

Sabbath, Circumcision, and Tithing



Which Old Testament Laws
Apply to Christians?

fourth edition

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Sabbath, Circumcision, and Tithing: Which Old Testament Laws Apply to Christians?

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Introduction

Many Christians have questions about the laws of the Old Testament. Many claim to keep the Ten Commandments, for example, but then ignore one of them — the seventh-day Sabbath. In effect, their “Ten” means only nine — and many can’t explain why. They may say, “Oh, the Sabbath was an Old Testament law” — but so were the other nine! Why one and not the others?

As another example, many churches teach that Christians should tithe — give ten percent of their income to the church. But if the seventh-day Sabbath does not apply to Christians, why should the law of tithing apply? Why one Old Testament law, but not the other?

Anyone who reads the Old Testament is likely to wonder: In this mix of ceremonial, civil, and ethical laws, how are Christians supposed to know which laws apply today? Are there biblical principles we can use to evaluate the laws of the Old Testament?

In this mix of ceremonial, civil, and ethical laws, how can Christians know which laws apply today?

Yes — and the results challenge some common assumptions. Whether we advocate the Sabbath or abolish it, someone will like it, and others will not. Whether we teach tithing or not, someone will disagree, and others will be happy to agree.

It’s a controversy, so we want to see what Scripture says. What does the New Testament say about Old Testament laws? Which laws are quoted with approval, and which are said to be obsolete? What principles do we use when evaluating Old Testament laws that the New Testament does not specifically mention?

Basic beliefs

We begin with two basic beliefs: that Christians should obey God, and that the Bible is a reliable guide to the way we should obey. People who don’t accept those beliefs probably aren’t interested in this book, anyway — they don’t care which laws apply today, because they don’t consider any of them very authoritative.

Entire books could be written about the authority of the Bible, and I will not discuss that question here. I will simply note that the Bible describes God’s people as people who obey God. Throughout the New Testament, the expectation is given that Christians respond to God’s grace by obeying him. A few scriptures illustrate this point:

- Jesus told the apostles to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them to *obey* everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20, italics added).
- Timothy was told that the Scriptures he had known from infancy — that is, the Old

Testament Scriptures — “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Even in the Christian era, the Old Testament is useful for “training in righteousness.” It helps us know how to live (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

- Paul said that grace is not permission to sin, and faith does not eliminate the validity of biblical law (Romans 3:31; 6:1-2). Far from it! “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12).
- Jesus said he did not come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it. “Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18).

But wait a minute, someone might protest. Christians don’t keep *every* law in the Old Testament. We don’t make sacrifices, stone adulterers, or consider ourselves “unclean” after attending a funeral — and neither did Jesus. So what did he mean? The laws have not disappeared, but at least some of them are no longer in force.

Is the law of circumcision good? Yes, says Paul. As part of inspired Scripture, is it useful for teaching Christians about righteousness? Again, yes — but in what sense? Christians do not have to keep it literally, but why not? Why can Christians ignore some of the laws that God gave? That’s what this book is about.

I begin with another belief, too: that this subject is not just for scholars, pastors and professionals. It can be understood by ordinary Christians, and indeed should be. Scholarly studies can help, but they do not help everyone. Some books make the subject so complicated that the average person soon gives up.

I have therefore tried to make this subject easy to follow, and rooted in Scripture at every step. I mention a few other books for those who want further reading, but for the most part, this subject can be properly understood from Scripture itself. My main goal is to help average Christian readers understand what the Bible says about the laws of the Old Testament.

<p>Christians don’t keep <i>every</i> law in the Old Testament. So what did Jesus mean?</p>

About the author

You may also want to know a bit about me. What qualifications do I have to write on this topic? I have, at different times in my life, kept the Sabbath and various Old Testament laws. At other times, I have not. In my Christian ministry, I have written against the validity of the seventh-day Sabbath, and I have written in support of it. I have studied the issues from both sides, both in theory and in experience. I know the arguments of both sides, and in this book I hope to share with you what I believe to be the best understanding of Scripture.

What are my academic qualifications? I have a Master of Divinity degree from Azusa Pacific University, and I am a doctoral candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary. I am a member of the NewLife Fellowship in Pasadena, California, serving in youth ministry and sometimes giving sermons.

My wife Janet is from New Zealand and we have two children: Steven and Melinda. I thank them for their support and patience with me as I worked on the doctrinal studies that eventually became part of this book. I must also thank my church for encouraging me in my

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Section I: How can *any* of God's laws be obsolete?

1

The strange variety of Old Testament laws

Someone once asked Jesus, Out of all the laws in the Bible, which is the most important? (Matthew 22:36). Jesus quoted two laws from the Old Testament: “Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (verses 37-40).

Jesus says that our most basic duty is to love — and those commands are found in the Old Testament — in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, to be exact.

When we understand *why* a law is or isn't valid, then we will know how to evaluate other laws.

But if we go to *the very next verse* in Leviticus, we find some unusual commands: “Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (Leviticus 19:19; also found in Deuteronomy 22:11).

In other words, the Bible tells people not to wear fabric made of two kinds of fiber. In ancient times, it might have

been a mix of wool and flax. In modern times, this might mean a wool-polyester blend, or a cotton-polyester shirt. What is a Christian supposed to do with a law like that? Should we say, The Bible says it, so I will do it whether or not I understand it? Or should we say, That doesn't sound anything like Jesus?

The good news is, that we *can* understand why this law is not part of Christianity. And the good news is, that when we understand *why* a law is or isn't valid, then we know how to evaluate *other* laws, such as tithing and Sabbath. That's our goal. But first, let's look at a few more laws.

Civil laws

The Law of Moses says, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (Deuteronomy 25:4). Animals should be treated humanely, and should share in the results of their work. Paul quoted this verse with approval, using it as a principle that human workers ought to be paid (1 Corinthians 9:9-10).

Another principle regarding animals is found in Deuteronomy 22:6-7: "If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go." This is a good principle of wildlife conservation — but is it part of Christian duty? Should Christian churches lobby for laws like this?

A good economic principle can be seen in Deuteronomy 20:19-20: "When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls." In other words, you can chop down as many trees as you want, but save the fruit trees for your own benefit.

A safety rule can be seen in Deuteronomy 22:8: "When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof." In ancient Israel, roofs were usually flat, and people used them as part of their living and working area. It made good sense to build a short wall around

We do not know why the grapes would be "defiled" if some beans were planted between the vines.

them so people wouldn't accidentally fall off. But is this law required for Christians today? Wouldn't it be enough to simply keep people off of the roof in the first place?

It is not always easy to discern the purpose of some of the laws of Moses. For example, the next verse: "Do not plant two kinds of seed in your vineyard; if you do, not only the crops you plant but also the fruit of the vineyard will be defiled" (verse 9). We do not know why the grapes would be "defiled" if the owner planted a little barley and beans in between the grapes. If there's plenty of room between the rows, what's wrong with using the space for something else?

Another clothing law

Verse 12 has another rule: “Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear.” Another law is even more specific: “You are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel” (Numbers 15:38). What was the purpose of these tassels? “You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes” (verse 39).

Every time the Israelites saw these tassels, they were to remember their responsibility to obey God. Orthodox Jews still wear prayer shawls with blue tassels (the modern blue-and-white Israeli flag was modeled after a prayer shawl). If Christians want to obey God, should they wear blue threads in tassels on their garments? If not, why not?

Agricultural and festival laws

At the risk of being tedious, let’s notice a few more laws. God commanded his people to kill Passover lambs each year (Exodus 12:1-8, 24-27). He claimed ownership of every firstborn male, both human and animal (Exodus 13:1-2). The animals were to be given to the Lord, and payment given for every firstborn son (verses 11-15). God gave these laws, and Christians need to ask, Are these laws important, or not? Do we have to keep them in order for them to be useful for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)?

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An interesting agricultural law was given at Mt. Sinai: “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove” (Exodus 23:10-11).

Every seven years, the land was to have some rest. This sabbatical year might have been good for Israel’s soil and climate, but is it still God’s law for farmers in America or in tropical countries? Are we willing to trust God on this — or does he even tell us to do this? If God doesn’t want us to obey these laws, why did he put them in the Bible? Should we obey his command to set aside every 50th year as an additional land-sabbath? (Leviticus 25:8-12).

If we can ignore these laws, should we also ignore “You shall not steal” (Deuteronomy 5:19)? Why one and not the other? That’s what this book is about.

God commanded his people to observe three annual festivals — and they weren’t Easter, Labor Day and Christmas (Exodus 23:14). They were the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Harvest, and the Festival of Ingathering (verses 15-16). He commanded all men to

When we understand *why*, then we will be able to evaluate other laws.

appear before him at a designated site in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 16:16). He told his people to make shelters out of tree branches and live in them for a week (Leviticus 23:39-43).

He commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, and all his children were to be circumcised (Genesis 17:11; Leviticus 12:2-3). The early church dealt with this specific issue in Acts 15, and they concluded that non-Jewish Christians do not have to be circumcised (we'll cover that in more detail in chapter 3). Paul explained that physical circumcision was not necessary (Romans 2:28-29). Uncircumcised people can be righteous in God's sight (Romans 3:30). But if God gave this law, why shouldn't we try to keep it?

"Why" is the key question. When we understand why, then we will be able to evaluate other laws.

Review

- We do not have to obey all the commands God gave Abraham — for example, circumcision.
- We do not have to obey all the commands God gave his people through Moses — for example, blue tassels.
- Even if a law isn't *required*, should Christians try to keep Old Testament laws if we can? For example, it is not *difficult* to wear blue tassels. Should we recommend it?
- What is wrong with the logic of saying, "God said it, so I'll do it"?
- Some people teach this principle: "A law remains valid until it is specifically revoked." Is this principle true?

2

Does God make mistakes?

God does not change (Malachi 3:6; James 1:17). Indeed, his Hebrew name *Yahweh* indicates that he is The One Who Is, or the Eternal One (Exodus 3:14). But if God remains the same, how can his laws change? Can the Eternal give temporary laws?

It is obvious throughout Scripture that God does in fact give commands to some people but not to others. Commands he gave to Noah do not apply to others. When he told Abraham to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:2), he did not intend for anyone else to go and do likewise. When he commanded Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, he did not intend for anyone else to do it.

When he told Joshua to go around an enemy city seven days in a row (Joshua 6:2-5), he was not creating a law for all future followers. Similarly, when Jesus commanded his disciples to go only to the cities of Israel (Matthew 10:5-6), he was not creating an eternal law.

God gives commands to some people but not to others.

Even though God remains the same and his purpose remains the same, he sometimes gives commands that are suited to a particular person and circumstance. When we read a command God gave Abraham, we do not have to assume that we must also obey it. When we read a command given to the Jews, we do not assume that we must do it, too. Some of the commands he gave through Moses are still valid for us today; others are not, and we want to know how to discern the difference.

Animal sacrifices

Most Christians know that God commanded his people in the Old Testament to make animal sacrifices. Every day, they had rituals to perform, animals to kill and burn on the altar. There were various washings, grain offerings, wine offerings, and other offerings. Most Christians also know (by observation, if nothing else) that Christianity does not involve any animal offerings. What God once commanded, he no longer requires.

In this case we would be wrong to try to do what Israel was commanded to do.

We can see this explained in the book of Hebrews,

chapter 10. The law was only a shadow, verse 1 says, not the reality of salvation. We could compare it to a sketch or a simple diagram, not the full picture. Or it is a silhouette, not the real person. Although the law had “the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year,” it was not able to make the worshippers complete, and it could not cleanse their consciences (verse 2). “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (verse 4).

So when Christ came into the world, he said (quoting one of the Psalms) that sacrifices were not what God really wanted (verse 5). And by doing God’s will, Christ did away with the need for sacrifices (verses 9, 18). Christ did what they could only symbolize, and now that the reality is here, we no longer need the picture. The sacrifices were only a temporary command, given to the nation of Israel until Christ would come and fulfill what the sacrifices symbolized.

God gave these commands — but he did not give them to us. We can’t assume that “if they were good enough for Israel, they are good enough for us.” No, in this case we would be wrong to try to do what Israel was commanded to do. We are a different people.

I use the example of sacrifices because it is something that all Christians agree on: These commandments given to Israel do not apply to us today. God himself, in the Scriptures, has told us so.

Earlier in the book of Hebrews, we are told that “there must also be a change of the law” (Hebrews 7:12). The subject in that chapter is the priesthood. The Law of Moses said that only Levites could be priests. But Jesus Christ is our priest now, and the fact that he is a priest (even though he is not a Levite) shows that there has been a change in the law. The law that restricted the priesthood to Levites is no longer in force. The Eternal’s laws have changed.

So, the book of Hebrews tells us, “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” (verses 18-19). We draw near to God by Jesus Christ, of course, but notice those strong words about the law that God had given: It was *weak* and *useless*. It told people that they were sinful, but it could not cleanse their consciences. It could not forgive their sins. It was not the way that God was trying to save people. It had only a temporary purpose.

<p>The law told people that they were sinful, but it could not cleanse their consciences.</p>

Later, we are told that there was something wrong with the first covenant (the agreement that God made with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai). The people couldn’t keep their part of the deal. God knew they couldn’t, but he made the covenant with them, anyway. It would be like us making a contract to sell our house for ten million dollars, knowing full well that the “buyer” didn’t have any money. Something is wrong with an agreement like that. God made this agreement with Israel even though he knew that they couldn’t live up to the bargain.

God had a purpose in this, of course. It was one step in his purpose to bring us salvation. But it was just a preparatory step. It was designed to show that people could

not keep laws. We need a Savior, not more and better laws. We need supernatural rescue, not more guidance and teaching.

A temporary law

Paul asks, “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (Galatians 3:19). It was a temporary addition, designed from the start to be in force only until Christ came. That is why sacrifices and offerings are no longer needed. The same law that restricted the priesthood to Levites, the same law that commanded animal sacrifices, is all swept away by the coming of Christ.

We need a Savior, not more and better laws. We need supernatural rescue.

“The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ,” Paul writes (verse 24). “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (verse 25). The law that Moses gave no longer supervises our relationship with God. We do not look to Levitical priests or sacrifices or rituals or anything else that is found only in the Law of Moses. Instead, we look to Christ. We trust in him for our salvation, not in our ability to keep laws.

Paul says the same thing in a different way in Ephesians 2. There he discusses the laws that separated Jews and Gentiles, laws that Jews had to keep to make them different from Gentiles. (Many of the laws we mentioned above were never given to Gentiles, and God did not expect Gentiles to keep them; they would cause Jews to be different from Gentiles. This purpose is specifically mentioned for some laws, such as in Leviticus 20:24-25.)

The law created a barrier between the two peoples, and it created some hostility between them. But Christ destroyed this barrier “by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations” (Ephesians 2:14-15). He did this, Paul says, to reconcile both people to God through his cross (verse 16).

Jesus did not die to remove human-made laws. In God’s sight, human religious laws were never in force in the first place. But Jesus’ death did set aside God-made laws, such as animal sacrifices, because they had been designed in advance to cease when Christ died. In this way Jesus removed laws that separated Jews from Gentiles. This includes animal sacrifices and many other laws. Now, God does not have different rules for Jews than for Gentiles.

The laws of Moses have fulfilled their purpose, and now there is no need for anyone to offer sacrifices or do the old rituals. As it says in Hebrews, the old covenant is “obsolete” (Hebrews 8:13). Laws that the Eternal gave are indeed obsolete. Not because we are tired of them or think they are old-fashioned, not because church history says so, but because God himself says so in Scripture.

But how much does this include? The old covenant

Jesus’ death set aside some of God’s laws, such as animal sacrifices, because they had been designed in advance to cease when Christ died.

included laws against stealing, murder, and adultery. Are those laws obsolete? Of course not. We will need to investigate a bit further. But to provide a better foundation for our studies, we need to take a closer look at circumcision.

Review

- God gave commands that were designed to be temporary.
- It would be wrong to offer sacrifices, even though God once required them.
- Question: What is wrong with the argument, “God’s law doesn’t change, because God doesn’t change”?

3

Circumcision: a new way to keep an old law

Almost all Christians agree that circumcision is an obsolete law, for the New Testament is very clear about it. But it will be helpful for us to examine in greater detail *why* it is obsolete. Although you may not have any questions about circumcision itself, the lessons we learn from circumcision will help us evaluate laws that you *do* have questions about. So even though it might at first seem to be irrelevant, it is actually very relevant to our study. Let's begin by seeing how circumcision started.

A command for Abraham and his family

In the first biblical mention of circumcision, God made a covenant or an agreement with Abraham and his descendants.

God said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." God explained his part of the covenant — he would be the God of Abraham's descendants and give them the land of Canaan (Genesis 17:1-8).

God then explained Abraham's part of the covenant (verses 10-14). "This is...the covenant you are to keep." Every male was to be circumcised — the foreskin at the tip of the male sex organ was to be removed — and this was to be the "sign" of the covenant with God, and it was "an everlasting covenant."

Every male in Abraham's household was to be circumcised immediately, and from then on every baby boy was to be circumcised on the eighth day of his life. Whether they were Hebrews or whether they were slaves, the men had to be circumcised. If they were not, they would be cut off; they had broken the covenant.

Gentiles had to be circumcised if they wanted to worship God by means of the Passover.

Abraham did what God told him to do (verses 23-27; 21:4). The practice of circumcision became the defining characteristic of Abraham's family. However, the Israelites did not circumcise their boy babies in the wilderness. Joshua had to reinstitute this custom (Joshua 5:2-8). The omission had to be corrected before the plan of God proceeded. God

It will be helpful for us to learn *why* circumcision is obsolete.

would not allow the Israelites to live in the promised land unless they were faithful to the covenant God had made with Abraham.

Circumcision among the Israelites

Since circumcision was already a requirement for the Israelites, it is natural that it was included within the old covenant laws (Leviticus 12:2-3). People had to be circumcised to participate in the Passover (Exodus 12:44, 48). Even Gentiles had to be circumcised if they wanted to worship God by means of the Passover.

However, circumcision was not merely a physical and external practice. It symbolized something internal. God described idolatry and disobedience as a result of an uncircumcised heart (Leviticus 26:41); he described repentance as a circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6).

But this spiritual meaning did not eliminate the need for the physical practice — the Israelites were to obey both the letter of the law *and* its symbolic meaning.

The Israelites apparently continued the practice of circumcision. Even in the lawless period of the judges, the Israelites were distinguished from others by the fact that they were circumcised (Judges 14:3; 1 Samuel 14:6; 2 Samuel 1:20; 1 Chronicles 10:4). The practice of circumcision was important in Israelite self-identity, in knowing that they were the people of God.

The prophets used the term “uncircumcised” as a synonym for Gentiles (Isaiah 52:1). Ezekiel criticized those who let uncircumcised people into the temple (Ezekiel 44:7). He predicted that only people who were circumcised in both the flesh and the heart could worship properly (verse 9). Physical circumcision was required.

The prophets elaborated on the *spirit* of circumcision, too. Jeremiah encouraged the people, who presumably were already physically circumcised, to circumcise their hearts (Jeremiah 4:4). It was a figure of speech meaning repentance. Indeed, God said he would punish both Israelites and Gentiles who are circumcised in the flesh only and not in the heart (Jeremiah 9:25-26). Physical circumcision was not enough; spiritual circumcision was also necessary.

Isaiah emphasized the importance of circumcision in one of his prophecies of God’s glorious rule. He predicted a time when only circumcised people would be allowed to enter the new city of Zion (Isaiah 52:1-2). In Isaiah’s culture and time, that meant people who were physically circumcised. Isaiah may have also meant those who were circumcised in heart as well. This was part of his prophecy of redemption (verse 3) — when good tidings of salvation are preached and God rules (verse 7) when the Lord returns to Zion (verse 8) and reveals salvation throughout the world (verse 10).

Circumcision in the early church

Now we come to the New Testament. John the Baptist and Jesus were circumcised (Luke 1:59; 2:21). Jesus’ only comment about circumcision was favorable: It was part of the Law of Moses, and it was so important that it could be done on the Sabbath (John

7:22-23).

Stephen mentioned the covenant of circumcision that God had given Abraham (Acts 7:8), but he criticized the Jewish leaders for having uncircumcised hearts and ears (verse 51). They were physically circumcised, but not obedient to what God had told them through Jesus. Physical circumcision should have been followed by a circumcision of the heart — repentance.

The biggest controversy about circumcision came when the gospel began going to Gentiles. Circumcised believers (Jews) were astonished when the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile (Acts 10:45). Jewish Christians criticized Peter for going to the house of uncircumcised people and even eating with them (Acts 11:2-3). For centuries, all of God's people had been circumcised, and these Jewish Christians assumed that this would always be true.

The problem surfaced again when more and more Gentiles began to believe in the Lord Jesus (verses 20-21). Later, some Jewish believers came to them and taught that the Gentiles had to be circumcised or else they could not be saved (Acts 15:1). They also said that the Gentiles should obey the entire Law of Moses (verse 5). In Antioch, this would not have included sacrifices, but it would have included other Jewish customs found in the books of Moses. By "circumcision," these Jews meant complete proselyte status, that the Gentiles had to become converted to Judaism — and that would mean that they had to keep all the other laws (Galatians 5:3). They said that Gentiles had to become Jewish in order to be saved.

However, the Jerusalem conference concluded that circumcision was *not* required for Gentile believers. They did not have to obey "the Law of Moses."

A possible argument for circumcision

Today, we understand that circumcision is not required for Gentiles, and we take it for granted. But perhaps we will better understand the significance of this decision if we try to argue the case *for* circumcision. Luke does not report the actual arguments used by the Judaizers, but they *could* have made a strong case. For example:

"Circumcision goes back to God's eternal covenant with Abraham, in which God promised to be the God of his descendants. These Gentiles are claiming Abraham as their spiritual father. He is the father of the faithful, and Genesis 17:12 tells us that *all* who are his descendants, whether physically or otherwise, come under the covenant of circumcision. If they really have the faith that Abraham did, they will be willing to do what Abraham did. If they really have a covenant with the same God, they will gladly accept the sign of that covenant. The covenant was revealed as everlasting, not a temporary arrangement. It was commanded by God himself.

"God has called these people, and that is good. But just as our ancestor Israelites could not inherit the promises until they were circumcised, so also these Gentiles cannot inherit the spiritual promises (salvation) unless they are

circumcised. Until they are circumcised, they are strangers to the covenant of promise. We should not allow them to participate in our worship until they are circumcised; even though they have believed in Jesus our Passover, they should not partake of the meal or receive the benefit of his sacrifice unless they are circumcised. There is solid scriptural precedent and support for this. The example of the ancient Israelites was written for our admonition.

“Circumcision is not only a physical command from God; it also has important spiritual symbolism. It pictures repentance, but this symbolism doesn’t eliminate the need to obey God physically, too. In fact, if these people really were obedient to God, they would not want to spiritualize away God’s command to be circumcised. Isaiah clearly said that when the good news of salvation is preached, only circumcised people will be able to enter the daughter of Zion, which is the church today. These Gentiles are being grafted into Israel, and they therefore need to keep Israelite laws.

“What advantage is there in being circumcised? Much in every way! It is our nation that has the promises and covenants, and our Lord said that salvation is of the Jews. The only thing Jesus said about circumcision was positive. Circumcision helps us remember that we are God’s people and we are not supposed to act like other people do. Circumcision has value if a person observes the law, and we certainly don’t want to encourage these new converts to be lawbreakers. Our Messiah specifically said that he didn’t come to do away with the law, and none of it would pass away. He fulfilled the symbolism of sacrifices, but that doesn’t do away with our need to obey the plain and clear commands of God.

“God justifies people by faith, but the faith isn’t genuine if these people aren’t willing to obey clear commands of God in the God-breathed Scriptures that are able to make us wise for salvation. No one should rely on circumcision as a guarantee of salvation, of course, but neither should we reject it. Abraham believed first, and then he obeyed. That’s what these Gentiles need to do to be saved. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.”

Would we be able to answer such an argument without the writings of Paul? Probably not. The argument sounds strong (and parts of it are still used today in support of other Old Testament laws!), but the writings of Paul make it clear that the argument is faulty. If we want to obey God, then we will want to know *why* the argument isn’t valid.

Acts 15 concludes by saying that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised (verses 19-20; we will look at Acts 15 in more detail in chapter 5). Peter, Barnabas and Paul reinterpreted the law of circumcision by keeping the spiritual meaning but rejecting the physical custom. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they explained that Abraham received the promises by faith *before* circumcision (Romans 4:9-10). Therefore the circumcision of the most-respected patriarch (even though commanded as an everlasting covenant for his physical heirs and extended household) cannot be a requirement for salvation. Abraham

had saving faith without being circumcised, and Gentiles were being given the Holy Spirit without being circumcised.

Peter, Barnabas and Paul saw a *discontinuity* between the old way and the new. Even a ritual given hundreds of years before Sinai could be set aside, as a requirement for salvation, by the new situation that Jesus brought.

Paul and circumcision

Many Jewish Christians could have been troubled by the conclusion that circumcision was not required. An ancient and culturally important religious law was set aside without even a hint that Jesus was against it. Why was this necessary? Let us look at what Paul later wrote and understand his reasons for the change between old and new.

“Circumcision has value if you observe the law,” Paul writes (Romans 2:25). But a person who observes the law is *counted as* circumcised (that is, in Abraham’s covenant) whether or not he is actually circumcised (verse 26). A Gentile who obeys is better than a Jew who disobeys (verse 27); physical circumcision does not affect our salvation. If a person is Jewish only in physical circumcision, but not in the heart, such a person is not one of God’s people, since real circumcision is not “merely” physical (verse 28).

Paul’s comments so far might be agreeable to a Jewish believer who said that both physical *and* spiritual circumcision were necessary. But Paul’s next comment would be too sweeping: A person is one of God’s people if he is inwardly circumcised, since the real circumcision is a spiritual matter, of the heart, “not by the written code” (verse 29). Although the prophets said that a person must be circumcised both inside and out, Paul said that only the inside counts. If the inside is OK, the outside does not matter.

But what value is there in being circumcised? Or, in synonymous terms, what advantage is there in being a Jew? Much, replies Paul (Romans 3:1-2). He mentions that circumcised people have in their community the words of God (verse 3). That is a great value, but it is useless if they do not obey — and that brings Paul to the core of the problem.

There is none righteous, no not one, he says (verse 10). No one keeps the law perfectly; we all fall short. So how can we be saved? Only by faith. “There is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (verse 30). Justification by faith is the main reason that the physical rite of circumcision is no longer necessary. We are right with God through faith, not by a ritual done in our flesh.

Paul examines the example of Abraham again, and notes that Abraham was counted as righteous even while he was uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-10). Even though he later received a physical sign or seal of his righteousness, his righteous status before God did not depend on circumcision (verse 11). He is the father of all who faithfully live the way he did *before* he was circumcised (verse 12). He lived by faith, trusting in God.

Paul spells it out for the Galatians

Paul explained circumcision in greatest detail in his letter to the Galatians. The Galatian Christians were being misled by a Judaizing heresy that said Gentile believers should follow up their faith by obeying Old Testament commands. But Paul explained that it is wrong to view physical circumcision as *necessary* because that would imply that faith in Christ was not enough. “If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all” (Galatians 5:2).

Paul did not *forbid* circumcision; after all, he had circumcised Timothy, whose mother was Jewish (Acts 16:3). But he explains that Titus, a Gentile, was not circumcised (Galatians 2:3). It was not a requirement for salvation, nor a requirement for leadership within the church. Circumcision is permissible as a voluntary practice, but it should not be taught as a requirement. It does not improve anyone’s standing before God. It should not be done as an obligation, or as a commitment to old covenant laws, which was the concern in Acts 15 and Galatians 5:2-3.

Circumcision was only the beginning of the Judaizers’ demands. What they were really insisting on was the whole Law of Moses (Galatians 5:3). They were insisting on the Mosaic covenant. Faith in Christ is great, they probably said, but we have to add to our faith some works as specified by the authoritative writings of Moses. Not so, said Paul. “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (verse 6).

Paul had to say that he was *not* preaching circumcision (verse 11). Why was this necessary? Probably because the Judaizers said that Paul was in favor of circumcision. Like other Jewish preachers seeking proselytes, Paul taught morals and virtues. Once people had accepted the morals, the Judaizers claimed, Paul would add circumcision as the capstone requirement. Not so, said Paul. He was not going to add requirements to what he had already taught the Galatian believers. He felt so strongly about the Judaistic agitators that he exclaimed, “I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (verse 12). Moreover, if the Galatians submitted to this work of the law as if it were required, then they could *not* be saved (verse 2)! They would no longer be trusting in Christ.

