

A Study of the Sabbath Compared to New Covenant Teaching

By Randall F. Matheny

Introduction

The observance of the sabbath is incorporated in the Decalogue (Ten Commandments), the basis of the law of Moses, which Christ did not come to destroy, but to fulfill (Mat. 5:17-18), and which cannot be robbed of one commandment without injury to all the rest. What does it mean to “fulfill?” Were the (requirements of) law and the prophets ever fulfilled? If so, when, and by whom?

The Law and Prophets were Undeniably Fulfilled in Christ’s Redemptive Work

In the gospel dispensation the first day of the week is not a departure from, or degradation of, the law of Moses, for that law had been fulfilled in the life, ministry and death of Jesus Christ. Jesus was to fulfill the law (of Moses) and the prophets (Matthew 5:17). He declared that task, along with all others He had come to perform, excepting his death, to be finished (John 17:4). His full redemptive work was declared "finished" in John 19:30. See also:

- Romans 7:1-6: Christians have been delivered from the law (v. 6).
- Romans 7:7-12 removes all doubt as to which law was referred to in the previous verses by identifying as containing the words “You shall not covet” quoted from the Decalogue (Exodus 20:17), therefore, the law from which Christians have been delivered is that of the Ten Commandments.
- 2 Corinthians 3:7-18: the ministry of righteousness (that of Christ) exceeds the glory of the law of Moses (ministry of condemnation) to the extent that the previous law had no glory at all (vv. 9-11), those who still rely upon the law of Moses, or any part thereof, as an authority governing worship remain blinded to the glory of Christ (vv. 12-18).
- Galatians 3:23-25: The law (of Moses) was a tutor, or schoolmaster, intended to direct toward faith in Christ; those having been led to Christ no longer being subject to the tutor/schoolmaster.
- Galatians 5:4 declares that all those who attempt to be justified by the law (of Moses) have fallen from grace.
- Ephesians 2:14-16: The law of commandments contained in ordinances (the Decalogue and the ordinances built upon it) was done away (Gk. *katargeo*) in the death of Christ, which “handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us, and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14-15).
- Colossians 2:16-17: the sabbath, among other things, was a shadow of things to come, which substance is of Christ, by which no Christian is to be judged.
- Hebrews 8:6-13: Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant which is established on better promises. “For it the first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.” “In that He says, A new covenant, He has made the first obsolete.”
- Hebrews 9:16-22: The point in time at which the new testament was enacted as law, superseding the old (cf. Acts 3:19-26), was at the death of the testator, Jesus Christ.

First and Second Century Considerations

The New Testament itself teaches that the first day of the week was observed by the first century church as a day of worship, and in special commemoration of the Resurrection, whereby the work of redemption was finished. (Jn 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). Although it is uncertain that “the Lord’s

day” of Revelation 1:10 was the first day of the week, it was so understood by the earliest commentators on the verse. The day of the Lord was often referred to in the writings of the Old Covenant as occasions of judgment as well as deliverance. The sabbath was never referred to as “the Lord’s day.” The statement of Matthew 12:8, “For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day” refers to His universal lordship which includes, but is not limited to, the sabbath.

The universal and uncontradicted first day observance in the second century can only be explained by the fact that it had its roots in apostolic practice. Although the practice of assembly and worship on the first day of the week had been long established from the days of the apostles onward, it had no support in civil legislation before the age of Constantine (AD 280?-337). To the best of my ability to research history, the Roman emperor Constantine simply recognized, more as a political act than as a religious one on his part, the first day of the week as the already customary day of Christian assembly and worship. To insist that Constantine established the day as a religious act which had no biblical precedent is to be dishonest with the Bible and with the facts of history.

The Significance of the First Day of the Week in the New Covenant

1. It was on that day that Christ rose from the dead (John 20)
2. That he appeared to Mary Magdalene and other women (Luke 24:1-12)
3. That he appeared to the disciples of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-27)
4. That he appeared to the assembled apostles (Luke 24:33ff)
5. That he poured out his Spirit and founded the church (Acts 2:1) (the day of Pentecost was the fiftieth day after the sabbath of the passover week; and as the count commenced on the day after the sabbath, it also ended on the same day of the week, the first day, our Sunday.)
6. On that day Paul met with the disciples at Troas to break bread and preached till midnight (Acts 20:1-7). This “breaking of bread,” representative of the entire Lord’s supper, was done in accordance with the “apostles doctrine (Acts 2:42),” which was ultimately the doctrine of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20; John 14:26; 16:13)
7. On that day God ordered the Galatian and Corinthian Christians to make, in connection with divine service, their weekly contributions to the Lord’s work according to their ability (1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

An Additional Consideration

It is occasionally maintained that early Christians, particularly Paul and his group as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, assembled regularly on the sabbath in the temple and in synagogues. This begs the question, “Why?” This provided an excellent opportunity to teach because of the assemblies that they provided (cf. Acts 5:42; 13:13ff; 14:1-7; 16:11-15; 17:1-4). It cannot be shown that this was practiced for any other reason than for the ready assemblies that they offered, especially since Paul himself declared that Christians are not to be judged by the sabbath (Colossians 2:16-17).

Conclusion

The Bible, the New Covenant of Christ in particular, and secondarily, history, bear out undeniably that the first day of the week is to be the day of assembly and worship for the New Testament church. It was on that day that the church commemorated the Lord Jesus’s death, burial and resurrection in gathering to partake of the Lord’s supper and hear preaching (Acts 20:1-7; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). It was also when they contributed of their means for the work of the ministry (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Christians today will humbly submit to doing the same.

