are not obligated to obey the whole law. Paul is not talking about sacrificial or ceremonial laws—he is talking about the entire law. The entire law of Moses is obsolete, and Christians are not under its authority.

Christians obey some of the laws of Moses, of course. We do not covet or lie to one another. But we obey these laws not because Moses wrote about them, but because they are part of the Christlike life. We are under Christ, not Moses. Christ tells us to love our neighbors, and the New Testament explains that this means we do not lie or covet.

As one more illustration of Paul's use of the word *law*, let's look at Ephesians 2:11-19. Paul is saying that gentiles were once separated from the covenants, separated from Christ. But in Christ they have now been brought near. How is this possible? Because Christ has destroyed the barrier that kept the gentiles away. He has abolished the law. Which law? The law that had commandments and regulations separating Jews from gentiles.

Because Jesus has destroyed the legal basis for discriminating against gentiles, gentiles have become part of God's people. Does this mean that

gentiles have to become like Jews, obey laws pertaining to Jews and live like Jews? Certainly not.

That was precisely the conclusion of the Jerusalem council, and it is the conclusion of Paul, too, since he says that even Jews have died to the old covenant law and are not bound by it. Paul had the freedom to live like a Jew, or the freedom to live like someone who lived uprightly though that person did not have the law.

Peter also understood that he was permitted to live like a gentile (Galatians 2:14). Which laws would a righteous gentile be expected to keep? Which laws of Moses separated "living like a gentile" from "living like a Jew"? Apparently rabbis did not require righteous gentiles to be circumcised, to observe Jewish dietary restrictions or to observe the Sabbath. Those three laws, from both Jewish and gentile perspectives, distinguished Jews from gentiles.

James Dunn writes this: "In the phrase ... works of the law ... Paul has in mind particularly circumcision, food laws and sabbath, as the characteristic marks of the faithful Jew, so recognized and affirmed by both Jew and Gentile.... Just these observances were widely regarded as characteristically and distinctively Jewish. Writers like Petronius, Plutarch, Tacitus and Juvenal took it for granted that, in particular, circumcision, abstention from pork, and the sabbath, were observances which marked out the practitioners as Jews, or as people who were very attracted to Jewish ways.... They were the peculiar rites which marked out the Jews as that peculiar people" (*Jesus, Paul and the Law*, pages 4, 191-192). Further information may be found in Menahem Stern's book

*Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*.

To summarize this section: 1) To be under the law is to be under its authority. 2) Christians are not under the law. 3) We are not obligated to keep the Torah. Rather, we may live like righteous gentiles who do not have the law of Moses.

We have traditionally and rightly ignored many of the laws contained in the books of Moses. We do not build altars of earth. We do not have blue tassels in our garments. We do not build tree-branch booths. In our practice, therefore, we acknowledged that the Old Testament law is not authoritative. A New Testament authority is needed before any old practices are continued. That's because the law of Moses, the old covenant, the Torah, is obsolete.

I hope that this helps explain some of the basics. Please study the enclosed papers carefully. We must have faith, and all our thoughts and actions ought to be done for Jesus Christ's honor and glory. All our behavior and ethics should flow from our relationship with him who died for us. Let us, as Hebrews 6:10 tells us, show our love for God by helping one another.

## Study papers

P.S. With this issue are two papers about the Sabbath. The first paper is our study paper on the Sabbath. It takes a comprehensive look at all the arguments we formerly used and shows where their weaknesses are. Many of these issues have already been addressed, but this paper gathers them into a complete package. The second paper is a more detailed look at the context of Hebrews 4:9.

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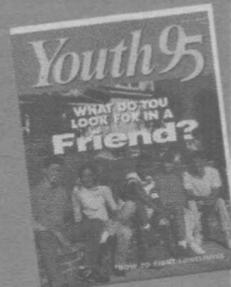
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# What do the Scriptures say about the Sabbath?

The Worldwide Church of God conducts its regular weekly worship services on the seventh day of the week, which the Old and New Testaments call the Sabbath. However, we do not observe the Sabbath in the way it was commanded in the old covenant. For example, we do not teach that Christians have to give up their jobs in order to keep the Sabbath holy.

We do not want to condemn either Sabbath-keepers or non-Sabbath-keepers. Neither approach to the Sabbath day is inherently more righteous than the other. Christians may have different opinions on this topic, and the Worldwide Church of God welcomes all Christians into its fellowship. This paper does not imply that members must change their own approach to the Sabbath. They may continue to keep the seventh day as a Sabbath if they wish, but they should be tolerant of Christians who do not.

In order to argue for tolerance, it is necessary to demonstrate that the weekly Sabbath is not a requirement for Christians today. Let us now investigate the arguments for Sabbath-keeping and see whether they prove from the Scriptures that Sabbath-keeping is required for Christians today. We will examine the evidence in roughly the order it appears in the Bible. We will see that the New Testament treats the Sabbath in a significantly different way than the Old Testament does.

At several points, our analysis will resemble that of other commentators.<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that we have benefited from their comments, but in many cases we arrived at our conclusions before we even became aware of theirs. The analysis should be examined for its own merits, not according to who first taught it.

**Question: On the seventh day of creation, God rested. Is this when he made the Sabbath?**

Response: Genesis tells us:

- 1) God created the world in six days.
- 2) By the seventh day, creation was complete.
- 3) God rested [Hebrew: sabbatized] on the seventh day.
- 4) He blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-3).

However, there are several things that Genesis does *not* tell us:

- 1) It does not say that humans rested.
- 2) It does not say that humans were told to follow God's example.
- 3) It does not say that humans were told to rest.
- 4) It does not say that God taught Adam and Eve on the Sabbath.
- 5) It does not say that God created the Sabbath.
- 6) It does not say that humans kept the Sabbath.

In fact, it is not even clear whether God blessed only one day (the seventh day of creation week), or every seventh day thereafter. Creation week was unique. We do not expect God's activity on the first day to be repeated on every first day. What he did on the fourth day does not affect subsequent Wednesdays. And what he did on the seventh day of creation—cease from creation—is not repeated every week thereafter. He ceased only once.<sup>2</sup>

Humans are not able to imitate God's activity. Humans cannot create for six days. Therefore, they cannot cease from creation on the seventh. They cannot imitate everything God did. If humans were told to imitate one specific aspect of creation week, rest, we are told nothing about it in Genesis. Scripture records various

commands given to Adam and Eve, but there is no hint of a Sabbath command either before or after they sinned.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, even if every seventh day were holy, we are not told anything about how it was to be kept.<sup>4</sup> The way in which Israel was commanded to keep holy time is not necessarily how the patriarchs would have kept holy time.<sup>5</sup> God's end-of-creation rest could provide a *pattern* for a Sabbath command centuries later, just as it provided a pattern for the sabbatical year, but the pattern does not prove that the Sabbath command itself existed before Moses.

Since the Church strives to teach the whole counsel of God, we cannot base our Sabbath doctrine on speculations about creation ordinances or assumptions about pre-Mosaic worship practices. Genesis does not command the seventh day to be observed in any particular way. The Bible does not say that the Sabbath command existed before Moses.

Nevertheless, some seventh-day and first-day sabbatarian scholars think that the overall impression of Scripture is that the Sabbath existed ever since the seventh day of creation. They are of course free to keep the Sabbath. However, we cannot use an implied or inferred "creation ordinance" as proof of what God's people are required to do today. We cannot use Genesis to prove that everyone must abide by this rule or else be thrown into the lake of fire. If we are to *require* Christians to rest on the Sabbath, we must base our doctrine on other passages of Scripture.

If it were only ourselves, we could perhaps decide to keep the Sabbath "just in case." But when we as a Church are given the responsibility of teaching others what is required, we must be careful not to add burdens that Christ does not require. If we require too much, we will have to answer for it in the day of judgment. Therefore, we must study the matter thoroughly.

**Question: The Sabbath was commanded in Exodus 16, before the old covenant was made. Does this mean that it remained in force even after the old covenant ended?**

Response: We cannot assume that every command given before Sinai is still in force simply because it was given before the old covenant was made. Sacrifices were instituted before Moses. Circumcision was commanded for Israelites before Moses, but it is not required for the Church today, except in a spiritually transformed way.

Likewise, various other pre-Sinai commands are no longer in force under the new covenant. We do not select lambs on the 10th of Abib or smear their blood on our doorposts. We do not consecrate to the Lord every firstborn male. We do not gather food each day, gathering twice as much on the sixth day. We do not stay in our tents on the seventh day.

When the early Church met to decide whether gentile converts should keep the "law of Moses" (Acts 15:5), pre-Sinai commands given through Moses would have been considered part of the "law of Moses." The Torah of Moses included not just sacrifices, but all the other regulations that Moses wrote about, whether before Sinai or after.<sup>6</sup> "The law of Moses" is not required for Christians today. Peter said that those regulations were an unbearable yoke (Acts 15:10) and were not required for gentiles (verses 28-29).

In Paul's analysis, too, Exodus 16

would not be considered binding on Christians. Exodus 16, just like other parts of the law of Moses, was added 430 or more years after the promise had been given to Abraham and therefore it did not affect the promise (Galatians 3:17). Judaizers wanted the Galatian Christians to keep not only ceremonial laws, but the "whole law" (Galatians 5:3). The entire Torah went with circumcision.<sup>7</sup>

Some pre-Sinai laws are still valid, of course, as can be demonstrated from New Testament scriptures. But other pre-Sinai laws are not. We cannot use Exodus 16 to prove anything about Christian requirements today. If the Sabbath is still required, we need to demonstrate it from other scriptures.

In Exodus 16, Moses told the people that the seventh day would be a day of rest, a holy rest day (verse 23). Nothing in the account implies that the seventh day was holy before this.<sup>8</sup> The Lord, through Moses, gave some new instructions in conjunction with the manna that the Lord was giving the Israelites. He told them to cook all their food in advance (verse 23) and not to travel away from their tents (verse 29). We have admitted for decades that these provisions are not binding on Christians even though they were given before the old covenant was made.

Simply because these Sabbath commands were given before Sinai does not mean that they are required today. Paul's point in Galatians 3 is that obligations given after Genesis 15 do not apply to the covenant of promise, which Christians have inherited. Circumcision also shows that the antiquity of a law does not prove its continuity into the new covenant.

**Question: When God declared the seventh day holy, did that mean that he was present in that day?**

Response: God is present in every day. He is present in every place. God is holy, but holiness does not necessarily indicate the presence of God in any extraordinary way. The Levites were holy, the sacrifices were holy, etc., but that holiness doesn't mean that God's presence was in these things. Rather, holiness means that the things were set apart for specific uses. When God made the Sabbath holy, he specified how it was to be used. He never said that he is "present" in that particular day.

Today, Christ is present among his people in a special way whenever two or three are gathered in his name. He has promised to be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 18:20; 28:20).

**Question: God made the seventh day of every week holy (Exodus 16:23). If God makes something holy, does it remain holy forever?**

Response: No. In the Old Testament, various locations were holy—the ground around the burning bush, the ground covered by the holy of holies in the various tabernacle locations, and an area on the temple mount, but we have no reason to believe that the soil in such places is still holy. The showbread was holy, but a human need could cause it to become usable for ordinary purposes.

The Levites were once holy, having a special role in worship, but they no longer have that special status. After the Exodus, the Israelite firstborn male children and animals were holy (Exodus 13:1-2), but they are no longer holy, at least not in the same

way. The jubilee year (Leviticus 25:12) is no longer holy. In the temple, the holy of holies was holy, but its holy role was negated at the death of Christ, when the veil was torn in two. Jesus said that the time had come for worship to be disassociated from holy places (John 4:21-24).<sup>9</sup>

Although the New Testament does not specifically say that such things have ceased to be holy, it gives us the framework for understanding why they are not. The old covenant, which declared them holy, is obsolete, and therefore they are no longer holy. Even firstborn animals, which were declared holy before the old covenant was made, have ceased to be holy because they were sanctified in the old covenant context of God physically separating his people from others.

In the Old Testament, people, times and places were declared holy, but such things can also become ordinary—all according to whether God designates them for his special use.<sup>10</sup> We cannot *assume* that the Sabbath is still holy simply because it once was. If we are to teach it as a requirement, we must have evidence that God still separates the day and tells his people to use that specific day in a specific way.

Also, even if we find that the Sabbath continues to be holy, we cannot assume that physical rest is still an essential part of its holiness. "Holy" does not automatically mean "rest," and we must look to God for instructions on how to treat his holy things. In short, we do not want to build our Sabbath doctrine on assumptions, no matter how good or reverent they seem. We want to build it on scriptural proof.

**Question: The fourth commandment begins with "remember." Doesn't this indicate that the Sabbath existed long before Sinai?**

Response: No. It need not have any historical reference at all, and it certainly does not require an ancient one. It could simply be a reference to Exodus 16. When God made a covenant with Noah, he promised to remember it (Genesis 9:15). He was not referring to anything in the distant past, but something that he had done that very same day. In Exodus 13:3, Moses told the people to "remember this day."<sup>11</sup>

In the Deuteronomic version of the Ten Commandments, the fourth commandment begins with "observe." That is what Exodus 20 means when it says "remember."

Paul writes, "Remember this," and then he gives a proverb (2 Corinthians 9:6; cf. James 5:20). He was not referring to anything in the past, but simply saying that something should be remembered in the future. It would also be possible to say, Remember what I am about to do. The term *remember* does not prove any antiquity. Nor does it imply any permanence.

**Question: Are the Ten Commandments a permanently valid "core" of God's spiritual law? Do all 10 stay together as an eternal law?**

Response: All of God's words are authoritative. However, God has communicated a lot of words to humans that are not requirements today. Many God-given laws are obsolete. He spoke the law of circumcision just as much as he spoke the law of the Sabbath. God himself commanded that the firstborn males be set aside for him—he himself commanded the building of altars. To discern which of

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# Sabbath and our relationship with God

his laws are still valid, we have to seek the whole counsel of God and rightly divide the word of truth.

The Ten Commandments were not separate from the old covenant—they were the old covenant (Exodus 34:28). They were the preamble and the core of the covenant. They were engraved in tablets of stone, but that does not indicate permanence. The apostle Paul referred to the tablets of stone in 2 Corinthians 3, contrasting the old covenant with the new, contrasting the letters engraved on stone with the Spirit writing on the human heart.

The old covenant was glorious, but the new covenant is much more glorious and has made the old fade away. The Ten Commandments were, and still are, a glorious package of laws, but the new covenant has superseded that package. Although the covenant was inscribed by the finger of God in stone, it is obsolete.

Hebrews 8:6 tells us that the new covenant has been established, and verse 13 tells us that the old covenant is obsolete. Exodus 34:28 tells us that the old covenant was composed of the Ten Commandments. However, if all Ten Commandments are still in force in the same way, how can it be said that the old package is obsolete? We should expect a difference—a difference between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinaitic covenant, a difference between the Sinaitic covenant and the Christian covenant. Most of the commandments are repeated in the New Testament, but the Sabbath is not. The New Testament doesn't criticize anyone for breaking the Sabbath.

The old covenant, as a collection of laws, applied only until the Messiah came (Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 9:10). The laws were perfectly appropriate for Israel's circumstances, but they are not all requirements for Christians today. In some cases, old covenant laws are good descriptions of moral behavior and can be quoted in the New Testament. In other cases, they describe specific practices that are not required today.

The old covenant was a mixture of moral, civil and ceremonial laws. A moral law may be in the midst of ceremonial rules, and vice versa. Although we can categorize those laws according to function, Scripture does not. The only time that the Ten Commandments are given a special status or name, they are called the old covenant (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13).