The Judaizers, he said, had selfish motives. They wanted to look good by bringing in converts, and they didn’t want to be criticized by other Jews regarding the shameful death of Jesus (Galatians 6:12). They talked about obedience, but they themselves were sinning and in need of the cross they were ashamed of (verse 13).

Circumcision is obsolete, Paul said, since it has been replaced by the cross of Christ and all that the cross symbolizes (verse 14). Through faith in our Savior’s death on our behalf, we are acceptable to God on the basis of faith, and we do not need a physical sign of the covenant that we have in Jesus’ blood. Our relationship with God is based on Jesus, not on the flesh.

“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new

creation” (verse 15). If we are born anew in Christ, if we have a faith that works itself out in love, then we are acceptable to God. We do not have to observe this ancient ritual in order to be saved.

The circumcision controversy in other churches

To the Corinthians, Paul made it clear that if a person was called while uncircumcised, he should not attempt to change his appearance of his flesh (1 Corinthians 7:18). And his reason is surprising: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (verse 19). The surprise is that circumcision *had been* one of God’s commands, and yet it doesn’t count. Paul was apparently talking about New Testament commands, not old ones. The law of circumcision was a religious rite that had nothing to do with our moral responsibilities to our neighbors.

Because the Gentiles were uncircumcised, they were once excluded from the covenants of promise and cut off from God. But now, through the blood of Christ, they have been brought near to God (Ephesians 2:11-13). In Jesus’ own flesh, by his own obedience to the laws of Moses, he has abolished the commandments and regulations that separated Jews from Gentiles (verses 14-15). He gave all ethnic groups access to God and made them fellow citizens with each other; it is in Christ that we are being built together as a spiritual temple for God (verses 19-22). (We’ll look at Ephesians 2 in more detail in chapter 14.)

Paul also warned the Philippians about the circumcision advocates. “Watch out for those dogs,” he said (using Jewish slang for Gentiles) in reference to the Judaizers (Philippians 3:2). They are evil men, “mutilators of the flesh.” But the Spirit wars against the flesh; Paul emphasizes that the physical rite takes away from its spiritual meaning. It is *believers* who are the true circumcision — all “who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (verse 3). We do not look to fleshly things as evidence of spiritual salvation.

Paul himself was circumcised (verse 5), but he counted it as of no value for the sake of Christ (verses 7-8). His righteousness did not come from the law, but from faith in Christ (verse 9). Justification by faith has made circumcision obsolete.

The principle of *salvation by faith*, which Abraham had before his circumcision, gave Paul the logical foundation for saying that obedience to a command of Scripture was not necessary for salvation. A physical requirement cannot eliminate a promise of God that is given through faith.

Paul told Gentiles in Colosse that they were circumcised in Christ (Colossians 2:11). Since he is our righteousness, and we are in him, we have been given fullness in him (verse 10). We are counted as righteous because *he* is righteous. We are as good as circumcised if we are putting off our sinful nature — if our new nature is in Christ. We are keeping the old law in a new way.

Christians *are* circumcised, and our circumcision is not done by humans, but by

Christ himself. How? Through baptism (verse 12). That is how we show publicly that we have faith in Jesus as our Savior, that our old life is ended, that we — now circumcised in the heart — intend to live from then on in his service.

When we were separated from God in our sinful nature, we were spiritually uncircumcised. But God has now made us alive again with Christ (verse 13). He forgave our sins, canceling our spiritual debts (which we got through transgressing the written code) and the regulations that concerned the symbolic forgiveness of sins (verse 14). Sacrifices are obsolete.

Similarly, he canceled the regulation of circumcision, which symbolized repentance and sanctification. Since the fullness of those regulations has come in Christ, the symbol is no longer required. Christ has given us the fulfillment. (We'll look at Colossians 2 again in chapter 14).

Review 3

- God commanded Abraham and his descendants to be circumcised.
- Christians are also considered descendants of Abraham.
- We obey this law in a spiritual sense, and the literal sense is not necessary.
- Question: How strong could the argument for circumcision be? How many misleading arguments are in the speech on pages 11-12?
- “The only thing Jesus said about circumcision was positive.” Does this mean we should do it? Why?

4

The eternal validity of God's law

Physical circumcision, which was once commanded by God, is no longer required. How can this be? God, the perfect and unchangeable Lawgiver, changed a fundamental aspect of his law — not only circumcision, but also sacrifices and temples and priest-hoods. The infallible Scriptures contain commands that are obsolete.

But Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18).

Laws about sacrifice are valid in their intent, but we obey them through faith in Christ.

Jesus was talking about the entire Old Testament — the Law and the Prophets. So how can his statement be reconciled with the fact that some commands of the Old Testament are not required today? Perhaps the best approach to explain this is to understand that the laws are valid in their intent, but changed in their application. Laws about sacrifice continue to be valid, but we obey them through faith in Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for us. The law required sacrifice, and Jesus confirmed its validity at the same time as he made it unnecessary for us to perform it.

Obeying in the heart

When God commanded animal sacrifices, he commanded a law that was perfectly appropriate to the times. When David said that God did not want animals (Psalm 51:16), that was also a perfectly appropriate administration of the law of sacrifice, because David was inspired to understand that repentance was the real command (verse 17).

The real law is eternally valid; the physical administration of it has changed.

When Christ sacrificed himself, he made all animal sacrifices unnecessary (Hebrews 10:8-10). The administration of the law shifted to faith in the effectiveness of Jesus to atone for our sinfulness. When we have faith in him, we are

effectively obeying the laws regarding sacrifice. Likewise, we are obeying the law of circumcision when our attitudes are circumcised. The real law — allegiance to God — is eternally valid; the physical administration of it has changed. We live in a different age, needing a different administration.

God's law is written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:16). This does not mean the physical details regulating specifics of worship practices are on our hearts, but it means the *intent* behind those regulations, especially faith and love and other fruits of the Spirit.

God's law did not originate with Moses — sin existed before Moses and sin does not exist without law (Romans 5:12-14). God's law existed before Moses did, and the people transgressed it. There is a law *behind* the Law of Moses. The Mosaic administration was a valid expression of God's holy, spiritual, righteous law, and it was appropriate for its situation, but it is not appropriate after the death of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, to impose or to attempt to combine the Mosaic administration into Christian faith and practice can cause many problems. New wine makes old wineskins burst (Matthew 9:17). The old covenant, the old way of relating to God, is obsolete. However, many of the Mosaic rules, especially those concerning the way we should treat other people, are still valid applications of the spiritual purpose. Jesus explained them in the Sermon on the Mount, for example (see chapter 8).

But many other laws of Moses, especially those concerning worship, are not valid practices because we have been given the spiritual fulfillment that those rituals only symbolized. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for paying too much attention to details and not enough on human relationships (Matthew 23; Mark 7:11-13).

In summary, laws can remain in Scripture, and remain valid in purpose, and yet we may no longer be required to keep them in the letter. Just quoting Matthew 5:17 does not automatically prove that an Old Testament law must be administered in the way it was under Moses. The law of circumcision illustrates the Christian approach to old covenant laws.

Matthew 5:17 does not prove that an Old Testament law must be kept in the same way as it was under Moses.

Review

- Is the law of circumcision still valid? Explain one sense in which it is, and another in which it's not.
- Are the laws of sacrifice still valid?
- If a law was good at one time in history, is it always good?

5

A Christian council about Old Testament laws

Acts 15 describes the most important meeting the early church had. The future of the church was at stake — was it to be a Jewish group, or would it allow Gentiles?

If Gentiles could enter the church without following Jewish laws, the church would attract more Gentiles, and eventually Gentiles would be the majority. The church would no longer be a branch of Judaism, but a distinct faith. Let's see how the council of Jerusalem developed.

Literary context

The council comes in the center of the book of Acts. Acts begins with the Jewish church, dominated by Peter in chapters 1 to 5. The book ends with Paul's mission to the Gentiles, in chapters 16 to 28. Chapters 6 to 15 form a transition, alternating between Jewish and Gentile growth.

Chapter 15, the council of Jerusalem, forms the climax of the transition between Jewish and Gentile evangelism. In the story flow, the council forms the decisive step that makes the Gentile mission dominant. Paul and Barnabas had returned from a successful missionary trip in Gentile areas. They told the church in Antioch how God had "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). Thus the stage is set for chapter 15. Let's go through it verse by verse.

The council of Jerusalem forms the decisive step that makes the Gentile mission dominant.

Controversy arises

Some men were saying that circumcision and all the laws of Moses were required for salvation.

"Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'" (15:1). They were saying that circumcision was required for salvation.

They probably thought the question was simple: Christians should obey God, and God had commanded circumcision. If people want the blessings of Abraham, they

should act like children of Abraham, and that meant circumcision for Gentiles as well as for Jews (Genesis 17:12).

Paul and Barnabas had a different opinion: “This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them” (Acts 15:2). How was the argument to be resolved? “Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.” In this way the church could have unity.

So “the church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad” (verse 3). Luke is letting us know that most Christians supported the Gentile mission.

“When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them” (verse 4). What God had done was part of the evidence. The miracles and conversions supported what Paul was saying.

Formal debate

Then they debated the question: “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).

We saw in verse 1 that they believed that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Here we see that they also believed the laws of Moses were required. Circumcision was the first step in the process — they believed that Christians must keep *all* the laws of Moses.

What were these laws? Were they biblical laws, or the unbiblical traditions of the elders? In every other New Testament mention of the “laws of Moses,” the biblical books of Moses are meant (see below). Luke could have said “traditions,” but he did not. Anyone who knew the teachings of Jesus would already know that unbiblical Jewish traditions were not required. They did not need to debate about traditions. Just as circumcision was a biblical law, so also the laws of Moses were biblical laws.

Circumcision was the first step in the process of keeping *all* the laws of Moses.

The claim was this: Gentile believers should be circumcised, and then, as part of the people of God, they should obey all the laws he had given. One of the laws of Moses was that males were to be circumcised. However, the council concluded that Gentiles did *not* have to keep all those laws. Let’s see how they reached that decision.

The apostles speak

“The apostles and elders met to consider this question” (verse 6). Perhaps dozens of elders were involved. “After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles

might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe” (verse 7).

Peter reminded the people that God had used him to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his family (Acts 10). Cornelius was not circumcised, but Peter did not use that as proof. Rather, he focused on the theological foundations of how a person is saved — by believing.

The law of **The law of Moses**

What is the “Law of Moses”? What was being discussed at the council of Jerusalem? The Bible tells us what the Law of Moses includes. This phrase is used six other times in the New Testament.

- 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.” The Law of Moses includes priestly rituals regarding uncleanness after childbirth. The priesthood and temple are now gone, and this law cannot be kept. It is not part of Christianity. As we will show in chapter 18, this law is now obsolete.
- Luke 24:44: Jesus, after his resurrection, told 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 is one section of the Bible. It includes prophecies about the Messiah. It’s not just ritualistic laws — it’s the five books of Moses, also called the Torah or the Pentateuch.

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?” In this verse, the Law of Moses includes the law of circumcision. Moses didn’t originate the practice, but he wrote about it. It is in his law.

- Acts 28:23: “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.” In this verse, the Law of Moses is again a section of the Bible that includes prophecies about Jesus.
- 1 Corinthians 9:9 — Paul writes, “It is written in *the Law of Moses*: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’” We might call this a civil law. Paul could adapt the principle behind the law for human purposes, but in the Law of Moses it was a civil, agricultural law.
- 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 for people who rebelled against God.

In summary, the Law of Moses included civil laws, religious ceremonies and prophecies. It referred to everything that Moses wrote — the books of Moses, the Torah. The Law of Moses includes everything in those books, and that’s what the Jerusalem council was about.

“God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith” (verses 8-9). God gave the Holy Spirit to this uncircumcised family, purifying their hearts, pronouncing them holy, as acceptable to him, because of their faith.

Peter then began to scold the people who wanted the Gentiles to obey the laws of Moses: “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (verses 10-11).

Peter’s point is that the yoke of Moses was a burden that the Jewish people were not able to keep successfully. Those rituals showed that, no matter how hard people worked, they could never be perfect. The rituals showed, for anyone who ever wondered, that works can never lead to salvation. Salvation is attained in a different way — by grace. We can’t earn it, so it has to be given to us.

The yoke of Moses was a burden that the Jewish people were not able to keep successfully.

Since the Law of Moses cannot bring us salvation, there is no need to require the Gentiles to keep it. God gave them the Holy Spirit and showed that he accepts them without all those rituals. They are saved by grace — and the Jews are, too.

If we follow Peter’s logic, we will see that Jewish believers do not have to keep the laws of Moses, either. They are saved by grace through faith, just as the Gentiles are. The old covenant is obsolete, so its laws are no longer required for anyone, and that is why Peter could live like a Gentile (Galatians 2:14). But that is getting ahead of the story. In Acts 15, the question is only whether *Gentiles* have to keep the laws of Moses.

The judgment of James

After Barnabas and Paul told “about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12), James spoke. As leader of the Jerusalem church, he had a lot of influence. Some of the Judaizers even claimed him as their authority (Galatians 2:12), but Luke tells us that James was in complete agreement with Peter and Paul.

“Brothers, listen to me. Simon [Peter] has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself” (Acts 15:13-14). The fact that God has already acted was powerful evidence. James then quoted from the Greek translation of Amos to show that Scripture agreed with what was happening (verses 15-18). He could have used other Old Testament prophecies, too, about Gentiles being included among God’s people.

Experience and Scripture pointed to the same conclusion. “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (verse 19). There is no need to require the yoke of Moses, for that would make things unnecessarily difficult for the Gentile believers.

James then suggested four rules: “Instead we should write

The decree made it clear that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised or obey the laws of Moses.

to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (verse 20). Instead of making things difficult for the Gentiles, these four rules would be enough. They were part of idolatrous practices that Gentile Christians should avoid.

Obviously, Gentile believers should not lie, steal and murder. They already knew that, and did not need a special reminder about it.

The decree makes it clear that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised, nor do they have to obey the laws of Moses. They are circumcised spiritually, not physically. God never gave those commands to the Gentiles.

Moses is preached

We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles, James said. Instead, it will be enough to give them four rules, which they will find easy to comply with. Why give them these rules? Notice the reason that James gives: “For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (verse 21).

James was not encouraging Gentile Christians to attend the synagogues. The synagogues taught circumcision and Moses, the exact things that the Judaizers wanted forced upon the Gentile Christians. But because those laws were commonly preached, the apostles should tell the Gentiles four rules. Then they would not think that Christianity is more difficult than it is.

The thought is this: Because God is doing this work (verses 14-17), and because we do not want to hinder his work (verse 19), we should therefore give Gentile converts this decree (verse 20) because much stricter rules are being preached in the synagogues (verse 21). Pharisaic rules are too strict for Gentile Christians, but because those rules are being taught in every city, we need to write a decree to let all Gentiles believers know that they don’t have to keep the laws of Moses.

To summarize: Some men said that Gentiles should be circumcised and obey the laws of Moses or else they could not be saved. Not so, said the apostles. Gentiles are saved by grace and faith. God is pleased to dwell in people who aren’t circumcised and who don’t keep the rituals. But since Moses is widely preached, we need to give a decree that clearly distinguishes the Christian faith from the Law of Moses.

Review 5

- Some Pharisees claimed that Gentiles had to obey all the laws of Moses to be saved.
- Peter said that the laws of Moses were too heavy a burden.
- We are saved by grace, not by laws.
- Peter argued from experience (verse 8). Can we argue from our experiences?
- Do our experiences have to agree with Scripture, or can we find ways that Scripture agrees with us? (verse 15) What is the danger in this approach? Was it valid for James?

6

The biblical explanation: a new covenant

Early Christians may have been surprised that *any* biblical command (including the sacrifices and rituals) could become unnecessary. If God had given these laws, who could say that they were done away? Only one authority could do away with God-given commands: God. So we look to the New Testament to see the authority for doing away with any of God's laws.

The New Testament does not itemize all the valid Old Testament laws, nor all the obsolete ones. Some laws (unclean meats, sin sacrifices, washings) are mentioned; others (tassels on garments, grain offerings) are not. The New Testament quotes some Old Testament commands with approval; others are quoted as being inadequate or in need of replacement (Matthew 5:31-37). Commands from Leviticus and Deuteronomy are quoted as valid, for example, while other commands from the same sections are treated as obsolete. Some are moral and eternal; others are not.

A large category

Although the New Testament cites many individual Old Testament laws as valid, it does not specify a general category as permanently valid. However, when it declares laws obsolete, it uses large categories. In Acts 15, it is “the Law of Moses.” In 1 Corinthians 9:20, it is “the law.” In Galatians 3:17, it is “the law” that came 430 years after Abraham, that is, at the time of Moses. In Ephesians 2:15 it is “the law with its commandments and ordinances,” the law that separated Jews from Gentiles. In Hebrews 8:13 it is the Sinai covenant. Although various terms are used, there is a consistency in what is meant. A large category of law is being declared obsolete. That does not mean that every command within the category is obsolete, but the package itself is.

What is the New Testament explanation for this significant change in divinely given laws? It is a change in covenants, or the agreements between God and humanity.

Why should the death of Christ cause God-given laws to become outdated? The Bible gives a simple explanation: Christ brought a *new* covenant. The book of Hebrews makes this clear in chapters 7 to 10. Although the focus in Hebrews is on the ceremonial laws relevant to the priesthood, the conclusion is more broadly stated — it is the covenant itself that is

obsolete (8:13). A new covenant has replaced the Sinai-Moses covenant. The new covenant has some similarities to the old, but it is a new covenant.

Hebrews uses strong terms: laws are set aside, changed, abrogated, abolished, because one covenant has ended and another has begun. Of course, since the old and the new covenants were given by the same God, we should expect *some* similarities. We should expect moral laws to be found in both covenants. It should be no surprise that laws against adultery, which existed before Abraham, should also be included in the Sinai covenant, a later and larger package of laws. But we accept those laws as valid today not because they were given to Moses (the fact that a law was given to Moses does not automatically make it valid), but for other reasons.

Paul tells us that the Law of Moses was a temporary addition to the Abrahamic promises (Galatians 3:16-25). The Sinai covenant, which includes civil laws and ceremonial laws, was designed to come to an end when Christ came. The Scriptures are not annulled, of course, but the laws there are no longer binding.

This is brought out especially clearly in the book of Galatians, chapters 3 and 4. Let's go through these chapters verse by verse, to make sure that we are getting each verse in its context.

Galatians 3: the law and the Spirit

Paul, who had seen many things in his ministry, was flabbergasted with the Galatian Christians. He was aghast that they were being persuaded by a foolish idea. He wrote a strongly worded letter to stop this nonsense. In 3:1 he wrote: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified."

Here's the starting point, Paul says: Jesus Christ has been crucified. That is the foundation on which we build. His crucifixion changes everything, as Paul will explain.

"I would like to learn just one thing from you," Paul writes. "Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?" (verse 2). Obviously, they received the Spirit through faith, by accepting what they heard. This is another foundational point. Paul was astounded that the Galatians did not see the consequences of their experience with the Spirit. But apparently someone was telling them that they were saved only if they observed "the law."

"Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (verse 3). The Galatian Christians were apparently being taught that they needed to add the law to their faith. False teachers were saying that they needed to progress further in the faith by observing the Torah. They were teaching circumcision and the entire Law of Moses (Galatians 5:2-3; Acts 15:5).

Paul says this is a ridiculous idea — if a person is given the Holy Spirit on the basis of faith, without deserving this gift, then Christianity is based on faith, and there is no place for works as far as salvation is concerned. (Paul will later comment on how Christians should behave in response to Christ's work, but here he makes it clear that salvation is on the foundation of faith in what Christ has done.) Our goal cannot be attained by human effort, and that is why Jesus died on the cross. Whatever work had to be done, he did on the cross. That is our foundation.

Paul asks, "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you

observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” (Galatians 3:5). The people had seen miracles in their midst. And it came on the basis of faith, not of works of the Law.

Abraham

Paul then supports his argument from the Torah itself. “Consider Abraham,” he said, quoting from Genesis 15:6: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Paul concludes, “Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:6-7).

Paul’s point is that even in the Old Testament, a right relationship with God came through faith. Abraham was accounted righteous on the basis of faith, not because of his obedience. If we have faith, then we are accepted just as Abraham was.

Can non-Jewish people really have a relationship with God on that kind of basis? Yes, says Paul, and he again quotes the Torah: “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you’” (verse 8). The Torah says that non-Jews will be blessed through Abraham — and that blessing is by faith, not by the law. Abraham did not need to be given the Law of Moses, and his spiritual followers do not need it, either.

Paul concludes, “Those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (verse 9). God’s blessing is by faith.

The Law vs. faith

The law brings penalties, not blessing. “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law’” (verse 10). The law is not a way to earn favor with God. It functions in the reverse way, since we all fall short of its demands. If we think we have to observe the Torah, if we want to be under the law, we will be under its condemnation.

“No one is justified before God by the law, because, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’ The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, ‘The man who does these things will live by them’” (verses 11-12). Paul is contrasting faith and law. Righteous people should live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4), but the law is based on performance (Leviticus 18:5). The law emphasizes human effort, but salvation is given by grace through faith in what Jesus has done.

Law-keeping cannot earn us God’s favor. If we look to it, it can bring only a curse, since we all fall short. But even in the curse, there is good news — in the crucifixion of Christ: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (verse 13, quoting Deuteronomy 21:23). The law demanded a penalty for law-breaking, and Jesus Christ paid the worst penalty of the law.

Paul is using several lines of reasoning to show that Christians are not under the authority of the Law of Moses; we are not obligated to obey it. Not only is the law ineffective, bringing a curse rather than a blessing, Jesus has also paid its worst penalty. His crucifixion gives Paul the basis for saying that Christians are not under the law.

“He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (verse 14). The blessing is by faith as opposed to the law.

God's promise not changed by the Law

Paul then argues from another angle, using the example of a contract. “Let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case” (verse 15).

Paul is talking about God's promise to Abraham, which includes being accounted righteous by faith. He writes, “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (verse 16).

Here Paul notes that the word seed is singular. Although the singular word can be used for many seeds, Paul is saying that this scripture finds its fulfillment most perfectly in one Seed, Jesus Christ. It is through him that Gentiles can become part of Abraham's descendants (verse 29).

“The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise” (verse 17). What law is Paul talking about? The law given 430 years after Abraham — the Law of Moses. The laws that came through Moses cannot change the fact that God accepts people as righteous on the basis of faith, not by human efforts.

Paul then reasons, “For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise” (verse 18). Either it is one way or the other — either by laws and works, or by faith and gift. Paul does not try to combine the two. Rather, he is saying they cannot be combined.

Purpose of the Law

Why did God give the law? Paul answers: “It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (verse 19). Were laws added because the people were already breaking them? Or were they added so that people could see more clearly that they were sinners? Either way, the Law of Moses was added for only a certain length of time — until Christ came. After that, the Law of Moses became obsolete. The law added 430 years after Abraham became obsolete.

“Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law” (verse 21). The law did not nullify the promise of salvation by faith, for it was not designed as another means of salvation. If there was any way possible for laws to bring us right standing with God, then God would have given us those laws. But the Law of Moses is not designed to give us eternal life.

People who think they can improve their standing with God through the law are misunderstanding its purpose and are not accepting the biblical evidence that salvation is simply by faith, without any role for human efforts. We receive the Spirit by faith and are counted righteous by faith, without any need to add the Law of Moses.

The law cannot give life, because we all fall short of what it requires. “The Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe” (verse 22). Instead of giving life, the law prescribes penalties, and the result is that the promise of salvation can

come only through God's grace. The law makes it clear that we all fall short and need the salvation that Jesus offers by faith.

But before faith in Christ came, "we [the Jewish people] were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed" (verse 23). The Jews were under the restrictions of the law, under its temporary jurisdiction or custody.

"So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (verse 24). The law had authority from Moses until Christ. It showed that humans are prisoners of sin, unable to save themselves through human effort. It showed that salvation can be received only through faith, not by law.

Now that the Law of Moses has fulfilled its purpose, however, it has become obsolete: "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (verse 25). The Torah does not have authority over us. It is not a way to get right with God. It is not a way to enter his kingdom nor a way to stay in his kingdom nor a way to improve our standing with God.

Because of Jesus' crucifixion, our relationship with God depends entirely on faith. "You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (verse 26).

Since Christ is the descendant of Abraham, and we belong to Christ, then we are also descendants of Abraham and inheritors of the promise of salvation (verse 29). Through faith in Christ, we inherit the promise given to Abraham by faith.

When it comes to inheriting Abraham's promise, there is neither Jew nor Greek — all ethnic groups may inherit. In Christ, even slaves can receive an inheritance from Abraham. In salvation, there is likewise no difference between male and female — all have equal rights to inherit the promise (verse 28).

Children now come of age

In Galatians 4, Paul takes the concept of inheritance into another analogy, to show again that the law was only a temporary authority and that Christians are not obligated to it.

"What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world" (4:1-3).

If a father died early, he might leave his entire estate to a young child. The child, although the legal owner, would not have authority to run the estate. A temporary trustee would run the estate, would have authority over all the slaves of that estate, and would also have authority over the legal owner, as long as the heir was under age.

Paul then makes the analogy that "we" (apparently including himself and the Jewish people) were under that kind of temporary authority. Just as he earlier said that "we were held prisoners by the law" (3:23), he now says that the Jewish people were like underage children — inheritors who were under authority, just as slaves are.

But the child is not like a slave forever. Eventually a time comes when authority is given to the heir. "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" (4:4-5).

Jesus was born under the jurisdiction of the Law, and he redeemed or rescued the Jewish people from the restrictions of the Mosaic law. Now, Jews may receive the full inheritance

rights, which implies that they could not inherit under the law. The law could never give them the inheritance, that is, salvation. When Jews come to faith, they are under Christ, not under the law.

Gentiles no longer slaves

Gentiles, who were not under the Law of Moses, also become inheritors through Christ, so at this point Paul begins to use the word *you* again: “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir” (verses 6-7).

Since God had given the Holy Spirit to these Gentile Christians, that was proof that they were his children, with the right to inherit the promise. They were no longer slaves under a restrictive authority. But what kind of slavery had Jesus redeemed them from?

Paul explains: “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods” (4:9). They had been enslaved by pagan religions.

“But now that you know God — or rather are known by God — how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?” (4:9). The Gentile Christians, having been rescued from slavery, were thinking of returning to bondage. They wouldn’t have put it in those words, of course, but Paul is pointing out that this is what it amounts to.

Apparently they were being tempted with a different sort of slavery than what they came out of. They were being told that they had to be circumcised and that they had to obey the Law of Moses (4:21; 5:2-4). They had come out of pagan principles but were in danger of going back into *another* set of rules — another nonfaith approach to religion.

(Paul uses the uncommon Greek word *stoicheia* here for principles of the Galatian heresy, the same word he used in 4:3 for the slavery “we” had under the old covenant “basic principles.” The context of the letter makes it clear that the slavery the Galatians were falling back into was an obligation to old covenant customs.)

Paul then mentions one way they were falling back into servitude: “You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!” (4:10). In a heresy that involved circumcision and the Law of Moses, it is not difficult to guess what sort of days, months, seasons and years were being advocated. The old covenant said a lot about special times.

But if Paul was talking about the special days of Judaism, why didn’t he say so? It is because the Galatians were coming out of one religion and into another. Paul used words that applied to *both* religions to point out the similarities involved. Pagan religions had their special days, months, seasons and years; so did the old covenant. They had a different set of days, but it is similar. The Galatians had come out of religious bondage, and were going back into a religious servitude.

So Paul asks: How could you do such a thing? Can’t you see how foolish this is? Don’t you know that this can enslave you all over again? Paul does not say *how* they were observing these special days. He did not say they should observe them in a better way or a different way. He just said that the way they were observing them was a form of bondage, of feeling obligated to something that was not obligatory.

Paul pleads with them

“I fear for you,” Paul wrote in verse 11, “that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.” In order to win them to Christ, he had become like a Gentile (4:12; 2:14; 1 Corinthians 9:21). Now he urges them to become like he is.

With tears, no doubt, Paul remembered how eagerly the Galatians had first believed the gospel he preached. They had joyfully received the gospel with great respect for Paul. That is why Paul is so astonished that they had so quickly believed a different message (4:12-16).

He points out that the false teachers had selfish motives (verse 17), but his sincerity is shown by the fact that he is willing to suffer to help them become more like Christ (verse 19).

Son of a slave, or son of promise?

