

A Study of the Sabbath Compared to New Covenant Teaching

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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.