A Brief Study of
The Christian's Relationship to the Sabbath
By Randall F. Matheny

Please take time to read the following passages of scripture in context and complete the attached worksheet.

The old law was to be perpetual in Jewish generations.

(Exodus 31:15-17) "For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall surely be put to death. So the sons of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to celebrate the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed."

("throughout your generations" is repeated 25 times in 25 verses regarding facets of the law of Moses in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, thus narrowing the application of the law to the "sons of Israel," the Hebrew people)
(See Exo. 21:6 for general usage of adv. "forever" *'owlam*. In Exo. 31:17, *'owlam* must be understood in the context of worship during Hebrew generations.)

(Jeremiah 31:31-32) "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD."

Old law had to be changed in order for Jesus to be a priest.

(Hebrews 7:12-19) "For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. For He of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood. And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. For He testifies: "You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek. For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God. But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises."

The great excellence of the new covenant above the former is evident.

(Hebrews 8:7-13) "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant,

and I disregarded them, says the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."
(Refer to Jer. 31:31-34)

The old law (covenant) was done away, not in part, but in whole, when Jesus Christ was crucified.

(Hebrews 9:15-17) "And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives.

(Colossians 2:14) having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

(2 Corinthians 3:14) But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ.

Although there were ceremonial and moral aspects of the old law, neither the old law or the new make a distinction between "ceremonial" and "moral" laws for the purpose of retaining one portion and doing away with another.

(Romans 7:5-7) "For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter. What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."

Additional Scripture: Matthew 5:17-18; John 17:4; 19:30; Romans 15:4; Galatians 3:19-25; 4:21-31; 5:1-6

The Christian's Relationship to the Sabbath Worksheet

Exodus 31:15-17

1. What was the penalty for doing "any work" on the Sabbath day?
2. Who is specifically instructed to "observe the Sabbath?"
3. Give the phrase that is used to fix the duration of the covenant of the Sabbath:
4. The Sabbath is declared to be a "sign" between what two specific parties?
5. The words "perpetual" (v. 16) and "forever" (v. 17) translate what single Hebrew word?
6. In what particular context are the adjectives "perpetual" and "forever" to be understood?

Jeremiah 31:31-32

7. Jeremiah prophesied that the days were coming that the Lord would make what with the houses of Israel and Judah?
8. In what way would the coming covenant be like, or compared with, the one under which Jeremiah wrote?
9. What did the Lord declare as the status of the covenant that He made with Israel when He led them by the hand out of the land of Egypt?

Hebrews 7:12-19

10. In order for Jesus to become a priest, what had to be changed?
11. What would have prevented Jesus from becoming a priest under the old law, if it were not changed?

12. Why was there an annulling of the former commandment?
13. Regarding the new covenant of Jesus Christ, why is it superior to the old covenant?

Hebrews 8:7-13

14. Why was a second covenant to be sought?
15. What passages of old covenant prophecy are referred to as fulfilled in the new covenant?
16. In that He says a "new covenant," He has made the first what?
17. In terms of authority, what happens to that which is obsolete?

Hebrews 9:15-17

18. What is Jesus Christ to the new covenant?
19. By what means did Jesus Christ become Mediator of the new covenant?
20. To what end did Jesus Christ become Mediator of the New Covenant?
21. Where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be what?
22. A testament is in force after what occurs?
23. A testament has no power at all under what conditions?

Colossians 2:14

24. To what does "the handwriting of requirements" refer, and what was done with them?

25. Does this passage teach that the "handwriting of requirements" was nailed to the cross in part or in whole?

2 Corinthians 3:14

26. Why would the Jews, or Christians, or any others, have trouble distinguishing between the authorities of the old and new covenants?

Romans 7:5-7

27. What is the Christian's relationship to the law?
28. What particular law does Paul here have in mind? (Hint: What does he quote as representative of the law that Christians are delivered from? See Exo. 20:17)
29. Is there a distinction made here between moral and ceremonial laws, one of which was to be done away and the other to be retained?

Questions for additional scripture:

Matthew 5:17-18; John 17:4; 19:30

30. What is the definition of "fulfill?"
31. If Jesus came to fulfill the law (old), and did what He was sent to do, what obligation do Christian's have to a fulfilled law or covenant?

Romans 15:4; Galatians 3:19-25

32. What role does the old law play for the Christian who serves and worships under the law of Christ?
33. After faith (of Jesus Christ v. 22) has come, what is the Christian's relationship to the "schoolmaster" (tutor)?
34. To what does the word "schoolmaster" (tutor) refer to here?

35. Do these verses suggest that the Christian is obligated to obey any part or division of the "schoolmaster?"

Galatians 4:21-31

36. In this allegory, what is represented by the:
- a. "Bond woman?"
 - b. "Free woman?"
37. In this allegory, which covenant are Christians the children of?
38. Does this allegory teach that Christians remain obligated to any part or division of the covenant "from the mount Sinai?"

Galatians 5:1-6

39. Those who seek justification by the law of Moses, or any part of the law (from mount Sinai Gal. 4:24), even a single ordinance, have what relationship to Christ?
40. Those who seek justification by the law of Moses, or any part of the law (from mount Sinai Gal. 4:24), even a single ordinance, have what relationship to grace?