Paul then moves to an illustration of slavery and promise, taken from the Torah itself: “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?” (verse 21). Paul speaks now to people who want to be under the authority of the Torah. This was the heresy he was fighting against.

“For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise” (verses 22-23). Paul reminds the readers here of Hagar and Sarah, and the fact that Abraham’s blessing was given to Isaac, the child God gave Sarah in a miraculous way. The blessing was given on the basis of grace, not of normal human ability.

He then draws a dramatic analogy from this: “These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants” (verse 24). The Old Testament does not make this analogy — Paul is creating it for his own purposes. Some might not like the analogy, because it makes Paul’s point painfully clear: “One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children” (verses 24-25).

Hagar is here associated with the old covenant, the covenant made at Mount Sinai and in Paul’s day centered in Jerusalem. This covenant produces slave children, and all who are under the old covenant are in slavery. Paul was flabbergasted as to why the Galatians were being tempted to fall into this slavery (verse 9), an old covenant slavery that included the observance of special days and months and seasons and years (verse 10).

But Christians are not under the old covenant. “The Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.... Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise” (verses 26, 28). Christians are children of Abraham’s promise, and are free — which means, in this context, free of old covenant restrictions.

Eliminate slavery

Paul then points out another useful application of the analogy: “The son born in the ordinary way [Ishmael] persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit [Isaac]. It is the same now” (verse 29). That is, the Jewish children of the old covenant were persecuting the children of the new covenant. The Judaizers were pressuring the Gentile Christians to

conform to the old covenant.

Paul then makes his point, again from the Scriptures that the people respected: “But what does the Scripture say? ‘Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son’” (verse 30; Genesis 21:10). The application is clear: Get rid of those who teach the old covenant. Do not listen to them, for they will not inherit the promises of Abraham (5:2).

Paul is struggling for the spiritual survival of the Galatian Christians. He does not mince his words or beat around the bush. Rather, he makes it clear: The old covenant is slavery and you must get rid of it. Christian life is not found in the old covenant.

“Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman” (verse 31). We are children of the new covenant, not the old. We cannot have both — we must choose the new.

Review

- Scripture says that a large category of law is obsolete.
- Paul says that salvation is by faith, not law.
- Law can only declare us guilty, not rescue us.
- The law cannot affect the promise of salvation by faith.
- The law of Moses was designed to be temporary.
- Being obligated to the law of Moses is like slavery.
- Question: Can faith and law be combined? (Gal. 3:17)
- Paul himself gives numerous commands in Galatians 5. Can grace and command have different functions?

7

Hebrews and the change of covenants

The book of Hebrews also has much to say about the covenants. Again, we will go through the relevant passages verse by verse to make sure that we are not lifting verses out of context. We want to see the thought-flow of this section in Hebrews.

Let's start in chapter 7, verse 11. The author has just explained that Jesus Christ has been appointed as a priest "after the order of Melchizedek." Although that is an interesting story in itself, we will skip it and get right to the point:

"If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come — one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?" (verse 11). In other words, the appointment of Christ as high priest proves that the old priests were not enough.

Neither the law nor the priesthood could bring people to perfection.

Note in the middle of verse 11 that the law was given on the basis of the priesthood. The law was designed with the Levitical priesthood in mind — the law and the priesthood went together. But neither the law nor the priests could bring people to perfection. That is why the Scriptures spoke of another priesthood.

A change in the law

The descendants of Aaron would be replaced by a better priesthood and a better priest — and that has enormous consequences: "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law" (verse 12). What law is changed? The

Jesus was appointed as a priest. The law that restricted the priesthood to Levites was obsolete.

law that said only Levites could be priests. Which law said that? The old covenant. This will become more clear later in this chapter, and in the next few chapters.

But first, the author wants to make certain basic facts clear. "He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe" (verse 13). We are speaking about Jesus, of whom it is said that he is a priest after the order of Melchizedek — but Jesus was not a Levite. He belonged to

the tribe of Judah, and no one from that tribe was ever a priest, and Moses did not authorize anyone from Judah to be a priest (verse 14).

“And what we have said” — that is, that the law has been changed — “is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life” (verses 15-16). Jesus was appointed as priest not by a law that focused on genealogy, but because he lives forever at God’s right hand. From this fact alone, we can see that the Law of Moses is no longer in force.

“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” (verses 18-19). The law that restricted the priesthood to Levites was ineffective.

How much was “set aside”? Certainly, it was the regulation restricting the priesthood to Levites. But no one expected that restriction to produce perfection, anyway. There is more involved than just one regulation. It is “the law” as a whole that is under discussion here. The Law of Moses did not have the power to make anyone perfect. The best that the old covenant could offer was not good enough.

Instead of the law, we are given a better hope, and since we have something better than the law, we are now able to draw near to God in a way that was not possible under the Law of Moses.

Guaranteed by an oath

The author then uses a detail from Psalm 110 to emphasize the importance of Jesus’ appointment as priest. God himself makes an oath to appoint Jesus as high priest (verse 20). The descendants of Aaron became priests without any oath, but Jesus became priest by a special oath.

The old covenant was given by God, but here is a new word from God — not just an oath, but also a promise of permanence: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever’” (verse 21). The old priesthood is obsolete. The old regulation, the old law, was set aside. A new and better hope is given to bring people to a perfection that the law could not give.

<p>The discussion is not about a minor priestly regulation, but the entire covenant.</p>
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“Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant” (verse 22). Here the word *covenant* is used for the first time in this letter. It will be picked up again in the next three chapters for more detailed comment, but even here it is implied to be a replacement for the inferior, ineffective Law of Moses. The discussion is not just about a minor priestly regulation but an entire covenant, which includes many laws.

The author then contrasts the mortality of the Levitical priests with the immortality of Jesus Christ: “Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood” (verses 23-24). So the fact that there were many Levitical priests is an

illustration of their weakness, not of their effectiveness. The long genealogy that validated them also testified to the weakness of the entire system. Each high priest held office only temporarily, and the entire priesthood itself was temporary.

In contrast, because Jesus lives forever, he will forever continue to be our High Priest, because his priesthood is effective in bringing us to perfection: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (verse 25).

Exactly what we need

Jesus is exactly what we need. He was human, so he knows our needs (2:14-18), and he is now in heaven, in power, so he can effectively intercede for us. We can therefore be confident that we can approach God through him (4:14-16). He gives us access to God in

Rituals required in the old covenant have no spiritual merit for us.

a way that the Levitical priests could only symbolize.

When we have Jesus, we do not need the old covenant. The practices commanded in the old covenant (circumcision, various rituals and worship days) have no spiritual merit for the Christian. All we need is Jesus.

“Such a high priest meets our need — one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (7:26-27).

The Old Testament priests had to make sin sacrifices every day, showing that the final solution had not yet arrived. But Jesus was so effective that once was enough. His work did not have to be repeated.

The Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins, but Jesus did not, because he had no sin. When he offered himself, it was not for himself, but for everyone else. He was the kind of sacrifice we really needed — without blemish, fit even for the holiest place in heaven.

The old covenant appointed imperfect men as priests (7:28), but God promised to appoint another priest, a permanent priest — which implies someone who is perfect in himself and perfect in his work (Psalm 110:4).

Hebrews 8: the superior ministry of Jesus

“The point of what we are saying is this,” the letter says (8:1), drawing attention to its main point. After seven chapters, here is what we should have firmly in mind: “We do have such a high priest.” What humans need, what God has promised, has finally come. We have the priest who is able to save us completely. We need to focus our thoughts on him, hold fast to him and have confidence in him.

We need to focus our thoughts on the priest who can save us completely.

He is our priest not only because he lives forever, but because he has been exalted to a position of royal and spiritual power: He “sat down at the right hand of the throne of the

Majesty in heaven, and ... serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man” (verses 1-2).

What earthly tabernacles and priests could only picture, Jesus Christ is. He is the reality forever, not a temporary imitation.

The author has capped off seven chapters with a simple summary: Jesus is our high priest. What then? The letter begins to move forward from this by discussing the work of a priest. “Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer” (verse 3). What did Jesus offer? The author has already told us in 7:27, and he will develop it more fully in chapter 9, but here he mentions it only briefly. First, he wants to set the scene for chapter 9 by discussing the tabernacle.

If Jesus were on earth, he observes, “he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law” (verse 4). The earthly rituals were being taken care of. The temple work was being done by Levitical priests, as the law required. That is not where Jesus is doing his work. But the earthly temple does teach us something about the priestly work of Jesus.

The earthy imitation

The tabernacle of Moses, and later the temple, was “a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.” It is therefore important, and “this is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain’” (verse 5).

We should expect major differences between spiritual realities and earthly copies.

The author is quoting Exodus 25:40 to show that the earthly tabernacle was a copy, not the real thing. The Levitical priests served at a copy, and the rituals they

performed were copies, not the spiritual realities.

“But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises” (verse 6). Just as the heavenly sanctuary is better than the earthly one, so also is Jesus’ priestly ministry much better than the Levitical ministry, and so also is the new covenant much better than the old.

How much better? The tabernacle was merely a copy, a cheap imitation, in comparison to the heavenly reality. In the same way, the Levitical priesthood, although divinely ordained, was merely an imitation of a heavenly reality fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

How exact is the copy? The Levitical rituals came in great variety: water rituals, grain rituals, special clothing, hand motions, killing of animals and releasing of animals. All these rituals were fulfilled by and superseded by the work of Jesus Christ.

We do not see exact correspondence for every detail, nor do we need to. We cannot insist that the spiritual is just like the physical. We do not expect that the heavenly sanctuary has wool and linen curtains, bronze basins, acacia framing and red ram skins.

Indeed, it does not need curtains, frames and skins at all. Those are merely physical things, part of the imitation of a spiritual reality.

A superior priesthood

Jesus' priestly work is much better than the old priesthood — in quality, not quantity. The work he did *once* was better than millions of rituals done by Levites. Christ's work was so much superior that it did not have to be repeated.

In some cases we see laws disappear without any particular replacement.

It was a different kind of priesthood. We should expect major differences between spiritual realities and earthly copies.

In the same way, we should expect the new covenant to be different in quality from the obsolete covenant. Just as every ritual has been superseded, so also is every detail of the law. In some cases we can see how the new covenant modifies or clarifies an old law, but in other cases we see laws disappear without any particular replacement.

The new is better than the old, as far as heaven is from earth. The old covenant promised a long life in the land of Israel; the new covenant promises eternal life with God. It is a very different kind of covenant.

Predicted in the Scriptures

The author of Hebrews likes to show that the Old Testament Scriptures contain hints of the dramatic change brought by Christ. There are hints of a “rest” to come, hints of a priesthood to come, hints of a spiritual reality that supersedes the rituals.

Now he shows that a change in covenants was also predicted. “For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another” (verse 7). The fact that a new covenant was predicted implied that something was wrong with the Sinai covenant.

“God found fault with the people” (verse 8), but it is also correct to say that there was something wrong with the covenant, as verse 7 implies. The author has already said that the old covenant could not make anyone perfect (7:11, 19). It could point toward perfection, but it could not bring it. Many Jews thought it was good enough, but it was not, and that is why God predicted a new covenant:

“The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (8:8). This is quoted from Jeremiah 31:31, which is one of many prophecies of a new relationship between God and humans. The prophets described it as a new spirit, a new heart, a covenant of peace, an everlasting covenant. This covenant would be made with Israelites, but would also be open to Gentiles.

Different in quality

The new covenant, God says, “will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not

remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord” (Hebrews 8:9). Because the Israelites broke the old covenant, the new covenant will be different.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (verse 10). The Israelites had some of God’s laws in their minds, and they often wanted to obey them. But this prophecy implies that the new covenant will have a different level of internalization. The relationship will be characterized by attitude, not rituals.

All humans will have equal access to God; no longer will one tribe have special status.

“No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (verse 11). All humans will have equal access to God; no longer will one tribe have special status. Jeremiah’s prophecy does not spell out all the details, but the hint is here of a very different covenant.

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (verse 12). The covenant does not predict perfect people — it predicts perfect forgiveness, a forgiveness available to everyone based on God’s grace, without any priests or rituals.

This prophecy implied that the old covenant was ineffective and soon to be replaced. “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear” (verse 13).

Even in Jeremiah’s day, the old covenant’s days were numbered. Israel’s history had already shown that this covenant could not bring the people toward perfection. God’s plan required a new covenant, a covenant of forgiveness, a more spiritual covenant, a covenant with a perfect priest, who made a perfect offering for all sin. That is the subject of Hebrews 9.

Hebrews 9: the superior sacrifice of Jesus

Hebrews 9 begins by describing the old covenant ritual: “The first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary” (verse 1). The author does not write about the covenants made with Noah or Abraham, even though they came first. Rather, by “first” he means the covenant made at Sinai, because it is the covenant replaced by Jesus’ new covenant. The Sinai covenant had laws about how people could approach God.

It predicts a forgiveness available to everyone based on God’s grace, not on rituals.

“A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place” (verse 2; see Exodus 25:23-40). The author describes the tabernacle rather than the temple, perhaps because the tabernacle and its furnishings and rituals

were familiar to all who read the Torah.

“Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the

golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant” (9:2-4, see Exodus 25:10-22; 30:1-6). “This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now” (9:4-5; for details see Exodus 16:33-34; 25:18; Numbers 17:10; Deuteronomy 10:1-5).

What the rituals could not do

“When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance” (Hebrews 9:6-7). The high priest entered the Most Holy Place only on the Day of Atonement. Before he entered, he sacrificed a bull for his own sins, and later, a goat for the people (Leviticus 16:1-17).

What is the spiritual significance of this symbolism? “The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed” (Hebrews 9:8). In the tabernacle symbolism, God was *near* but *not accessible*. The symbolism hinted that there was a way to approach God, but that way was not yet revealed.

“This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper” (verse 9). Despite the sacrifices, the people were unable to go to God’s throne, unable to enter his presence. The rituals could not complete the work that they symbolized.

“They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings — external regulations applying until the time of the new order” (9:10). Rituals are external actions, and they cannot change the heart. They do not cleanse the conscience. They were valid only until Christ came.

In the symbolism, God was near but not accessible. The way had not yet been revealed.

Our author does not list all the obsolete regulations. It was enough to mention the Levitical rituals. But we can follow the logic to see much more. Worship details no longer apply. External rituals like circumcision are no longer required. The entire covenant is obsolete.

Christ’s work in heaven

Now, in contrast to the ritual works of the old covenant, we are told about the superior ministry of Christ: “When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation” (9:11). The better blessings have already begun, the author reminds us. We already have forgiveness and direct access to God, because Christ went through the heavenly holy place.

Jesus Christ entered the reality, not the imitation, and he did it by a better sacrifice: “He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption” (verse 12).

By dying for us, the Son of God was able to redeem us once for all. It was a perfect, sinless sacrifice, presented in the heavenly holy place, fully effective, never needing to be done again. This was a sharp contrast with the Levitical rituals, which were repeated continually yet never bringing the people any closer to God.

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean” (verse 13; see Numbers 19:1-22). Here the author refers to the ashes of a heifer. Like the other rituals, it

Worship details no longer apply. Rituals are no longer required.

had obscure details that had nothing to do with a person’s conscience.

Of course, Christ is much better than a heifer, and we should expect that his sacrifice achieves a much better kind of cleansing. “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:14).

He offered a perfect sacrifice, willingly, and through faith in him, this cleanses us on the inside and enables us to worship God. We can do what the high priest could only symbolize: we can approach God with total confidence. We have been washed and purified by the blood of Christ — all sins are removed. If a burned-up heifer could ritually cleanse an Israelite, we can be sure that the sacrifice of Jesus is more than enough for us.

Since Christ brings us complete forgiveness, he “is the mediator of a new covenant” (verse 15). He gives us a relationship with God on a completely new basis — not the old covenant, but the new. And the result is “that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.”

This was achieved, the author reminds us, because “he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” Under the first covenant, many external regulations defined sin. Christ set us free from that. The old covenant is no longer the standard of righteousness and sin. Christ forgives sin, but he *sets us free* from the rituals that were so important under the old covenant. We are not obligated to perform those rituals.

Covenant enacted by blood

But this new covenant could come about only through a better sacrifice — something far superior to animals. The author begins by using an illustration from the legal customs of the day. He uses the

We can do what the high priest could only symbolize: we can approach God with total confidence.

example of a will, because the Greek word for *covenant* could also mean *will*. It was a contract that became effective only when someone died (verses 16-17).

The Sinai covenant also involved death — the death of animals (verses 18-20; Exodus 24:5-8). The Law of Moses required blood in its rituals of cleansing (Hebrews 9:21-22). Obviously, drops of blood do not make anything physically clean. What the Israelites needed was a spiritual cleansing — an elimination of spiritual defilement, imperfection, sin, guilt and anything that separated them from God. They needed forgiveness.

Physical blood cannot change spiritual realities, and animal sacrifices cannot eliminate sin (Hebrews 10:4), but the old covenant nevertheless prescribed animal sacrifices for forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22). Just as the tabernacle itself pictured a heavenly reality, these animal sacrifices pictured a death that would be effective in removing sin. They did not do it — they only symbolized it.

The earthly tabernacle had to be ritually purified by animal sacrifices, but the heavenly holy place required a far better sacrifice (verse 23). The spiritual barrier between God and humans required a spiritual sacrifice — someone with a perfect conscience, totally without sin. Jesus was not dealing with a physical, symbolic copy (verse 24). He was not working with external rituals. Rather, he was dealing with the real spiritual problem, and he did his work in heaven. It was a better place, and a better sacrifice.

<p>Animal sacrifices pictured a death that <i>would</i> be effective.</p>

Humans are both matter and spirit; Christ's work was both physical and spiritual. He became fully human, mortal and physical, in order to redeem humans. But his redemption had to be on the spiritual level as well: a conscience untainted by sin, a life willingly offered on behalf of others, a being worthy of entering heaven itself to intercede for humans. He offered himself, both body and spirit.

Jesus Christ now appears for us in heaven to help us (verse 24). He is the God-man who bridges the gap between God and humans. His work is fully effective — for all time. Once was enough, unlike the work of the Levitical priests, who had to repeat the same rituals over and over again (verse 25). By this the Holy Spirit was showing that their work was not effective. True cleansing was possible only through a better sacrifice, a better priest, a better covenant.

The decisive sacrifice

Jesus did not go to heaven to perform endless rituals. He is not copying the old covenant, because the old covenant had only temporary substitutes (verse 25). Jesus does not have to suffer forever to rescue us from sin (verse 26). He gave himself once, and that was enough. “He has appeared once for all.” When? “At the end of the ages.” Why? “To do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (verse 26). Even 1,950 years ago, believers were living in the “end of the ages” — “in these last days” (Hebrews 1:2). The old era

was fading away; a new age had begun with Jesus Christ. The spiritual world was radically different. The sacrifice of all time had been given.

But the story is not yet done. Just as ordinary humans appear once, and then will appear again in the judgment, so also with Christ. “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:27-28).

Each person dies for his or her own sins, but Jesus died for others. Each person will face the judgment for his or her sins, but Jesus will be the judge. His death took away the sins of all who believe in him, and when he appears again, he will not be bringing their sins against them. Rather, he will be bringing eternal salvation for all who trust in him.

<p>Jesus did not go to heaven to copy the old covenant.</p>

Hebrews 10: the perfect results of Jesus

Hebrews 10 concludes this section of the epistle by discussing the perfect *results* of Jesus’ priestly work. Verse 1 begins with a conclusion: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming — not the realities themselves.” This conclusion follows chapter 9, which sketched the rituals of the Levitical high priest and stated that Jesus did far better, offering a perfect sacrifice (himself) in a perfect place (heaven). The Levitical rituals had to be continually repeated, but Jesus’ sacrifice was fully effective and therefore did not have to be done again.

Just as the tabernacle was a copy of the true holy place in heaven (Hebrews 8:5), so also the rituals were copies or shadows of the real sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The tabernacle and its rituals (all included in the word “law”) *represented* good things, but could not bring them about. The law talked about cleansing and forgiveness, but could not cleanse or forgive.

Are the “good things” already here, or are they yet future? The grammar in this verse could be understood in either way, but Hebrews 9:11 makes it clear: Christ is the “high priest of the good things that are already here.” Forgiveness and cleansing and relationship with God are already possible through Jesus Christ, and the old covenant is obsolete because the new covenant has already been established (Hebrews 8:6). There are better things yet to come (Hebrews 9:28), but the author’s stress in chapter 10 is on things that Christ has already brought.

Law cannot finish the job

The law is only a shadow, not the spiritual reality. “For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship” (Hebrews 10:1). No matter how many animals were killed, no matter how much water was used, the law could never achieve the forgiveness that the new covenant now offers.

<p>The law talked about cleansing, but it could not cleanse.</p>
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The word “perfect” can create unrealistic ideas. Faith in Christ does not make people morally perfect. We still sin, and we still fall short of what we ought to be. The Greek word could also be translated as “complete,” and this may be a better translation. We are completely forgiven by Christ, completely cleansed, and therefore perfectly qualified to worship God, perfectly able to have a relationship with him.

The context shows what the author has in mind: the removal of sin and a cleansed conscience, so we can approach God to worship him (verses 1-2, 4). The author views these as the same basic concept. The old covenant could picture forgiveness, but could not achieve it.

If the law could qualify the people for worship, then there would be no more need for sacrifices. If the sacrifices could achieve what they pictured, “would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins” (verse 2).

The logic is this: If the sacrifices completely prepared people for worship, then further sacrifices would not be needed. The people would no longer have a guilty conscience, and would not feel any need to offer sacrifices (at least not sin sacrifices).

The law was inadequate, and the author implies that the new covenant gives what the old could not: a cleansed conscience. Through faith in the effectiveness of Christ’s sacrifice, we do not feel guilty. Rather, we feel forgiven, cleansed, and accepted by God. Rather than being excluded from the holy place, we are invited in.

Through faith, we are forgiven, cleansed, and accepted by God.

The author then summarizes the argument against the old covenant system: The sacrifices, instead of cleansing the people, “are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (verses 3-4). A physical substance, such as blood, cannot remove a spiritual stain. The old covenant was designed to *picture* forgiveness, not to actually bring it.

The Old Testament saints were forgiven on the basis of faith and God’s grace, not because they had paid a big enough price or earned it. Forgiveness was available, but it was not through the details of the old covenant. The sacrifices had a shadow of forgiveness — they spoke about forgiveness and they pictured forgiveness — but they were not the way that forgiveness actually comes.

Christ is the answer

The author begins verse 5 with the word “therefore,” meaning “because of what I have just said.” In this case, we might paraphrase it like this: “Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ came into the world and said...” and then follows a quote from the Greek version of Psalm 40:6-8:

God gave the law not as a permanent ideal, but as a temporary system.

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you

were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God’” (Hebrews 10:5-7). In this psalm, our author has found one of several Old Testament passages that foreshadow the end of the sacrificial system. He rephrases the psalm to emphasize his point, and he begins by giving the label “first” to a point that he will come back to shortly: “First he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them.’”

And to make another point, he inserts an additional comment: “although the law required them to be made” (verse 8). The author is making a contrast between what the law required, and what God ultimately wanted. (Jeremiah 7:22-23 has a similar contrast.) God gave the law not as a permanent ideal, but as a temporary system that would prepare the way for the reality, which is Christ. The old covenant law was not the final word on what God wanted.

What did he want? Verse 9 says, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” God wanted the people to obey him — but only Christ did it perfectly. The early church apparently understood this psalm as a messianic psalm because Jesus fulfilled it in a way that no psalm-writer could. He did the will of God in a way that no one else did.

Then comes a powerful conclusion: “He sets aside the first to establish the second” (verse 9). What is the “first”? In the immediate context, it is sacrifices and offerings, but our writer has also used the word “first” five times to refer to the old covenant. The covenant with its sacrifices and rituals has been set aside.

And what has been established? The doing of God’s will. The word “establish” was also used for covenants, and the word “second” was also used for the new covenant (8:7). Our author is making a literary parallel here, using Psalm 40 as a miniature picture of the change in covenants. Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ said, Out with the old, and in with the new! The new covenant has been established by the obedience of Jesus Christ. He is the answer to the deficiency of the old covenant.

Made holy by Christ

Verse 10 begins, “And by that will...” It is by God’s choice, and by Christ’s obedience, that “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. We have been made holy — this is another way of describing the results of the new covenant. Our sins are removed, our conscience is cleared, and we are made holy, so we can approach God to worship. How is it done? Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ — a sacrifice that involved both his will and his body, both his mind and his flesh. Further, we do God’s will when we accept this as our means of sanctification.

Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth, between spirit and matter, in a way that nothing else could. Only he could make an offering on earth that was acceptable in heaven. The flesh and blood of his body was no different than the flesh and blood of any other crucified man, but it was effective for our sanctification and our forgiveness

Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth, spirit and matter.

because Jesus was perfectly obedient, because there was a perfect will in him.

Humans are both physical and spiritual, and we sin in the flesh and in the mind. The salvation Christ gives us redeems our bodies and our minds, sanctifying all of us for true worship of God. We are not saved by a purely physical sacrifice, nor by a purely spiritual one. A physical body had to be willingly given, because the spiritual sacrifice had to be expressed in the physical world. In Christ, we are assured that we have been completely redeemed. His will and his body were given for us, and it was fully effective, once for all time.

Perfect forever

Our acceptance by God does not depend on the performance of rituals (either ancient or modern) — it depends on what Christ has already done, and it is therefore guaranteed.

The spiritual sacrifice had to be expressed in the physical world.

This is contrasted with the ineffective work of the old covenant priests: “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (verse 11). Was it an exercise in futility? No, it was a picture, a drama that was worth repeating until Christ fulfilled it.

“But when this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (verse 12). The Levitical priests stood while they worked; Christ is able to sit (figuratively speaking, of course) because his work is now done. There will be more work in the future (verse 13), but for now he rests, “because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (verse 14).

The work of sanctification is done (verse 10), and it is still being done (verse 14). Christ is still working in our lives, but the work is based on the sacrifice that was done once for all time. He has completely cleansed us, made us qualified to be in God’s presence. That does not change.

As evidence, he quotes Jeremiah 31:33 again, the prophecy of the new covenant: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds” (Hebrews 10:16). This is the work now being done as we “are being made holy.”

The grand finale

Then our author skips down to the last part of Jeremiah 31:34: “Then he adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more’” (Hebrews 10:17). And he draws this conclusion: “And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (verse 18).

This may seem like a minor point, but it is a major point of the author.

This is the grand finale: Our sins are forgiven; there is no need for sin sacrifices. To us, this may seem a minor point, an anticlimax, something we take for granted. But to our author, this is a major point, the point he has been driving toward for four chapters. The

sacrificial system is not needed any more. The old covenant has been set aside. It never was effective, and Christ has set us free from it.

Apparently the audience of Hebrews found the sacrificial system attractive. It was a God-given pattern of worship, and the people saw no reason to give it up. Even if God allowed other forms of worship, wouldn't it be better to stick to the original plan? Wouldn't this assure us that we were doing something that God likes?

No, our author is explaining. God does not necessarily like now what he commanded centuries ago. He didn't like it in Jeremiah's day, or when Psalm 40 was written. The law was good for a time, but its time is past.

Is the original plan better?

In the early church, when Jewish people first believed in Jesus as the Messiah, many of them continued to participate in the temple rituals, either in person or through the offerings collected in the synagogues. At first this seemed harmless, and the people were allowed to continue their customs.

However, as time went on, it became clear that the rituals were a competitor to Christ. They were an enemy of faith. People were looking to the rituals for assurance, rather than to Christ. In their minds, their relationship with God was based partly on their participation in the rituals. They probably thought, Doesn't this make us more obedient, more pleasing to God? Even if the laws were optional, wouldn't it be better to continue them? And, aren't those who continue better than those who don't? The rituals could easily lead to judgmentalism.

People were looking to the rituals for assurance, rather than to Christ.

So our author argues, chapter after chapter, that the rituals are obsolete imitations. This is not the better way — this is the inferior way. Rituals do not achieve anything. Our standing with God is based on what Christ has done, and he has set aside the old covenant. The old covenant was once the best system around, but now that Christ has come, Christ is far better, and the old covenant is inferior.

Throughout the book, Christ is compared to various aspects of the old covenant, and Christ is always better. Does our author want his people to participate in the sacrifices and rituals? Probably not. Does he command them to quit? No, not directly, but he probably wants them to come to that decision themselves.

What he commands them is to look to Jesus. Old covenant rituals are ineffective. They are shadows — copies. Jesus is the reality, and he is fully effective. There is no need for obsolete rituals. They are not a badge of better Christianity — they are an unnecessary burden that can block our view of Christ. It would be wrong to insist on old covenant practices.