The New Testament does not distinguish the Ten Commandments from any other group of laws. It does not give them any particular name or give them any special status. New Testament writers may quote some of the Ten and another law from elsewhere in the Pentateuch (Romans 13:9; Matthew 19:18-19; Mark 10:19; James 2:8-11), without any indication that the Ten are any more authoritative than other laws. In fact, the greatest commandments are not in the Ten (Matthew 22:36-40). If there is any consistent grouping in the New Testament, it is the last six commandments—the first four are not quoted with the others. We cannot assume that all 10 must remain together.

The Ten Commandments contain some temporary portions as well as some timeless truths. They were given in the context of physical salvation—they begin with "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). In Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath is commanded as a reminder of the Exodus. It was given in that historical context.<sup>12</sup>

Also within the Ten Commandments, God says that he punishes "the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5). This applies to the physical blessings and curses of the old covenant, but it does not apply to the spiritual blessings of the new covenant. Today, God does not punish children for the sins of their parents.

These show that portions of the Ten Commandments are appropriate to Israel and not everything in the Ten should be considered eternal truth. Although most of the Ten are still valid, we cannot assume that all parts are.<sup>13</sup> We cannot assume the continuing validity of the Sabbath law merely because it was given with other laws that have continuing validity—especially when that package, considered as a whole, is called obsolete in the New Testament. We cannot assume that all 10 must stay together.

**Question: Is the Sabbath Commandment a moral law or a ceremonial law?**

Response: Sabbatarians commonly assert that all the Ten Commandments are in the category of moral law, but there is no biblical proof for this assumption. The term "moral law" comes from theologians who attempt to categorize Old Testament laws according to their primary purpose.

In general, civil laws concern details of how humans interact as a society. Ceremonial laws concern specifics of worship (for example, specifying that the heifer must be red, or that the priest must touch the right big toe). Moral laws concern more fundamental aspects of our relationships with God and humans, the way we get along with each other. Many theologians say that Old Testament moral laws have continuing validity.

The Sabbath command touches on our relationship with God as well as our relationship with humans. It tells us that we should not require our servants to work seven days a week, so in that sense it is moral, concerning interpersonal relationships. The law ensured that servants had time to rest and worship. However, from a human standpoint, one day of the week would be just as good as any other for resting. The requirement that the day of rest specifically be the seventh day of the week is not an interpersonal matter. It was specified by God and was a worship detail.

Concerning worship, our relationship with God needs time. The Sabbath was made for human benefit, not because God's holiness needed it. But is the specific block of time a fundamental and essential aspect of our relationship with God? In the old covenant, a specific time was required for work, and a specific time required for rest.<sup>14</sup> But in the new covenant, the basis of our relationship with God is faith, not a specific time. Time is still necessary, but the new agreement that God has given us specifies neither day nor frequency nor length of time.

The general worship value of the Sabbath command remains—humans need time to worship. But we should not assume that the specific details commanded (cessation of work specifically on the seventh day) are essential characteristics of a relationship with our Creator.<sup>15</sup> Day and night will eventually cease (Revelation 21:25), but our relationship with God will remain forever. The Sabbath is not an essential or permanent part of that relationship. God himself does not keep the Sabbath. It is not part of his character. Therefore, it does not play a direct role

in our spiritual transformation to become conformed to his image. The Sabbath is not an end in itself—it is only a means to an end.

Of course, if God tells us to rest on every seventh day then we will. (We have demonstrated our willingness for many years.) The question is not our willingness, but whether the new covenant tells us to rest on the seventh day. We should obey our Lord, of course, but what we teach as commands cannot be based on assumptions about the Ten Commandments (that they are all moral, or that they must remain together as a package). Our doctrine about the Sabbath must be based on scriptural statements instead of assumptions.

**Question: In ancient Israel, Sabbath-breakers were stoned to death (Exodus 31:14; 35:2; Numbers 15:32-36). Does this severe penalty show the importance of the Sabbath, that it is not just a ritual?**

Response: Exodus 31:14 shows that "cutting off" was the same severity of punishment as execution (see also Leviticus 20:2-3). People who violated the Sinaitic covenant could not be considered part of the covenant people—they had to be banished or executed. Numbers 15:30-31 says that any blatant, willful sin should be punished by cutting the person off from his people. This was immediately illustrated by the case of the man who was gathering sticks on a Sabbath. His rebellion was defiant and that is why he had to be stoned. He was deliberately rejecting the covenant.

Violations of the moral law were not the only covenant violations with severe punishments, however—covenant violations also concerned worship rituals such as using a sacred recipe for incense (Exodus 30:33), an unclean person eating some of the fellowship offering (Leviticus 7:20-21), sacrificing an animal in the wrong place (Leviticus 17:4), going too near the tabernacle at certain times (Numbers 1:51) and prophets who claimed divine authority but whose predictions failed (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). All such were to be cut off or killed. The severity of the punishment is not proof that those particular laws continue to be in force in the new covenant.

**Question: The Sabbath is a perpetual covenant showing that the Creator is the One who makes his people holy (Exodus 31:13-17). Should Christians today keep this perpetual covenant as a sign that they are the Creator's people?**

Response: The Sabbath was given for several purposes. Exodus 31 describes one of them: The Sabbath was designated as a sign between the Israelites and God so the Israelites would know that God made them holy. It reminded the Israelites that God had set them apart for his purpose. However, their holiness depended on their obedience to the old covenant (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 28:9). Thus the Sabbath covenant sign was dependent on the old covenant.

However, Exodus 31 does not say that God sanctifies only Israelites, or only those who keep the Sabbath. It leaves open the possibility that God might make other people holy or give them some other indicator of being sanctified. God is free to work with whomever he wants, in whatever way he wants.

God worked with Israel as a physical nation, and he told them to observe the Sabbath as a sign between them and him forever (vers-

es 16-17). However, circumcision was given as a similar sign, required for Abraham and his descendants, a reminder of the perpetual covenant between God and the people (Genesis 17:10-14). But the sign is not required for the Church—the New Testament gives a different sign.

Circumcision, like the Sabbath, was designated as a perpetual covenant in itself (Genesis 17:13b; Exodus 31:16b). The weekly showbread was also a perpetual covenant (Leviticus 24:8). But all these have been rendered obsolete by the establishment of the new covenant.

In the old covenant community, circumcision was the rite that marked the entrance of a person into the covenant, and the Sabbath was a regular reminder of participation in the covenant. In the new covenant, entry is marked by faith and baptism, and our acceptance of the new covenant is repeated regularly when we partake of the bread and wine in commemoration of our Savior. Those are the New Testament covenantal rites.

Baptism symbolizes being united with Jesus in his death and rising to a new life in him (Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12). This is our re-creation, the beginning of our new life. The Lord's Supper symbolizes our participation with Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). He is the living bread, the sustenance of our new life. Thus we look to Christ, not to Abraham and the Exodus. In the new covenant, Christ is our point of reference.

The New Testament shows that God works with everyone on the basis of faith, not external conformity to a perpetual covenant (Romans 4:9-10). Even the circumcision covenant, given to Abraham himself, cannot annul the promise given to him because of his faith. Laws added after that promise (including the covenant of circumcision, the old covenant, the Sabbath covenant and the showbread covenant) cannot annul God's promise (Galatians 3:17). If there are other reasons to require Sabbath-keeping, then we are of course willing to keep the Sabbath. But the Exodus 31 covenant is not binding on Christ's new covenant people.<sup>16</sup>

The Sabbath covenant between God and Israel showed that God had separated his people from other nations. This indicates that the Sabbath was not given to the gentiles. But today, God does not physically separate his people from others, and he does not have laws separating Jews from gentiles (Ephesians 2:11-18). The distinguishing characteristics emphasized in the New Testament are spiritual—faith and love—rather than physical, geographic or temporal.

We can't assume that perpetual covenants for Israelites automatically apply to the Church today. Exodus 31 is interesting historically, but we cannot base our Sabbath doctrine on it. If we are to claim that Sabbath-keeping is required for salvation, we need more substantial evidence.

**Question: Didn't God give Israel his laws so they would teach the gentiles to obey those same laws (Deuteronomy 5:5-7; Acts 7:38)?**

Response: God gave Israel numerous laws that gentiles are not required to obey today—sacrifices, purification rituals, dedicating first-born children, etc. Although those rituals were a good example to Israel's neighbors, they are not required now. We must look elsewhere in the Bible to see which laws have continuing validity and which do not. We cannot assume that "old covenant laws are

# Sabbath: importance in old covenant system

still valid unless specifically rescinded in the new"—the new covenant has made the old covenant obsolete and the old laws have been set aside. Moreover, as we shall see, the New Testament presents a dramatically different approach to the Sabbath than the old covenant did.

**Question: The Israelites were punished for breaking the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:17-18; Jeremiah 17:27). They were promised blessings for keeping the Sabbath (verses 21-26). Doesn't this show the importance of the Sabbath?**

Response: It shows the importance of the Sabbath in the old covenant system. As a sign, and as part of the tablets of the covenant, it showed covenant allegiance. The Israelites broke all aspects of the covenant, and they were punished with the curses that were attached to the covenant (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28).

Their disobedience regarding the Sabbath, as well as their disobedience in worship rituals, was an external sign of their unbelief.<sup>17</sup> The blessings were physical, and the curses were physical, characteristic of the old covenant but not of the new.

The Jews were punished again in A.D. 70, but Sabbath-breaking was not the reason. Their primary sin in the first century was the rejection of the Messiah, who was far more important than the Sabbath. They had rejected the new covenant. Jesus was the "test commandment" of the first century. Faith in Christ is now the requirement on which our salvation and eternity depends.

In brief, God punished the Israelites for Sabbath-breaking because the Sabbath was a requirement for the time they lived in, for the covenant they lived under. But that cannot prove that the physical details of the Sabbath are still required in a new age.

**Question: The Sabbath was a blessing for both Jews and gentiles (Isaiah 56:2-8). Doesn't that show that both Jews and gentiles should keep it today?**

Response: Isaiah predicted that God, through the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, would establish a new covenant with his people (42:6-7; 49:8-10; 54:9-10; 55:1-3). However, in describing this new relationship, Isaiah also described old covenant customs that in some cases apply only figuratively to the new covenant. In Isaiah 56:7, for example, he said that gentiles will offer burnt offerings and sacrifices at God's house.

Isaiah's main point is that God not only cares for Israelites, but also for gentiles. God's house will become a place for all nationalities, and he will gather gentiles as well as Israelites (verse 8). Eunuchs, who were excluded from the temple in the old covenant (Deuteronomy 23:1), would also be accepted. The terms of relationship between God and humans would be changed, and a new covenant would be made.

God's house would "be called a house of prayer for all nations." Jesus quoted this scripture in Mark 11:17, but the real fulfillment of the prophecy is not in the physical temple, but in flesh in which the Spirit lives. Both Jews and gentiles are invited into God's household, the Church. The physical details of Isaiah's prophecy—physical offerings and a physical temple—are not required for Christians today. If we interpret these physical details according to spiritual counterparts, may we not interpret Sabbath-keeping in a spiritual way, too?

Is the Sabbath a physical detail, like offerings, or is it a permanent and intrinsic part of a proper relationship with God? Neither view should be assumed, and this passage does not give us enough information to decide. We must turn to the new covenant to understand how the Sabbath applies to Christians.

**Question: The Sabbath is a delight and honorable (Isaiah 58:13). Wouldn't it be wrong to call it burdensome and give up its benefits?**

Response: Isaiah 58 is a call to repentance. Isaiah is declaring to the house of Jacob their sins and rebellion (verse 1). Although the Israelites had an external appearance of worship (e.g., fasting), they did it for selfish reasons (verses 2-5). Although they claimed to worship God, they did not obey his more important ethical laws: justice, liberty and charity (verses 6-7).<sup>18</sup>

If the Israelites did the weightier matters of the law, then God would be responsive to them (verses 8-11). He would give physical blessings to the nation (verses 11-12).

And the same is true of the Sabbath. If the people were obedient to the covenant they were under, if they kept it without complaint, if they used God's day the way God wanted them to, then God would bless them physically. As the covenantal blessings promised (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28), God would reward the nation in their land, in the physical inheritance of the patriarch Jacob (Isaiah 58:14). Similarly, the people should have given their burnt offerings and sacrifices cheerfully, without complaining that the sacrifices were burdensome obligations (see Malachi 1:6-14). They should have been happy with the covenant they had been given.

Isaiah 58 is appropriate to old covenant conditions, and it does not necessarily tell us anything about new covenant requirements. We cannot assume that the requirements are the same. All the old covenant laws were good, but their value was temporary. They were designed to lead us to Christ, and they applied until he came. The laws had benefits, but it is permissible for us to give them up after we are led to something better, and we cannot teach as requirement something that is actually optional.

Peter was inspired to say that the law of Moses was "a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Peter did not specify which aspects of the law were the most burdensome, but it is clear that the old covenant package was stricter, in external regulations, than the new covenant is. We must look to the new covenant to see whether 1) it tells us to look to the old covenant for worship days or 2) whether it gives new instructions regarding worship days and customs.

**Question: Prophecies describe a worship of God that includes the Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 44:24). Does this show that the Sabbath is a permanent aspect of God's law?**

Response: The prophets described an ideal time in which all peoples worshiped God. To effectively convey this concept to an old covenant nation, the prophets described old covenant forms of worship, including new moon observances (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3) and sacrifices in the temple (Zechariah 14:20-21; Ezekiel 20:40; 45:17; 46:4). They also describe discrimination against uncircumcised peoples (Ezekiel 44:9; Isaiah 52:1-2) and avoidance of ritual uncleanness

(Ezekiel 44:25-27). But neither circumcision nor sacrifices are religious requirements in this age. Moreover, another prophecy indicates that the day-night cycle will cease (Revelation 21:25), implying that there will be no more Sabbaths.

Prophecies (whether New Testament or Old Testament, whether about Sabbaths or sacrifices or circumcision) are not a reliable source of proof regarding Christian practice. Our doctrines must be based on scriptures that are applicable to the age we live in.

**Question: Jesus kept the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). Was he teaching us how to observe the Sabbath properly so we could follow his example (1 John 2:6)?**

Response: Jesus lived sinlessly under the old covenant requirements (Hebrews 4:15). He was born under the law, while the old covenant was still in force (Galatians 4:4). He observed old covenant customs such as participating in the sacrifice of Passover lambs, tithing to the Levites, telling cleansed people to make offerings as prescribed by Moses, and he observed cultural customs such as Hanukkah.

Because of Jesus' historical context, Christians should be careful about using his example in specific cultural circumstances. We do not have to follow his custom, for example, of going to synagogues.

Jesus never told anyone to keep the Sabbath. Although we are told various things that he did on the Sabbath, we are never told that he rested. According to the Gospels, what he did and taught on the Sabbath was consistently liberal. Let us examine the Gospels to see what the writers were inspired to preserve about Jesus' teachings regarding the Sabbath.

**Matthew 12:1-12:** "Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, 'Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.'"

We know that Jesus did not sin. He did not break the Sabbath, and presumably he did not permit his disciples to break the Sabbath, either. We must conclude that the Pharisees were wrong. However, Exodus 16:29 told people to stay in the camp on the Sabbath and not to pick up food off the ground. Exodus 34:21 says that the Sabbath applied to harvest season.

The Pharisees could claim good scriptural support for prohibiting grain-picking on the Sabbath. But their strictness was excessive—the old covenant rules were not meant to be blanket prohibitions of all activity. But Jesus did not try to argue that his disciples were abiding by the biblical law and violating only the pharisaic tradition. Rather, Jesus went to the Bible to show that the biblical law itself can sometimes be set aside.

