

Feature Article Sidebar: DS421

SABBATH KEEPING AND THE NEW COVENANT

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There are a number of views concerning Sabbath keeping that are held by biblically grounded Christians. These views differ based on how the relation between the Old Covenant (Law) and the New Covenant (Gospel) is viewed.¹

James Borland's view in the accompanying feature article is that the entire Mosaic Law was abrogated when Christ fulfilled it (Col. 2:14). Christians, therefore, are not obligated to keep the requirements of the Mosaic Law, whether moral or ceremonial, including the requirement to keep the Sabbath (Rom. 14:5–6). This does not mean, however, that God's moral standards have no application to Christians (which would be *antinomianism* — the denial of Christian obligation to keep any law), only that they no longer apply through the Mosaic Law. God's moral standards now apply to Christians through the law of Christ (basically the law of love — Rom. 13:8–10) or through natural law, also known as general revelation (Rom. 1:18–32; 2:12–16).

This was the view of Martin Luther and (arguably) John Calvin. It is also the view (with variations) of many of the contemporary Protestant denominations.² According to this view, Christians are not legally or morally obligated to keep the Sabbath on Saturday or any day. Sabbath breaking, therefore, is not a sign of apostasy as Seventh-day Adventists assert.

Others, however, such as from the Puritan tradition (e.g., Presbyterian and Reformed denominations that follow the Westminster Confession), see a continuity between the Old and New Covenants. They, therefore, do not believe the entire Mosaic law has been abrogated. Like seventh-day Sabbatarians, they hold that only the ceremonial aspect of the Mosaic law was done away with when Christ fulfilled it, and God's moral standards in the Ten Commandments remain in effect.³ They similarly believe that the Sabbath is part of a universal and perpetually binding moral law rooted in Genesis 2:3.⁴

This view is sometimes called "Sabbatarian," but it differs from seventh-day Sabbatarianism in several respects: First, it maintains that the specification of the seventh day was part of the ceremonial aspect of the fourth commandment that was done away with in Christ, but the principle of setting apart one day in seven for rest and worship is part of the moral aspect and thus remains.⁵ Sunday observance, therefore, does not violate the fourth commandment and is not a sign of apostasy, as Seventh-day Adventists assert. Second, it holds that the focus of Sabbath celebration shifted from God's rest from Creation (Gen. 2:2–3), to Israel's rest from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 5:13–15), and now to the believer's final rest in Christ (Heb. 4:8–10). The Old Testament Sabbath rest was but a physical "shadow" of the spiritual reality of the believer's rest in Christ. This Sabbath rest in Christ is now appropriately celebrated on the Lord's day, which historically is the first day (Sunday) and not the seventh day. According to this view, "the Old Covenant Sabbath is transformed into the New Covenant Lord's Day," but with "significant changes in application and practice of the fourth commandment."⁶ The Sabbath is most appropriately kept by resting and worshipping on the Lord's day (Sunday), though historically there has been a range of opinions about what activities are permissible.

For different reasons, both abrogationists and the school of nonabrogationists noted above agree that Christians are not obligated to observe a *seventh-day* Sabbath. Furthermore, while these two camps

disagree about whether Christians are obligated to observe *one day in seven* as a Sabbath, most in the latter camp would agree with the former camp that exactly *how* one does so (whether out of choice or obligation) is a matter of individual conscience and should not be legislated by teaching authorities within the church.

– Steve Bright

NOTES

1. For further study on the relation of the Old and New Covenants, see *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).
2. Nuances of both Luther's and Calvin's views are debated. For Luther's view, see *The Augsburg Confession* 28.55–68. For Calvin's view, see *Institutes* 2.7.14–17; 2.8.28–34. See also R. J. Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Protestant Tradition," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 312–21.
3. There are differences of opinion about whether the Mosaic law applies to all people or only to God's people. See *Five Views*.
4. Both Luther and Calvin justified their utilitarian views of a day of rest for worship from Genesis rather than from the fourth commandment (*From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 317–18).
5. *Ibid.*, 392.
6. Bruce A. Ray, *Celebrating the Sabbath: Finding Rest in a Restless World* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2000), 43. See also G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1964), 170–73.