Practical exhortations

Hebrews is a practical book. After each chapter or so of doctrinal explanation, the author

will put in a “therefore,” and point out how the believers should respond to the truth about Christ. At several points in the book, the author says, “Therefore, let us do such and such.”

At Hebrews 10:19, after several chapters of doctrine, the author comes to an exhortation passage. This one is a climactic point in the book. It has five exhortations. Since the old covenant is done away, and since we are forgiven by Christ, what are we supposed to do?

The author begins these exhortations by reminding us that we have two major benefits in Christ: 1) “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” and 2) “We have a great priest over the house of God” (verses 19-21). Since we have these two benefits, he says, we should respond in five ways:

- 1) “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (verse 22). We should accept the cleansing that Christ has given us, and use it for its purpose: that we draw closer to God. The rituals of the old covenant symbolized separation; the coming of Jesus Christ emphasizes the approachability of God.
- 2) “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess” (verse 23). Christ is faithful toward us, so we must be faithful toward him, keeping him central in our thoughts.
- 3) “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” Notice the focus. It is not that each person should do good. That is true, but the focus here is on encouraging *others* to do good. And not just exhorting others, but *thinking* about how we might do it better. In this way, the good deeds will be multiplied. Our relationship with God will have results in the way we interact with each other.
- 4) “Let us not give up meeting together” (verse 25). It seems that some first-century Jewish Christians were no longer meeting together. Perhaps they were pressured by the Jewish community. Perhaps they were disappointed that Christ had not yet returned. Perhaps they felt that Christianity was a “Gentile” religion. They were more interested in their Jewish distinctives than they were in Christ. So the author urges, Don’t drop out! If you don’t meet with one another, you can’t show love.
- 5) “Let us encourage one another” (verse 25). Repetition emphasizes. The first-century Jewish Christians needed to encourage one another. Mutual encouragement helps everyone stay in the faith.

This is not the better way — it is the inferior way.

This advice is still true today. We need to encourage one another in the faith, and in doing good — “all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Christ will return, and we will be called into account for how we responded to his message, for what our focus was. He will “bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28) — and not just waiting, but working in faith as well.

Review 7

- There has been an important change in the law.
- We are to look to Jesus, not to ritual laws.
- We should not expect the new covenant to be just like the old.
- The new covenant offers real forgiveness, not rituals.
- Jesus gives us complete forgiveness and therefore makes us perfectly acceptable to God.
- Question: Jesus is better than the rituals, but couldn't we have both? What spiritual problems might we have if we tried to observe ritual laws?

8

“The law is holy, just and good”

We are no longer under the supervision of the law, writes Paul (Galatians 3:25). But the same apostle also writes, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). He even writes that the old covenant came “with glory” (2 Corinthians 3:7). (However, he says in the next verse that the new covenant is “even more glorious.” We’ll examine 2 Corinthians 3 in chapter 17.)

The old covenant — including its sacrifices, rituals, and circumcision — was good. It was exactly what Israel needed. But once Christ came, the old covenant became obsolete. The sacrifices and circumcision are no longer a standard of righteousness. It would be wrong to pull out an obsolete law and command it for Christians today.

The old covenant was exactly what Israel needed. But when Christ came, it became obsolete.

Which laws?

Romans 7:12 tells us that the law is good — but does this mean the law requiring physical circumcision is still in force? Of course not. This verse does not tell us *which laws* are good. It does not tell us which laws apply to us today. We can’t just quote the Old Testament for the laws we like, and ignore it for the laws we don’t like. That would be a misuse of the Bible. But Romans 7:12 does tell us to be cautious. Any law that God gave is a good law — but it is not necessarily good for us today. Paul says that we “uphold” the law by our faith in Christ. We are not a lawless people. But again, we must ask, *which laws?* The verse does not tell us.

Paul says that we cannot be declared righteous by keeping the law (Romans 3:20), but that does not mean that we reject the law, either. We want to obey God, to do what he wants us to do, even if we can’t do it perfectly. “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” (Romans 6:15).

Paul could act like a Gentile; he did not obey laws that separated Jews from Gentiles.

The law tells us what sin is (Romans 7:7) — but which law? Does the law of circumcision tell us what sin is? Not any more. The laws of sacrifice do not tell us what sin is. Obsolete laws cannot tell us what sin is, so we need to be sure that we are

not putting *our* idea of law into Paul's meaning. We need to find out what law Paul himself meant, and which laws he himself kept.

He tells us this in 1 Corinthians 9, where he explains his missionary strategy: "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 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" (verses 19-20). When he was trying to win Jewish people to Christ, he acted like a Jew. (See Acts 21:26 for an example.) He could act like he was "under the law" even though he knew he was not.

"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" (verse 21). Paul even felt free to act like he was not under the law. He could act like a Gentile, even as Peter did (Galatians 2:14). The laws that separated Jews from Gentiles were no longer in force, and Paul did not have to obey them. He could obey them if he wanted to, when it was helpful for others, but he did not have to.

The law that Paul was under was "Christ's law" — "the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). This is the law that is holy, just, and good. This is the law that defines sin. Christ is the standard of righteousness; the old covenant is not.

Two ways to look at the law

Let's go back to Romans 3:31. There is a moral law that was not nullified by Christ. This law is holy, just and good. And the obvious question is, what is this law? It is tempting at this point to put our words into Paul's pen by saying precisely what "the law" is. Lutherans have their idea, Calvinists have theirs, Adventists have theirs, etc.

Is this "law" identical to the Ten Commandments? I see no evidence in the New Testament that anyone equated "the law" with only the Ten. Is "the law" larger? Does it include all of the Ten? Or are only some of the Ten in the eternal law? How can we tell? That brings us back to the central question, and unfortunately Romans 3:31 does not tell us exactly what we want to know. It simply tells us that there is a law that continues to be valid. Other parts of Romans tell us that there is also a God-given law that has expired. How do we fit this into Romans 3:31? Let's take circumcision as an example. Do we nullify this law by faith? The answer could be developed in two ways. Both have some validity.

First, we could say no, we do not nullify the law of circumcision by faith. Rather, we uphold it and we keep it better, in the heart instead of in the flesh. Similarly, we keep all the rituals and ceremonies better, by faith in Christ, even though we do not keep them in the letter, even though the New Testament does not tell us how precisely we are keeping the grain offerings and the clothing rules by having faith in Christ. We figure that faith in Christ fulfills whatever purpose those laws had. But in this view, it is possible to "keep" a law without paying any attention to what it actually says. We might say that the physical requirements have been spiritualized away. This line of thought, however, does not tell us

<p>In this view, it is possible to "keep" a law without paying attention to what it says.</p>

which laws can be spiritualized, and which must still be kept in the letter.

The other approach is to say yes, the law of circumcision is nullified by faith, and we do not have to keep it. Although there may be theological continuity, there is no continuity in what we do in the flesh. But that still leaves us without a precise definition of “the law” that is *not* nullified. Does it include most of the Ten Commandments? Certainly. Paul quotes most of the Ten Commandments in Romans. But the still-valid law also includes Leviticus 19:18b, Deuteronomy 6:5, Micah 6:8 and various other laws from other parts of the Old Testament.

So what is “the law” Paul is discussing in Romans 3:31 and 7:12? The context does not give us any reason to equate it with the Ten Commandments. Rather, it just gives us the general principle that the concept of law is still valid, and that God still has behavioral standards for his people. But precisely what those standards are, we cannot tell from these verses alone. Romans 3:31 does not tell us whether the Sabbath, for example, is part of the non-nullified law, or part of the law that is no longer required. We will have to look at other verses.

Superior righteousness

What did Jesus Christ mean when he said that he did not come to destroy the law? (Matthew 5:17) This verse from the Sermon on the Mount is sometimes used in support of old covenant laws. We need to see what Jesus said, and again, the *context* of the chapter will help us see what he meant.

The context of the chapter helps us see what he meant.

Jesus begins this section of the Sermon with a caution: When you hear what I say, you might wonder if I am trying to eliminate the Scriptures. I’m not. I am doing and teaching exactly what the Scriptures say I should. What I say will be

surprising, but don’t get me wrong.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (verse 17). Many people focus here on the word Law, and assume that the question is whether Jesus will do away with Old Testament laws (plural). This makes the verse very difficult to understand, since everyone agrees that Jesus Christ caused *some* laws to become obsolete, and that this was part of his purpose. Just how many laws are involved may be disputed, but everyone agrees that Jesus came to abolish at least some laws.

But Jesus is not talking about laws. He is talking about the Law (singular) — the Torah, the first five books of the Scriptures. He is also talking about the Prophets, another major section of the Bible. This verse is not about individual laws, but about the Scriptures as a whole. Here is a valid paraphrase: Jesus did not come to do away with the Scriptures, but to fulfill them. This involved obedience, of course, but it went further. God wants his children to do more than follow rules. When Jesus fulfilled the Torah, it was not just a matter of obedience — he completed all that the Torah had ever pointed to. He did what Israel as a nation was not able to do.

God wants his children to do more than follow rules.

Nothing will disappear until...

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (verse 18).

But Christians don’t have to circumcise their children, build booths out of tree branches, and wear blue threads in tassels. Everyone agrees that we don’t have to keep these laws. So what did Jesus mean when he said that none of the Law would disappear? For practical purposes, haven’t those laws disappeared?

There are three basic approaches to this. First, we can recognize that these laws have not disappeared. They are still in the Torah — but being in Torah doesn’t mean that we have to do them. This is true, but it does not seem to be what Jesus intended here.

A second approach is to say that Christians do keep these laws, but that we do so by having faith in Christ. We keep the law of circumcision in our hearts (Romans 1:29) and we keep all ritual laws through faith. This is true, but it also does not seem to be what Jesus was saying right here. His original audience could not have understood this.

A third approach is to observe that 1) none of the Law could become obsolete until everything was accomplished, and 2) everyone agrees that at least some of the Law has become obsolete. So we conclude 3) that everything was accomplished through Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection. Jesus fulfilled his mission, and the old covenant law is now obsolete, since it was originally planned to be in force only until he came.

There are many Old Testament laws that Christians do *not* have to keep, and verses 17-20 do not tell us which laws are which. If we quote these verses only for the laws we happen to like, we are misusing these verses. They do not teach the permanent validity of all laws, because not all laws are permanent. We cannot take these verses out of context as if they taught the permanence of the Old Testament laws that *we* happen to support. They don’t, because not all the laws *are* permanent. We come back again to the question of *which* laws are still in force, and again, this verse does not tell us.

Jesus is not saying that we need better obedience to the same laws, but we need to obey better laws.

These commandments

Jesus then says, “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (verse 19).

What are “these” commandments? Is Jesus referring to commandments in the Law of Moses, or to his own commands, which he will soon give? We must take into account the fact that verse 19 begins with the word “therefore” (which the NIV does not translate).

There is a logical connection between verses 18 and 19. Is it, The Law will remain, so these commandments should be taught? That would imply that Jesus was talking about teaching all of the law. But there are commandments in the Torah that are obsolete and should *not* be taught as law today. So Jesus cannot be saying that we should teach all the laws

of the Old Testament. That would contradict the rest of the New Testament.

More likely, the logical connection between verses 18 and 19 is different, focusing more on “until all is accomplished,” which is the closest phrase. The thought is like this: All the Law will remain until everything is accomplished, and therefore (since Jesus *did* accomplish everything), we are to teach these laws (the laws of Jesus that we will soon read) instead of the old laws that he criticizes. This makes better sense in the context of the sermon, and in the New Testament.

It is *Jesus’* commandments that should be taught (Matthew 7:24; 28:20). Jesus explains why: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 7:20). The Pharisees were known for detailed obedience, tithing even on their herbs. But true righteousness is a matter of the heart, of a person’s character, not just conforming to certain rules. Jesus is not saying that we need better obedience to the same laws, but rather obedience to *better laws*, and he will soon illustrate what he means.

But none of us are as righteous as we should be. We all need mercy, and we enter the kingdom not through our own righteousness, but through God’s mercy, as Jesus explained in the beatitudes (verse 7). Paul explained it as the gift of righteousness, as justification by faith, as the perfect righteousness of Jesus being attributed to us as we become united to him through faith.

Here is a summary of this section: Do not think that Jesus came to abolish the Scriptures. He came to do what they said. Every law remained in force until Jesus accomplished all that he was sent to do. Now he gives a new standard of righteousness, and we must conform to his standard and teach it.

But I say...

Jesus then gives six contrasts between the old teachings and the new. Six times he quotes a traditional teaching, most often from the Torah itself, and six times he explains that *the old way is not enough*. He offers a more exacting standard of righteousness.

Do not despise

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment’” (verse 21). This is a quote from the Torah and a summary of its civil laws. People heard this when Scripture was read to them. (In the days before printing, people more often *heard* Scripture than they read it.)

Who said this “to the people long ago”? God himself, at Mt. Sinai. Jesus is not quoting a distorted tradition of the Jews — he is quoting God in the Torah. He then contrasts it with a more rigorous standard: “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (verse 22). Perhaps the Torah really meant this, but Jesus does not reason on that basis. He does not mention any authority for his teaching. It is true simply because he is the one who says it.

We will be judged on our anger. Someone who wants to kill, or wishes that someone else were dead, is a murderer in the heart, even if he or she is unable or unwilling to carry out

the deed. However, not all anger is sin. Jesus himself was sometimes angry. Nevertheless, Jesus states it boldly: Anyone who is angry will be subject to divine judgment. The principle is stated in stark terms; the exceptions are not listed. Here and elsewhere in the sermon, we must realize that Jesus phrases his demands in an extreme form. We cannot lift sayings out of the sermon and act as if none of them have any exceptions.

Jesus then says, “Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca’ [a term of derision], is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (verse 22). Jesus is not referring new cases to the Jewish leaders. More likely, in the saying about “raca,” he is quoting something that the scribes were already teaching. But he says that the penalty for evil attitudes goes much further than a civil court — it goes all the way to the final judgment.

But Jesus himself called people “fool” (Matthew 23:17, same Greek word). We cannot take these sayings as legalistic rules that must be enforced to the letter. No, they are startling statements designed to make a point. Here, the point is that we should not despise other people. This principle is beyond the requirements of the Torah, but it is the true righteousness that characterizes the kingdom of God.

Two parables

Jesus then gives two parables to illustrate: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (verses 23-24).

Jesus lived in an old covenant age, and his mention here of old covenant laws about sacrifice does not mean that they are still in force today. His parable points out that interpersonal relationships have priority over sacrifices. If someone has something against you (whether justified or not), that person should have taken the first step, but if that person does not, do not wait. Take the initiative. However, it is not always possible. Jesus is not giving a new law, but stating a principle in bold terms: we should try to reconcile.

The mention here of old covenant laws does not mean that they are still in force today.

“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny” (verses 25-26).

It is not always possible to settle matters out of court, and we do not have to let false accusers get away with extortion. Again we see that we cannot treat Jesus’ words as precise laws. Nor is he just giving us wise advice about how to stay out of debtors’ prison. Rather, he is telling us to seek peace because that is the way of true righteousness.

Do not lust

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery’” (verse 27). God said it on Mt. Sinai. But Jesus tells us “that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The tenth commandment prohibited lust, but the

seventh commandment did not. It prohibited "adultery" — a behavior that could be regulated by civil laws and penalties.

Jesus makes no attempt to have Scriptural support behind his teaching. He does not need it. He is the living Word, and has more authority than the written Word. His teaching falls into a pattern: The old law says one thing, but true righteousness requires much more. He then gives extreme statements to drive the point home. When it comes to adultery, he says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell" (verses 29-30).

Yes, it is better to lose a body part than to lose eternal life. But that is not really our choice, because eyes and hands cannot cause us to sin, and if we remove them, we have committed another sin. Sin originates in the heart, and what we need is a changed heart. Jesus' point is that we need surgery on our thoughts. We need extreme measures to eliminate sin.

Jesus gives extreme statements to drive the point home.

Do not divorce

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce'" (verse 31). This refers to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which accepts the certificate of divorce as a custom among the Israelites. This law said that a woman could not be married to one man, then another, and then go back to the first man. Other than this rare situation, the law did not make any restrictions. The Law of Moses permitted divorce, but Jesus did not.

"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (verse 32). This is a hard saying, both to understand and to apply. Suppose an evil man puts away his wife for no reason at all. Is she automatically a sinner? And is it a sin for anyone to marry this victim of divorce?

It would be a mistake for us to treat Jesus' statement as an unalterable law. For one thing, Paul was inspired to realize that there is another legitimate exception for divorce (1 Corinthians 7:15). Matthew 5 is not the last word in the Bible on the subject of divorce. What we learn here is only part of the picture.

Jesus' saying here is a shocking statement designed to make a point — in this case, the point that divorce always involves sin. God intended for marriages to be life-long, and we must strive to keep them the way he intended. Jesus did not attempt to discuss what we should do when things go wrong.

Do not swear

"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord'" (verse 33). These principles are taught in Scripture (Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:31). But what the Torah clearly allowed, Jesus did not: "But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King" (Matthew

5:34-35). Apparently the Jewish leaders allowed people to take oaths in these names, perhaps to avoid pronouncing the holy name of God.

“And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (verses 36-37). The principle is simple: honesty — but it is made in a startling way.

Exceptions are allowed. Jesus himself said more than Yes and No. He often said Amen, Amen. He said that heaven and earth would pass away, but his words would not. He called God as witness that what he was saying was true. Paul also wrote some strong affirmations that were more than simply saying Yes (Romans 7:1; 2 Corinthians 1:23).

So we see again that we should not take the bold statements of the Sermon on the Mount as prohibitions that must be enforced exactly as written. We should have simple honesty, but we can on occasion emphasize the truth of what we are saying. In a court of law, to use a modern example, we are allowed to “swear” to tell the truth, and ask God to help us tell the truth. It is nitpicking to say that “affirm” is acceptable but “swear” is not. In a court of law, these words mean the same thing — and both are more than a simple Yes.

We obey according to the commands of Christ, not the laws of Moses.

Do not seek revenge

Jesus again quotes the Torah: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth’” (verse 38). It is sometimes said that this was merely a maximum limit for vengeance in the Old Testament. It was indeed a maximum, but it was sometimes a minimum, too (Leviticus 24:19; Deuteronomy 19:21).

But what the Torah required, Jesus prohibited: “But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person” (verse 39). But Jesus himself resisted evil persons. He drove moneychangers out of the temple. The apostles resisted false teachers. Paul objected when soldiers started to flog him. Jesus’ statement is again an exaggeration: It is permissible to resist evil persons. Jesus would allow us, for example, to resist evil persons by reporting crime to the police.

Jesus’ next statements must be seen as exaggerations, too. That does not mean we can dismiss them as irrelevant. Rather, we must receive the principle, and we must allow it to challenge our behavior, without turning these rules into a new law-code as if exceptions were never allowed.

“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” In some circumstances, of course, it would be better to walk away, as Peter did (Acts 12:9). Nor is it wrong to voice an objection, as Paul did (Acts 23:3). Jesus is teaching a principle, not a rule that must be kept in a rigid way.

“And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (verses 40-42). If people sue you for ten thousand dollars, you do not have to give them twenty thousand. If someone steals your car, you do not have to give your truck as well. If a drunk asks for ten dollars, you do not have to give anything.

The point in Jesus’ extreme sayings is not that we have to let people take advantage of

us, nor that we should reward them for doing so. Rather, it is that we should not take revenge. Try to make peace; do not try to hurt others.

Do not hate

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” (verse 43). The Torah commands love, but it also commanded Israel to kill the Canaanites and to punish all evil-doers. But Jesus says, “I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (verse 44).

Jesus teaches a different way, a way not like the world. Why? What is the model for all this radical righteousness? “That you may be children of your Father in heaven” (verse 45). We are to be like God is, and he loved his enemies so much that he sent his Son to die for them. We cannot send our children to die for our enemies, but we are to love our enemies and pray for them to be blessed. We fall short of the standard that Jesus says is right. But our frequent failures do not mean that we should quit trying.

Jesus reminds us that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (verse 45). He is merciful to all. “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” (verses 46-47). We are called to do more than what is natural, more than unconverted people do. Our inability to be perfect does not change our calling to seek to improve.

Our love for others is to be complete, to extend to all peoples, and that is what Jesus means when he says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (verse 48).

Do not think that Jesus came to do away with law entirely — but do not think that he came to make the old covenant permanent, either. Christians should obey God, but we obey according to the commands of Christ, not the laws of Moses. That is part of the Great Commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything *I* have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). We are under the law of Christ, not the Law of Moses.

Review

- God’s law is still valid, but not all of his laws are.
- Peter and Paul could live like a Gentile. In Jewish culture, what would that mean?
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes several bold commands that we later find out have exceptions. Is his statement in verse 19 also an exaggeration?
- Does verse 19 mean that Christianity should teach all the laws of the Old Testament?
- What does Jesus emphasize — rules about worship, or laws about how we get along with other people?

Old teaching	Source	New teaching	Exaggeration
Do not murder, anyone who murders will be subject to judgment	Quote from Ex. 20:13, summary of Old Testament civil laws about murder	Anyone who is angry with a brother will be subject to judgment Anyone who says, “fool!” will be in danger of hell First be reconciled to your brother Settle matters out of court You will not get out until you have paid the last penny	Jesus was sometimes angry; not all anger is sin Jesus called people “fool” Reconciliation is not always possible It is not always possible Sometimes debts are forgiven
Do not commit adultery	Quote from Ex. 20:14	Anyone who lusts has already committed adultery If your eye or hand causes you to sin, remove it	Eyes and hands cannot cause sin; and removing them <u>is</u> a sin
Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce	Reference to Deut. 24:1-4	Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery	Paul allowed another exception The man commits adultery, too. If she does not remarry, she is not an adulteress.
Keep the oaths you have made to the Lord	Paraphrase of Num. 30:2 and Deut. 23:31	Do not swear at all Let your “Yes” be “Yes”	No need to say “affirm” instead of “swear” Jesus and Paul said more than “Yes” to affirm their words
Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth	Quote from Lev. 24:19; Deut. 19:21	Do not resist an evil person Turn the other cheek Give double what they ask	Nonviolent resistance is permissible; Jesus even used force sometimes We can object or walk away Not always required - do not reward evildoers
Love your neighbor hate your enemy	Quote from Lev. 19:18 Torah	Love your enemies and pray for them Be perfect	humanly impossible
Summary	Usually a quote	Even more is required — who can	Exceptions often exist

	of the Torah	obey these startling demands?	
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9

Was the Sabbath commanded at creation?

Now we are better prepared to study the specific issue of the Sabbath, which may be the most controversial of the Old Testament laws. Some people believe that Christians should keep the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week; some advocate the first day. Many say that the Sabbath is an old covenant ritual law and does not apply to Christians. But in some ways the Sabbath is not like sacrifices or other old covenant laws. We need to examine those differences and see the arguments for and against. The arguments can be complex, so we will take several chapters to examine them thoroughly.

“Remember the Sabbath day,” the Ten Commandments say. “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:8, 11). So here the Law of Moses sends us back to the creation of the world. The Sabbath goes back to what God did at creation (Genesis 2:2).

The Sabbath in Genesis

So the question is: Was the Sabbath commanded at creation? If so, it would seem to apply to all the descendants of Adam and Eve, to all humanity. If God wanted the first humans to keep the Sabbath, then it is more likely that he wants us to keep the Sabbath today. What do the Scriptures say? Genesis tells us:

- God created the world in six days.
- By the seventh day, creation was complete.
- God rested [the Hebrew verb used for “rest” is similar to the Hebrew noun for Sabbath] on the seventh day.
- He blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-3).

However, there are several things that Genesis does *not* tell us, although some people have assumed or claimed these things.

- It does not say that humans rested or were told to rest.
- It does not say that humans were told to follow God’s example.
- It does not say that God taught Adam and Eve on the Sabbath.

- It does not say God created the Sabbath, or that humans kept it.

On the seventh day of creation, God “rested.” But he was not tired; what it means is that he stopped creating. The creation was complete. He stopped creating when he came to the seventh day. But he didn’t stop every week — he stopped only once, and he did not create at all on the seventh day.

But he didn’t create on the eighth day, either, or the ninth, or the tenth, etc. Perhaps this is why Genesis does not say that evening and morning were the seventh day — God’s noncreation continued from that day on. To God, all those days were like the seventh. He was resting on those days, too, until sin entered. (Jesus said that God is now working — John 5:17. He is redeeming the world, re-creating his people. This work became necessary when Adam and Eve sinned.)

In all of created history, God stopped creating once. He does not stop every week; he does not live by a six-one cycle of work and rest. The six-one cycle does not describe God’s moral nature or righteousness. God does not keep the Sabbath.

Were humans included?

What about humans? Genesis tells us that humans were created on the sixth day of creation, and they were “very good” — without sin. They were in a state of peace with God, trustful and obedient. They did not need to work in the way they later did, and they did not need to set aside a day for rest. They did not need to rest on the seventh day of creation week (the second day of their lives). Nor did they need to set aside a day for communion with God, for they had it continually. In other words, they did not need a weekly Sabbath — and the Sabbath, as a command, was not given until after sin entered.

Creation week was unique. We do not expect God’s activity on the first day to be repeated on every first day. What God 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.

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 to imitate a specific aspect of creation week, rest, they would have to be told about it. Scripture records various commands given to Adam and Eve, but there is no hint of a Sabbath command either before or after they sinned.

Even if every seventh day were holy, we are not told *how* it was to be kept. Holiness does not automatically mean rest (in Israel, every 50th year was holy — the entire year). Holiness just means that the day is set apart for God’s use. God later used it as a pattern for the Israelites, but we are not told how he used it before then. God’s end-of-creation rest provided 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 at creation.

If God commands the Sabbath for Christians, then of course we should keep it, even if it costs us our jobs and divides our families. But before we do that, we need a clear command from God — and the creation account does not have it.

Nevertheless, some people call the Sabbath a creation ordinance, or a creation command. Perhaps it would be helpful to compare it here with reproduction, which *is* commanded in Genesis 1:28. Despite this creation command, physical reproduction is not a requirement for all Christians. Single people do not lose out on salvation. So there are exceptions allowed even in a clear command; we must be even more flexible when it comes to the Sabbath, which does *not* have a clear command. The Sabbath is commanded only after sin enters the world.

Did Abraham keep the Sabbath?

The word “Sabbath” does not occur in the book of Genesis. It does not say anything about the Sabbath for Adam, Noah, or any patriarch. The Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 31), but Abraham was given a different sign. If the Sabbath marked the people of Israel as distinctively God’s, couldn’t it just as easily mark Abraham as distinctively belonging to God? But Genesis says nothing about the Sabbath.

When Jacob was fleeing for his life, willing to make promises to God if God would protect him, Jacob promised to worship and to tithe (Genesis 28:22), but he said nothing about the Sabbath. It seems that he did not view it as a major component of worship. It is a mark of historical accuracy that Genesis does not say anything about the Sabbath for the patriarchs, for the Sabbath was not yet a command.

What can we learn from silence? It shows that the author was not worried about whether Abraham kept the Sabbath. Indeed, Jewish interpreters believed that Abraham did *not* keep the Sabbath. 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 Passover and other 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.

No Sabbath before Moses

The Jewish Talmud says: “The children of Noah...were given seven Laws only, the observance of the Sabbath not being among them.”¹

The seven laws of Noah’s time are listed in *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 16:6 (Soncino edition, p. 131), *Sanhedrin* 56 a, b; and *Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:2(5) (Soncino edition, pp. 26-27).² Gentiles could be considered righteous if they observed these laws, which did not include the Sabbath. Nor did they include restrictions about pork. Rabbi Judah could say that there was a time for the “sons of Jacob when unclean beasts were still permitted to them.”³ Clearly, these Jewish rabbis did not believe that Abraham had to observe these laws that were later given through Moses — and that would have included the Sabbath.

¹ *Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:21 (Soncino edition, p. 23), as quoted in C. Mervyn Maxwell and P. Gerard Damsteegt, eds., *Source Book for the History of Sabbath and Sunday* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1992), p. 75.

² Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 74.

³ *Hullin* 7:6, as quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 74.