The Pharisees were not interpreting the Scriptures in the right way. Jesus pointed this out by mentioning the example of David: "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests" (verses 3-4).

The law said that showbread was holy and was to be eaten, without exception, by priests. And yet David did it and was presumed innocent. It was not lawful according to the letter of the law,<sup>19</sup> and yet it was permitted in the purpose of God's spiritual law. Jesus' point here regarding the Sab-

bath is that the letter of the law is not a reliable guide to holiness. People should be judged on the heart, not on superficial actions.

Jesus gave another example in verses 5-6: "Haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here." Jesus says that the priests "desecrate" the Sabbath day. They are, according to the letter of the Sabbath law, doing something that is not lawful. But yet their work was permitted because it was temple work. Something was more important than the Sabbath, and that something was the temple.<sup>20</sup> The temple and its sacrificial rites were more important than the Sabbath and superseded it.

Jesus, however, is more important than the temple and its sacrifices. The logical conclusion is that he is also more important than the Sabbath. Even before his death and resurrection, he was more important than the Sabbath.<sup>21</sup>

The Pharisees, instead of worrying about a little activity on a holy day, ought to have been concerned with how they were treating the Holy One of Israel, who was standing before them. They should have worshiped him instead of looking to old covenant holy places and instead of using old covenant holy times to judge the Giver of those times. The Sabbath was holy only because God had designated it so, and here was God himself. They should have accepted without question whatever he did, and they should have followed his example!

Jesus then summarized his argument about the Sabbath and about his own identity: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (verses 7-8).

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that love for humans is more important than sticking to worship rituals. Holy bread can be given to ordinary people when they are hungry. Holy time can be used in an ordinary way when people are hungry. If the Pharisees had understood the intent of the law, they would not have been criticizing the disciples. They would have been merciful, not judgmental.

Jesus ends the discussion with his claim to be Lord of the Sabbath—someone who had more authority than the God-given Sabbath did. It is not just that Jesus claimed to have a more accurate understanding of how the day should be kept—he claimed to be more important than the day itself. It was a stupendous claim, and it is no surprise that some Pharisees thought he blasphemed and deserved to die (verse 14).

Jesus' next activity gives a practical demonstration not only of his authority over the Sabbath, but also the proper use for the Sabbath in the old covenant. "Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'" (verses 9-10). The Pharisees seem to be baiting Jesus, confronting him with a situation to test him. Healing was one of the types of work they said was unlawful.<sup>22</sup>

But Jesus again pointed out the hypocrisy in their approach. They would rescue a sheep on the Sabbath (verse 11)—thus even a sheep was more important than resting on the Sabbath—and yet they were so strict

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# Sabbath: Humanitarian needs took precedence

that they didn't allow human needs, whether hunger or healing, to be taken care of on the Sabbath. Their rules were a terrible distortion of what the Sabbath should have been. "How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (verse 12). This is what Jesus taught about the Sabbath. Don't worry about prohibiting work—be more concerned about doing good.

So Jesus healed the man and the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus. They thought the holy day was more important than the One who had made it holy.

**Mark 1:21-22**—"They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." This verse doesn't tell us much about the Sabbath, merely that Jesus happened to teach on this day. Presumably he taught on other days of the week, in other locations, but this is the day on which he could teach in a synagogue.

The passage says that Jesus taught with authority. He also cast out demons with authority (verses 23-26), and the people were amazed at his authority (verse 27). Luke 4:31-37 is a parallel account.

Mark 2:23-3:6 is parallel to Matthew 12:1-12. Mark does not include the comments about sheep and mercy, but he makes a similar point by saying, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

Several unsubstantiated claims have been made about verse 27. Let's note what it says and what it does not say.

First, it says that the Sabbath was made for humans. It was given to serve their needs and to benefit them. Actually, all of God's laws, even the laws of sacrifice, were given for human good. All the old covenant laws were designed to lead people to Christ. They were made to benefit humans. But their value has been eclipsed in Christ. God has given us something better.

Jesus did not say *when* the Sabbath came into existence. Nothing in the context indicates that Jesus was alluding to creation week.<sup>23</sup> We cannot assume that something made *for* humans necessarily had to be made immediately after humans were. For example, we could also say that the festivals were made *for* human benefit, and the rite of circumcision was instituted *for* human benefit. Christ was crucified *for* us. All these show that the word "for" is not precise enough to conclude, from this verse, when the Sabbath originated.

Also, Jesus did not say that the Sabbath was made for both gentiles and Jews—this is not in the context. When Jesus used the word "man" in Mark 2:27, he was using it in a general sense, without any reference to Jews specifically or to gentiles specifically. Most first-century Jews did not believe that gentiles had to keep the Sabbath,<sup>24</sup> and Jesus was not addressing this question. We should not ask questions that are beyond the context of the passage.<sup>25</sup>

The verse simply says that the Sabbath was made to benefit humans. We cannot assume that it was made at creation, nor that it hasn't been superseded by a better blessing in the new covenant. Since the Sabbath was made for human benefit, the Son of Man has authority over it (verse 28). He is more important than the Sabbath. Our relationship with God is based on faith in him,

not in old covenant institutions.

In the Sabbath healing that follows, Mark again is slightly different than Matthew. Particularly striking is the emotion of Jesus: "He looked around at them in anger ... deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts" (Mark 3:5). Jesus was angry at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who were so much more concerned about the holiness of a day than about the well-being of humans. They were really more concerned with self than with God, for they were failing to do what God himself would do.

**Luke 4:15-30**—"He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read." Jesus taught in the synagogues on the Sabbaths. Considering the historical context, there is nothing unusual about that.

What is more significant is what Jesus taught: "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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (verses 18-19).

Jesus used the Sabbath, in his preaching and in his miracles, to deliver poor people from bondage. His ministry was like a jubilee year. He preached the good news that the Lord's favor was on the people. He gave physical sight to a few, but spiritual sight to many. He did not release anyone from physical prisons, but freed many from spiritual captivity (through casting out demons and through forgiving sins). Although many people appreciated his ministry, many others did not.

In Nazareth, people were offended at who Jesus was. They recognized that he had wisdom, and that he could do miracles, but they also thought of him as an ordinary villager (Mark 6:2-3). How could a carpenter, the son of a carpenter, have such authority?

They could not believe that Jesus was more than an ordinary human, and Jesus said that it was a typical situation: "No prophet is accepted in his hometown" (Luke 4:24). And after Jesus reminded the people that God often sent his prophets to non-Israelites, the people were furious and tried to kill him (verses 25-29).

Although these incidents occurred on a Sabbath, there is little here about the Sabbath itself. There is more about who Jesus is and what he preached. He preached liberty and salvation.

**Luke 6:1-11**—This is the grainfield incident, parallel to Matthew 12 and Mark 2. The point is again the same: "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Luke 6:5). Although we might see here the fact that the Son of Man is the One who created all things and the One who worked with Moses and therefore the One who made the Sabbath, this was probably not understood by Jesus' audience, nor does it seem to be intended.

Jesus simply means that he has authority over the day. This is demonstrated by the healing that follows in all three Synoptic accounts. The miracle demonstrated not only Jesus' ministry of liberation, but also his authority over the Sabbath, since he could perform such miracles on the Sabbath.

**Luke 13:10-17**—Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke includes two more stories of Sabbath healings, and these provide further information to us regarding Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath.

"On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God" (verses 10-13).

By using the words "set free" or "loose," Jesus was emphasizing liberation rather than healing. This also provided the context for the comparison Jesus soon made.

The synagogue ruler (most synagogues were run by Pharisees) complained, saying that healing was a work that could be done on the other six days and was not appropriate for the Sabbath (verse 14). "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? 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?'" (verses 15-16).

Since humans are more valuable than animals, and animals can be loosed on the Sabbath—an ordinary, daily, mundane task—then humans can be loosed on the Sabbath, too. The pharisaic rules about the Sabbath were not designed to benefit humans.

Instead, the rules served the self-righteous attitudes of the Pharisees. The Pharisees would prefer to see the woman labor with her infirmity rather than see the labor of healing. They were binding unnecessary obligations on the people, and Jesus said that the people should be "set free" or "loosed" on the Sabbath day. Luke's readers may have extended this principle even further than would have been possible in a Palestinian setting.<sup>26</sup>

A similar point is made in the next chapter. Luke 14:1-6—"One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?'" (verses 1-3). As in previous situations, the Pharisees had probably set the situation up to test Jesus. Jesus knew their thoughts and handled the situation so expertly that he left them speechless.

Jesus healed the man, then asked, "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?" (verse 5). Of course, the Pharisees would rescue a child or beast on the Sabbath. Rescue was permitted, so healing ought to be permitted, too.<sup>27</sup>

Consistently, whether alleviating minor hunger or healing major pain, Jesus pointed out that humanitarian needs took precedence over the Sabbath. The day was supposed to benefit humans, not cause burdens for them.<sup>28</sup>

**John 5:1-18**—The Gospel of John has some additional stories about Jesus' Sabbath activities, and they reinforce the emphases we have already seen. On the Sabbath, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. And he told the man: "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (verse 8). The Jews accused the man of breaking the Sabbath because he was carrying his mat.

Why did Jesus tell the man to carry his mat? There was no emergency, and the man was certainly capable of coming back after the Sabbath to get his mat. Jesus could have easily said,

"You can carry your mat today if you want, but to avoid offense, leave it here for now." But Jesus was not that conservative. He wanted to emphasize human freedom—not only the man's freedom from his infirmity, but also his freedom to do something on the Sabbath.

The Jews criticized Jesus for what he was doing on the Sabbath, but Jesus provoked them even further by boldly saying that he was indeed *working* on the Sabbath and that he did so because he was like the Father! (verse 17). "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" (verse 18). Jesus continued to equate himself with the Father (verses 19-27).

Jesus did not try to defend his work, and the man's work, as within the intent of the law. Instead, he boldly described his activity on the Sabbath as "work." However, we know from Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus kept the Sabbath perfectly, even within the parameters of old covenant law. Just as the priests could do God's work on the Sabbath, Jesus could, too.

However, we today are not under the old covenant restrictions. Just what that means for the Sabbath is not addressed in this passage. If we imitate our Savior, we might conclude that we are allowed to work on the Sabbath. At least John does nothing to prevent such a conclusion.

Jesus alluded to this Sabbath healing, and the controversy it caused, in John 7:22-23. He pointed out the irony that the Jews did not allow healing on the Sabbath, but they did allow circumcision. "If a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?"

Work could be done on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses would not be broken, showing that the law of Moses commanding circumcision was considered more important than the Sabbath restriction. The circumcision law was more important than the strictness of the Sabbath law, just as the laws of temple ritual were.

The Jews probably had no answer for Jesus. They could not refute what he said, and that is one reason they tried to kill him. But the readers of John's Gospel would understand that circumcision, temple rituals and "the law of Moses" were not required for gentile Christians. If important laws could be swept aside, what does that imply for the lesser requirements of the Sabbath law?

In John 9, Jesus made mud to heal a blind man (verses 1-7). "Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath" (verse 14). All this had a spiritual meaning, of course: Jesus is the light of the world, enabling spiritually blind people to see the truth.

On this Sabbath day, Jesus said, "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (verse 4). Work must be done on the Sabbath, Jesus said.

The Jews, of course, objected to Jesus' work—and they objected to it being done on the Sabbath. Making mud was against their law, and so was healing. They judged Jesus according to their law, and they judged unrighteously. They claimed to have the correct standard, but they were spiritually blind, neglecting love, justice, mercy and faith (verse 41). They were looking at the law instead of the Lawgiver as

# Sabbath: Jesus' example is liberty

the standard of judgment.

Throughout these Sabbath incidents, Jesus liberalized the standards. He repeatedly did things that could have waited until sundown. He boldly claimed to have authority to work on the Sabbath. That is one reason why many Christians conclude that the Sabbath is no longer required. Other Christians, who are also right with God, conclude that they should keep the Sabbath, although not as strictly as the Pharisees did. They are all welcome to their opinions and welcome in our fellowship if they do not judge others on this topic.

Every Christian should be fully convinced, living every day to the Lord, seeking to be led by the Holy Spirit. If people think that the day is required, then to them it is required. If people think that they have freedom in this matter, then Christ expects them to act responsibly with that freedom. Whatever is not done in faith is sin.

Numerous scriptures admonish us to follow the example of our Savior. In following his example, however, we must distinguish between his activities that were based on the historical situation he lived in (e.g., going to synagogues), and those activities that were based on timeless laws of interpersonal conduct and worship in spirit and truth. We see some of these more important principles when we notice the context in which the scriptures admonish us to do as he did:

We are to serve one another, as he served his disciples (John 13:14-15). We are to love as he loved us (John 13:34; 1 John 2:5-7; 2 John 5). We are to accept one another, just as he accepted us (Romans 15:7). We are to be humble, as he was (Philippians 2:5-7). We are to suffer without retaliation, as he did (1 Peter 2:19-23). We should make sacrifices for one another, just as he did for us (1 John 3:16).

**Question: Jesus risked his life by what he did on the Sabbath. Wouldn't he have avoided controversy unless it were necessary—wouldn't he have avoided Sabbath activities unless his disciples needed to know how to keep the Sabbath properly?**

Response: Jesus criticized the Pharisees' approach to various laws and rituals, including ritual handwashing (Matthew 15:2), phylacteries (Matthew 23:5) and Corban rules (Mark 7:11-13). In all these things, he antagonized the Pharisees and risked his life. But these criticisms were not attempts to tell his disciples how to continue these customs in a better way. In fact, Jesus' criticisms helped the early Church realize that these customs were obsolete. Therefore, we cannot assume, when the Gospels record Jesus criticizing the way something was done, that he wanted the practice continued by the Church in a better way.

Jesus sometimes criticized the way the Pharisees approached customs that were good, including almsgiving, prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16). On these topics, Jesus clearly taught his disciples to continue the practice (verses 3, 6, 17). But Jesus never taught his disciples to keep the Sabbath. We are told about *work* that Jesus did on the Sabbath, but we are never told that he rested on the Sabbath. He repeatedly noted that restrictive rules were violations of the intent of the Sabbath—he taught that a focus on external details was ineffective and incorrect. Those restrictions did not transform the heart.

Jesus showed that various forms of

work could be done on the Sabbath. He compared the Sabbath to show-bread rules, noting that holy things can be used for secular purposes when there is a need. David could break the letter of the law and yet be innocent according to the spiritual law. Jesus is more important than the temple rituals, and the rituals are more important than the strict requirements of the Sabbath law. Logically, then, Jesus is more important than the Sabbath. He is the new focus of worship.

But Jesus never broke the Sabbath, nor did he teach others to break the Sabbath. But neither did he teach against circumcision and sacrifices. He could not while the old covenant was still in force. He could point out administrative problems, and present himself as the Lord, but it was not yet time to publicly reject any particular law (cf. John 16:12-13). But the implications are there. When John describes Jesus as working on the Sabbath, he does not feel compelled to explain that Christians cannot. When Luke says that people are freed on the Sabbath, he does not feel compelled to qualify what he said. Jesus' example regarding the Sabbath is liberty, not rules.

**Question: We should pray that we don't have to flee on a Sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Does this show that Jesus' disciples would be keeping the Sabbath?**

Response: This warning was given to "those who are in Judea" (verse 16), and this warning is preserved only in Matthew's Gospel, which was probably written to Jewish Christians. Jesus' warning tells us more about practices in Judea than it does about Christianity.