The rabbis did not think that the Sabbath had been given to Gentiles: “Why does it say, ‘The Lord hath given you’ (Exodus 16:29)? To you hath he given it [the Sabbath], but not to the heathen. It is in virtue of this that the Sages stated [*Sanhedrin* 56b] that if some of the heathen observed the Sabbath, then not only do they not receive any reward [but they are even considered to be transgressing].”⁴

“A non-Jew who observes the Sabbath whilst he is uncircumcised incurs liability for the punishment of death. Why? Because non-Jews were not commanded concerning it... The Sabbath is a reunion between Israel and God, as it is said, ‘It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel’ (Exodus 31:17); therefore any non-Jew who, being uncircumcised, thrusts himself between them incurs the penalty of death.... The Gentiles have not been commanded to observe the Sabbath.”⁵

Further evidence of the antiquity of this Jewish understanding comes from the second-century B.C. book of Jubilees: “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.”⁶

These historical sources show the traditional understanding of the Jews: The Sabbath was *not* commanded at creation, and was not commanded for Gentiles. It applied to Israelites only. This is important for our understanding of Genesis, and it also helps explain the way the New Testament church approached the question.

Review 9

- Adam and Eve did not need to rest on the seventh day.
- Genesis does not command anyone to keep the Sabbath.
- Jews understood that Abraham did not keep the Sabbath.
- God called the seventh day holy, but he did not command it as a day of rest until the days of Moses.
- Question: Must all Christians obey the command God gave Adam and Eve to have children?
- Even a law God gave in Genesis (circumcision) does not apply to Christians.
- If the Sabbath is commanded today, we must find proof for it in other books of the Bible.

⁴ *Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 25:11 (Soncino edition, p. 314); *ibid.*, p. 74).

⁵ *Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:21 (Soncino edition, pp. 23-24); *ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶ *Jubilees* 2:31, James Charlesworth, editor, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), vol. 2, p. 58.

10

The Sabbath and the Ten Commandments

The Sabbath was commanded before Sinai — only a few weeks before. We find it in Exodus 16. There, 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 a rest day before this. The Lord, through Moses, gave some new instructions in connection 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 on the Sabbath (verse 29). Moses is telling the people how to keep the Sabbath as if they knew nothing about it.

However, the fact that these commands were given before Sinai does not automatically mean that they are required today. They are still part of the “Law of Moses” that was added 430 years after Abraham (Galatians 3:17). Paul argues in Galatians 3 that commands given after the promise (Genesis 15) do not apply to the covenant of promise, which Christians have inherited. Circumcision (added in Genesis 17) does not apply. The antiquity of a law does not prove its continued existence in the new covenant. Circumcision shows that even a command given in Genesis can be declared obsolete.

Other laws before Sinai

Various obsolete laws were commanded before Sinai. We do not select lambs on the 10th of Abib or smear their blood on our doorposts (Exodus 12). We do not consecrate to the Lord every firstborn male or offer sacrifices (Exodus 13), all of which were commanded before Sinai. We do not gather food each day, gathering twice as much on the sixth day (Exodus 16). We do not stay in our homes 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 fact that this command was given a few weeks before Sinai is not theologically significant; it is still part of the Law of Moses and the old covenant.

Some pre-Sinai laws are still valid, as can be shown from New Testament scriptures. But other pre-Sinai laws are not. Our standpoint must be the New Testament, not the Old. 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.

Once holy, always holy?

Exodus 16:23 tells us that God made the seventh day of every week holy. But this does not mean that it remains holy forever. In the Old Testament, various places 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. However, 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 (Matthew 12:4). 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, even though the New Testament does not mention it specifically.

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. 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 sets the day apart and still tells his people to use it in a specific way. When we look at old covenant holy things and holy time, our principle of interpretation must be “obsolete unless proven otherwise.” The jubilee year, a holy year, demonstrates that.

We cannot *assume* the Sabbath is still holy just because it once was. The jubilee year demonstrates that.

The Sabbath at Mt. Sinai

When the Israelites came to Mt. Sinai, God spoke to them. Among his commands to them were these words: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:8-11).

The Sabbath command is one of the Ten Commandments — but what does that mean? Is there any biblical evidence that all ten commands have to stay together, or that all ten are permanently valid? People sometimes *assume* this, and Christians have traditionally given lip-service to the Ten Commandments, but there is no biblical proof that all Ten must stay together as a permanent package. That statement requires considerable proof, so let’s examine the Scriptures.

Remember what God said

First, let’s note that the command begins with “remember” (verse 8). Does this mean that the Sabbath was already a long-established command? No, it does not need to refer any further back than Exodus 16. But even more important, it does not refer to the past at all — it is a command for the future. It could have been a brand-new command, and God was saying,

What I am giving you today, I want you to be sure to remember from now on. The word “remember” does not prove anything about the past.

Second, we observe that God himself spoke this command. Does this make it eternally binding? No, God spoke all his commands, including the command for circumcision, Passover lambs, tree-branch booths, etc. Scripture never assigns any special permanence to commands that God himself spoke. God’s people were expected to obey all commands equally, whether they came directly from God or through a prophet or messenger.

Third, the Sabbath is here connected to creation. Does this mean that the Sabbath was commanded at creation? No. It just means that the pattern made in creation week was being used as the model for the Israelites’ week. We might paraphrase it in this way, “I want you to rest at the end of each of your weeks, just as I rested at the end of creation week. I have set aside that day for my special purpose. Now I am telling you what to do with it.” Exodus 20:11 does *not* say that the seventh day had always been a commanded day of rest. The sabbatical year was also patterned after creation, but that does not imply that it existed at creation, or that it is required now. The patterns are not commands. Reproduction is also

Scripture never assigns any special permanence to commands that God himself spoke.

connected with creation, but even it is not a command for all Christians.

Christians have given their lives to the Lord. They give him all their time and energy. Every day is dedicated to him, to be used for him. All time is holy. The question we face now is, Does God want us to use the seventh day, or the first, or any other day, in a special way? This was commanded for the Israelites, but is this still a command for Christians?

Obviously, this command is part of the Law of Moses. It is part of the law given 430 years after Abraham, and this puts the Sabbath command in the company of a lot of obsolete laws, as well as with some eternal laws. The fact that it was once commanded does not help us evaluate its validity today. We must look at other principles, especially New Testament verses.

Are the Ten Commandments a permanent group?

Let’s look at the fact that the Sabbath command is part of the Ten Commandments. Are these an eternally valid group of laws? The Ten Commandments are treated as a group in only three places. Exodus 34:28 tells us that the old covenant was composed of the Ten Commandments. So does Deuteronomy 4:13. But this is the covenant that Hebrews 8:13 says is obsolete!

Paul refers to the Ten Commandments not by name, nor by the fact that God spoke them, but by the fact that they were written on stone tablets (2 Corinthians 3:7-8). He contrasts this old covenant with the new covenant, saying that the old was glorious, but the new is so much better that in comparison, the old is no longer glorious. He’s talking about the Ten Commandments! In comparison to Christ, they have no glory (verse 10). If we equate great displays of glory as a sign of permanence, we are wrong (Hebrews 12:18-19). If we equate stone with permanence, we are wrong. The Bible does not assign that kind of

significance to these facts.

Further, Paul says that the Ten are “fading away” (verse 11). So we must ask, if all Ten are still in force in exactly the same way or in a stronger way, why would Paul say that they were fading away? We must reckon with the possibility that the Ten are *not* an eternally valid package. *Something* must have changed!

The Ten Commandments are the core of the old covenant. Since God is the One who gave the covenant, it is no surprise that most of the commands are eternally valid laws. But just as the old covenant contained dozens, even hundreds of commands about sacrifices and rituals that are now obsolete, we should be open to the possibility that even the core of the covenant contained a command that is peculiar to the old covenant, as a special indicator of the old covenant. As we will see shortly, this is the Sabbath command.

Hebrews 8:6 tells us that the new covenant has been established, and verse 13 tells us that the old covenant is obsolete. There has been a change of covenants. We should therefore expect a difference between the Sinai covenant and the Christian covenant. Most of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, but the Sabbath is not. The New Testament doesn’t criticize anyone for breaking the Sabbath. But that is getting ahead of the story.

The old covenant, as a group 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 New Testament does not distinguish the Ten Commandments from other laws. It does not give them a special name or status. New Testament writers may quote some of the Ten and another law from elsewhere in the Scripture (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 even in the Ten (Matthew 22:36-40).

The last six are a group

There is a consistent grouping in the New Testament — the last six commandments. The first four are not quoted with the others. But even if the last six commandments are quoted together, does that prove anything about commands that weren’t quoted? No. We cannot assume that when Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18 that he also meant verse 19. We cannot assume that when he quoted Deuteronomy 5:17-21 that he also meant verses 22-30, or that he meant all of Deuteronomy 5 or even *all* of Deuteronomy. We cannot assume any particular boundaries, so we cannot assume that all 10 must remain together.

If Jesus meant anything more than what he quoted, we have no way of proving *how much more* he meant. That means that we cannot assume he meant anything more than what he actually said. We cannot assume he meant all Ten Commandments when he quoted only six. We have to go by what the New Testament actually says.

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: a covenant with a specific nation.

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” (verse 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 only, and not everything in the Ten should be assumed timeless truth. 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 Ten must stay together.

If we look at the Ten Commandments only, we might wonder why only one might be obsolete. But when we look at the old covenant as a whole, we see hundreds of obsolete commands, many of them worship regulations. If the coming of Jesus did away with the Sabbath command, then it would be one command among many. When we see that *many* commands are now obsolete, it is not strange that one of the obsolete ones happens to be in the Ten Commandments. We’ll get to that in a few more chapters. But there is still some Old Testament evidence we must attend to.

How long does an eternal covenant last?

The Lord told Moses to tell the Israelites: “Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested” (Exodus 31:14-17).

The Sabbath was given for several purposes. Exodus 31 describes one of them: The Sabbath was 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). The Sabbath covenant sign was dependent on the old covenant.

A covenant with Israelites

Exodus 31 is specifically made with Israelites, not Gentiles. However, Exodus 31 does not say that God makes only Israelites holy, or only those who keep the Sabbath. It leaves open the possibility that God might make other people holy or give them some other sign 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 (verses 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 (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. It is unfortunate that translators have used the English words eternal, perpetual, and everlasting, for it is obvious that the Hebrew word *'olam* does not mean permanent. The “eternal” covenant with the Levite priests (Numbers 25:13) has come to an end.

New covenant signs

For old covenant people, circumcision was the ritual 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 communion. Those are the New Testament covenantal rites. 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 covenant (Romans 4:9-10). Even the circumcision covenant, given to Abraham, 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 Christians should be willing to keep the Sabbath. But the Exodus 31 covenant is not binding on Christ’s new covenant people. 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 days of a week.

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. We are under a different covenant.

Review 10

- Some laws given before Sinai are now obsolete.
- We cannot assume that holy time remains perpetually holy, or that it must always be used in the same way.
- The Ten Commandments are mentioned only three times in Scripture — always as a covenant that is now old.

- Question: Do any portions of the Ten Commandments apply to Israelites only?
How do we know which portions?

11

The prophets and the Sabbath

Let's now consider two facts about the Sabbath in the Old Testament:

- The Israelites were punished severely for breaking the Sabbath. Doesn't this indicate its importance?
- Both Israelites and Gentiles were praised for keeping the Sabbath, and the prophets predicted a time when Gentiles would keep the Sabbath. Doesn't this indicate that it is God's ideal for us today?

Punishments for Sabbath-breaking

In ancient Israel, Sabbath-breakers were stoned to death (Exodus 31:14; 35:2; Numbers 15:32-36). By breaking the covenant laws, they were showing that they were not part of the covenant people.

But a similar punishment was given for people who broke other old covenant laws. Exodus 31:14 shows that "cutting off" was the same severity of punishment as execution (see also Leviticus 20:2-3). Numbers 15:30-31 says that any blatant, willful sin should be punished by cutting the person off from the people. This was then illustrated by the case of a man who gathered sticks on a Sabbath. His rebellion was defiant, and that is why he had to be stoned. He was deliberately rejecting the covenant. He was "cut off" by being killed.

Violations of the Sabbath 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.

They were punished because the law applied to them; it does not mean that it also applies to us.

The severity of the punishment is not proof that those laws continue to be in force in the new covenant. They were punished because the law applied to them; it does not mean

that it also applies to us.

National captivity for Sabbath-breaking

Hundreds of years later, the Jewish nation was punished for breaking the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:17-18; Jeremiah 17:27). They were also promised blessings for keeping the Sabbath (verses 21-26). This 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.

A similar punishment was given to people who broke other old covenant laws.

The Israelites' disobedience regarding the Sabbath, and their disobedience in worship rituals, was a visible sign of their unbelief. The Israelites broke all aspects of the covenant, and they were punished with the curses that were part of the covenant (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28), but this does not mean that the same covenant blessings and cursings apply to us today. We are under a different covenant.

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 were keeping the Sabbath but had rejected the new covenant. Jesus was the "test commandment" of the first century. Faith in Christ is 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. It is not so today.

Praise for Sabbath-keeping

The Sabbath was a blessing for both Jews and Gentiles (Isaiah 56:2-8). Isaiah predicted that God, through the Suffering Servant (the Messiah) would establish a new covenant with his people (Isaiah 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

Jesus was the "test commandment" of the first century.

that Gentiles will offer burnt offerings and sacrifices at God's house. This is certainly not a requirement today.

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 peoples, 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 people in whom the Holy 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. Since we interpret these physical details according to spiritual counterparts, as we must, it is possible that Sabbath-keeping should be interpreted in a spiritual way, too. We should turn to the New Testament to understand whether the Sabbath is to be applied literally or figuratively in the new covenant.

Isaiah also had positive things to say about the Sabbath in chapter 58. As part of his call to repentance, he calls the Sabbath a delight and honorable (verse 3). He is declaring to the house of Jacob their sins and rebellion (verse 1). Although the Israelites had an outward appearance of worship (fasting, for example), 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).

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 — and of other old covenant laws, too. If the people were

obedient to the covenant they were under, if they kept it without complaint, if they used time and material things the way God wanted them to, then God would bless them physically.

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, for we know they are not. 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 ritual laws had some benefits, but it is permissible for us to abandon them after we are led to something better: Christ.

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.

Prophecies about the Sabbath

Scripture also praises the Sabbath in prophecies that describe a worship of God that includes the Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 44:24). Does this show that the Sabbath will continue to be part of God’s law?

The prophets described an ideal time in which all peoples worshipped God. To communicate this concept to the Jewish nation, the prophets described old covenant forms of worship, including new moon observances (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3) and

Isaiah is appropriate to old covenant conditions, but it does not necessarily tell us anything about new covenant requirements.

Our doctrines must be based on scriptures that are applicable to the age we live in.

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.

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. Moreover, another prophecy indicates that the day-night cycle will cease (Revelation 21:25), which would mean the end of the Sabbath, too. Our question is not really about the future, though — it is about right now, and we want scriptures that apply to us now. For that, we must examine the New Testament.

Review 11

- Israelites were punished for rejecting the old covenant and the Sabbath, the sign of the old covenant.
- The prophets praised obedience to various old covenant details.
- Question: Can we assume that something praiseworthy in Isaiah's day is also praiseworthy today? (see Isaiah 6:7, for example)

12

Jesus and the Sabbath

For many people, the most persuasive argument in support of the Sabbath is the fact that

Jesus went to the Scriptures to show that the biblical law can sometimes be set aside.

Jesus kept the Sabbath. Christians want to follow Jesus, to live like he did (1 John 2:6). Does this include the day that he kept?

The problem is that Jesus was also circumcised, and he spoke of circumcision as a valid law (John 7:23). He also spoke of sacrifices as a law that should be kept (Matthew 5:24; 8:4). As a law-abiding Jew, Jesus would have offered Passover lambs (Luke 2:41), built tree-branch shelters for the Festival of Tabernacles, kept other Jewish festivals, worn blue-threaded tassels, supported the temple (Matthew 17:27) and other old covenant customs. 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).

Jesus lived in old covenant times; we do not. Because of this important difference, we can't just assume that we must do everything that Jesus did. We do not have to obey the same laws he did. Jesus went to synagogues (Luke 4:16) and kept Hanukkah (John 10:22). Let's examine the Gospels to see what Jesus actually taught about the Sabbath. There's lots of material, so we have much to examine.

The first thing we might note is that 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. The example we are given is always one of activity, not of rest. He urged liberty; he never endorsed any restrictions.

Picking grain to eat

Let's begin our study in Matthew 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'" (verses 1-2).

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.

Jesus lived in old covenant times. We do not have to obey the same laws he did.

However, the Pharisees could claim good scriptural support for outlawing grain-picking on the Sabbath. 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.

But the Pharisees were too strict — the old covenant rules were not meant to be prohibitions of *all* activity. However, Jesus did not try to argue that his disciples were abiding by the biblical law and violating only Jewish tradition. Rather, Jesus went to the Bible to show that the biblical law itself can sometimes be *set aside*. His approach was much more sweeping than just to say that it's OK to pick a little grain when you are hungry.

Laws can sometimes be broken

Jesus mentioned 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, referring to 1 Samuel 21:1-6). The law said that showbread was holy and was to be eaten only by priests. And yet David did it and was counted innocent. It was not lawful according to the letter of the law, and yet it was permitted in the purpose of God’s spiritual law. Jesus’ point regarding the Sabbath 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 used a ritual law as the most appropriate point of comparison for the Sabbath.

However, notice that the argument doesn’t work if the Sabbath is more important than showbread rules — the Pharisees could have said, “The Sabbath is more important than showbread, so we have to be more careful about it.” In order for the logic of the argument to work, the showbread has to be at least as important as the Sabbath. Only then could the comparison carry any weight. Only then could the argument conclude, that if it is permissible to bend the showbread rules, then we can bend the Sabbath rules, because it is easier to bend the Sabbath because it is not as important. Jesus used a ritual law as the most appropriate point of comparison for the Sabbath.

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 is not saying that the Sabbath law *allowed* priestly work — he says that the priests “desecrate” the Sabbath day. They were, according to the letter of the Sabbath law, doing something that was 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 work — the rituals.

The temple and its sacrificial rites were more important than the Sabbath. But if the sacrifices were more important than the Sabbath, and the sacrifices are now obsolete, shouldn’t we be willing to consider the possibility that the Sabbath is obsolete, too?

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. 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 worshipped 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!

Mercy more than sacrifice

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). Again, Jesus is using a ritual law (sacrifice) as a basis for his disciples’ activity on the Sabbath. Just as mercy is more important than sacrifice, mercy is also more important than Sabbath rules.

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 Sabbath.

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. This claim was so stupendous that some Pharisees thought he blasphemed and deserved to die (verse 14).

Healing on the Sabbath

Jesus’ next activity gives a practical demonstration not only of his authority over the Sabbath, but also the proper use for the Sabbath even 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 not lawful.

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 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).

Don’t worry about prohibiting work — be concerned about doing good.

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.

The Sabbath was made for humans

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. Luke 4:31-37 is a parallel account.

Mark 2:23-3:6 is similar 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).

Let’s note what this verse 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

If Jesus taught that the Sabbath was made for Gentiles, it would have supported the Pharisees’ concerns instead of refuting them.

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 referring to creation week. 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 annual festivals were made for human benefit, and the rite of circumcision was instituted for human benefit. Christ’s death was also for our benefit. Simply knowing that the Sabbath was made for human benefit does not tell us when it was made — nor does it tell us whether an even better blessing is available in the new covenant.

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. As we showed in chapter 9, most first-century Jews did not believe that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath, and Jesus was not addressing this question.

The Pharisees were concerned about the behavior of the disciples, not the Gentiles. If Jesus responded by teaching that the Sabbath was made for Gentiles as well as Jews, it would have supported the Pharisees’ concerns instead of refuting them. The Pharisees were overestimating the importance of Sabbath restrictions. Jesus responded to them not by expanding the Sabbath, but by reducing it.

We can see what Jesus meant by looking at the next phrase: “and not man for the Sabbath.” His point was that the Sabbath was made to serve people, instead of people being created to serve the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a servant, not a master. He was addressing the relative importance of the Sabbath, not which specific people were given the Sabbath.

Jesus used the Sabbath to deliver people from bondage.

In a similar way, we can also say, “Circumcision was made for humans, not for angels.”

This statement is true, but we should not focus on the first half as if it meant that circumcision was made for all humans. It was given to Israel only, not the rest of the world. Similarly, Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for humans, but he did not say, nor did he mean, that it was made for *all* humans.

Since the Sabbath was made for human benefit, Jesus says, then he, as 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 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 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.

Jesus and the Sabbath in Luke

Animals can be loosed on the Sabbath — an ordinary, daily task.

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. 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).

Jesus emphasized human freedom, not restrictions.

Liberation 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 word “set free,” 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 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 another day rather than see an effortless healing. They were putting unnecessary obligations on the people, and Jesus said that people should be “set free” on the Sabbath day. 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 may have set the situation up to test Jesus. Jesus knew their thoughts and handled the situation so expertly that he left them speechless.

Circumcision was more important than the Sabbath, just as temple rituals were.

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 animal on the Sabbath. Rescue was permitted, so healing ought to be permitted, too. Needs can be taken care of, whether they are emergencies like animals in a ditch, or an everyday need like untying an animal to bring it to water.

Whether alleviating minor hunger or healing major pain, Jesus pointed out that humanitarian needs took precedence over the Sabbath. The day was supposed to make life better, not to make it more difficult.

Jesus and the Sabbath in John

John 5:1-18 — The Gospel of John has some additional stories about Jesus’ Sabbath activities, and they reinforce the points we have already seen. On the Sabbath, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. Then 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 made them

even more angry by boldly saying that he was indeed working on the Sabbath and 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 did not try to defend his work and the man’s work as permitted by the law. No doubt he could have, but instead, he boldly described his activity on the Sabbath as “work.” (We know from Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus kept the Sabbath perfectly, within the parameters of old covenant law. Just as the priests could do God’s work on the Sabbath, Jesus could, too.) If we imitate our Savior, we might conclude from this passage that at least certain kinds of “work” are allowed on the Sabbath.

In **John 7:22-23**, Jesus referred to this Sabbath healing, and the controversy it caused. 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. This shows that the law commanding circumcision was more important than the Sabbath restriction. The circumcision law was more important than 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 like those could be swept aside, what does that imply for the less-important law, the Sabbath?

If important laws could be swept aside, what does that imply about the less-important law?

“We must work”

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). The healing had a spiritual meaning: 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). God’s work must be done on the Sabbath, Jesus said.

The Jews objected to Jesus’ work — and they objected to it being done on the Sabbath. Making mud or clay was against their Sabbath 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 the standard of judgment.

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). 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. We cannot assume that when Jesus criticized the way something was done, that he wanted the practice continued by the church in a better way. We cannot assume that Jesus was telling his disciples how to keep the Sabbath in a better way. The Gospels do not give us any evidence that he ever commanded the Sabbath at all.

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 the Gospels never show us Jesus teaching 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 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 (see John 16:12-13). But the implications are there. When John describes Jesus as working on the Sabbath, he does not feel any need to explain that Christians cannot. Jesus' example regarding the Sabbath is liberty, not rules.

Throughout these Sabbath incidents, Jesus liberalized the standards. He repeatedly

A ritual law, or a moral law?

Jesus consistently compared the Sabbath with ritual laws, not the laws about the way we should treat our neighbors. Those ritual laws showed us how to worship God, how to express love to him. We might assume that these laws are the most important and the most permanent, but the opposite is true: The laws of worship are precisely the laws most likely to be obsolete. All those sacrifices and rituals, specifying this and that, are done away in Christ. We do not have to show love to God in exactly the same way as the Israelites did.

We find additional evidence that the Sabbath is a ritual law in that God himself does not keep the Sabbath. It is not part of his nature. He rested once, but a six-one cycle is not part of his eternal nature. Nor do we have any evidence that angels keep the Sabbath; it was not designed for them. This means that the Sabbath is not an inherent part of the way good creatures show love to God or to one another. The Sabbath is not eternal, for it did not exist before creation, and will not be relevant in the new heavens and new earth. The Sabbath is not God's nature, nor universal, nor timeless. It is a ritual law, saying that behavior that is good on Friday is not good on Saturday.

Good angels always worship God, they never make idols, they never misuse God's name. They always honor the Father, never murder, steal, commit adultery, steal or covet. (They cannot commit adultery because they are sexless, but they *would* not commit adultery even if they could.) They are in literal compliance with nine of the Ten Commandments, and will forever be in compliance with those nine, but they do not keep the Sabbath. This also shows that the Sabbath is different from the other nine commandments. It is different in quality — a ceremonial law rather than a moral law. Morality does not depend on the rotation of the earth, the day of the week, etc.

Jesus clearly ranked the showbread as more important than the Sabbath, and the temple sacrifices as more important than the Sabbath, and circumcision as more important than the Sabbath. Jesus said that the Sabbath had to be broken so that sacrifices and circumcision could be performed — but I can't imagine Jesus saying that an *important* law had to be broken so a ritual could be performed! Clearly, the Sabbath law **is** a ritual law. It should be no surprise that the Sabbath command expired at the same time as those other commands.

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 committed to God, conclude that they should keep the Sabbath, although not as strictly as the Pharisees did. They are welcome to their opinions provided they do not judge others on this topic.

Every Christian should be fully convinced, living every day to the Lord (Romans 14:5), seeking to be led by the Holy Spirit. If people think that the day is required, then they should keep it. 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 (Romans 14:23).

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 (going to synagogues, for example) and those activities that were based on timeless laws of interpersonal conduct and worship in spirit and truth. He kept the Sabbath because he was under the old covenant law, not to set an example for us. His example is always one of work and liberty, never one of rest.

Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). He is God in the flesh, and he incorporates all of God's law. He incorporates in himself the law of circumcision, the law of sacrifices, and the law of Sabbath. It is through faith in him that we are considered circumcised (Romans 2:29), and it is through faith in Christ that we receive forgiveness, which the sacrificial laws could only picture (Hebrews 10:1, 18). All ritual laws have been superseded by faith in Christ. That includes the Sabbath, too, which we will see as we study the epistles.

Review

- Jesus kept many obsolete old covenant laws.
- His example on the Sabbath is always activity, never rest.
- The Sabbath was set aside so rituals could be performed. Could important commands be set aside for rituals?
- Even obsolete laws were made for human benefit, but they are now obsolete.
- Question: Does Jesus support the Sabbath law, or does he imply that it is not permanent?

13

Example of the apostles

Scripture doesn't actually say that the apostles kept the Sabbath, but they probably did (many Jewish Christians were keeping ceremonial laws as late as Acts 21). The apostles went to the temple on the Sabbath and preached in synagogues on the Sabbath, but they also met and preached on every other day of the week. Their example is not a command for Christians today.

Paul, like Jesus, customarily went to the synagogue (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2). But there is no reason to imitate the "Sabbath" part of the sentence and ignore the "synagogue" part. 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 a ready-made 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.

The best way to preach to the Jews would be to go to the synagogues on the day Jews were there.

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 circumstances they lived in, and which were based on Christianity.

Free to live like a Gentile

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.

Peter was free to "live like a Gentile," and Paul was, too.

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 demand an immediate change in 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, however, 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 want to follow the example set by Paul and Jesus.

Should not make it difficult

Moses was preached in the synagogues every Sabbath, James noted (Acts 15:21). But James was not encouraging Gentiles to attend synagogues! The new Christians 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).

The council did not tell Gentiles to keep the Sabbath — nor did Luke, who wrote many years later for Gentile readers.

“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 council told them to abstain from blood, strangled things, idolatry and fornication (verse 20). The council gave a lenient decree because strict 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 no one said the Sabbath was any different than other laws of Moses. The council did not tell Gentiles to keep the Sabbath, nor did Luke, who wrote many years later for Gentile readers.

Every day of the week

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 while he made tents, he could discuss the Scriptures with anyone who had time to listen. In Ephesus, Paul preached every day of the week for two years (Acts 19:9). 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 waited 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.

Paul taught on the Sabbath (Acts 18:1-11). Was he teaching the Gentiles to keep the Sabbath? 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 his epistles.

Review 13

- The apostles could keep Old Testament laws when they were in a Jewish culture.
- They could also “live like a Gentile.” What would that mean in the first century?
- Gentiles do not have to keep the laws of Moses. What would that include?
- Why did the church in Troas wait until the first day of the week to meet?

14

Paul and the Sabbath

In all of Paul's epistles, the word "Sabbath" is used only once. Perhaps this should tell us something — at the least, that the Sabbath was not a major part of his message. He was not having to answer lots of questions about it. He was not telling slaves what to do about it; he was not instructing anyone in how to keep it right. He was simply letting stand the typical Jewish understanding of the Sabbath — that it was given to the Israelites and was not required for Gentiles. The reason he could say so little about it, is because neither Jews nor Gentiles thought it applied to Gentiles.

Here's what he did say about the Sabbath: "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" (Colossians 2:16-17).

Paul could say so little about the Sabbath because neither Jews nor Gentiles thought that it applied to Gentiles.

The larger context

Paul begins his analysis of the Sabbath with a "therefore." There is a logical connection between what he has said before, and the conclusion he gives in verses 16-17. This should alert us to back up and examine the context. Let's start in verse 1, where Paul explains his concern for the church: "I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (verses 1-3).

They needed to continue in Christ, rather than trying to add strange teachings.

Apparently the Colossian Christians wanted to understand mysteries, to have wisdom and knowledge — but they were so eager to have *special* teachings that they were listening to *false* teachings. But Paul's sufferings and labors were evidence that

he was teaching not for his own benefit, but to benefit others. He is the one who had the true wisdom and the true understanding of the mysteries of Christ. “I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is” (verses 4-5). Paul is not worried that these people will abandon Christ — but they do need some doctrinal guidance.

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (verses 6-7). The Colossian Christians had already been taught about Christ, and what they had already learned was enough. They needed to continue in that, and strengthen that, rather than trying to add strange doctrines to it. Christianity is not a search for the mysterious and the exotic — it is a simple faith in a Savior who died for us. It does not need to be complicated with extra requirements.

In some ways the gospel goes against human wisdom.

Not human philosophy

“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (verse 8). The ancient world had a wide variety of religious ideas and philosophies. Many of them offered special mysteries for the select few. Others were taught by traveling philosophers who tried to show how sensible and practical their ideas were.

In contrast, Paul taught salvation through a crucified man. He taught that God existed in this man who was killed, and that God had brought the body back to life. (Most other religions taught that physical bodies were inferior and not worth saving.) Paul taught that this Christ would return on some future day to bring all bodies back to life and to judge the entire world.

In other words, Paul’s gospel did not depend on human wisdom — in some ways it went against human wisdom. It did not depend on principles that most people already agreed with. It did not depend on clever arguments. It depended on Christ alone, on who he was and what he had done.

Gospel wisdom is backwards. Most religions try to figure out what people’s problems are, and from that, figure out what they need to solve those problems. But the gospel has a reverse logic. It begins with what Christ has done, and from that, it see what the human problem is, and what it is that we need to be saved from. Once we see that the answer is Christ, we are better able to ask the right questions.

Life with Christ

“In Christ,” Paul writes, “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority” (verses 9-10). If we have Christ, we do not need any other ideas added on. Christ is superior to everything else, and all Christians have fullness in Christ, and he is fully God. Through belief in Jesus

Christ, we are already joined to God. Paul is saying that Christ is not only supreme, but also fully sufficient. We don't need to add anything to him. Paul then begins to explain the practical significance of this.

“In Christ you were also circumcised...” (verse 11). On several occasions, Paul argued against people who said that Christians ought to be circumcised and to obey the laws of Moses. It seems that someone wanted the Colossian Christians to be circumcised. That isn't necessary, Paul responds, since you have already been circumcised spiritually, through your faith in Christ.

How were they circumcised? “...in the putting off of the sinful nature.” Physical circumcision could only symbolize the removal of sin, but Christ performs the reality in our lives, making the symbol unnecessary. Through Christ, the sinful nature is cut off. The reality has been achieved, so the ritual is not needed. When we have Christ, we have enough. We do not need to add physical circumcision. Ritual laws are to be fulfilled in Christ, not in the flesh.

Christ is not only supreme, but also fully sufficient. We don't need to add anything.

Paul further adds that Christians have “been buried with him [Christ] in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ” (verses 12-13). These are the results of faith in a Savior who is fully divine. The old person, corrupted by sin, is dead and buried. Paul is speaking spiritually and figuratively. Through faith in Christ, we are united with him, and what he has done is effective for us. He died for us, for our sins, so that our sins are no longer counted against us. He has paid for them.

In the death of Christ, our sinful self (spiritually uncircumcised) received the wages of sin. And in the resurrection of Christ, we also live with new life. What God did in Jesus Christ, he also did it for those who have faith in Christ. One practical significance of this is that our sins are fully forgiven. We do not need to do anything extra to kill them, pay for them or make up for them.

Christians do not need extra rules to deal with sin—we have Christ. Our sins are effectively and completely taken away in him.

Fully forgiven in Christ

Paul elaborates this point — the heart of the gospel — when he writes that Jesus Christ “forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross” (verses 13-14). The “written code” comes from a Greek word used for a note of debt. Paul is using this monetary illustration to again make the point that our sins are effectively and completely taken away in Christ. Those sins have no power over us; sins cannot impose regulations about what we have to do, because they were removed on the cross of Christ — gone. Christians do not need extra rules to deal with sin — we have Christ.

“Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (verse 15). Paul again uses the phrase “powers and authorities,” probably referring to something the false teachers were teaching. Perhaps they were saying that Christians should do something to please or get help from some mystical powers. Paul is saying that Christ has conquered them all. When we have Christ, nothing else has power or authority over our lives.

The power called sin has no authority over us. We do not need special rituals to break that power — what we need is Christ, who has already triumphed over that power. And he has done it in public. There is no special secret involved. All we need is faith in Christ, and our old sinful self is considered dead, and our new life is with Christ. Christ is the reality.

Don’t be swayed by others

Paul begins the next verse with the word “therefore,” because it is a logical result of what he has just said. Because our sins are fully removed in Christ, we should “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” (verse 16).

A problem in the translation?

In Colossians 2:16, the word “Sabbath” is plural in the Greek manuscripts. Some people have therefore claimed that it refers to annual Sabbaths rather than the weekly Sabbath.

However, the Bible often uses the plural word Sabbaths to refer to the weekly Sabbath (Matthew 12:1; Acts 16:13, etc.). Further, the combination *festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths* is found several times in the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; Nehemiah 10:33, etc.), and the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament uses the same Greek words as in Colossians 2:16.

In all these passages, the plural word Sabbaths refers to the weekly Sabbath. Since the annual Sabbaths are in the annual festivals, there would be no need to have two words for the same set of days. The same is true in Colossians 2:16. Some people were criticizing what the Colossians did on annual, monthly, and weekly days. We cannot “do away” with one category (such as new moons) while trying to keep the others. All three are in the same category.

The false teachers were saying that food and drink would somehow help people deal with sin in their lives. Whether they were saying a person had to avoid certain foods, or that a person had to eat certain types of foods, does not matter. Food and drink have no power to take away sin. Whether we keep the Sabbath or not, we should not let other people make us feel guilty regarding the Sabbath. Nor should we make others feel guilty. 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.

Paul is saying that we are fully forgiven in Christ, and we should therefore not let anyone judge us or criticize us about what we eat and drink. Of course, we cannot prevent what people think about us, no matter how careful we are. What Paul is saying is that we should not accept their judgments — we should not believe that our standing with God

depends on food and drink regulations. Similarly, because we are fully forgiven in Christ, we should not let others judge us with regard to festivals, new moons or Sabbaths. These, like circumcision, were part of the Jewish religion. Apparently the false teachers of Colosse included a mixture of Judaism in their heresy.

How could people in Colosse observe festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths? They could not do any of the sacrificial rituals in Asia Minor. Even Jews in Jerusalem did not think of sacrifices when they thought of how they observed the weekly Sabbath. Ordinary Jews observed the weekly and annual Sabbaths by not working. The false teachers were saying that this cycle of annual, monthly and weekly observances would help Christians deal with sin in their lives — and Paul says it's not true. Abstaining from work does not help anyone deal with sin. It does not forgive past sins, nor does it give power to avoid sin in the future.

The logical connection between verse 15 and verse 16 is this: Sin was dealt with completely by Jesus' crucifixion, and as a result, we should not let others judge us by what we do or don't do on various days of the calendar. The logical connection between these two

At the last judgment, the definitive question will not be about days, but about faith in Christ.

verses also shows that Christ's death on the cross changed something about the Sabbath, something about the Christians' approach to the Sabbath. Christians were not to be judged by anyone regarding the Sabbath.

Those days “are a shadow of the things that were to come” (verse 17). The Jewish worship days were a shadow, or a silhouette, of things to come. Paul does not elaborate about whether these days had any predictive value. He does not say how the new moons were shadows. He does not comment on how accurate a picture these days gave. He could see, however, that most of the people who kept such days did not accept Jesus as the Christ.

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) — they are 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. 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.

No matter what Paul meant by shadow, no matter whether the things to come are past or future, the result is clear: these days had no effect on sin. We should not let others judge us regarding any portion of these days — nor should we judge others. As far as sin is concerned, these days are irrelevant.

Christ is the reality

Paul then makes this contrast: “the reality, however, is found in Christ.” The Greek literally says “but the body of Christ.” This part of the verse has no verb, so we need to add

one. Translators usually add the verb “is,” because Greek often omits the verb “is.” It was also common in Greek to contrast shadow and body as terms for picture and reality. The meaning is simply that food, drink and days are shadows, but the reality is Jesus Christ. Christ deals with sin in reality; foods and days can do it only in picture. Paul is saying that Christ is important; the shadows are not.

But some have suggested that we should add a different verb: Don’t let anyone judge you by food and days, but [let] the body of Christ [judge you]. It is true that Paul sometimes uses “the body of Christ” to refer to the church, but Paul does not say that we should let the church judge us. He has just explained that our sins are fully forgiven in Christ; he is not going to reduce that idea by saying that we should let the church judge us. This is not in his thought or in the context. His point is that Christ is the reality that foods and days could only hint at.

Paul is not going to weaken his argument by saying that we should let the church judge us.

Rules may sound sensible; they may make it look like we are dedicated, but they cannot break the power of sin.

Moreover, of those people who say that we should let the church judge on this matter, most have ironically *rejected* the judgment that the church has already given regarding foods and days.

Beware restrictive philosophies

Paul ends this chapter with a warning about those who teach that religion consists of restrictive rules: “Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions” (verse 18).

The false teachers, in addition to ideas about circumcision, foods and days, seem to have had some strange notions about angels. They claimed unusual visions. They claimed humility, but it was a wrong sense of humility, since they were leaving Christ out of the picture. “He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow” (v. 19).

Paul repeats one of his main points: “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’?” (verses 20-21). The Christian life is not based on worldly wisdom. Things that sound good to religious people are often wrong. We do not live by those regulations, but by Christ.

We do not need regulations to help us deal with sin — we have Christ. These restrictive rules “are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (verses 22-23).

Rules about avoiding certain foods, or avoiding work on certain days, may sound good

and wise. They might make it look like we have self-control, but they cannot break the power of sin. Only Christ can do that, and he has done it fully and effectively on the cross.

Dealing with different opinions

We have seen in Colossians 2, in the only place that Paul mentions the Sabbath by name, that Paul did not teach Gentile Christians to keep the Sabbath. He told them instead that the Sabbath was not an area in which we should be judged.

And he tells 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).

The Roman church contained both Jews and Gentiles. When Paul mentions that some people think certain days are better than others, he is apparently referring to Sabbaths in a gentle way. That is a day that some of them would prefer over others. (The vegetarianism that Paul addressed here was a daily life-style, not a restriction placed only on certain days.)

At a time when most Jews said that Gentiles did not have to keep the Sabbath, Paul did not think it necessary to tell the Romans Christians that one particular day is sacred or superior. He left it to individual conviction.

The old covenant was very particular about which days should be kept. 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 in Romans 14 is that one Christian should not judge another, including opinions about 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” (verse 12).

There will be a final judgment. 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”? 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. And they must not be done in fear, for that stems from a *lack* of faith. Our salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, not by performance of various rules.

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 is 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. At least that's what they did with some Pharisees.

Don't focus on externals

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 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)!

The false teachers taught circumcision and old covenant laws — a Jewish way of life (Galatians 5:3). When they taught "days and months and seasons and years" (verse 10), it is likely that they were teaching the Jewish calendar with its days, months, festival seasons and sabbatical years. Such requirements were "weak and miserable principles" (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.

Something more significant than the Sabbath

Don't observe days as if they are necessary, says Paul — and he does not add anything that would exempt the Sabbath. In his teaching about days, Paul either ignored the Sabbath commandment, or said it was unnecessary. But how could he ignore any law, such as circumcision or any number of other ritual laws?

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 moral 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 that the old ritual required — we abide by the spiritual purpose of the Sabbath when we have faith in Christ. We can see this a little more clearly in Hebrews 4, which we will analyze in our next chapter, 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.

Our needs are not identical

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 not only wear ourselves out, we will probably also 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 worship services 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. There is value in setting aside a day for worship, a time in which we do not allow secular duties to intrude, a time for building family cohesion and building the community of faith.

We need to set boundaries for ourselves. But 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. Christ gives us 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; neither can we be enslaved by their erroneous ideas.

Ephesians 2: peace between Jew and Gentile

Let us study one more chapter in which Paul discusses the old covenant laws. It's a helpful chapter, for it makes the basis of our salvation very clear. Ephesians 2 takes us from death to life, from hostility to peace. This chapter also shows us that there is an important connection between God's grace and human interrelationships.

Paul begins by telling his readers: “You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live” (verses 1-2). All humans start in a state of spiritual death, whether we have many transgressions or only a few. A life not oriented to God is dead. Paul is talking about average people, socially respectable people. When they “followed the ways of this world,” they were following the devil — “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (verse 2). In living the way they thought best, they were unwittingly imitating the devil and disobeying God.

Christians did it, too: “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (verse 3). We lived with no thought other than to take care of our desires, and as a result, we were objects of wrath — under the judgment of God (Romans 2:5).

Spiritual life

But God’s wrath is not the end of the story: “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5). The judge of all humanity is full of mercy, and even when we were guilty and without excuse, he forgave us. Insofar as we sin, we are dead, but as much as we are in Christ, we are alive.

Life in Christ is much more than the physical existence we are familiar with — our new life has a different quality to it, a heavenly quality, an eternal quality. When we become Christians, our identity changes. We become new people. The old self dies, and a new person lives. We died with Christ, we were buried with Christ, and we also live with Christ.

“God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (verse 6). Those who have faith in Christ are seated with him in glory. It is so sure that Paul can say that it has been done. God did this “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (verse 7). God’s grace is already at work in our lives, but the extent of his grace will be revealed with much greater clarity in the future.

Paul then summarizes the way God is working: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (verse 8). In Greek, the words grace and faith are feminine, but Paul uses a neuter form of the word *this*. Paul is not saying that faith is a gift of God, or that grace is a gift of God — they are, but here Paul is saying that all of salvation is a gift of God. None of it comes from ourselves — “not by works, so that no one can boast” (verse 9). No one can brag about having faith or works. Since God has done it, he gets all the credit. Our basis of salvation, our boast, is in Christ and not in ourselves.

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (verse 10). Even our good works are a result of the way God is working in us. He created us for his purpose, to do his will. Paul expects believers to be obedient. He says that we used to be disobedient, but that in Christ we are created anew,

so that we might have a different foundation for how we live. This new life is a *result* of our salvation, not the cause of it. Our works should be good, but they can never be good enough that we deserve to be saved. We are saved by grace, by God's mercy and love, through Jesus Christ.

Unity in Christ

Paul then begins to address a practical matter within the church: the tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers. Because we are saved by grace and because we are saved for good works, our attitudes and behavior toward one another ought to change.

He begins by writing to the Gentiles: "Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (that done in the body by the hands of men) — remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (verses 11-12).

The Jews looked down on the Gentiles, calling them "uncircumcised." This insult was a reminder that the Gentiles were not in the covenant of Abraham and not included in the blessings promised to him. Although circumcision was a human work, it reflected a spiritual reality. The Gentiles were separated from Christ, God, hope and promise. But that has now changed: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (verse 13). Once they were separated from Christ; now they are united with him. Once they were excluded; now they are included. They have hope, and they have God, through the death of Jesus Christ.

"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one" (verse 14). What "two" is Paul talking about? He is talking about Jews and Gentiles. The peoples who used to be in different spiritual categories are now united in Christ. The Jews were just like the Gentiles in being spiritually dead; the Gentiles are now like Jews in that through Christ they are members of the people of God.

Jesus has made the two peoples one by bringing the outsiders in, by bringing the Gentiles just as close as he does the Jews. Through Christ they both have the promises, the citizenship, and the hope, and they have God. Where there was rivalry between Jews and Gentiles, Jesus has made peace, because both peoples are equally saved by grace and no one has any reason to feel superior.

Abolishing the law

How did Jesus make peace between Jews and Gentiles? It is because he "has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (verse 14). And what was the wall that created hostility between Jews and Gentiles? Paul answers this question when he says that Jesus destroyed the barrier "by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations" (verse 15).

The wall of hostility was the law, which had commandments and regulations separating Jew from Gentile. This law defined who was on which side of the barrier, it said who had the

promises and who belonged to the people of God.

Some of the Jews had created laws that made the Jew-Gentile hostility worse, but Paul is not talking about human-made laws. Christ did not need to abolish those laws — they had no spiritual authority in the first place, and Paul is talking about barriers in connection with God. He is talking about spiritual realities, not human traditions.

Paul is talking about laws that divided Jew from Gentile in the sight of God, laws that had to be abolished by the cross of Christ (verse 16). Jesus did not have to die to eliminate human regulations. Rather, he died to bring an end to the old covenant. Ephesians 2 is in agreement with what we read in Acts 15, 2 Corinthians 3, Galatians 3-4, Colossians 2 and Hebrews 7-10.

The old covenant came to an end with the death of Jesus Christ. The old covenant had defined Jew and Gentile, creating the distinction, and Jesus made the two peoples one by destroying that divider. Jesus abolished the old covenant with its regulations and commandments. The people of God are no longer defined by old covenant laws. The Sabbath, an old covenant law given only to the Israelites, is no longer required. It was part of the barrier that Christ destroyed on the cross.

Christ's purpose, Paul says, "was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (verses 15-16). Before Christ, there were two kinds of people: spiritually dead Jews and spiritually dead Gentiles. Both peoples needed to be reconciled to God, and this is what Christ did on the cross. The result is a new people, a people who are alive in Christ, alive to God.

"He came and preached peace to you who were far away [Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [Jews]. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit" (verses 17-18). Paul is proclaiming equality for Gentile believers and unity of all Christians. People of different ethnic groups, people of different denominations, are one in Christ.

One building

"Consequently, you [Gentiles] are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (verse 19). Through Christ, we are members of God's family.

Paul then shifts to a different metaphor: "Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (verse 20). Moses is not our foundation. The apostles and prophets are — and Paul is probably speaking of New Testament prophets, as he does in Ephesians 3:5. But even more important than this foundation is the fact that "Christ Jesus himself [is] the chief cornerstone." He is our primary point of reference.

"In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:21). Our unity is in Christ, and as we are growing in him, we are a place of acceptable worship. Worship does not depend on a day — it depends on Christ in us.

Review

- Paul uses the word Sabbath only in Colossians 2:16, where it is called a shadow, like new moons and annual festivals.
- We should not let anyone make us feel guilty about the Sabbath — Christ is sufficient for our salvation.
- Christ's death changed *something* about the Sabbath and festivals. Days are not the standard of judgment.
- Laws and rules cannot break the power of sin.
- Question: In what way can laws and rules deceive us?
- The Sabbath was one of the regulations that separated Jews and Gentiles, and it was abolished on the cross (Ephesians 2:15) to unite the two groups in Christ.

15

A better way to rest

Let's summarize what we have seen about the Sabbath:

- The Bible does not say the Sabbath was commanded at creation.
- The Bible does not say the Sabbath was commanded before Moses.
- The Bible does not say the Ten Commandments are a permanent package.
- The Sabbath is commanded only within the old covenant, which is obsolete.
- Old Testament praise and warnings about the Sabbath should be seen as praise and warnings about old covenant obedience, not a permanent law.
- Jesus never commanded the Sabbath, and is never described as resting on the Sabbath.
- Jesus' example is that of work and activity on the Sabbath.
- The book of Acts tells us that the apostles preached on every day of the week, and describes a church meeting on the first day.
- Paul never commanded the Sabbath, and told people it was not a day to be concerned about.

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 — and that includes the Sabbath. The Sabbath is compared with things that are now obsolete: temple sacrifices, circumcision, showbread, a shadow. It is not a basis for judging one another, and it should not be taught as a necessary addition to Christ. The Sabbath is not required.

Surprising silence

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, 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. He says plenty about faith and love, magnifying the real purpose of God’s law, but the Sabbath is simply not mentioned.

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 work on that day if they have faith that Christ has given them that freedom. This book is designed to help you be fully convinced that the Sabbath is not required.

Nor does the New Testament tell us that any other day of the week ought to be a day of rest. The Sabbath command is not “transferred” to some other day. Believers are free to meet on the seventh day of the week, or on any other day, whatever is convenient for them. Paul preached on every day of the week.

If the Sabbath were required, it would be astonishing that the New Testament did not mention such an important command.

The Sabbath was a shadow of Christ, just as the sacrifices were. Jesus fulfilled the symbolism of the sacrifices, but in what way does he fulfill the symbolism of the Sabbath? We might make a few guesses, but the book of Hebrews gives us some helpful direction.

Christ better than the old covenant

The epistle to the Hebrews may have been written to Jewish believers who were still participating in (or at least attracted to) the customs of Judaism. The epistle explains that the old covenant is obsolete and its regulations have been set aside. When the word *sabbatismos* (a Sabbath-rest, NIV) is used in 4:9, it is not trying to subtly affirm an old covenant law when the rest of the epistle argues *against* old covenant laws.

Throughout the epistle, the 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, and better than the Sabbath. He has superseded them all, fulfilling the spiritual truths that they pictured, rendering their physical performance unnecessary. Hebrews 4:9 does not, contrary to the rest of the epistle, command the continuation of an old covenant practice.

Sabbatismos is mentioned to illustrate the superiority of faith in Christ.

Look to Jesus

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 Jewish Christians were apparently being tempted to go backwards, and the epistle exhorts them to be faithful to the superiority of Jesus Christ. Listen to what Jesus says (Hebrews 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 (Hebrews 8:1-5; 10:1).

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

The promised land was a foreshadow of spiritual rest.

believe it, and enter his rest. Don’t be like your unbelieving, disobedient ancestors, he says. They refused God so many times that he set them aside and shut them out. Don’t test his patience, he seems to say. Listen to what God is saying now.

Israelites did not enter rest

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 since they lacked faith and would not obey his order to invade Canaan, they would not enter the promised land: “They shall never enter my rest” (Numbers 14:26-29; Psalm 95:11; Hebrews 3:11).

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 (Hebrews 4:8). The promised land had been a physical symbol or foreshadow of a spiritual rest that the Israelites had not yet entered.

This implies that we enter God’s rest by means of the gospel.

How we enter

Let’s look at chapter 4 verse by verse: “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” (verse 1). We can paraphrase the thought in this way: God makes it possible for us to enter his rest, so we need to make sure that we accept his offer. If we do not keep our faith in him (the main exhortation of this epistle), we will fail to enter.

How do we enter? Verse 2 tells us, “For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just

as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.” The author urges us to be diligent, then he talks about the gospel. This implies that we enter God’s rest by means of the gospel.

The ancient Israelites had the gospel in a veiled form, in symbols such as the bronze snake, the washings, the sacrifices and festivals. But despite the miracles, the people did not have faith in God and the message did not do them any good.

We do not have to make the same mistake. “Now we who have believed enter that rest” (verse 3). Believe what? Believe the gospel of Christ. All who look to Jesus, who have faith in Jesus, are entering God’s rest. 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 faith in Jesus Christ. We must be careful that we do not lose faith and lose the rest that we have entered.

In Christ, we have rest. He has freed us from the old covenant, which was a yoke too difficult to bear (Acts 15:10), and has given us a new covenant, which is a yoke that is so

We are invited to enter God’s end-of-creation rest by believing in his Son.

much easier to bear that it is called a “rest” (Matthew 11:28-30). When we are in Christ, we have entered God’s rest.

But didn’t God rest thousands of years ago? How can it be possible for us to enter something that is long gone? The author deals with this by bringing up the objection: “And yet 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’” (verses 3-4).

Genesis tells us that God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2). That is, he had finished the creation. (He continues to work in the sense of upholding all things.) But the author of Hebrews observes that God’s work has been finished ever since, which means that God is still resting. God is still in his rest, and it is open for humans to enter. It was available for the ancient Israelites; otherwise there would be no point in saying, “They shall never enter my rest” (verse 5). Even though they refused to enter, God’s rest was available to them.

God’s rest is a permanent rest, and the believer’s rest is, too.

Still available for us

God’s rest is available to us, too: “It still remains that some will enter that rest” (verse 6). The offer is still open, and it is made even more clear and compelling through Jesus Christ. God exhorts people to enter his rest. 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 are entering 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 (the Greek translation of Genesis 2:2 uses the word *katapausin*). 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" (verse 3). God's rest is an enduring rest, a permanent 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.

The Israelites at the time of Moses, "who formerly had the gospel preached to them, did not go in, because of their disobedience" (verse 6). Their disobedience was evidence of their lack of faith. They did not believe that God would give them what he had promised.

"Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts'" (verse 7). Many years after Moses, God again spoke about rest, urging people to not harden their hearts and thereby fail to enter his rest. Hear him today, David urged in the Psalm. The offer was still good. People could enter God's rest, and could be secure in his promise, if they listened with faith and willingness.

The author then eliminates another possibility: "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day" (verse 8). The "rest" that Psalm 95 was speaking of was not the promised land, and it was not the weekly Sabbath. It was something that the Israelites, with few exceptions, failed to enter. They did not respond to God with faith and willingness.

Our Sabbath-rest

The author then concludes: "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest [*sabbatismos*] for the people of God" (verse 9). Is he bringing up a new subject? No — he is still on the same subject, using different words to develop it further. He is saying, Since people did not enter God's rest in Moses' day, nor in Joshua's day, and yet we are still exhorted in the Psalms about God's rest, the conclusion is that this rest still remains for the people of God today. It is still available.

The writer is using a different word for rest, but he is not referring to a different rest. Both *katapausin* and *sabbatismos* are being 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. (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*. Throughout the chapter, it is the same "rest" that "remains" for the people of God.)

He is talking about the "rest" of salvation. The writer of Hebrews is using the two words for rest as synonyms, one alluding to the creation rest and the other alluding to its weekly commemoration, but both referring to the 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).

Why does he call this a Sabbath-rest? He is not slipping in a command for the seventh-day Sabbath. That would be totally out of context. His exhortation throughout this book is telling Jewish people to look to Jesus. He is not urging them to do a better job of keeping Jewish customs that they were already keeping.

The ancient Israelites, who had the Sabbath, did not enter the rest he is talking about. God's rest is entered by faith — by believing the gospel (verses 3-4). The author is not interested in a day of the week — he is concerned about how people respond to Jesus. A person who keeps the weekly Sabbath but rejects Christ has not entered God's rest. We enter God's rest only by believing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why then does he call this a Sabbath-rest? By using this word, he indicates that this is what the Sabbath pointed to. Just as the bronze snake pointed to Jesus' crucifixion (John 3:14), and the washings pointed to forgiveness, and the sacrifices pointed to Jesus, similarly, the weekly Sabbath pointed to something spiritual: our rest through faith in Christ. It is available — we may enter God's rest. Don't put it off — do it today. Trust in Christ, not in your own works!

“Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his” (verse 10). God rested from his creative work, but what kind of work do we rest from? What do we quit doing when we come to have faith in Christ? We quit doing the work of trying to earn our salvation, the work of trying to qualify for the kingdom. When we look to Jesus for our salvation, we quit looking to ourselves.

<p>A person who keeps the Sabbath but rejects Christ has not entered God's rest.</p>
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Practical applications

The author draws a practical conclusion: “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience” (verse 11). Since the rest is available to us, let's enter it with faith. Ironically this requires effort, not passivity. If we disobey God by refusing his Son, we will fall!

Just as Psalm 95 said, we must hear God's message with faith and obedience. His word contains both promise and command. It calls for our *response*. And as Hebrews 4:13 says, nothing is hidden from God's sight. He sees everything we do and knows our thoughts, and we must give account to him. That is why we must respond, while it is yet today, with faith in Jesus Christ.

Then comes another practical application: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (verse 14). Again, the exhortation is not to a day of the week, but to Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Summary of Hebrews 4

Let us paraphrase the chapter: 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 trust 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 for some to enter it. That's why the psalmist was 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 symbolic 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 (verses 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 was 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 an every-week picture of it. He is speaking figuratively of the kingdom of God. We enter our spiritual rest by faith in Christ. He 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.

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 it 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.

Additional questions

Whether we understand the symbolism of the Sabbath or not, the New Testament is clear that the Sabbath is not a requirement for Christians today. But perhaps we should deal with a few additional questions that are sometimes raised.