We have always known that it is permissible to flee for your life on the Sabbath. The reason that it might be difficult to flee on the Sabbath, however, is because unbelievers are keeping the Sabbath, not because the fleeing people are. Perhaps the fleeing people keep the Sabbath or perhaps they do not, but either way it might be difficult to flee when the people of Judea have closed their shops, closed the city gates, etc. This verse does not prove that the disciples would be keeping the Sabbath—only that it might be difficult to flee on a Sabbath.

**Question: The resurrection stories show that the Sabbath still existed after Jesus' crucifixion. The women "rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). Does this show that the Sabbath is still commanded for Christians?**

Response: The Sabbath still exists. Hanukkah does, too, but its existence does not prove that it has to be observed. When the Gospels tell us that the resurrection was discovered "after the Sabbath, on the first day of the week," they are not telling us to keep the Sabbath any more than they are telling us to keep the first day of the week. They are simply telling us when this event occurred, using the term that was widely known at the time.

The women rested on the Sabbath, but their example does not tell us whether that commandment is still in effect. Today, many Sabbatarians would consider it permissible to prepare a body for burial, especially if the person had been dead for more than a day and there is no refrigeration. Luke's readers, whether they kept the Sabbath or not, might have wondered why the women rested even though they were faced with this particular need. Luke was inspired to

tell his readers that the women rested because of the commandment.

Luke used the word "commandment," but that does not prove that the commandment was required for Luke's readers. Paul used the word "commandments" to describe the rules that divided Jews from gentiles (Ephesians 2:15), but the word does not imply that those commandments still had validity for his readers. Luke is simply using commonly understood terms to explain why the women rested. He is not giving a command for his readers to follow that example.

In a similar way, the phrase "a Sabbath day's walk" (Acts 1:12) does not imply anything regarding the distance we may travel today on the Sabbath. The phrase was simply a measurement of distance, just as "Sabbath" was the name of one day of the week. The name does not imply continuing obligation for Christians.

**Question: Paul's custom was to keep the Sabbath (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2). Shouldn't we follow his example in this (1 Corinthians 11:1)?**

Response: Paul, like Jesus, customarily went to the synagogue. But why should we insist on imitating one phrase of the sentence and ignore another part? Why should we cite the example of "Sabbath" but not of "synagogue"? The fact that this was a synagogue should alert us to the historical situation and should caution us regarding specific customs. Paul went to the synagogue on the Sabbath because that is when and where people were assembled to hear discussions of Scripture. That is when and where he had an audience. He went to Jews first, and then to gentiles, and the best way to preach to Jews would be to go to the synagogues on the day Jews were there.<sup>29</sup>

Paul sometimes kept other Jewish customs, too, such as circumcision, making vows and participating in temple rituals. His example isn't automatically authoritative. If we imitate all the ways in which he lived like Jesus, we would have to be celibate traveling preachers. We need to discern which details of their lives were based on the culture they lived in, and which were based on Christianity, and which were involved in both.

Paul considered himself under the law of Christ, not under the law of the old covenant (1 Corinthians 9:19-21). He was free to observe old covenant customs when with Jews, and he was free to ignore them in other situations. Peter was free to "live like a Gentile," and Paul was, too (Galatians 2:14). Today, we are to obey the commands of Jesus (Matthew 28:20), and Jesus never commanded anyone to rest on the Sabbath.

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul gave a controversial message in the synagogue: "Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39).

The Jews and proselytes asked Paul to speak to them the next Sabbath (verse 42), and that is what Paul did. Paul did not try to change their Sabbath-keeping custom. Large portions of the audience would have had to work the next six days and would not have been able to assemble on Sunday. Also, it would be good for them to think about and discuss Paul's message for a week. Because Paul waited a week, the entire city was able to hear about the controversy

and therefore came to hear him speak (verse 44).

In the gentile cities of Lystra and Derbe, nothing is said about the Sabbath. Even in Athens, where some Jews lived, nothing is said about the Sabbath. Instead, Paul reasoned "in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17). Daily preaching is a valid custom, too, if we wish to follow the example set by Paul and Jesus.

Moses was preached in the synagogues every Sabbath, James noted (Acts 15:21). But James was not encouraging gentiles to attend synagogues!<sup>30</sup> The converts needed to hear about Christ, not about Moses. The Jerusalem conference rejected the view of those who thought the gentiles had to keep the entire "law of Moses" (verse 5).<sup>31</sup>

"We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (verse 19). Instead of requiring gentile Christians to keep the law of Moses, the conference told them to abstain from blood, strangled things, idolatry and fornication (verse 20). The council gave a lenient decree because stringent requirements were being preached in the synagogues (verse 21). The Sabbath was part of the law of Moses, just as much as circumcision was, but nothing was said to make the Sabbath an exception, either by the council or by Luke, who wrote many years later for gentile readers.

In Corinth, Paul again started in the synagogue, and there he argued every Sabbath (Acts 18:4). But soon Paul left the synagogue and began teaching next door (verse 7). After this, nothing is said about the Sabbath, and Paul could have taught every day of the week. Even as he made tents, he could discuss the Scriptures with any who had time to listen. In Ephesus, Paul preached every day of the week for two years (Acts 19:9-10). This is a valid custom, too.

On his way back to Jerusalem, Paul stopped seven days in Troas (Acts 20:6). But we do not hear anything about the Sabbath. What we hear is that the church ("we") waited until the first day of the week to come together and break bread, and Paul preached after the Sabbath was over (verse 7). Why wait till then? Apparently the first day of the week was the time that the believers could get together. Although Paul was in a hurry (verse 16), he had to wait until the first day of the week. This is a significant example, too.

In short, we are never told that Paul rested on the Sabbath, or that he taught anyone to rest on the Sabbath. What we are told is that he used the day as an evangelistic opportunity, and that he could use any day of the week to preach about the Savior. His example shows liberty, and nothing about requirements.

**Question: Paul taught regularly on the Sabbath (Acts 18:1-11). Was he teaching the gentiles to keep the Sabbath?**

Response: This passage says only that he taught in the synagogues for a few Sabbaths—after that, it does not say when he taught. Although it may have been on the Sabbath, it may have been on other days, too, as it was in Athens and Ephesus. And the passage says nothing about avoiding work on a particular day of the week.

The book of Acts tells us what Paul did on a few Sabbaths and a few other days. If we want to know what Paul himself taught about the Sabbath, we must turn to the only place

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# Sabbath: how the shadow points to reality

the word "Sabbath" is used in his epistles: Colossians 2:16-17: "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. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Paul begins his analysis of the Sabbath with a "therefore." That word should alert us to back up and examine the context. It is because Christ has triumphed in the cross (verse 15) that Christians should not let people judge them regarding the Sabbath. Christ's death on the cross had changed something about the Sabbath. In Colosse, the Sabbath had no connection with temple rituals. The only way it could be observed is by abstaining from work and assembling for worship. But Christ's death had changed something about the Christians' approach to the Sabbath. Christians were not to be judged by anyone regarding the Sabbath.

The Sabbath, festivals, new moons and the entire Jewish calendar were a "shadow" of things to come. They were foreshadows—predictive shadows symbolizing things to come. Grammatically, it is ambiguous as to whether those things have already taken place, or whether some are future. For Christian practice, it does not matter, since Paul's conclusion is that we should not let others judge us with regard to the Sabbath.

Whether we keep it or whether we do not, we should not let others judge us over this issue. Whether we keep the Sabbath or not, we should not let others make us feel guilty regarding the Sabbath. We should not let others make us think that we will lose our salvation if we don't comply with their ideas. The Sabbath is neither forbidden nor required. That is why the Worldwide Church of God welcomes Sabbath-keepers as well as non-Sabbath-keepers.

The contrast between "shadow" and "reality" is found also in Hebrews 10:1—the sacrificial laws were a shadow of the good things that were coming (same Greek word and tense as in Colossians 2:17), not the reality. Just as the sacrifices were shadows that pointed to Christ and were superseded by him, the old covenant worship days were also shadows that pointed to Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Now that he has come, the days are no longer standards by which we are judged. The proper standard is Jesus Christ. At the last judgment, the definitive question will not be about days, but about faith in Jesus Christ. His coming has made an enormous difference in the way God's people should worship in spirit and in truth. We have only recently begun to realize how significant his death and resurrection have been to both faith and practice.

Paul did not teach gentile Christians to keep the Sabbath. He actually told them that the Sabbath was not an area in which we should be judged. As he told the Roman church, which contained both Jews and gentiles, "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" (Romans 14:5).<sup>33</sup>

Paul did not think it necessary to tell these people that one particular day is sacred or superior. He left it to individual conviction. How could Paul take such an indifferent attitude to the concept of special days? Apparently something significant had happened—the most significant event in history: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Because of that event, days

are no longer a matter for judging behavior.

Paul's main point is that one Christian should not judge another regarding any supposedly better days: "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" (verse 4). "Each of us will give an account of himself to God," Paul writes in verse 12.

But does this mean that we should live in fear of the last judgment, keeping the Sabbath "just in case," observing new moons "just in case," and other restrictions "just in case"? Certainly, if a person does these things reverently, "to the Lord," they may be acceptable, helpful habits. But they cannot be made requirements on other Christians. Paul's conclusion is clear: "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (verse 13). For every obstacle we put in front of people, we will be judged. When teaching requirements, we must be cautious.

It is good to be obedient, but we must not think that our obedience earns anything toward salvation. Paul warned the Galatian Christians strongly that faith in Christ was sufficient for salvation. Faith leads us to walk by the Spirit, and that means a life-style of love, joy and peace, etc. Faith does not mean a superstitious observance of circumcision or old covenant laws "just in case" they are also necessary.

We are called to faith—confident that the sacrifice of Christ cleanses us from all sin—not to fearful bondage to religious traditions and human rules. Such rules may appear to be religious and they may have the form of godliness, but they do not have the power to transform the heart, which is the focus of Christianity. In fact, rules can become more important to some people than having love for neighbor. The rules can deceive people into thinking that they are right with God merely by keeping the rules.<sup>34</sup> At least that's what they did with some Pharisees.

The Galatians had been gentiles in pagan religions before they were saved by faith in Christ. But Judaizing heretics were apparently teaching them that, although they had started with Christ, they needed to complete their salvation with circumcision and a commitment to the old covenant (Galatians 5:3). Such a teaching must be cursed and condemned! It makes Christ of no value (verse 2).

The old covenant law was slavery, Paul said (Galatians 4:24-25; 5:1; note also the "we" in 4:3), just as paganism was (Galatians 4:8). The Galatian Christians had gone from one childish slavery (paganism, with its many external rules) to another (the old covenant, with its external rules)!

When the Judaizers taught "days and months and seasons and years" (verse 10), it is likely that they taught the Jewish calendar with its days, lunar months, festival seasons and sabbatical years. Such external requirements were "weak and miserable principles"<sup>35</sup> (verse 9), since they can never earn us salvation, nor are they required after we are given salvation. Christians may keep such days if they want (as many Jewish Christians did), but they should not teach that such days are required under the new covenant.

How could Paul be so indifferent to something that had been a commandment? Because something more significant than the old covenant has

come—something more important than manna has given us life. The old covenant worship days were shadows or silhouettes, just as the sacrifices were, and now the Reality has come (Colossians 2:16-17; Hebrews 10:1-2). The law—the entire old covenant—was in force until Christ came (Galatians 3:25; Hebrews 9:10).

The old covenant was an administration appropriate to a carnal nation. The new covenant is administered in a different way. God's law is the same, but it is administered in different ways at different times for different peoples and different purposes.

We must recognize the continuing validity of God's law—but we must recognize that the New Testament gives us a more complete picture than the Old Testament does. We must interpret old laws from the perspective of the new situation Jesus Christ brought. The spiritual purpose of the Sabbath is still valid, but the spiritual purpose is not in the avoidance of work on a specific day. The spiritual purpose is to point us to Christ. Now that we have come to Christ, the pointer is of such diminished importance that (whether we understand its function or not) Paul can say that it is not a matter on which Christians should be judged.

The Sabbath pointed an unconverted nation to its Creator. It gave them frequent reminders of him, just as the temple and its sacrifices did. But now that the Creator is living in us, we do not need pointers in the same way. Just as we abide by the spiritual purpose of circumcision through repentance and forgiveness—completely ignoring the physical details the old rite demanded—we abide by the spiritual purpose of the Sabbath when we have faith in Christ.

We can see that a little more clearly in Hebrews 4, which we will analyze below, but the conclusion is made necessary simply by Paul's indifferent attitude toward old covenant days. Something so significant has happened that the weekly Sabbath is no longer a matter on which God's people are to be judged.

However, the practical aspects of the Sabbath are still practical. We still need time to worship, and we need time devoted to God. If we work seven days a week, we will most likely drift away from God and starve ourselves spiritually.

We must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, not only for our own benefit but for the benefit of the entire community of faith. "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25). We should come to church services prepared to encourage others, to give words of praise and thanks to the Lord.

Christians should not use liberty for self-destruction. They should not take their liberty to excess, like wild teenagers suddenly released from parental rules. Most of us recognize that there is great value in setting aside a day for worship, a day in which we do not allow secular duties to intrude, a day for building family cohesion and building the community of faith.

We need to set boundaries for ourselves. This is good for our spiritual growth, and we should not recklessly abandon such valuable customs. But we realize that the New Testament does not specify when this ought to be done, nor exactly how much time

it must involve. Therefore, we cannot demand that others must do precisely as we do, and thereby judge them regarding the Sabbath. Christ gives liberty not for selfish pleasures, but for service to others (Galatians 5:13). We must be grateful for our freedom and use it to build others up, not to put stumbling blocks in their way. We must not allow our freedom to become offensive to others.

In summary, all the Sabbatarian arguments are faulty. We cannot prove that the Sabbath existed or was commanded before Moses. We cannot prove that it is valid simply because it is part of the Ten Commandments. We cannot prove that it is important for Christians simply because it was important for ancient Israel. We cannot prove that Jesus commanded it or that Paul commanded it. Instead, we see that Jesus consistently argued for more liberty, and Paul said that we should not judge others regarding worship days.

Of course, there is no New Testament verse that says the Sabbath is now obsolete. Instead, there are verses that say the entire old covenant law is obsolete. The law of Moses is not required. We are to live by the spirit, not by the letter of the law. The Sabbath is repeatedly likened to things now obsolete: temple sacrifices, circumcision, showbread, a shadow. It is not a basis for judging one another, and it must not be taught as a necessary addition to Christ. Therefore, many Christians conclude that the Sabbath is not required.

If the Sabbath were a requirement, it would be astonishing that the New Testament never mentions such an important command. It has space for all sorts of other commands, including holy kisses, but no occasion to command the Sabbath. Sweeping statements are made regarding the old covenant law, but never does anyone say, "except the Sabbath." If the Sabbath is essential, it is astonishing that no one is ever criticized for ignoring it.

Paul dealt with numerous problems of Christian living, and he lists numerous sins that can keep people out of the kingdom of God, but he never mentions the Sabbath. In describing sins of the gentiles (Romans 1), he says nothing about the Sabbath.<sup>36</sup> He says plenty about faith and love, magnifying the real purpose of God's law, but the Sabbath is simply not commanded. Nor is it credible to claim that the entire New Testament was purposely written in such a way that only the "wise" would understand the most important command.

Instead, the Sabbath is an indifferent matter. People are free to rest on that day if they do it to the Lord. People are free to use the day in other ways, too, if they are living to the Lord. They may even work on the day if they have faith that Christ has indeed given them that freedom. Let everyone be fully convinced, for whatever is not of faith is sin.<sup>37</sup>

Nor does the New Testament tell us that any other day of the week ought to be a day of rest. Believers are free to meet on the seventh day of the week, or on any other day. Paul preached on every day of the week.