1) Jesus told his disciples that they should pray that they don't have to flee on a Sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Does this show that Jesus' disciples would be keeping the Sabbath?

This warning was given "to those who are in Judea" (verse 16). It is 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.

Even under the old covenant, it would be permissible to flee for your life on the Sabbath. The reason it might be difficult to flee on the Sabbath, however, is that non-Christians in Judea are keeping the Sabbath, not that the fleeing Christians 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, just as it would be difficult to flee in winter.

2) 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?

The women rested on the Sabbath, but their example does not tell us whether that commandment is still in effect. This was before they knew that Jesus was resurrected, and long before the church understood that the old covenant had come to an end. Luke's readers might have wondered why the women rested even though they were faced with an urgent need. Luke told his readers that the women rested because of the commandment. He is not commenting on whether it continues to be required.

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.

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

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 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 enough to make old covenant practices unnecessary and not a basis for judging others. Of course, we still have a practical 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, the Sabbath 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 another matter. That is why Paul could treat the question of special days in such a take-it-or-leave-it way (Romans 14:5). 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. We are to keep the Sabbath by having faith in Christ, not by requiring a particular day of the week.

4) The Sabbath points to the re-creative, redemptive work of Christ, which is the most important part of our history. Shouldn't we commemorate this weekly?

The Bible tells us to commemorate Christ's redemption by means of bread and wine, not by a day of rest. Jesus makes 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 a requirement something that the Bible does not. It is good to commemorate Christ's salvation in weekly worship services, but without a New Testament command, we cannot insist that everybody worship on the same day and time we do.

5) 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?

God looks on the heart, on the attitude, and he blesses his people even if their behavior is 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.

Some godly people have kept the Sabbath, and some have kept Sunday as a Sabbath. Some have been blessed for keeping Sunday, too. Some have been blessed without keeping any Sabbath at all. The example of these people, 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.

6) 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?

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. That was good.

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 to desire 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 everyone set aside the same time. 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.

As a practical need, of course, churches have to appoint a day and time for worship. We encourage all who can to meet with Christians and worship the Creator and Savior.

7) Shouldn't we uphold the law?

Yes, and we should use the law in a lawful way (1 Timothy 1:8) — and the new covenant, the law that Christians are now under, does not permit us to say when and how much time other Christians should give to the Lord. It does not permit us to make requirements for people and threaten them with the lake of fire if they don't comply with our understanding. The law we must be concerned about is the spiritual law, not the 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 cannot require circumcision, tassels, or any other obsolete law, including the Sabbath.

We who are led by God's Spirit want to obey our Creator and Savior. We encourage obedience, worship, and sanctification. We also emphasize that salvation is by grace through faith, and we accept as Christian everyone who has faith in Christ. Some Christians may continue to believe that their Savior requires them to keep the Sabbath. They may be mistaken, but we do not need to criticize them for acting in accordance with their beliefs. We are saying that we should not judge one another regarding this day. All we can do is teach what the Bible teaches, that the Sabbath is no longer required.

Paul did not preach that all law is done away. He knew that faith leads to obedience, and that love works 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 8:5). 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.

Our relationship with God depends on faith in Christ, not on a specific block of time. This does not do away with our practical need to give time to the Lord to pray, study, meditate, fast and imitate Jesus' life-style 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. But the New Testament does not command a particular time.

8) The early church kept the Sabbath. Wasn't it the influence of paganism that motivated some people to abandon it?

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 (Romans 11:13-17), 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). And it was not paganism for Paul to wait until the first day of the week to meet with the Ephesian Christian leaders (Acts 20:6-7).

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 compromisers. They were not likely to give up essentials merely for 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 accusations 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. In our next chapter, we'll look at the history in more detail.

Review 15

- The New Testament commands many things, but never the Sabbath.
- The promised land “rest” pictured spiritual salvation; so did the Sabbath.
- We enter God’s rest by means of the gospel — through faith in Jesus Christ.
- Hebrews stresses the superiority of Christ over the old covenant — it does not encourage any “Jewish” practices.
- The *only* biblical commands for the Sabbath are in the old covenant period.
- Question: Should we keep old covenant laws “just in case”? How are we to be fully convinced?
- What does Jesus say about religious teachers who put unauthorized burdens on people?

16

Sabbath and Sunday in the early church

None of the texts prove that Christians regularly met on any particular day of the week.

The earliest Christians were law-abiding Jews in Jerusalem, who attended Jewish festivals and observed Temple rituals (Acts 2:1; 3:1; 15:5; 21:20). They apparently observed the seventh-day Sabbath, too. However, in the second, third and fourth centuries we find that almost all Christians observed Sunday — sometimes as a Sabbath-like day of worship meetings and rest, sometimes as a day for worship and work, sometimes in addition to the Sabbath and sometimes instead of the Sabbath.

How did the change in worship day occur? This chapter examines the evidence we have for the first and second centuries.

The first century

To begin our research into first-century Christian worship days, we look first at the New Testament. We have already noted the example of Jesus, the example set in the early church, and what Paul taught about the Sabbath.

The New Testament also gives us examples of Christians meeting on the first day of the week. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples on two Sundays (John 20:19, 26), but there is no mention that he gave any command for a weekly commemoration of the resurrection. Paul's traveling party once stayed seven days at Troas, and met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), but this was not necessarily a normal practice. Paul told the Corinthians to set aside an offering on the first day of each week (1 Corinthians 16:2), but this may also have been an exceptional practice rather than a normal one. John had a vision on "the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10), but this verse does not say that this was a day on which Christians should meet.

The New Testament also gives us examples of Christians meeting on Sunday.

In short, none of the biblical texts give any command for Christians to meet on or to *avoid* meeting on any particular day.

Examples of *meeting* on the first day do not change the Old Testament command to *rest* on the seventh day (it is quite possible to do both). The Old Testament law is *obsolete*, not

changed to another day. None of the texts can be used to *prove* that Christians regularly met on any particular day of the week. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that some Jewish Christians, especially in Palestine, continued to observe the Sabbath. This is shown in three ways:

1) Paul was accused of teaching Jews to turn away from Moses (Acts 21:21), which implies that Judean Christians had not turned away from Moses. If Christians taught that the Sabbath should no longer be observed by Jews, the Jewish leaders would have criticized them for leading Jews away from Moses.

2) “Another indirect indication of the survival of Sabbath observance among Palestinian Jewish Christians is provided by the curse of the Christians (*Birkath-ha-Minin*), which the rabbinical authorities introduced (A.D. 80-90) in the daily prayer.”¹ This curse was supposedly designed to identify Christians in the synagogues. Anyone who refused to pronounce the curse was suspected of being a Christian. The point is that Jewish Christians were still attending synagogues and were probably keeping Jewish customs such as the Sabbath.

3) Ebionites and Nazarenes, groups who claimed descent from the Jerusalem church, were keeping the Sabbath in the fourth century, and their observance of Jewish laws probably goes back to apostolic times.

The above evidence shows that it is unlikely that there was any apostolic authority for a complete transfer of the Sabbath command to Sunday. Early Sunday observers did not claim any such authority. It seems clear that the earliest Jewish Christians kept the Sabbath.

However, this conclusion is limited in two ways. First, it does not address Gentiles. Acts 21:21 implies that if Paul taught Gentiles to ignore the laws of Moses, Jewish believers would not have protested. Verse 25 indicates that the Jerusalem decree (Acts 15:29) had already been enough. Was the Sabbath considered to be part of the Law of Moses not required for Gentiles? As discussed in chapter 9, Jewish rabbis did not think that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath. Although most of the rabbinic evidence comes from the fourth century, the evidence indicates that it reflects first-century attitudes as well.

Second, this says nothing about the possibility of a day in *addition* to the Sabbath. After Christians heard the Scriptures read in the synagogues, they would want to meet separately to discuss the Christian interpretation of what they had heard. They would also want to break bread together, encourage one another, and worship Jesus Christ. These Christian meetings could have been held on Saturday evenings or on Sundays. There is no direct evidence for either meeting time, nor is

After Christians heard the Scriptures in the synagogues, they would want to meet separately to discuss the Christian interpretation of what they had heard.

¹ Samuele Bacchiocchi, “The Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity,” chapter 7 in Kenneth A. Strand, editor, *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), p. 135.

evidence likely to be found, for neither practice would have created controversy. It would be quite possible to observe both Sabbath and Sunday (as some fourth-century churches did).

Bacchiocchi says, “If Paul had been the promoter of Sunday observance, he would have met and answered objections from a Judaizing opposition,”² but his conclusion is too sweeping. Paul could have (whether he did or not is another question) promoted Sunday observance if it were in addition to rather than a replacement for the Sabbath. And he could have promoted Sunday observance among Gentiles, even to the exclusion of the Sabbath, without objections from orthodox Judaism.

Ignatius

Our earliest evidence from the second century is given by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, in letters he wrote somewhere around the year 115. He warned Christians to reject those who “preach the Jewish law” (*Philadelphians* 6:1). Similarly, “If we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace.... It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize.”³

Ignatius warned Christians to reject those who “preach the Jewish law.”

More specifically about the Sabbath, Ignatius praised some who were “no longer observing the Sabbath.”⁴ Clearly, Ignatius did not observe the Sabbath. It is debated, however, whom he is praising. In the previous section, he was talking about the Old Testament prophets, but it does not seem likely that he would accuse them of abandoning the Sabbath, even though some ancient writers mentioned the prophets’ criticisms of Sabbath-keeping (such as Isaiah 1:13). More likely, he is praising Jewish Christians who had given up the Sabbath — “those who were brought up in the ancient order of things.” This does not mean that all Jewish Christians had abandoned the Sabbath, but some had, and Ignatius was praising them. The lack of extensive explanation indicates that the Christians in Magnesia, like Ignatius, did not observe the Sabbath, but that Judaizers existed who advocated the Sabbath.

Furthermore, Ignatius praised some people for “living in the observance of the Lord’s Day.” The meaning here is debated, but Ignatius’ attitude toward the Sabbath makes it likely that he was observing a different day, in a different way.

Barnabas writes against Jewish sacrifices, fasts, circumcision and other laws that prefigured Christ.

Barnabas

Our next evidence comes from the Epistle of Barnabas, which was probably written from Alexandria, perhaps as early as A.D. 70 or as late as 132. He writes against Jewish sacrifices, fasts, circumcision and other laws. Those laws were types prefiguring Christ. He gives a figurative meaning for unclean meat laws, and then a figurative meaning for the Sabbath: “Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression,

² Ibid., p. 132.

³ Ignatius, *Magnesians* 8, 10. Quotes from the Ante-Nicene Fathers edition.

⁴ *Magnesians* 9.

‘He finished in six days.’ This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with him a thousand years.”⁵

Barnabas cites Isaiah 1:13-14 as criticism of the Sabbath, concluding, “Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world.” He also mentions our present inability to keep any day holy by being “pure in heart,” and he concludes that we will be unable to keep the Sabbath holy until the end-time new world, after we have been made completely holy. In this passage, Barnabas does four things, which will be repeated by later authors:

- 1) He interprets the Sabbath in terms of moral holiness, not rest.
- 2) He associates the Sabbath with the prophesied age.
- 3) He associates the new age with the eighth day — which he then associates with the eighth day of the week: “Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.”
- 4) He associates the Christian day of worship with the resurrection of Jesus.

Barnabas, with antagonism against Jewish laws, transferred the Sabbath command entirely into the future and, since the future age was called not only the seventh but also the eighth, could view Sunday-keeping as likewise picturing the future. Thus first-day observance was only indirectly related to Sabbath observance.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr gives us evidence from Rome, about the year 150. His comments probably reflect Christian custom in other cities, too, such as Ephesus, where he lived for a while.

Sunday was regarded not as a day of rest but as a day of joy.

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read.... Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.⁶

Justin is clear: It was the widespread practice of Christians to observe Sunday. “Perhaps there were some Gentile Christians who kept the Sabbath...but if so, they found no spokesman whose writings survive.”⁷ An Adventist scholar writes,

Justin probably reflects custom in other cities, too.

Many Christians were already honoring Sunday near the beginning of the second century.... Evidence is very

⁵ *Barnabas* 15.

⁶ *First Apology*, 67.

⁷ R.J. Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church,” chapter 9 in D.A. Carson, editor, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), p. 269.

strong...that many if not most Christians had given up the Sabbath as early as A.D. 130.... Just as Sunday observance came into practice by early in the second century, so among Gentile Christians Sabbath observance went out of practice by early in the second century.⁸

But Sunday was not a replacement for the Sabbath:

Sunday was observed only as a day for worship, not as a Sabbath on which to refrain from work.... Sunday was not at first celebrated as a ‘Sabbath.’... It was not observed in obedience to the fourth commandment... Sunday was regarded by Christians generally not as a day of rest or holiness but as a day of joy.⁹

A debate with a Jewish teacher

Justin Martyr gives a lengthy explanation of his understanding of the Sabbath in his debate with a (possibly hypothetical) Jewish teacher named Trypho, who explained the Jewish way to be accepted by God:

First be circumcised, then observe what ordinances have been enacted with respect to the Sabbath, and the feasts, and the new moons of God; and, in a word, do all things

“The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath.”

which have been written in the law; and then perhaps you shall obtain mercy from God.... To keep the Sabbath, to be circumcised, to observe months, and to be washed if you touch anything prohibited by Moses, or after sexual intercourse.¹⁰

Trypho criticized the Christians:

You, professing to be pious, and supposing yourselves better than others, are not in any particular separated from them, and do not alter your mode of living from other nations, in that you observe no festivals or sabbaths and do not have the rite of circumcision.... Yet you expect to obtain some good thing from God, while you do not obey His commandments. Have you not read, that that soul shall be cut off from his people who shall not have been circumcised on the eighth day?¹¹

Justin replied that Christians were indeed obedient to God, even when obedience was extremely painful:

We too would observe the fleshly circumcision, and the Sabbaths, and in short all the feasts, if we did not know for what reason they were enjoined you — namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts. For if we patiently endure all things contrived against us by wicked men...even as the new Lawgiver commanded us: how is it, Trypho, that we would not observe those rites which do not

⁸ C. Mervyn Maxwell and P. Gerard Damsteegt, eds., *Source Book for the History of Sabbath and Sunday* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1992), pp. 136, 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 139.

¹⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho* 8, 46.

¹¹ *Trypho* 10.

harm us — I speak of fleshly circumcision, and Sabbaths and feasts?¹²

Justin explained the reason Christians ignored the Jewish laws:

We live not after the law, and are not circumcised in the flesh as your forefathers were, and do not observe sabbaths as you do.... An eternal and final law — namely, Christ — has been given to us.... He is the new law, and the new covenant.... The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you.... If there is any perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so; if any adulterer, let him repent; then he has kept the sweet and true sabbaths of God.¹³

In Justin's view, the Sabbath command was a command for morality, and Christians, by behaving morally on every day, were in perpetual obedience to the purpose of the Sabbath. Justin repeatedly said that the patriarchs Abel, Enoch, Lot, Noah and Melchizedek, "though they kept no Sabbaths, were pleasing to God.... For if there was no need of circumcision before Abraham, or of the observance of Sabbaths, of feasts and sacrifices, before Moses; no more need is there of them now."¹⁴

Justin argued that, since Sabbaths and sacrifices and feasts began with Moses, then they ended with Christ, who was the new covenant.¹⁵ Not only do Gentiles not have to keep the Sabbath, Justin concluded that "the just men who are descended from Jacob" do not have to, either.¹⁶ Trypho asked, Could a Christian keep the Sabbath if he wished to? Justin knew of some Jewish Christians who kept the Sabbath and replied, Yes, as long as he doesn't try to force other Christians to keep the Law of Moses.¹⁷

Justin explained some typology between Old Testament rituals and Christian realities. Among these were a connection between circumcision and Sunday. His argument assumes that Trypho knew that Christians met on Sundays:

The command of circumcision, again bidding [them] always circumcise the children on the eighth day, was a type of the true circumcision, by which we are circumcised from deceit and iniquity through Him who rose from the dead on the first day after the Sabbath, our Lord Jesus Christ. For the first day after the Sabbath, remaining the first of all the days, is called, however, the eighth.¹⁸

<p>Christians were in perpetual obedience to the purpose of the Sabbath.</p>
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Irenaeus

Irenaeus, leader of the church in Lyons (modern-day France) in the last half of the

¹² *Trypho* 18.

¹³ *Trypho* 10-12.

¹⁴ *Trypho* 19, 23.

¹⁵ *Trypho* 43.

¹⁶ *Trypho* 26.

¹⁷ *Trypho* 47.

¹⁸ *Trypho* 41.

second century, also gives us lengthy comments on the Sabbath, and his views probably reflect those of Asia Minor, since that is where he was from. He had also been in Rome and may have been influenced by Justin Martyr.

Irenaeus, commenting on the grainfield incident of Matthew 12, notes that Jesus did not break the Sabbath, but Irenaeus gives a rationale that applies to Christians, too:

The Lord...did not make void, but fulfilled the law, by performing the offices of the high priest...justifying His disciples by the words of the law, and pointing out that it was lawful for the priests to act freely [Matthew 12:5]. For David had been appointed a priest by God, although Saul still persecuted him. For all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank. And all the apostles of the Lord are priests.¹⁹

The idea is that, since all believers are priests, and priests are free to work on the Sabbath serving God, then Christians are free to work on the Sabbath. Regardless of the validity of his reasoning, he obviously did not believe that Christians had to keep the Sabbath. Just as circumcision was symbolic, he says, the Sabbath command was, too, typifying both morality and prophecy: “The Sabbaths taught that we should continue day by day in God’s service...ministering continually to our faith, and persevering in it, and abstaining from all avarice, and not acquiring or possessing treasures upon earth. Moreover, the Sabbath of God, that is, the kingdom, was, as it were, indicated by created things; in which [kingdom], the man who shall have persevered in serving God shall, in a state of rest, partake of God’s table.”²⁰

Irenaeus, like Justin, said that the patriarchs before Moses did not keep the Sabbath. But he also said that they kept the Ten Commandments and that Christians also had to!²¹ His discrepancy can be explained in two ways. Bauckham suggests that Irenaeus used the term “Ten Commandments” loosely, as synonymous with the natural law, as suggested in 4.16.3.²² Another possibility, which I prefer, is that Irenaeus considered a moral person to be *de facto* keeping the Sabbath command, as suggested in 4.16.1 and in another work: “Nor will he be commanded to leave idle one day of rest, who is constantly keeping sabbath, that is, giving homage to God in the temple of God, which is man’s body, and at all times doing the works of justice.”²³

Tertullian

In the late second century and early third century, Tertullian also rejected the literal Sabbath, said that the patriarchs did not observe it, interpreted it in terms of morals, and worshipped on Sunday.²⁴ He gives yet more evidence that

Since all believers are priests, and priests can work on the Sabbath, then Christians can work on the Sabbath.

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.8.2-3.

²⁰ *Against Heresies* 4.16.1.

²¹ *Against Heresies* 4.16.2; 4.15.1.

²² Bauckham, pp. 267-69.

²³ Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 96; see also 89 and 95.

²⁴ Tertullian, *Apology* 21; *Against Marcion* 1:20; 5.19; *An Answer to the Jews* 2, 4; *Apology* 16; and *On*

second-century Christians had, as far as we can tell, abandoned the Sabbath and observed Sunday as the day for Christian worship.

The written evidence is clear: Almost all second-century Christians observed Sunday as a day of worship (not a day of required rest), rather than the Sabbath. No matter what the original reason(s) may have been for meeting on the first day of the week, Christians could have easily seen a biblical significance to that day: It was the day on which the risen Lord appeared to the disciples. Of all the days of the week, only the first and the seventh were ever considered, and Sunday was quickly understood as the day for Christian worship.

Although a few Christians observed the Sabbath, Sunday was more distinctively Christian. It became the day on which believers worshiped the Lord, and the day became known in the second century as “the Lord’s day [*kuriakē hēmera*].” The term was so well known that the word for “day” became unnecessary — if a Christian wrote about the *kuriakē*, readers would understand that Sunday was meant. This term therefore gives additional evidence that Sunday was the Christian day of worship in the second century.

Even in the early second century, Sunday-keeping was the norm throughout

Sunday-keeping was the norm throughout Christianity, with no trace of controversy.

Christendom (except for Jewish groups) — with no trace of controversy or any evidence that the custom was a recent innovation. The church that began as a Sabbath-keeping group became a Sunday-keeping group that rejected literal Sabbath-keeping.

How the church changed

Modern Sunday-keeping Christians often conclude that the apostles authorized or even commanded Gentiles to meet on Sundays instead of Sabbaths. Of course, this conclusion must be rejected by anyone who thinks that Christians should observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Therefore, Seventh-day Adventists have proposed ways in which the vast majority of professing Christians could have become deceived about the Sabbath. Some claim that the change from Sabbath to Sunday was introduced at Rome in the middle of the second century.

Bacchiocchi’s theory

In support of that position, Samuele Bacchiocchi argues that Sunday-keeping was a Roman Catholic innovation that became widespread because of the authority of the Roman church.²⁵ Anti-Jewish sentiments were strong in Rome, and Gentiles became prominent in the church there. Since Hadrian fought against the Jews, his reign would be a likely candidate for the beginning of Sunday observance. The idea is that Christians wanted to be different than the Jews. Bacchiocchi argues that only a powerful church (i.e., Rome) could effectively switch the day of worship throughout the empire.

However, Bacchiocchi’s theory has serious weaknesses, as noted by another Adventist scholar. The Roman church simply did not have that kind of power in the second century. As

evidence, we note the following: 1) When Ignatius wrote to the Roman church, he did not greet a bishop of Rome. 2) Irenaeus was willing to disagree with the bishop of Rome regarding their policy toward the Quartodecimans. 3) Polycarp and Polycrates acted as equals with the bishop of Rome. 4) It was only with difficulty and controversy that Rome pressured a change in the date of Easter for one area in Asia Minor. 5) Even in later centuries, Rome was unable to force other cities to observe the seventh day as a fast day. 6) In the fourth century, when many Eastern Christians began to observe the Sabbath as well as Sunday, Rome was unable or unwilling to stop the practice.²⁶

Although Rome could influence some areas of the empire, it would not have been able to change long-standing customs, especially in the East, without any visible evidences of controversy, especially when those customs were based on apostolic practice. Another major difficulty with Bacchiocchi's theory is that Sunday-keeping is documented before the reign of Hadrian and outside of Rome: Ignatius of Antioch was not a Sabbath-keeper and presumably observed Sunday, and the Magnesians and Philadelphians (and probably the

The Roman church did not have that kind of power in the second century.

other churches to which he wrote) probably agreed with him in this. Barnabas gives evidence that Alexandrians were observing Sunday early in the second century. In no case is there evidence that the change in day of worship was recent. For Justin, too, "there is significant evidence that Justin may have been an observer of Sunday long before A.D. 155 — and long before he

visited Rome."²⁷

If second-century Rome ever decreed that Christians should observe Sunday (there is no historical evidence for such a decree), it could have been effective only if the majority of churches were *already* observing Sunday. Nor can Sabbath-abandonment be explained simply as anti-Jewishness. The early church went to great lengths, against Marcion, to keep the Old Testament Scriptures in their canon. They did not feel at liberty to simply reject the Sabbath. Rather, they re-interpreted it and claimed to be keeping its intent. Also, at certain times in history it would have been to the Christians' advantage to be seen as a branch of Judaism, since Judaism was a legal religion and Christianity was not. The complexity of the Christians' attitude toward Judaism makes it highly unlikely that Rome could have convinced all Christians in all parts of the empire to change their day of worship. Many Christians would have had reasons to resist such a change.

Another element of Bacchiocchi's theory is that sun-worship, such as Mithraism, influenced Rome to select Sun-day as the new day of worship. Again, there is no evidence for such a factor (Tertullian specifically rules it out), it is historically unlikely, and the selection of Sunday can be explained without resorting to pagan precedents. Moreover, the

²⁵ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1987).

²⁶ Kenneth A. Strand, "From Sabbath to Sunday in the Early Christian Church: A Review of Some Recent Literature. Part II: Samuele Bacchiocchi's Reconstruction," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 17 (1979), pp. 96-99.

²⁷ Maxwell, p. 138.

early church resisted pagan practices. Christians would die rather than do something as simple as call the emperor “Lord.” Strand gives a convincing critique:

Would it not be somewhat far-fetched to look to a pagan religion fostered mainly by soldiers in the Roman legions as the source for the Christian day of worship?... Why would Christians who were ready to give up life itself rather than to adopt known pagan practices (e.g., Justin Martyr, who did precisely this) choose an obviously pagan Sunday as their Christian day of worship?²⁸

In short, the theory of Roman initiation and enforcement is not historically credible.

Other theories

Maxwell explains some of the reasons that contributed to Sunday observance:

(1) The extraordinary impact of the Resurrection. (This is the commonest reason given by the Christians themselves.) (2) The Christian desire to honor Christ in a special way. (3) The insistence of Gospel writers (including John in the later part of the century) on stating the day of the week when the Resurrection occurred. (4) The effect of following for some months, or even years, Paul’s request to set aside money for the poor on Sundays.²⁹

The early church resisted pagan practices; they would rather die than adopt a pagan custom.

Maxwell, an Adventist, is not arguing for Sunday-keeping, but for honest use of the second- and third-century evidence. He gives an excellent summary of the evidence:

These writers taught that the new covenant had put an end to the old law — and that now the new spiritual Israel, with its new covenant and its new spiritual law, no longer needed the literal circumcision, literal sacrifices, and literal Sabbath. Barnabas observed that God “has circumcised our hearts.” Justin referred triumphantly to the new spiritual circumcision in Christ. Irenaeus taught that circumcision, sacrifices, and Sabbaths were given of old as signs of better things to come; the new sacrifice, for example, is now a contrite heart. Tertullian, too, had a new spiritual sacrifice and a new spiritual circumcision. Each of these writers also taught that a new spiritual concept of the Sabbath had replaced the old literal one....

This supplanting of the old law with the new, of the literal Sabbath with the spiritual, was a very Christ-centered concept for these four writers. God’s people have inherited the covenant only because Christ through His sufferings inherited it first for us, Barnabas said. For Justin the new, final, and eternal law that has been given to us was ‘namely Christ’ Himself. It was only because Christ gave the law that He could now also be “the end of it,” said Irenaeus. And it is Christ who invalidated “the old” and confirmed “the new,” according to Tertullian. Indeed Christ did this, both Irenaeus and Tertullian said, not so much by annulling the law as by so wonderfully fulfilling it

²⁸ Strand, p. 90.

²⁹ Maxwell, p. 161C.

that He extended it far beyond the mere letter. To sum up: The early rejection of the literal Sabbath appears to be traceable to a common hermeneutic of Old and New Testament scriptures.³⁰

I suggest that these writers, even though they were from various parts of the empire, have a “common hermeneutic” because that same hermeneutic was used in the Gentile mission ever since Acts 15: a mission that did not require Gentiles to keep the laws of Moses, including the Sabbath. It is unlikely that churches throughout the empire would, without controversy, develop the same practice unless that practice had been present from the beginning. It is also unlikely that people throughout the empire would give the same reasons for their practice unless those reasons had also been present from the beginning. Their “common hermeneutic” is evidence of antiquity.

A practical need

I would also like to note that Jewish Christians had a practical need for meeting times that did not conflict with synagogue observance. The second-century writers show that the vast majority of Christians met on Sunday and did not keep the Sabbath. They give no clues to suggest that Sunday was a recent innovation. This suggests that Sunday observance began in the first century.

The widespread nature of Sunday observance also argues for its antiquity. The second-century church did not have the organization or communication that might enable them to require a particular day of worship without generating disagreement and controversy. Therefore it is likely that Sunday observance began before or during the early stages of the Gentile mission.

It is possible that Sunday observance even began in Jerusalem. Thousands of law-observant Jews came into the church. They attended temple and synagogue functions, yet they also wished to have more private meetings for believers only. They wished to discuss Scriptures, share meals, pray and sing Christian hymns. Initially, they met daily (Acts 2:46). Sabbath restrictions, however, might have made it difficult to prepare meals and gather large groups on Saturday evenings.

Sundays would provide opportunities for large Christian gatherings. Scriptures that had been read the previous day would be discussed, especially if they had messianic significance. Sermons would be given; Christians would celebrate their faith in Jesus the Messiah. As Christianity spread to Jewish communities in Antioch, Alexandria and Rome, similar situations would foster the development of post-Sabbath Christian meetings.