In the Worldwide Church of God, we meet on the seventh day of the week for several reasons:

It is our tradition. Although our tradition was originally based on the overly dogmatic claim that the seventh-day Sabbath is required for salvation,<sup>38</sup> there is no biblical reason why we have to change our day of worship even after discovering that our original reason was mistaken.

# Sabbath: By faith we enter God's rest

Since our members have arranged their work schedules to avoid Saturday work, Saturdays are the day on which almost all of us can meet regularly.

Since we welcome Sabbath-keepers into our fellowship and do not demand that they change their custom, we meet on Saturday so they can worship with us.

Because of these reasons, we will meet on the Sabbath for a long, long time.

## Question: Does Hebrews 4:9 command Christians to keep the Sabbath?

Response: The epistle to the Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who were probably still participating in the customs of Judaism. The epistle explains that the old covenant is obsolete and its regulations have been set aside. When it mentions *sabbatismos* in 4:9, it is not sneaking in an affirmation of an old covenant law.

Throughout the epistle, the Hebrew believers are admonished that Jesus is much, much better than anything the old covenant had. Jesus Christ is the main focus of the epistle. Tithing is mentioned, for example, only because it shows the superiority of Christ over the Levitical priests. *Sabbatismos* is also mentioned, not as a point in itself, but because it illustrates something about the superiority of faith in Christ.

Jesus is better than angels, better than Moses, better than Aaron, better than all the rituals. He has superseded them all, fulfilling the spiritual truths that they pictured, rendering their physical performance unnecessary. Hebrews 4:9 does not command the continuation of an old covenant practice.

Let us begin our analysis in Hebrews 3: "Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.... Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses" (verses 1, 3). The epistle then quotes from Psalm 95, reminding the Hebrews that their ancestors had hardened their hearts and been faithless and disobedient under Moses' leadership.

Don't harden your hearts, the epistle exhorts, echoing the point that had been made in Hebrews 2:1-3. The Hebrew Christians were apparently being tempted to go back into Judaism, and the epistle exhorts them to be faithful to the superiority of Jesus Christ. Listen to what Jesus says (1:2; 2:1). Look to him, not to Moses, as our authority in faith and practice. Look to him as our High Priest in heaven, not to the Levitical priests in the temple, which are only shadows and copies of spiritual truth (8:1-5; 10:1).

Do not turn away from the living God, the epistle exhorts (3:12). Hold your faith in Christ firmly to the end (3:14). Do not harden your hearts (3:15). We cannot please God if we do not have faith (3:19; 11:6).

The epistle draws an analogy between the Israelites entering the promised land and Christians entering the better promise of the new covenant. This analogy is again designed to show the superiority of Christ. When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they sent spies into Canaan to see the land that the Lord would be giving them. However, most of the Israelite spies were afraid of the Canaanites, and most of the Israelites believed the spies instead of God. God therefore declared that they, since they lacked faith and would not obey his order to invade Canaan, would not

enter the promised land: "They shall never enter my rest" (Numbers 14:26-29; Psalm 95:11; Hebrews 3:11). In this psalm, "rest" was a metaphor for the old covenant promise, the land of Canaan.

The next generation of Israelites entered the promised land under Joshua's leadership. Nevertheless, even after they entered the promised land, God continued to warn them, in the psalm, not to harden their hearts lest they fail to enter God's rest. So the psalm was pointing toward a future rest (4:8). The promised land had been a physical type or foreshadow of a spiritual rest that the Israelites had not yet entered.

The epistle to the Hebrews picks up the message and continues it: Do not harden your hearts, and do not reject the teaching of Jesus. Do not become unbelieving and disobedient, but continue trusting in Jesus and obey him.

Christians have been given the new covenant, with its better, spiritual promises. They participate in this new covenant through faith in Jesus Christ. They enter God's rest, his promise, by their faith in Jesus Christ. "Now we who have believed enter that rest" (Hebrews 4:3)—and that is the "rest" that the psalmist was talking about (verse 3b). Now, because we have entered God's rest, we must be "careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it" (verse 1).

The spiritual rest that the psalmist had spoken of, the rest that God wants us to enter, has arrived in Jesus Christ. And the way people might fall short is by abandoning their faith in Jesus Christ. We must be careful that we do not lose faith and lose the rest that we have already entered.

In Christ, we have rest. He has freed us from the old covenant, which was a yoke too difficult to bear, and has given us a new covenant, which is a yoke that is so much easier to bear that it is called a "rest" (Matthew 11:28-30). When we are in Christ, we are in spiritual rest. We have begun to experience the better promises of God.

God exhorts people to enter *his* rest—and the place that Scripture talks about God resting is on the seventh day of creation (Hebrews 4:4). We are invited to enter God's end-of-creation rest by believing in the Son of God. By faith, we have joined with God in his rest. By faith, we have become new creations, created anew. We have been brought into the kingdom of God.

Our re-creation is not yet complete, but we have entered his rest. We have been reconciled and have fellowship with God through our High Priest, just as Adam and Eve had fellowship with God before they sinned. By faith in Christ, we enter God's rest, as predicted by the psalmist.

We have entered into God's *katapausin* rest, the same type of rest that he had on the very first seventh day.<sup>39</sup> "Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his" (4:10). This is far more significant than resting one day a week, because the epistle has already noted that God's "work has been finished since the creation of the world" (4:3). God's rest is an enduring rest, and the believer's rest is, too.

As long as we have faith in Christ, no matter what day of the week it is, we have entered God's rest and we are resting from our own work. Our own work cannot save us, but we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. We enter God's rest permanently through faith in Christ.

"There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest (*sabbatismos*) for the people of

God" (4:9). The writer is using a different word, but he is not referring to a different rest. Both words are used as metaphors for salvation. As can be seen by the word "then" or "therefore," it is the same rest that is mentioned in verse 8—the "rest" of salvation.

Joshua, entering the promised land, did not give the people the spiritual rest (*katapausin*) of God. That's why the psalmist, centuries later, spoke about another day. Therefore, verse 9 says, for that reason, because the psalmist spoke of a future rest (*katapausin*), it logically follows that there still remains a Sabbath-rest (*sabbatismos*) for the people of God, and, verse 11, we should make every effort to enter that rest (*katapausin*). However, if the *sabbatismos* rest were different than the *katapausin* rest, then it would not logically follow that the *sabbatismos* remains simply because the psalmist talked about a *katapausin*.

Verse 10, which begins with "for," also presents a logical connection between *sabbatismos* and *katapausin*. A *sabbatismos* exists for Christians because they enter God's *katapausin*. The logical connection would not exist if these were two different rests.

The equivalence of *katapausin* and *sabbatismos* can be further seen in the parallel way they are used. In verse 1, he says that the promise of *katapausin* rest still stands. In verse 6, he says that it still remains (*apoleipetai*) that some will enter the *katapausin* rest. And in verse 9, he says that there remains (*apoleipetai*) a *sabbatismos* rest for us.

He is using the words for rest as synonyms, one alluding to the creation rest and the other alluding to its weekly commemoration, but both referring to the same rest that Christians are to try to enter. It is the salvation rest that remains for Christians to enter and to be careful not to fall short of through unbelief. We are exhorted to enter this rest through faith (verses 11, 3).

Let us paraphrase the passage: God promised a rest, but the first Israelites did not enter it because of unbelief and disobedience. Joshua brought them into the land, but the Israelites were still being exhorted to enter the promised rest. It was still future. Therefore, since there is still a promise of rest, we must be careful that we do not fall short of it. We who have faith in Christ enter the promised rest, which is called God's rest.

God rested at the end of creation, so this is the divine rest, the supernatural rest, the spiritual promise that believers enter. Although some people fell short of the promise, it still remains that some will enter it. That's why the psalmist was still exhorting people to hear God's voice and obey him.

If Joshua had fulfilled the promise, God would not have inspired the psalmist to continue exhorting people about the promised rest. Joshua's entry into the promised land was an antetype of a spiritual entry into a spiritual promise, a spiritual rest. The psalmist was speaking about another day, a day in which people could enter the promise. Therefore, there continues to be a spiritual rest for the people of God, because anyone who enters God's spiritual rest is able to cease from work, just as God ceased from his creative works. Therefore, we should strive to enter this spiritual promise, and not fall away through disobedience.

Why does the writer use the word *sabbatismos*? It clearly refers to the weekly Sabbath, but it is being used figuratively. The author is telling us that this spiritual rest is what the

weekly Sabbath had pictured all along. The Sabbath was not only a reminder of the end-of-creation rest and the Exodus, it also looked forward, prefiguring something, as a predictive shadow of a coming reality, our spiritual rest. We enter God's rest by faith in Christ (verse 3), and by doing so, we enter the rest that God entered when he completed his creation (verse 3b-4).

Our salvation rest is a Sabbath-rest, a fulfillment of the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath. If the author wanted to talk about the Sabbath day, he could have used the word for Sabbath. If he wanted to talk about keeping a law, he could have said that, too. But he did not use those words because he is not talking about the Sabbath day itself.

He is not saying whether it is necessary or unnecessary—he is not dealing with that issue. Rather, he is saying that the spiritual promise is a Sabbath-rest. Salvation is pictured by the Sabbath. Whether the Sabbath should continue to be kept as a weekly picture is not being discussed. The author is referring to salvation, the spiritual promised rest. He speaks of only one predicted Sabbath-rest, not a weekly picture of it. He is speaking figuratively of the kingdom of God. We enter our spiritual rest by faith in Christ.

The writer is describing an analogy, and we today often find analogies unconvincing. Even if there are parallels, we might say, that doesn't prove anything, and doesn't prove that the Sabbath is no longer required in its old covenant details. That's true. Hebrews tells us what the Sabbath pictures, but it does not address Christian behavior regarding the Sabbath. For that, we must turn elsewhere, such as the statements of Paul we have already examined.

In summary, Hebrews 4 is not exhorting us to keep a weekly Sabbath, but to enter the rest of God by having faith in Christ. We come to Christ and he gives us rest.

## Question: The Sabbath is a reminder of creation and it points to salvation. God is re-creating us. However, our creation is not yet complete. Should we therefore continue to keep the weekly Sabbath as a celebration of salvation in Christ?

Response: The Sabbath was indeed a memorial of creation. And it foreshadowed and pointed to our salvation in Christ. And our salvation is not yet complete. Nevertheless, Paul says that we *are* new creations. John says that we have already been given eternal life, and that eternal life is in Jesus Christ. We have been given the promised Holy Spirit, guaranteeing the future promises. We do not yet have the fullness of salvation, but we have enough. Paul can say that we should not let anyone judge us regarding the Sabbath. The reality is Christ, and we have the reality, even if it's not yet in its fullness.

The sacrifices pictured our cleansing from sin, and yet we see that we are not yet sinless. But that doesn't mean that we still need sacrifices. Although the last judgment has not yet been done, the verdict has been declared for all who have faith. Circumcision pictured a cleansed heart, and we are not yet perfect in our hearts, but the physical symbol is not required. Likewise, although our re-creation is not yet complete, even the beginning is sufficient to make old covenant practices unnecessary and not a basis for judging our brothers. Of course, we still have a practical

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# Sabbath: devoting time for spiritual growth

need for physical rest and worship times, but we cannot use the old covenant to demand that everyone rest and worship at the same time that we do.

The Sabbath pointed to our renewal in Christ, and in that spiritual meaning it is still required—just as the spiritual meaning of circumcision is required, and the spiritual meaning of the sacrifices is still valid. But the physical details of such laws are in a different category. That is why Paul could treat the question of special days in such a take-it-or-leave-it way.

If the people had faith in Christ, if their entire lives were devoted to the Lord, then they were already abiding by the purpose of sacred days. They were already experiencing the holiness, righteousness, peace and joy that come with the kingdom of God, in which God had placed them based on their faith in Christ. God's own presence is in the saints on a full-time basis.

**Question: The Sabbath points to the re-creative, redemptive work of Christ, which is the most important event of all history. Shouldn't we commemorate this weekly?**

Response: The Bible tells us to commemorate Christ's redemption by means of bread and wine, not by a day of rest. Jesus made it clear, in his controversies with the Pharisees, that it is wrong to add requirements to God's law and make things more difficult. We cannot teach as requirement something that the Bible does not. It is good to commemorate Christ's salvation in weekly worship services, but we cannot insist that everybody worship on the same day and time we do.

**Question: The early Church kept the Sabbath. Wasn't it the influence of paganism that motivated some people to abandon it?**

Response: The earliest Church was entirely Jewish, and it continued the practice of circumcision and other old covenant customs, too. It was only through time, discussion and the intervention of the Holy Spirit that the Church came to understand that Jewish customs should not be imposed on others. Although gentiles were being grafted into Israel, figuratively speaking, making them spiritual Israelites, they did not have to live like Jews (Galatians 2:14). They did not have to obey all the rules that separated Jews from gentiles.

However, it was not paganism that prompted Paul to say that he was not under the old covenant law (1 Corinthians 9:19-21), or that Christians did not have to keep "the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5, 28). And it was not paganism that motivated Paul to say that days were not something to judge each other about (Romans 14:5; Colossians 2:16).

Many early Christian martyrs met for worship on Sunday. That doesn't prove that this was the only acceptable day of worship, but their willingness to die for the faith is evidence that they were not compromising sorts of people. They were not likely to give up essentials due to convenience or to make Christianity more attractive to pagans. In their lives and in their deaths, the central issue was allegiance to Christ, not whether they abstained from work on any particular day.

Although some early Christians kept the Sabbath, many others did not, and allegations of paganism are designed more to frighten people than to examine history objectively. Our

doctrine must be based on Scripture, not on ancient or modern history.

**Question: Many Christians have lost their jobs because they kept the Sabbath, and God miraculously provided better jobs. Doesn't his blessing show the correctness of their behavior and God's approval of Sabbath-keeping?**

Response: God looks on the heart, on the attitude, and he blesses his people even if their behavior was based on a misunderstanding. He honors sincerity. If we do something with the conviction that God wants us to do it, he is pleased with our willingness, and he often rewards such sacrifices, but his rewards do not necessarily endorse our particular understanding.

Many Sunday-keepers have been blessed in similar ways for avoiding work on Sundays. Many people have refused medical treatment and have been healed, but this approach cannot be recommended as spiritually superior. God often rescues us from our errors, but this does not endorse the errors. Rather, it shows God's mercy and compassion.

In times of sincere ignorance God may wink and help, but he also wants us to grow in wisdom and understanding. On many other occasions, in matters of health and employment, sincere people have suffered for years and years because they thought they had to do something that was neither wise nor required. Experience is a source of wisdom, but it is not the standard of truth. Rather, it must be judged by the Word of God, and that is our primary source of understanding. We are thankful for what God has done in the past, and we are thankful for what he is doing in the Church now.

**Question: Our spiritual leaders kept the Sabbath, and we respect them. Wasn't God inspiring them, and shouldn't we follow their example?**

Response: Many godly men and women have kept the Sabbath and inspired others to follow their example—people like Stephen Mumford, Ellen White and Herbert Armstrong. But other faithful Christians, such as Peter Waldo, John Calvin and William Miller, observed Sunday, and many Christians followed the example they set. Such examples can be emotionally powerful to those who knew the people personally or knew them through their writings, but the examples do not carry as much weight with the general public.

When we preach to the public, we cannot ask them to follow a human—we must point them directly to Christ. The example of highly respected leaders, like any tradition, must be evaluated according to the biblical testimony. It is Christ we must preach, as he is revealed in the Old and New Testaments.

**Question: The Sabbath gives us rest from our physical labors, giving us more time for worship, fellowship and good works. It is a spiritually valuable time. Wouldn't it be wrong to neglect it?**

Response: The old covenant specified exactly when and how much time should be separated for the Lord. It specified when and how and where to make sacrifices. These physical requirements helped keep the people aware of God, reminding them of their need for reconciliation and fellowship with him.

In the new covenant, however, we have been given the fellowship with

God that the old covenant customs pictured. The Holy Spirit lives within us, helping us be aware of our relationship with God. The Holy Spirit transforms our hearts, leading us to love the Lord and desiring to spend time with him. It is good for us to spend time with the Lord and with his people. Those who neglect worship time stunt their spiritual growth.

However, we have no biblical authority to mandate that everybody set aside the same time that we do. We encourage people to set aside time for prayer, Bible study, fellowship and good works, but we should not judge anyone regarding the days they keep. It is physically helpful to rest from our labors. It is spiritually helpful to devote time each week to the Lord, and we encourage people to do this, but we do not condemn those who do not set aside a 24-hour block of time. Rather than relying on an external discipline of rules, each Christian needs self-discipline to devote time to the Lord for spiritual growth.<sup>40</sup>

Devoting time to the Lord includes prayer, study and worship services, of course. It can also include volunteer work in humanitarian service, such as by helping out at a hospital. Since service is one way to express true Christianity, service projects can rightly express the spiritual purpose of a day of worship. This could even be done as a group, as a congregational activity.

As a practical need, of course, we appoint a day and time for worship, and in the Worldwide Church of God that day is Saturday. We encourage all who can to meet with us and worship the Creator and Savior on this day, but we do not condemn those who worship on another day.

**Question: Shouldn't we uphold the law?**

Response: We should use the law in a lawful way—and the new covenant, the law that Christians are now under, does not permit us to dictate when and how much time other Christians should give to the Lord. It does not permit us to judge others regarding this day. It does not permit us to bind heavy burdens on people and threaten them with the lake of fire if they don't comply with our understanding. The real law we must be concerned about is the spiritual law, not the precise way the old covenant was to be administered.

We want to uphold the law in the way that is appropriate to the age after the coming of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The New Testament gives hundreds of commands. It gives a high standard of conduct for God's redeemed people. It requires sacrifice and complete allegiance. It often quotes Old Testament laws and amplifies them to the intents of the heart.

But it never commands Sabbath-keeping, and it commands the Church not to lay unauthorized restrictions on God's people. We should never let traditions annul the Word of God, and that includes traditions about old covenant customs that were once authorized but whose authorization has expired.

We who are led by God's Spirit want to obey our Creator and Savior. We want to encourage obedience, piety, and sanctification. We also want to emphasize that salvation is by grace through faith, and we want to accept as Christian everyone who has faith in Christ. We do not want to judge others regarding their observance of festivals or Sabbaths. We must imitate the apostle Paul, who said that some Christians regard cer-

tain days as more important than others, and some Christians do not. Each person should be fully convinced in his own mind and do all things to the Lord.

This paper may not convince everyone of our particular position. Some members may continue to believe that their Savior requires them to keep the Sabbath. We do not wish to criticize them for acting in accordance with their beliefs. However, we do hope that this paper convinces them that our position is a reasonable way to understand the Scriptures. A spiritual understanding of the Sabbath is not proof of rebelliousness or of being against God's law. We are arguing for tolerance. We are not requiring anyone to change what they do on the weekly Sabbath. We are saying that we should not judge one another regarding this day.

Paul did not preach that all law is done away. He knew well that faith led to obedience, and that love worked within the boundaries of law. But he treated the Sabbath as a matter of individual conscience, not for enforced conformity. Why could he take such liberty with the Sabbath law? Our conclusion is that he could approach the Sabbath in the same way as he dealt with circumcision: He could take it or leave it. It was not a requirement because faith in Christ superseded it. We should uphold faith.

All who have faith in Jesus Christ are already abiding by the *intent* of the Sabbath law. If we walk by the Spirit, we are fulfilling the requirements of the law (Romans 8:4). We have come to Christ and he has given us rest. All who believe have entered God's rest. Although a future rest yet remains, we have already entered into rest, and a specific day of rest is no longer required even though rest itself is physically and spiritually beneficial.

The Israelites needed physical boundaries on time and space to keep them in remembrance of their physical redemption. They needed physical activities and restrictions to enforce a habit of obedience. The entire old covenant pointed to Christ and salvation through him. Therefore, when the reality (Christ and the Holy Spirit) came, the substitutes ended. He is the frame of reference in which we must analyze worship and interpersonal behavior.

Christians today have been redeemed spiritually, and holy times and places no longer regulate their lives in the same way. As we walk in faith, in a relationship with God, we are automatically doing what the Sabbath command merely pointed toward. We are seeking to please our Savior in every way in every day. The Christian Sabbath command is that we trust Jesus Christ for our eternal salvation and we find our promised rest in him.

In its spiritual meaning, the Sabbath has been magnified in importance. The weekly Sabbath pointed to Christ and the rest we have in him, the salvation that is the better promise of the new covenant. In this spiritual way, the most important doctrine of the New Testament (faith in Christ) is included within the Ten Commandments.

We devote our lives to Jesus Christ, find our rest in him, realize that our works are all for nothing without him completing the creation in us. He is the Holy One, far superior to a holy day, and our lives must be hidden in him. We must live in him and he in us. When we do this, when we have faith in Christ, when we have faith in someone who is greater than the Sabbath, then we are abiding by the

# Sabbath

intent of the fourth commandment and we are keeping God's spiritual Sabbath (that is, trusting in Christ for God's promises). We are upholding the greater law. Christ has superseded the Sabbath.

It is a sin to break the Sabbath in its *spiritual* meaning—it is a sin to abandon faith in Christ. If we fail to trust in Christ for our salvation, then we are breaking the intent of the Sabbath commandment whether we avoid work or not. For some commandments (such as adultery and murder), keeping the spirit of the law *automatically* causes us to keep the letter of the law. This is not so with circumcision, nor is it so with the Sabbath.<sup>41</sup> In those cases, the physical details were shadows that pointed us to spiritual realities in Christ.

## Endnotes

1 These include Robert Brinsmead's articles in *Verdict*, Dale Ratzlaff's *Sabbath in Crisis*, and the contributors to the book edited by D.A. Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*.

2 In creation week, the seventh day (unlike the other six days) has no stated ending. The physical creation continued to be complete (Hebrews 4:3b). God might have taught Adam and Eve on the seventh day, but this teaching activity would not be considered work in a Sabbatarian sense. However, God is now working (John 5:17). One of his works is that of re-creation or redemption. God may have resumed his creative work when Adam and Eve sinned and his redemptive, re-creative work became necessary.

3 Adam was told to name the animals, and he did it right away. Adam and Eve were told to dress and keep the garden, too, and we could easily assume that they did it right away, on the very next day. Since it was God's work, it would have been permitted on the Sabbath, just as priests could do God's work on the Sabbath.

Adam and Eve had hardly done any work at all, so they did not need to rest. And Genesis 3:19 implies that their work in the garden was not strenuous, not even working up a sweat. God fellowshiped with them on the sixth day, and presumably he did on the seventh day, too, and every day thereafter. In Genesis, for humans, all days were alike.

4 "Holy" does not mean "rest." The entire jubilee year was holy (Leviticus 25:12), and it involved agricultural rest, but it did not require the cessation of all labor. "Holy" simply means that something is set apart for a special use. If God sanctified the seventh day of every week, he designated it for special use.

But we are not told how it was to be used. Humans could have used the day for worship activities—but that is speculative, since we are told nothing about seventh-day observance before Moses. For Adam and Eve, the seventh day of creation was presumably a time for fellowship between God and humans. For Israel, millennia later, the seventh day of every week was designated the day for formal worship and rest.

5 Abraham kept God's requirements, commands, decrees and laws (Genesis 26:5), but we cannot assume from what Israel was told to do later that Abraham sacrificed all his firstborn male animals, or that he kept the annual festivals, or that he did anything different on the seventh day of each week. The verse tells us that Abraham was obedient, but it simply doesn't tell us which statutes and decrees were in effect in his day.

If we claim that Abraham kept all the requirements of the old covenant, we imply that the Abrahamic covenant was the same as the Sinaitic, which contradicts Deuteronomy 5:3. The Abrahamic covenant was based on faith; the Sinaitic covenant was based on the Ten Commandments.

6 The "law of Moses" includes after-childbirth purification rituals (Luke 2:22), circumcision (John 7:22-23), prophecies of the Messiah (Luke 24:44; Acts 28:23), the law about muzzling oxen (1 Corinthians 9:9) and laws punishable by death (Hebrews 10:28). Thus it includes ceremonial laws, civil laws, prophecies and general principles. Apparently everything that Moses wrote was considered to be part of the "law of Moses."

7 It has been claimed that Galatians 3:19 refers to sacrificial laws only and that sacrifices were added to God's law only after the people sinned. This is erroneous. First, the old covenant itself made provision for sacrifices (Exodus 20:24; 23:18); they were not a secondary provision.

Second, Paul, who was trained as a rabbi, could have easily specified which aspect of the law he meant if he meant only a portion. Instead, he meant "the whole law" (Galatians 5:2)—the law that contained both patriarchal stories (Galatians 4:21-22) and civil penalties (Galatians 3:10). It was the Torah—everything Moses wrote about. Third, it is unlikely that Judaizers would claim that Galatian Christians had to perform sacrifices.

8 Verse 28 says, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?" This

Our relationship with God depends on faith in Christ, not on a specific block of time. Of course, this does not do away with our practical need to give time to the Lord to pray, study, meditate, fast and imitate Jesus' lifestyle of good works to the needy and preaching the gospel. If we allow secular things to occupy all our time, we will become profane, like Esau, and grieve the Holy Spirit. There is a spiritual need for worship time.

Christ exhorts his Church to meet regularly to encourage one another in faith and good works and to worship. Those who remove themselves from the vine wither and die. Since God does not give a complete spectrum of his gifts to any one person, we must use our gifts to help one another grow in maturity. We must continue meeting together, and Christians should make reasonable efforts to meet weekly with the fel-

lowship God has placed them in.

As we continue to worship Jesus Christ on the seventh day, we will be asked why we are different than most Christian churches. We will have to explain why we worship on the seventh day, and the honest answer is that we used to think that we absolutely had to, but we no longer think that. Then we'll be asked why we continue to worship on the seventh day, and the honest answer is that we are free to be different.

Because of our tradition, because our members have developed work schedules that give them time off on Saturdays, we have chosen to continue worshipping on Saturdays. That's what we plan to continue to do, with the understanding that the old covenant is obsolete and that we have freedom in Jesus Christ.

In summary, we enter God's rest,

simply would have rested at home.

15 The Sabbath command may be divided into specific details (which day of the week, and what to do), the practical (we need rest), and the spiritual (we need to worship and have a relationship with God). The spirit of the law is of course the last aspect, and we will say more about it later in this paper. That's the part that is eternally valid. And the practical is still practical—love for neighbor means that an employer gives employees a day of rest.

But the new covenant does not specify which day this ought to be, nor does it say that every culture ought to worship on the same day. And the new covenant does not imply that we must look to the old covenant to see which day is proper.

16 Is the Sabbath still required for Israelite Christians but not for gentile Christians? This may be addressed in three ways: 1) God saves Jews in the same way that he saves gentiles (Acts 15:9, 11). All are saved by faith; the new covenant applies to all. God does not require one group to keep different laws than the others.

Peter was allowed to live like a gentile (Galatians 2:14). With God, there is neither Jew nor Greek, "slave or free, male or female. The terms and conditions of our relationship with God are the same. If the Sabbath is required for one, it is required for all. 2) As the book of Hebrews explains, the old covenant is obsolete, and that means it is obsolete for Hebrews. 3) The Jews' relationship with God was like a marriage, and a death has broken the obligations of that marriage. Paul used that analogy, saying that Jews and Israelites have "died to the law through the body of Christ" so that they might belong to the resurrected Christ (Romans 7:1-4).

Figuratively speaking, both Israelites and gentiles are betrothed to Christ, and the obligations of previous covenants do not apply to anyone, whether Jew or gentile, who has died to the law through Christ. Christianity is a new marriage, a new covenant. "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" (verse 6).

17 Hebrews 3:12-19 equates disobedience and unbelief. Numbers 14 emphasizes their unbelief, although numerous instances of murmuring and rebellion contributed to the pattern. Ezekiel 20 emphasizes the Sabbath-breaking and idolatry that characterized the Israelites in the wilderness. Despite the presence of the tabernacle, the pillar of cloud and fire, and the weekly cycle of manna, the Israelites had a resistant heart.

Ezekiel criticized the nation in his day for similar sins. The priests did not treat the temple utensils as holy, did not teach people the laws of uncleanness, did not teach the Sabbath, claimed to have divine authority when they did not, and committed social injustices (22:26-31). All these were appropriate for Israel in Ezekiel's day, but not all are appropriate today.

18 The people complained about new moons in the same way that they complained about Sabbath restrictions (Amos 8:5). Although the Pentateuch does not forbid commerce on new moons, apparently that is the way they were observed in Amos's day.

The people kept the days, but reluctantly. God criticized them most for social injustice. Hosea 2:11 similarly includes new moons among the "appointed feasts" being kept in Israel. Because injustice permeated the nation, God threatened to stop all the hypocritical worship.

19 David said that his men were holy; they hadn't slept with women (1 Samuel 21:5). But this did not make it lawful to eat the bread that only Levites were permitted to eat. Jesus clearly said that David did something that was not lawful.

20 The priests' work was permitted because it was commanded by God to be done on the Sabbath. But Jesus did not focus on the command of God—he emphasized the presence of the temple. The temple symbolized the entire old covenant system.

21 Christianity rejects both the temple and its sacrifices, although some Jewish Christians continued participating in both while the temple still

stood. Jesus is more important than those rituals, and they are now obsolete. Jesus is more important than the Sabbath, too, which implies that he has superseded it, just as he superseded the rituals. In defending his Sabbath activities, Jesus put the Sabbath in the same legal category as show-bread, sacrifices, and the physical temple, all of which are now obsolete.

22 The Pharisees were concerned about work in itself, not about employment. They were not worrying about whether anyone got paid for picking grain or for healing. Jesus did not address that issue, either.

Although he never charged for his healings, he never used that as an excuse to justify why healing could be done on the Sabbath. Healings and other works of mercy may be done on the Sabbath whether or not one receives pay. The concern throughout is on whether work may be done, not whether one is paid for it.

23 Jesus did not use the word for create—he used *egeneto*, which is usually translated "became." This word does not allude to the creation account (the Septuagint does not use *egeneto* in Genesis 2:2-3), nor can any stress be put on the English word "made," since it is not in the Greek.

24 The rabbis taught that gentiles should observe laws that go back to Noah, and the Sabbath was not part of the "Noachian" requirements (see the *Jewish Encyclopedia* or the *Encyclopedia Judaica*). Although the number of Noachian laws and the prohibitions varied, the lists did not include the Sabbath. The rabbis looked on the Sabbath, like circumcision, as something that marked the Jewish people as different from other nations.

The second-century B.C. book of Jubilees gave the view that seems to have been common: "The Creator of all blessed it, but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the sabbath thereon with the sole exception of Israel. He granted to them alone that they might eat and drink and keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth" (Jubilees 2:31, quoted from James Charlesworth, editor, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, [Doubleday, 1985], vol. 2, p. 58).

Although the Sabbath was patterned after the creation week, Deuteronomy 5:15 says that the Sabbath was given to the Israelites because God had brought them out of Egypt. That implies that it was not given to other nations. Gentiles did not have a covenant relationship with God.

25 For example, some might ask: Was the Sabbath made to exalt God, or was it for human benefit? If we use verse 27 to try to answer the question, we are using it out of context and trying to read something into the text. In the same way, we twist the context and intrude into the verse if we use it to answer questions such as, Was the Sabbath made at creation?—or, Was the Sabbath made for all humans or just for Israelites? These questions are inappropriate for this verse. Jesus was saying that the Sabbath was made for humanitarian benefit; he was not commenting on other questions.

26 The word Jesus used for "loose" (*luo*) can also mean "break." In John 5:18, the Pharisees accused Jesus of "loosing" the Sabbath.

27 Today, we call various emergencies "an ox in the ditch." Jesus, however, was not basing his argument on the urgency of the situation. The healing was a humanitarian need, but not an emergency need. Jesus could justify his healing activities equally well by referring to an ox in the ditch or to the ordinary need of leading an animal to water. His point was not urgency, but simple need.

28 If Sabbath work actually dishonored God, then the Sabbath would have priority over humans in need and oxen in pits, since correct worship of God is more important than human lives and oxen. If absolute rest were essential to worship, then Sabbath-keepers should let houses burn down, since that would only be a monetary loss and God's honor is far more important than our material goods. This indicates that the command to rest on a specific day is a ceremonial matter rather

# Does Hebrews 4:9 command Sabbath-keeping?

By Paul Kroll

Those who believe that Christians are required to keep the seventh-day Sabbath, especially as it applies to resting from work, sometimes cite Hebrews 4:9-11 as a proof-text. In the New International Version these verses say the following: "There remains ... a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall."

If this passage requires Christians to keep the seventh-day Sabbath, it would be the only direct post-resurrection scriptural command to do so. Suppose, however, that Hebrews 4:9-11 does not contain a command to rest on the Sabbath?

If it doesn't, then we have no existing proof-text command specifically written to the New Testament Church mandating the keeping of the Sabbath. In view of this, it is extremely important that we understand clearly what the verses in question are telling us.

An important principle in understanding a specific passage of Scripture is to see it in context. The context includes the immediate subject at hand in which the questionable verses are found, as well as the overall context of the book itself.

A passage in question should also be understood as much as possible on its own terms. It should not be interpreted on the basis of an assumed premise, such as in this case: God commands Christians to keep the seventh-day Sabbath.

## Theme of Hebrews

In order to understand Hebrews 4:9-11, then, we must first ask ourselves what the book of Hebrews itself is about. At this point, we recommend that time should be taken to read the entire epistle in a modern translation.

We can state the theme of Hebrews in the following brief summary. It is generally believed that Hebrews was written to Jewish believers. At the least, it was written to gentile believers who had become convinced that the Judaistic form of worship had a central meaning for them as Christians—and was even required.

The writer of Hebrews takes issue with this idea. He is intent on portraying the classic Judaism of the time as representing the then obsolete old covenant. Christians, he says, are under the better and greater new covenant. This theme is sounded in many ways throughout Hebrews.

Chapter 8, in particular, makes this point. Here the writer cites Jeremiah 31:31-34 to show that the Hebrew scriptures themselves say that the old covenant would become null and void. They also look forward to a time when God would make a new covenant with his people. The writer summarizes his point in these words: "By calling this covenant 'new,' he [God] has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (8:13).

## Moses and Jesus

Throughout the epistle, the Hebrew believers are admonished to look to Jesus as the center of their faith. The writer summarizes this

claim by saying: "The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man" (8:1-2).

In this connection, the writer of Hebrews takes pains to show that Jesus has a superior position to Moses in God's plan of salvation. While Moses may have been the mediator of the old era, Jesus is the mediator of the new. The writer felt that Moses—and the law system inaugurated through him—needed to be put into perspective because both were so highly venerated in classical Judaism.

William Barclay wrote in *The Daily Study Bible Series* commentary on Hebrews that "to the Jew it would have been impossible to conceive that anyone ever stood closer to God than Moses did, and yet that is precisely what the writer of Hebrews sets out to prove" (page 29).

Hebrews tells us: "Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself" (3:3). Moses, of course, represents the old covenant, as many scriptures tell us. To place Christ above Moses, then, is another way of saying that the new covenant supersedes and has better promises than the old covenant.

The entire New Testament attests to this fact. An excellent passage expounding this point outside of Hebrews is 2 Corinthians 3. Paul says of his ministry, "He [God] 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" (3:6).

Hebrews is telling Christians to look to Jesus and the new covenant and not to Moses and the old covenant as the authority for faith and religious practice. In this connection, the writer insists that Jesus is the true High Priest, not the Levitical priests in the temple.

He also makes the point that the worship components of the law were only shadows and copies of spiritual

truths (8:1-5; 10:1). The old covenant laws given through Moses regarding temple rituals and the priesthood have only metaphorical value for Christians in that they point to the fully delivered faith through Jesus Christ.

Having said this about the theme of Hebrews in general, let us now turn to the specific context of Hebrews 4:9-11.

## Wilderness experience

The subject at hand in these verses actually begins to be addressed in Hebrews 3:7, when the writer quotes from Psalm 95:7-11. This psalm is used liturgically by Jews to inaugurate the Friday evening service of prayer. There is indication that it may also have been sung during the days of the early Church as part of the temple service, before the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.

Here is the passage from Psalm 95:7-11 as it is quoted in Hebrews 3:7-11: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared an oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

Psalm 95 refers to the wilderness story as told in Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13. There are several things we should notice about this passage.

The author focuses on the introductory word of the quotation, "today" and the phrase in which it is found. He repeats the word "today" five times (3:7, 13, 15; 4:7, twice) and the phrase "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" three times (3:7, 15; 4:7).

The phrase with its opening word "today" is significant for the writer in that it allows him to apply the promise of "rest" found in the Scripture to his present readers. William Lane discusses this point in the *Word Biblical Commentary* on

Hebrews: "'Today' provided the writer with a catchword for bringing the biblical statement before his hearers sharply. 'Today' is no longer the today of the past, surveyed by the psalmist in his situation, but the today of the present, which continues to be conditioned by the voice of God that speaks day after day through the Scriptures and in the gospel tradition" (page 87).

Lane makes the point that Psalm 95 "was a prophetic announcement that God was determining a future date for making his rest available" (page 100). The writer of Hebrews insists that the prophecy is being fulfilled in his day, in the Church—and his readers need to heed its call.

He wants his readers to make a connection between themselves and the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness. The author emphasizes a key concept: The Old Testament promise that God's people would enter into "rest" is being fulfilled in the Church and through Christ.

He begins by discussing God's "rest" in terms of the promise of God to bring the rescued Israelites into the promised land. But as we know, and as the Scripture points out, the first generation of freed Israelites did not enter God's "rest," but they died in the wilderness (Numbers 14:26-35). The Israelites Moses led out of Egypt did not enter into God's "rest."

The author wants his Christian readers to focus on the meaning of this tragedy. They are not to turn away from the living God (3:12) or be "hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (3:13). Rather, they are to "hold firmly till the end" their first confidence (3:14) so that they may enter into God's "rest."

The writer summarizes his admonition by saying, "Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it" (4:1).

The readers of Hebrews are encouraged to keep up their faith and hope in Christ. Otherwise, as the unbelieving Israelites in Moses' day lost their opportunity to enter the See Hebrews, page 15

## Endnotes

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than a moral one. God's spiritual law does not have any exceptions.

29 Gentile God-fearers would often attend synagogues on the Sabbath, but they did not necessarily observe the day by abstaining from all work. Apparently the rabbis did not expect noncircumcised people to observe the Sabbath.

30 If Christians normally attended synagogues, there would be no need for Luke to comment that Paul's custom was to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Luke does not say that it is "our" custom—it was only Paul's. When Paul was in Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla, he went alone into the synagogue (Acts 18:19). Even though Aquila and Priscilla were Jews, they did not go to the synagogue with Paul.

31 We have correctly understood for decades that the legalists taught that the gentile converts had to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses to be saved. We understood that James mentioned four prohibitions, and otherwise the gentile converts did not need to observe the law of Moses. However, we usually restricted "the law of Moses" to sacrifices and other things we didn't want to do. As shown in footnote 6, everything that Moses wrote—his entire Torah—was considered to be part of the "law of Moses."

32 The Sabbath is a foreshadow of salvation in Christ. In this way, the most important doctrine of the new covenant (Christ) is included within the Ten Commandments.

33 If we think that Paul is referring to special fast days, we are reading things into the text. The

vegetarianism that Paul addressed was a daily lifestyle, not a restriction placed only on certain days. When Paul wrote to the Roman church, which contained both Jews and gentiles, and mentioned that some people think certain days are better than others, many readers would conclude that he is referring to Sabbaths in a gentle way.

34 Some Sabbath-keepers assume that they are right with God because they keep the Sabbath. However, Sabbath-keeping is neither sufficient nor necessary. Some unbelievers keep the Sabbath, and some believers do not. The test of Christianity is not the day of devotion, but the Person to whom devotion is given. Some Sabbath-keepers have made the Sabbath the central foundation of their relationship with God. Their faith, though it may be genuine, has been misplaced.

Sabbath-keepers may continue to avoid work on the Sabbath. The new covenant does not require that they change their behavior. But our doctrinal change might affect their faith. It might involve emotional readjustment. If so, that is normal, and it is good. The main point is that, whether we keep the weekly Sabbath or not, our faith must be in Christ. He is the only sure foundation. That's what the doctrinal change forces us to emphasize. We are accounted right with God through faith, not by works.

35 The Greek word for "principles" is *stoicheia*, which refers to elementary or basic things. Just as the law was a disciplinarian that took young children to school (Galatians 3:24), it contained rules appropriate for immature children. Paul says that "we [including himself as a Jew and his readers as gentiles] were in slavery under the basic principles of the world" (Galatians 4:3).

It was an external approach to religion, having rules about what can be touched or eaten (Colossians 2:20-21). Such regulations appear to be reli-

gious, but they do not transform the heart, where real worship ought to be centered.

36 In Romans 2:14-15, Paul says that some gentiles do by nature the things required by God's spiritual law. It is highly unlikely that anyone keeps the Sabbath by nature.

37 We do not want members to abandon the Sabbath simply because we say that they may. Each person should prove it for himself and become convinced based on the Word of God. Each person should examine himself to see if he is acting in faith. Of course, members are welcome to continue keeping the Sabbath as an expression of love for God, but not out of fear that dreadful things will happen if they don't.

38 The Church published a few statements that implied that people could be saved without observing the Sabbath. However, most literature implied that salvation would not be given to anyone who, after hearing the arguments for Sabbath-keeping, refused to keep the Sabbath. This was considered evidence that the person's heart was not willing to obey God and was not converted or being called.

39 The Septuagint version uses the verb form of *katapausin* in Genesis 2:2.

40 Some people need more rules to structure their lives, and they are welcome to keep their own rules, as long as they do it to the glory of God, and as long as their faith regarding salvation is in Christ and not in their rules. But they should not criticize those who have different rules for themselves.

41 Jesus showed that, even under the old covenant, it was sometimes necessary to work on the Sabbath in order to keep the spiritual law. Unlike the moral commandments Jesus expanded in the Sermon on the Mount, keeping the spirit of the law does not automatically lead one to keep the letter of the Sabbath law. Here again, the Sabbath is not like the other commandments.

# Hebrews: entering a spiritual rest of salvation

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rest in Canaan, the believers may forfeit the greater blessings of the new age "rest."

## 'Rest' from the beginning

The author of Hebrews then turns to a discussion of God's "rest" from another point of view. He says that this "rest" has been available to mankind since the beginning: "His work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'And on the seventh day God rested from all his work'" (4:3-4).

The "somewhere" is Genesis 2:2. In the days when Hebrews was written, the Scriptures were written on scrolls. It was much more difficult to look up specific passages, so writers often quoted passages from memory.

The "rest" described in Genesis 2:2 can be considered as the archetype of all later experiences of rest—including the Sabbath command given at Sinai, the rest Israel received from its enemies under Joshua (a type of Christ), and the promised future rest of the kingdom of God.

The Genesis "rest" of God, in force since the beginning of the seventh day of creation, is meant to typify the spiritual salvation of the people of God. That means the weekly Sabbath rest is a lesser expression—a shadow, as it were—of the true "rest" inaugurated at the seventh day of creation. This makes the weekly Sabbath a metaphor of the Genesis rest, as was the Canaan rest.

The idea of the Genesis rest is that, beginning with the seventh day of creation, God ceased creating. He continues in a state of nonwork so far as further creating is concerned. However, this doesn't mean God has been idle.

Leon Morris points out in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* on Hebrews: "It is worth noticing that in the creation story each of the first six days is marked by the refrain 'And there was evening, and there was morning.' However, this is lacking in the account of the seventh day. There we simply read that God rested from all his work. This does not mean that God entered a state of idleness, for there is a sense in which he is continually at work (John 5:17). But the completion of creation marks the end of a magnificent whole.... So we should think of the rest as something like the satisfaction that comes from accomplishment, from the completion of a task, from the exercise of creativity" (page 41).

F.F. Bruce also explains what this means in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* for the book of Hebrews: "When we read that God 'rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done' (Gen. 2:2), we are to understand that he began to rest then; the fact that he is never said to have completed his rest and resumed his work of creation implies that his rest continues still, and may be shared by those who respond to his overtures with faith and obedience" (page 106).

Thus, God's "rest" has been available from the time the creation was finished—from the foundation of the world. Even though it has been available, very few people entered into it before Jesus' death and resurrection.

The offer of salvation "rest" still stands. The writer of Hebrews makes this point by saying: "It still remains that some will enter that rest" (4:6). Whatever this "rest" is, the writer is

emphasizing that it is—at the time of writing—a promise his readers can take advantage of. In fact, they must take advantage of it, and not fail to achieve the "rest" because of disobedience (4:6).

## Joshua's rest

The author of Hebrews must have realized something as he wrote. There had been an apparent large-scale exception to his claim that no people had achieved the "rest" God had promised. After all, the second generation of Israelites who were saved from Egypt did enter the promised land under Joshua.

Under Joshua, "the Lord had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them" (Joshua 23:1). But the writer of Hebrews quickly points out that this is not the "rest" that constituted God's ultimate objective—the one promised to Christians. He writes: "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (4:8-9).

Hundreds of years after Joshua led the Israelites into the rest of the promised land, the psalmist is still insisting that there is a "rest" his readers must enter into. Clearly, there is more to the "rest" in question than mere entry into Canaan.

As it turns out, Israel had not secured the true "rest" after all. Thus, the writer can exhort his readers to seek, obtain and hold on to this superior "rest" in Christ—which is the true "rest" to which Genesis 2, the literal Sabbath, the wilderness experience, the Joshua rest, and the prophecy of Psalm 95 all looked forward to. He is interested in the redemptive and eternal rest in the kingdom of God, of which the weekly Sabbath and Canaan rests were symbols.

On this point, William Lane, in the *Word Biblical Commentary* on Hebrews, explains why the Joshua rest was but a type of the true "rest": "The settlement of Canaan did not mark the fulfillment of the divine promise but pointed to another, more fundamental reality. If in fact Joshua had achieved the promised rest, there would have been no need for the renewal of the promise in Ps 95. Accordingly, the experience of rest in Canaan was only a type or symbol of the complete rest that God intended for his people, which was prefigured in the Sabbath rest of God" (page 101).

We have now come full circle to the verses in question, Hebrews 4:9-11, and we see something interesting. The author is not telling his readers to keep a weekly seventh-day Sabbath holy by resting on it. He is not talking about the weekly Sabbath at all. Rather, he is making the point that there is a spiritual "rest" that God's people should be entering into. It is the heavenly counterpart of the earthly Canaan, and is the goal of the people of God today.

The epistle of Hebrews has made this point by creating an analogy between the Israelites entering the promised land and Christians entering the better promise of a new covenant spiritual "rest."

## A present rest?

The promised land was a physical type or foreshadowing of a spiritual "rest" that the Israelites had not yet entered. And that is the point. Christians have entered God's "rest" by their faith in Jesus Christ. "Now we who have believed enter [or, "are entering"] that rest," the writer insists (4:3).

Jesus himself during his ministry had promised a rest for the spirit: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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" (Matthew 11:28-29).

Leon Morris points out in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* that the word for "enter" in 4:3 is in the present tense. This would mean the author of Hebrews was suggesting that his readers were already in the process of entering the "rest" of salvation that Jesus had promised.

Some commentators agree that the Hebrews 4:3 "rest" into which Christians have entered begins now, in this life. Leon Morris quotes Hugh Montefiore on this point: "Contrary to some commentators, the Greek means neither that they are certain to enter, nor that they will enter, but that they are already in process of entering" (page 40).

**There is a spiritual "rest" that God's people should be entering into. In a certain sense Christians have begun to enter "rest" now.**

In fairness, Morris points out that some other commentators feel that the "rest" is something that occurs in the future. The present tense used here, they insist, is meant to be applied only in a generalizing sense. Morris concludes by saying: "Either view is defensible and probably much depends on our idea of the 'rest.' If it lies beyond death, then obviously 'rest' must be understood in terms of the future. But if it is a present reality, then believers are entering it now" (page 40).

Our view is that in a certain sense Christians have begun to enter "rest" now. Peter says that Christ "has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). Paul says God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13). The author of Hebrews says that we are "the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven" (12:23).

It's really a question of when the kingdom of God comes—now or in the future? The answer is, both. The kingdom is already, but not yet. There is a sense that the kingdom is both present and yet obviously future in its full reality.

Christians live in the tension between promise and fulfillment, between the already and the not yet, between the glimmer and the reality. But they have nevertheless entered the "rest," even if only in an imperfect and qualified way.

We have already been invited to enter God's end-of-creation "rest" by believing in the Son of God. By faith, we have joined with him in his "rest." By faith, we have become new creations—created anew. Our re-creation is not yet complete, but we, so to speak, have our foot in the door of his kingdom "rest."

To be evenhanded, the writer of Hebrews does not directly state how he views the time in which the "rest" takes place. But as we've seen, his

concern seems to be with the present time—with today. He no doubt understands that the fullness of rest comes only with a future resurrection (10:37-38; 12:26). But his point of view in Hebrews 3 and 4 is the present time, the time for which he is writing.

It's important that we understand the writer is thinking of the salvation "rest" as beginning in the present. Otherwise, one can be misled about which "rest" he is interested in—the spiritual one or a physical one such as the weekly Sabbath day.

One traditional commentary, the *Critical, Experimental and Practical Commentary* by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, became confused on this issue and came (we feel) to a wrong conclusion: "It is Jesus, the antitype of Joshua, who leads us into the heavenly rest. This verse [4:9] indirectly establishes the obligation of the Sabbath; for the type continues until the antitype supersedes it: so legal sacrifices continued till the great antitypical sacrifice superseded it. As then the antitypical Sabbath rest will not be till Christ comes to usher us into it, the typical earthly Sabbath must continue till then" (page 537).

The authors have erred. Christ has already led us into the heavenly rest just as he is already our sacrifice for sin. We have come to Christ and he has given us rest. This argues against the commentary's claim that the literal Sabbath is in force. The antitypical salvation rest has already been ushered in, albeit incompletely, thus the shadow (the literal Sabbath) is no longer necessary.

However the writer of Hebrews conceives of the future millennial rest, he is not concerned to discuss it in chapters 3 and 4. He is interested in his readers who are alive when he writes—and who need to take hold of the promise of spiritual "rest" during their lifetime.

F.F. Bruce agrees that the millennial rest is not in view in the passage in question. He says in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* commentary on Hebrews: "The identification of the rest of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews with a coming millennium on earth has, indeed, been ably defended; but it involves the importation into the epistle of a concept which in fact is alien to it" (pages 106-107).

The writer of Hebrews is not so much concerned with the future as with the present spiritual state of his readers. That's why he stresses the word "today."

It was the privilege of those to whom the epistle was addressed to enter God's "rest" then—and it is also our privilege to do so now. The promise of entering God's "rest" remains valid for each generation—and is repeated to each successive generation—in the Church age.

## We enter God's 'rest'

Hebrews 4:9-11 is telling us we have entered into God's promised "rest," the one he inaugurated on the seventh day of creation. This is the writer's main theme.

The epistle has already noted that God's "work has been finished since the creation of the world" (4:3). That is, the "rest" of salvation has been in existence—and promised to humankind—since the foundation of the world. It was, in a manner of speaking, a work of creation, inaugurated with man and for man.

Donald Guthrie writes: "What See Hebrews, page 16

# Hebrews: Spiritual rest comes by faith in Christ

believers can now enter is none other than the same kind of rest which the Creator enjoyed when he had completed his works, which means that the rest idea is of completion and not of inactivity.... It is important to note that the 'rest' is not something new which has not been known in experience until Christ came. It has been available throughout the whole of man's history.

"This reference back to the creation places the idea on the broadest possible basis and would seem to suggest that it was part of God's intention for man. 'Rest' is a quality which has eluded man's quest, and in fact cannot be attained except through Christ (*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, "Hebrews," page 113).

As long as we have faith in Christ—the main point of Hebrews—no matter what day of the week it is, we have entered God's "rest" and we are resting from our own work. "We who have believed enter that rest.... Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his" (4:3, 10).

What does the author mean by "work"? He is not discussing the question of employment on the weekly Sabbath day. That is not his interest. (He has been encouraging his readers to enter the spiritual "rest" of salvation throughout Hebrews 3 and 4.) The writer of Hebrews wants his readers to stop putting their faith in the works of the law and to place their faith in Christ as Savior. He wants them to look to the work of Christ, which work of forgiveness and empowerment through the Holy Spirit allows us to enter the true spiritual "rest."

On the other hand, the writer has a low view of the "works" of the law. He says of the law in general and the Levitical priesthood as a whole: "The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God" (7:18-19).

The author of Hebrews seems to be suggesting that what we rest from is our own human ways and from the "work" we do in a religious way in an attempt to make (and keep) ourselves acceptable to God. But our own "work" (whatever it may be) cannot save us or endear us to God. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ, and we are endeared to God by that same grace.

The Jewish Christians or gentile believers to whom Hebrews was written were already enamored of Judaistic practices. They would have already been observing the Sabbath day and would not need any admonishment to rest on this day.

Even the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* understands this point. We find this explanation for Hebrews 4:9 on page 423: "Certainly, in writing to Jews, the author of Hebrews would not consider it necessary to prove to them that Sabbathkeeping 'remaineth.' If the conclusion of the extended argument beginning with ch. 3:7 is that Sabbathkeeping remains for the people of God, it would seem that the writer of Hebrews is guilty of a *non sequitur*, for the conclusion does not follow logically from the argument.

"There would have been no point in so labored an effort to persuade the Jews to do what they were already doing—observing the seventh-day Sabbath.... What relationship a protracted argument designed to prove that Sabbath observance remains an obligation to the Chris-

tian church might have to the declared theme of chs. 3 and 4—the ministry of Christ as our great High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary—is obscure indeed."

The writer of Hebrews is interested in the spiritual or heavenly meaning of such things as the Sabbath and animal sacrifices, not their literal observances, which are shadows of the true "rest" and sacrifice for sin.

In fact, the very Israelites who had been given the Sabbath (the generation that left Egypt) failed to enter God's "rest." So did the Jews who strictly kept the Sabbath day when Hebrews was written. Keeping the Sabbath does not automatically bring someone to God. Why, then, would the writer of Hebrews insist on it? The fact is, the literal seventh-day Sabbath is not in his view at all.

## Two Greek words for 'rest'

We should now briefly take up the issue of the Greek words for "rest"

## The verses in question admonish us to enter the spiritual "rest" of God by having faith in Christ.

used in Hebrews 4:9-10. We quote here the verses in question and show the two Greek words being used: "There remains ... a Sabbath-rest [*sabbatismos*] for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest [*katapausin*] also rests from his own work" (4:9-10).

A Greek-English interlinear of the New Testament will show that the Greek word *katapausin* is used to denote "rest" throughout Hebrews 3:7-4:11. There is one exception, in 4:9, as shown above. Here, *sabbatismos* is used, and it is translated "Sabbath-rest" in the New International Version. The word is formed from the verb *sabbatizo*, which means to "keep/observe/celebrate the Sabbath."

The only time in the Bible that *sabbatismos* is used is here in Hebrews 4:9.<sup>1</sup> The word is not found in ancient Greek literature until well after the time when Hebrews was written.

Some decades later, *sabbatismos* is found in Plutarch as part of a list of superstitious practices. In his work, the word signifies weekly Sabbath observance. In later Christian documents, *sabbatismos* sometimes indicates the celebration or festivity associated with the Sabbath day.

With this in mind, William Lane translates Hebrews 4:9 as: "There remains a Sabbath celebration for the people of God." He points out that the use of *sabbatismos* is meant to "define more precisely the character of the future rest promised to the people of God" (*Word Biblical Commentary*, volume 47, "Hebrews," page 101).

It conveyed something about the promised spiritual rest that *katapausin* would not have done—"the special aspect of festivity and joy, expressed in the adoration and praise of God" for his wonderful grace (page 102).

On one level, the writer of Hebrews seems to have used the two Greek words interchangeably. In 4:9, he says that a promised Sabbath-rest (*sabbatismos*) remains for the people of God to enter into, and this same

rest is called God's *katapausin* "rest."

Some scholars suggest that the writer coined the word. He wanted to differentiate between the ultimate spiritual "rest" and the promised land rest into which Israel went. If so, the author may also have been making the same difference between the true spiritual "rest" and the weekly Sabbath rest. That is to say, the Sabbath day is a metaphor of the true rest in the same way that the entering of the children of Israel into the promised land rest under Joshua was also a metaphor for spiritual rest.

Since the seventh-day Sabbath is a symbol of the true spiritual rest (which is much more important), the writer would have no logical reason to stress the keeping of the weekly Sabbath (which is of lesser importance). Like the promised land, the Sabbath day itself was but a shadow that prefigured the coming reality—the spiritual "rest" of the Christian.

To summarize: The spiritual rest of salvation into which God's people are entering is a *sabbatismos*—a "Sabbath keeping"—a participation in God's own "rest," which we enter by faith (4:3). "Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his" (4:10).

That is to say, the *sabbatismos* rest of God described in Hebrews 4:9 refers to the salvation "rest" into which all Christians have entered. Of course, as mentioned earlier, the culmination of this rest does not occur until the resurrection. But, upon conversion, we have begun the journey.

## Better promises

The book of Hebrews, considered as a whole, tells us that the practices of the Mosaic law are obsolete (7:11-12, 18-19). This would refer to the works or observances of the law (of which the Sabbath is one example) as opposed to its great moral principles. These "works of the law" include such practices or observances as meticulous tithing, circumcision, purification rites, festival regulations, temple worship and avoiding certain foods.

The new covenant theme of Hebrews suggests that the weekly Sabbath day as described in the old covenant has been superseded by a better promise. The weekly Sabbath can be celebrated and kept, but it need not be. However, Hebrews 4:9-11 itself does not directly state this.

Hebrews 4:9-11 tells us what the Sabbath pictures—the eternal rest of God into which we enter. But that is all it tells us. It does not seem to address the issue of whether the weekly Sabbath should be kept or not. This simply is not the author's interest.

Certainly the weekly Sabbath rest can point to the blessing and joy of the spiritual "rest" Christians have in Christ. This may be why the author of Hebrews may have coined the word *sabbatismos*—making a play off the word for the Sabbath day (*sabbaton*). That is, *sabbatismos* stressed the joy, the celebration, the peace, the jubilation of the spiritual "rest." (We've put "rest" in quotes here because inactivity is not really what is meant.)

Admittedly, Hebrews is a bit unclear as to the writer's attitude toward the weekly Sabbath day. Perhaps he wanted his readers, who were attracted to old covenant customs, to understand the Sabbath's true meaning in the light of the Christ event—without having to make an issue of whether it needs to be kept or not.

The Sabbath is meaningful on its

own terms, just as the Passover-Exodus is. After all, the Sabbath stands as a metaphor of the whole purpose and meaning of redemption. It foreshadows the true spiritual "rest" we have in Christ every day. That's why Christians are free to keep the Sabbath to the degree they wish—and why it remains a tradition of the Worldwide Church of God.

But Hebrews 4:9 issues no command about keeping or not keeping the Sabbath. This verse cannot be used as a proof-text to insist that Christians keep a weekly seventh-day Sabbath rest. In summary, the verses in question do not exhort us to keep an old covenant Sabbath, but they do admonish us to enter the spiritual "rest" of God by having faith in Christ.

## Endnotes

1 *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, volume 3, page 219, edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider gives the following explanation of *sabbatismos*:

1. The NT offers in Hebrews 4:9 the oldest documentation of the noun *sabbatismos*, which occurs several times in post-NT early Christian writings independently of Hebrews 4:9 (e.g., Justin *Dial.* 23:3; Origen *Orat.* 27:16; Epiphanius *Haer.* xxx.2.2; Ixvi 85:9; *Acts (Martyrdom) of Peter and Paul* 1; *Apostolic Constitutions* ii.36.2; pseudo-Macarius (Symeon) *Homily* 12.2.4.... At present, *sabbatismos* has been documented in non-Christian writings only in Plutarch *Superst.* 3 (*Moralia* 166a).

The noun is derived from the vb. *sabbatizo*, which in the LXX [Septuagint] appears as the tr. of Heb. *sabbat*. The vb. means: a) "celebrate/observe the sabbath" (*Exod* 16:30; *Lev* 23:32; 2 *Macc* 6:6; so also Ign. *Magn.* 9:1; Pap. Oxy. 1,1.2; Justin *Dial.* 10:1 and *passim*), b) "observe (sabbath) rest" (*Lev* 26:34f.; 2 *Chr* 36:21; 1 *Esd* 1:55).

Accordingly, the subst. means *sabbath observance* (thus in the non-NT passages mentioned) and *sabbath rest* (thus the understanding of *sabbatismos* in Heb 4:9 by Origen *Cels.* v.59; *Selecta in Exod* on 16:23 [PG XII, 289b]).

2. In Heb 4:9 *sabbatismos* encompasses both *sabbath rest* and (cultic) *sabbath observance*. The word is neither identical in meaning nor interchangeable with—*katapausis* (3:11, 19; 4:1, 3, 5, 10f); it designates more closely what the people of God should expect when they enter the *katapausis* of God (cf. 4:9 with v.6a). Just as God rested on the seventh day of creation from all his works, so also will believers find the eternal sabbath rest on the day of the completion of salvation in God's "place of rest" (see 4:10).

Quietistic or mystic elements have nothing to do with this expectation. The statement in Heb 4:9f. remains dependent on a Jewish sabbath theology that associates the idea of sabbath rest with ideas of worship and praise of God (*Jub.* 2:21; 50:9; *Bib. Ant.* 11:8; 2 *Macc* 8:27; cf. also 1 *Enoch* 41:7). Accordingly, the author of Hebrews understands by *sabbatismos* the eternal sabbath celebration of salvation, i.e., the perfected community's worship before God's throne.

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