When Gentiles first began to be added to the church, they were God-fearing Gentiles who attended synagogue meetings and would also need an after-Sabbath meeting time for Christian worship. Eventually Gentiles from pagan backgrounds were also added, in Alexandria, Ephesus and Rome. These converts were not in the habit of attending synagogue, but they would nevertheless meet with the others after the Sabbath. Thus there were two

³⁰ Maxwell, pages 154-156.

groups of Christians: those who kept Sabbath and met after the Sabbath, and those who ignored the Sabbath and met only after the Sabbath. This dual development would have been common throughout the empire, since Jews lived in many cities, and evangelists preached to the Jews first. But the need for dual worship meetings would have ceased in most cities as Gentiles became the large majority. Anti-Jewish sentiment could have accelerated this development.

The custom of after-Sabbath meetings would have been spread by traveling evangelists, and the tradition would have been maintained even in areas without Sabbath meetings. Even in areas with synagogues, meeting on the Sabbath would become less important, since synagogue readings had to be interpreted, and the interpretations were given in the after-Sabbath meeting. The desire for attendance at the synagogue would become further reduced when Christian groups obtained their own copies of the Scriptures.

This hypothetical reconstruction explains how an initially Sabbath-keeping Jewish group could become a Sunday-keeping Gentile group within a generation, and it explains how this could have been done throughout the empire simultaneously with a minimum of controversy: It was part of Christianity from the beginning.

The Acts 15 conference had already concluded that Gentile converts did not need to keep the Law of Moses and, judging by rabbinic writings, uncircumcised Gentiles were not expected to keep the Sabbath. Paul, writing to a church that contained both Jews and Gentiles, downplayed the significance of days (Romans 14:5). He explained that the Sabbath (like sacrifices) had typological significance and was not a matter for judging Christians (Colossians 2:16). And he criticized any observance of any days that were obligations (Galatians 4:10). The writer of Hebrews explained that the Sabbath typologically prefigured a spiritual rest, and it is that latter rest that Christians should strive to enter (Hebrews 4:1-10).

These New Testament scriptures indicate that questions about worship days *did* arise in the first century, and that they were resolved at an early stage in church history with the conclusion that the Sabbath is not a Christian requirement.

Review

- The earliest Jewish Christians observed the Sabbath; Gentiles did not.
- Writings of the second century unanimously report Christians meeting on Sundays.
- No church had the power to enforce a change in day in both west and east; this suggests that Sunday had been observed from the beginning.
- Many Sunday-keeping Christians would rather die than compromise with paganism.
- Question: Is this evidence that Christianity went astray as soon as the apostles died, or evidence that the church understood Paul correctly?
- Why was there no controversy about the change?

17

The role of the Ten Commandments in Christian life

The Sabbath is part of the Ten Commandments. If the Sabbath can be done away, at least in its literal sense, then how should Christians approach the Ten Commandments? Don't Christians worldwide respect the Ten Commandments? What role should the Ten Commandments, also called the Decalogue, have in Christian life and behavior?

Many Christians teach that the Ten Commandments were spoken by God himself, written in stone, and are the major expression of God's moral law, based on the unchanging character of God and therefore permanent. But many of those same Christians say that the Fourth Commandment has been changed. However, it makes no sense to have an unchanging moral law that has a change in it.

Authority for change

The Sabbath is not an isolated case, but a representative case.

If we focus on the Ten Commandments, we might wonder why one command would become obsolete. But if we view the Law of Moses as a whole, we see *hundreds* of laws that are no longer in force. The Sabbath is not an isolated case, but a representative case. After we see that the New Testament sets aside hundreds of biblical commands, it is less of a surprise that the list of obsolete laws happens to include the Sabbath, too.

Early Christians may have been surprised that *any* biblical command (including the sacrifices and rituals) could become unnecessary. If God had given these laws, who could say that they were done away? Only one authority could do away with canonical commands: God. So we look to the New Testament to understand why old laws are obsolete. We will briefly summarize what we have covered so far.

The New Testament does not itemize all the valid Old Testament laws, nor all the obsolete ones. Some laws (unclean meats, sin sacrifices, washings) are mentioned; others (tassels on garments, grain offerings) are not. The New Testament quotes some Old Testament commands (even ones that are now obsolete) with approval; others are quoted as

being inadequate or in need of replacement (Matthew 5:31-37). Commands from the Ten Commandments, the Holiness Code in Leviticus, and Deuteronomy are quoted as valid; other commands from those same groups are treated as obsolete. Some are moral and eternal; others are not, and in this, the Ten Commandments are no different than other Old Testament laws. There is no reason to give the Ten Commandments special treatment, or to require a different method of biblical interpretation for them.

Commands from the last half of the Ten Commandments may be quoted together, or they can be quoted with another law of similar authority (Matthew 19:18-19). Although the New Testament includes most of the Ten Commandments, it does not quote the Ten Commandments as a whole as a moral authority for Christians. It uses the last half several times, but it never uses the whole. It never even refers to it by name. When the New Testament quotes the last half together, there is no reason to assume that it is endorsing any larger group, such as the Ten, the Book of the Covenant, or the old covenant as a whole.

A large category of law is being declared obsolete.

A change in covenants

Although the New Testament cites many individual Old Testament laws as valid, it does not specify a general category as permanently valid. However, when it declares laws obsolete, it uses large categories. In Acts 15, it is “the Law of Moses.” In 1 Corinthians 9:20, it is “the law.” In Galatians 3:17, it is “the law” that came 430 years after Abraham, that is, at the time of Moses. In Ephesians 2:15 it is “the law with its commandments and ordinances,” the law that separated Jews from Gentiles. In Hebrews 8:13 it is the Sinai covenant. Although various terms are used, there is a consistency in what is meant. A large category of law is being declared obsolete. That does not mean that every command within the category is obsolete, but the package itself is.

What is the New Testament explanation for this significant change in divinely given laws? It is a change in covenants. The book of Hebrews makes this clear in chapters 7–10. Although the focus in Hebrews is on the ceremonial laws relevant to the priesthood, the conclusion is more broadly stated — it is the covenant itself that is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). A new covenant has replaced the Sinai-Moses covenant. The Sabbath, which was a sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 31:16-17), is obsolete, and so is the covenant itself. The new covenant has some similarities to the old, but it is a *new* covenant.

Hebrews uses strong terms: laws are set aside, changed, abrogated, abolished, because one covenant has ended and another has begun. Of course, since the old and the new covenants were given by the same God, we should expect some continuity. In all his covenants, God proposes to be God for his people. We should expect truly moral laws to be found in both covenants. It should be no surprise that laws against adultery, which predated Abraham, should also be included in Sinai, a later and larger package of laws. But we accept those laws as valid not because they were given to Moses (the fact that a law was given to Moses does not automatically make it valid today), but for other reasons.

Paul tells us that the Law of Moses was a temporary addition to the Abrahamic promises

(Galatians 3:16-25). The Sinai covenant, which includes the Ten Commandments, civil laws and ceremonial laws, came 430 years after Abraham, and it was designed to come to an end when Christ came.

John Goldingay puts it this way: “Paul does not mean that the Hebrew *scriptures* are annulled. Indeed, his argument that the law is annulled appeals to these scriptures. But he does assert that they are no longer binding *as law*.”¹ And the Bible makes no exception for the core of the Sinai covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Paul and the Ten Commandments

Paul deals with the Ten Commandments directly in 2 Corinthians 3, where he describes laws written on stone tablets and Moses’ face shining with glory. It is clear that he is talking about the Ten Commandments, and he calls them “the ministry of death” (verse 7). Let’s look at this chapter in detail.

Paul begins this chapter by pointing out that he, the apostle Christ used to begin the Corinthian church, did not need a “letter of recommendation” from anybody: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody” (verses 1-2). The people themselves served as proof that Paul was an apostle of Christ: “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God” (verses 3-4).

We accept those laws not because they were given to Moses, but for other reasons.

Paul explains that God is the real source of his authority: “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He 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” (verses 5-6). The new covenant had already been instituted, and Paul was serving God in it.

The new contrasted with the old covenant

Paul has already mentioned “tablets of stone,” and then the “new covenant.” He then builds the contrast between the new and the old. His authenticity as an apostle of Christ is not built on the old covenant, but on the new — not on the letters engraved in stone, but in the Spirit of God.

Let’s see how he develops the contrast: “Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?” (verses 7-8). Paul is talking about something written on

¹ John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, second edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), p. 44.

stone, at a time when Moses' face shone with glory. It is clear that he is talking about the Ten Commandments. This is what was written on stone. This is when Moses' face shone (Exodus 34:29). Paul is calling the Ten Commandments a “ministry that brought death.” Paul was not a minister of the letter (the Ten Commandments), but of the Spirit.

Notice that he does not say, like some people want him to, that he was a minister of “the spirit of the law.” Instead of combining law and spirit, Paul equated the law with the letter, and he made a *contrast* between the Law and the Spirit of God. Of course, it was God who gave the Law. Nevertheless, Paul saw a fundamental contrast between the Law and the Spirit, between the old and the new. There is continuity, of course, for both old and new are covenants of the same God. But even though God does not change, and his underlying principles do not change, his covenants do.

Paul explains some differences in the next verses: “If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!” (verse 9). The Ten Commandments were a ministry that condemned people. They had some glory, but not nearly as much as the new covenant. The Ten Commandments cannot bring righteousness, but the new covenant does.

The Ten Commandments cannot bring righteousness, but the new covenant does.

A fading glory

“For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory” (verse 10). The Ten Commandments have no glory now, Paul is saying, in comparison to the new covenant, which brings life and righteousness.

“And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!” (verse 11). What was fading away? Moses' face was fading, but Paul is not talking about Moses' face any more — he is talking about “the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone.” That is what “came with glory” (verse 7). That is what was fading away.

The Ten Commandments, Paul is saying, came with glory, but they are fading away, just as surely as the glory of Moses' face also faded. The new covenant not only has much greater glory, but it also “lasts.” The Ten Commandments, Paul implies, do not last forever. They were designed as a temporary “ministry of condemnation,” designed to lead people to Christ. Notice the contrasts Paul has made:

The Ten Commandments	the new covenant
written on tablets of stone (v. 4)	written on the heart.
the letter that kills (verse 6)	the Spirit that gives life
a ministry that brought death (v 7)	a ministry that brings life
engraved in letters on stone (v. 7)	a ministry of the Spirit
came with glory (verse 7)	even more glorious
the ministry that condemns (v. 9)	ministry that brings righteousness
have no glory now in comparison	the surpassing glory (v. 10)

came with glory (verse 11)	has much greater glory
are now fading away (verse 11)	the ministry that lasts

What has faded?

Paul clearly says that the Ten Commandments, although good, are temporary and fading. But what has faded? Some people say that the Ten Commandments, instead of fading, are now *more* binding. They want to expand the Ten instead of letting them fade.

But there is a fundamental change in the way people relate to God. The old way is a written law that condemns people to death. The new way is the Holy Spirit, and this new way brings forgiveness and life. The Spirit leads us to obey God, but this is a fundamentally different relationship, a different basis of relating to God.

There is some basic continuity between the old covenant and the new. Most of the Ten Commandments are quoted with approval in the New Testament. Those commands reflect aspects of God's law that were in effect long before Sinai — from the beginning. One

An Old Testament law cannot be evaluated by its location—it must be evaluated by new covenant criteria.

commandment, however, is not repeated in the New — the Sabbath command. It was a ceremonial law, instituted for a temporary time period. This is where the Ten have faded.

A better standard of conduct

In other words, we do not look to the stone tablets as the standard of Christian living. Every moral law within the Ten Commandments is also found outside of the Ten Commandments, and one of the Ten has been set aside in the New Testament. The Ten Commandments are neither sufficient nor necessary for Christian behavior. Saying, "It's one of the Ten Commandments" is no more proof of current validity than saying, "It's in Deuteronomy."

An Old Testament law's validity cannot be assessed by its location — it must be assessed by new covenant criteria. Theft is immoral not because God happened to forbid it in the Ten Commandments, but because by new covenant principles we can see that it was immoral long before God gave this law to Moses. Love is moral not because it was written on stone (it wasn't!), but because it was moral long before the Torah was written. The Ten Commandments are not the standard of comparison we need.

The two most important commandments are not even in the Ten Commandments.

In showing that the Sabbath command is obsolete, in showing that the Ten Commandments as a group have been superseded and that they should not be our primary point of reference, I do not mean to argue that Christians have no moral standards or ethical duties. The New Testament has hundreds of commands, hundreds of behavioral expectations for how forgiven people should respond to their Savior. Some of these commands are also found in the Ten Commandments, but their validity does not rest on the fact that they were on the stone tablets. As shown in 2 Corinthians 3, we cannot equate

stone with permanence. The validity of such laws rests on moral principles that are much bigger than the specific situation of Sinai.

Jesus affirmed the validity of the first commandment (Matthew 4:10), and of five more (Matthew 19:18-19). But the two most important commandments were not even in the Ten Commandments (Matthew 22:37-39; 23:23); Jesus also said that true morality went beyond the wording of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 5:21-28). The Ten Commandments, when isolated from their historical context in Exodus (as it often is in modern teaching), easily becomes a mere list of rules, a legalism.

Jesus was not claiming to be simply a better interpreter of Moses — he claimed to have more authority than Moses. He allowed what the Law of Moses did not (John 8:1-11) and forbade something that Moses allowed (Matthew 5:33-34). He was setting a new standard for right conduct. In Jesus' last instructions to his disciples, he told them to teach people to obey, but the standard he gave was not the Ten Commandments, but his own teaching. Jesus' teaching is a better basis for ethics than the Ten Commandments is, and it is unethical for us to refer people to an inferior standard when a better one is available.

Reading the Ten Commandments

What then are we to do with the Ten Commandments? How are we to approach them as Scripture inspired by God, “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16)?

I suggest that we approach them as they are written — as a report of what God gave his people in the time of Moses. We read it as a story first, before jumping to conclusions that we are supposed to obey every command within it. The Ten Commandments, like other Old Testament laws, were given as a rule for Israelite behavior. That was its original intent. However, the New Testament tells us that the Old Testament is *informative* but not *normative*. If we approach the entire Torah as law, as commands, then we quickly run into erroneous conclusions about what Christians are required to do — thus showing that this method is not valid. We need to read it as history.

Even the commands must be read as part of a story. When we read in Genesis 17 that the males among God's people were to be circumcised, we do not assume that we should do so today. When we read in Exodus 13 that God's people are to have a festival of matzos, we do not assume that we should do so today. Those commands were given for a specific people.

So also the commands we find in Exodus 20. They begin with this preface: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” This gives a historical context to the situation: it was a multitude of just-escaped slaves, in a desert, surrounded by pagan nations. And God gave them laws that would compensate for their lack of civic experience, laws that would help them resist paganism, laws that would help them become a distinct nation, laws that would help them organize society in a new land. These laws were good for their situation, but it is another question as to whether those same laws are good for us today in our situations.

Much of the Old Testament is history. Nevertheless, 2 Timothy 3 can say that this type

of writing, since it is part of Scripture, is “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Stories can help inform our ethics. They can illustrate consequences, misunderstandings, deficiencies and flexibilities. The story of Abraham and circumcision is useful for teaching and for training in righteousness without requiring us to practice circumcision. The commands about sacrifice are to be read as story, not as commands for us today. The details may be useful symbols, but they are read first as part of a story, not as currently valid law. Even the civil laws of the Old Testament are useful illustrations of how moral principles may be fleshed out in a specific culture, but we do not assume that they are all valid today.

Genesis is a story, and in that story God gave certain commands and implied other commands. Some of them apply to us today and some do not. Exodus continues that story and gives more commands, commands about how people should worship, how to behave with one another and what to do when someone disobeys. Some of these commands apply to us today; others do not. So we must see them first in the context in which the books give them: a covenant or arrangement God made with specific people at specific times in history, a covenant God has now revealed to be obsolete.

Instructive, but not required

The commands that God gave them are *instructive* but not necessarily *imperative* for us. They may have value as an example, and may be reinterpreted for different contexts. Their ethical value must be cautiously explored, not assumed, and in our evaluation we must give greater weight to the New Testament revelation, the part of the canon that has the authority to set aside and change the laws of the Old Testament.

When we study Old Testament ethics, the Ten Commandments are an important law code. They tell us basic ethical rules that God gave those people back then. But that is *descriptive* for ancient Israel, not *prescriptive* for Christian ethics. Christians have been told to look to Jesus Christ as a greater authority, a better ethical example and a better teacher of righteous living.

Since the Sabbath command has been set aside in the New Testament, no one should preach or imply that the Ten Commandments are a valid ethical standard for Christians. As a group, they are not. They have an important exception right in the middle of them, and it is confusing to say Ten when only Nine are meant. It is inaccurate and misleading.

Moreover, Christians have a better ethical standard in the New Testament — a bigger body of literature with better ethical balance. We have the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Of course, the Christian church has used the Ten Commandments for centuries, from the second century onwards. But it is also clear that these well-intentioned affirmations about the Ten Commandments have been turned into unbiblical commands for modern Sabbath-keeping. This is a theological error that should cease. We should point people to Christ, not to Moses, for instruction on how to live like a Christian.

Review

- The Sabbath is only one of hundreds of obsolete worship laws.
- Paul contrasted law and spirit; he did not combine them.
- The Ten Commandments cannot bring righteousness.
- We evaluate Old Testament laws by new covenant criteria.
- Question: How are Old Testament commands valuable as part of a *story* of how God dealt with various people?
- Why do people focus on the Ten Commandments in particular?

18

Mildew, meats, and cleanliness

Among the rules God gave the ancient Israelites were various laws about cleanness and uncleanness. The primary purpose of these laws was not hygiene, but ceremonial status. People who were “unclean” were not allowed to participate in religious ceremonies.

Are these laws relevant today? This chapter examines the evidence in the five books of Moses and the New Testament. Some of the details may seem tedious, but they will help us better understand the Old Testament concept of uncleanness.

Religious purity

The word for “clean” (*tahor*) may also be translated “pure,” as we see in numerous places in Exodus. The tabernacle furniture and utensils had to be made with *pure* gold. Jacob told his household to get rid of their idols and to “purify” themselves and change their clothes (Genesis 35:2). We are not told how they purified themselves, but it seems to have been related to worship. Later, Levites were purified with “the water of cleansing” (Numbers 8:6, 15, 21).

Portions of a sin offering had to be incinerated in a clean place (Leviticus 4:12). Ashes of the burnt offering had to be put in a clean place (Leviticus 6:11). The priests ate sacrifices in a clean place (Leviticus 10:14). If priests performed an offering when they were unclean, they were to be expelled (Leviticus 22:3). They could eat offerings only when they were clean (verses 4-7; Numbers 18:11-13).

If something unclean touched meat of the fellowship offering, that meat would have to be incinerated (Leviticus 7:19). Only clean people could eat meat of the fellowship offering (verses 19-21). If an unclean person ate the meat, that person was to be expelled (verses 20-21). However, unclean people could eat nonsacrificial meat (Deuteronomy 12:15, 21-22; 15:21-22).

In these passages, the distinction between cleanness and uncleanness was made for religious purposes, relating to the Levitical and sacrificial system of ancient Israel.

Sexual impurities

The Hebrew word for “unclean” (*tame'*) may also be translated “defiled,” and this is

how the NIV translates it in Genesis 34:5, 13, 27. When Shechem had sex with Dinah, she became defiled. A person who committed sexual sins was defiled (Leviticus 18:20-23). Adultery was called impurity or defilement (Numbers 5:12-30). A woman who remarried was defiled for her first husband (Deuteronomy 24:4). Witchcraft and child sacrifice would also defile a person (Leviticus 18:21; 19:31; 20:2-3).

Sin was involved in the cases above, but in the vast majority of cases uncleanness did not come from sin. For example, normal sexual intercourse rendered both husband and wife unclean (Leviticus 15:18). Childbirth made women unclean. For a boy baby, the mother was unclean for a week, and cleansed or purified 33 days later. For a girl baby, the mother was unclean for two weeks, and purified 66 days later. In both cases, her purification ceremony involved a burnt offering and a sin offering (Leviticus 12:1-8; Luke 2:22).

Menstruation caused uncleanness for seven days, and whoever touched the woman's bed was unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:19-23). If a man slept with her during menstruation, he would also be unclean for seven days, and any bed he slept on would also be unclean (Leviticus 15:24). An emission of semen caused uncleanness, whether it was during intercourse or a nocturnal emission (Leviticus 15:16-18; Deuteronomy 23:10).

Unusual discharges, sexual or otherwise, caused a man or woman to be unclean (Leviticus 15:2-3, 25-27). If an unclean man touched anyone or spit on anyone, that person would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:7-8). If the unclean man touched a pot, the pot had to be broken (Leviticus 15:12). When the discharge stopped, the person could be cleansed after a week, with a sin offering and a burnt offering (15:13-15, 28-30).

<p>In the vast majority of cases uncleanness did not come from sin.</p>

Unclean things

A basic principle of uncleanness was contagiousness: "Anything that an unclean person touches becomes unclean, and anyone who touches it becomes unclean till evening" (Numbers 19:22). If a person went into an unclean house, he would be unclean (Leviticus 14:46). If a person touched an unclean bed, he would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:4-10). Even if a person accidentally touched anything that would make him unclean, he was "guilty." He had to confess his "sin" and make a sin offering (Leviticus 5:3-6).

If an unclean animal died and touched something, the thing would become unclean; it was to be put into water and would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 11:32). But if a dead animal touched a clay pot, the pot and its contents would have to be destroyed (verses 33-35). If a dead animal touched dry seeds, they would be clean, but if they were wet, they would be made unclean (verses 37-38).

If a person touched a dead body, he would be unclean for seven days and unable to be in religious activities such as the Passover (Numbers 5:2; 9:6-10; 19:11, 16). If a person died in a tent, all who were in the tent would be unclean for a week (Numbers 19:14).

Priests were allowed to become unclean as a result of the death of close relatives, but not of in-laws (Leviticus 21:1-4). But the high priest could not become unclean for any relative

(21:10-12); nor could Nazirites (Numbers 6:7). If a person died in the presence of a Nazirite, the Nazirite had to offer a sin offering and a burnt offering because he “sinned” by accidentally being near a dead body (verses 9-12).

People who were unclean because of a dead person could be cleansed by the water of cleansing, which was made with the ashes of a specially sacrificed red heifer (Numbers 19:9-13, 17-19). Although the ashes could be used to purify people from sin (verse 9), people who made the ashes were unclean, and those who touched the water were unclean until evening (verses 7-10, 21). Those who failed to be cleansed in this way were to be expelled (verses 13, 20).

On the day of Atonement, the high priest atoned for the uncleanness of the Israelites (Leviticus 16:16, 19, 30).

Daily activities reminded the people that they were not perfectly holy.

Skin diseases

Various skin diseases could cause a person to be considered unclean. If a sore was more than skin deep and the hair turned white, the person was unclean (Leviticus 13:3, 20, 25, etc.). If the skin problem spread, the priest pronounced the person unclean (verses 8, 22, 27). Such persons had to live outside the camp and warn people that they were unclean (verses 45-46).

When the people could be declared clean, the priest killed a bird, dipped another bird in the blood, sprinkled the person and released the live bird (Leviticus 14:2-7). The person then had to shave and wash twice before he was fully clean (verses 8-9), then offer a guilt offering and a sin offering, and the priest was to anoint him on the right earlobe, the right thumb and the right big toe (verses 10-32). Surprisingly, if the problem covered the entire body, the person was clean (Leviticus 13:12-13). And if the sores turned white, the person was clean (verses 16-17).

Mildew was a similar problem. Clothing with spreading mildew was unclean and had to be burned (Leviticus 13:47-55); even if washing helped, the affected material had to be destroyed. If a building had a spreading mildew, it had to be scraped and repaired; if the mildew returned, the entire house had to be dumped outside the town in an “unclean” place (Leviticus 14:33-45). If the mildew did not return, the house was declared clean after a ceremony in which one bird was killed and the other released (Leviticus 14:48-53).

Purpose of the ceremonies

The laws of uncleanness are unusual, and the purification ceremonies are unusual, too. Why would a red heifer be more effective than a black one? Was there any public-health reason for dumping sacrificial ashes in a clean place rather than an unclean one?

Does the law forbid husbands and wives to sleep in the same bed 25 percent of the time? Why was sexual intercourse defiling? Why were *sin* offerings required for circumstances beyond a person’s control? Why were pots broken rather than purified in fire? Were people supposed to avoid uncleanness if they could? Was it sinful to help bury a dead relative? Why did the water of cleansing make some people clean and others unclean? Why are the rules so

concerned about contagious skin diseases, but not any other contagious diseases? Why is a person affected from head to toe considered clean? Why anoint the right big toe instead of the left little toe?

There are many questions we cannot answer. The distinction between clean and unclean was, as far as we can understand, sometimes arbitrary. Above all, the rules reminded the Israelites that they were different from other peoples. Births and deaths reminded the people to get right with God. Daily activities reminded the people that they were not perfectly holy. Various taboos gave the people frequent reminders that God had something to say about how they lived. Sacred things were different from ordinary things, and the Israelite nation, being holy to God, was different from other nations.

Laws about uncleanness might have given the Israelites some public-health benefits, but those benefits seem more incidental than the main goal. The quarantining of skin diseases may have helped prevent their spread, but it would have been better to quarantine other diseases. It would have been good to wash before childbirth as well as afterward. If mildew was a public-health hazard, it would have been dangerous for anyone to scrape the inside of the house walls.

God did not claim any health benefits for these rules. Therefore, although we might discern, from our 20th-century perspective, some health benefits to some practices, we have no authorization to claim that they were all principles of health. These laws do not authorize us, as Christians, to examine skin sores and expel people from church services if their sores have gotten larger. (But, as an expression of love for others, we rightly quarantine for contagious diseases that the Law of Moses does not mention.) We do not forbid people to take the Lord's Supper if they touched a dead person the previous day. We do not check to see who has slept on which bed or how long it's been since they had a discharge of some sort. If we kill a mosquito on our arm, we do not wash our clothes and consider ourselves unclean until evening even though we have been touched by a dead unclean animal.

In the new covenant, we do not have any rules for cleansing; they are not relevant to our relationship with God.

Moreover, we have no scriptural guidelines telling us which customs were arbitrary and which were beneficial. Therefore, we have no biblical reason to reject one rule and retain another. All the procedures for washing are now obsolete (Hebrews 9:10), superseded by the spiritual cleansing that Christ gives. In the new covenant, we do not have any rules for cleansing; they are not relevant to our relationship with God. (Of course, we believe in good hygiene and sanitation, but this is not under discussion in the biblical concepts of clean and unclean.)

Jesus' example is instructive. He touched people with leprosy and people with discharges (Matthew 8:3; 9:20). Even though the people were healed, under the old covenant rules, both they and Jesus would technically be unclean until evening. However, Jesus made no effort to avoid this. Nor do we read that Jesus ever participated in a cleansing ceremony. In the new covenant, a nocturnal emission or menstruation does not affect our status with

God. It is not wrong to touch a dead person. There is nothing to repent of, to ask forgiveness for or to be cleansed of in the religious sense.

Unclean meat — before Moses

Now let us look at the distinction between clean and unclean animals. It's the same Hebrew word; there is no indication in the Bible that this uncleanness was different in nature or in purpose to other types of uncleanness.

Noah was told to make a distinction between clean and unclean animals (Genesis 7:1-9). We are not told why Noah was to make the distinction; the only evidence we have in Genesis is that the clean animals were used for sacrifice (Genesis 8:20). After the flood, God said, "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything" (Genesis 9:3). This suggests that humans did not eat any meat before the flood. Therefore, when Noah took clean animals into the ark, he did not bring them for eating, but for sacrifice.

The distinction between clean and unclean animals was for sacrifices, not for food. Moreover, Genesis 9:3 says nothing about clean and unclean in reference to eating meat. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* says: "It seems that in the mind of this writer the distinction between clean and unclean animals was intended for sacrifices only: for in the following chapter he makes God say: 'Everything that moveth shall be food for you' (Genesis ix. 3)."¹

God wanted his people to be distinct from other cultures.

After the flood, Noah was allowed to eat "all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air...every creature...all the fish...everything that lives and moves...everything" (Genesis 9:2-4). Blood was listed as an exception, but unclean animals were not. The implication is, and the traditional Jewish interpretation is, that Noah could eat any kind of meat he wanted, just as he could eat any kind of green plant he wanted. (Some plants are poisonous, of course, but God did not describe which are. He allowed humans to discern which plants are good. Likewise, some animals are not good for food. God allowed Noah and his descendants to discern which were good for food.)

Food laws in the old covenant

Clean and unclean animals are listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. But we might notice that God makes no claims regarding health. He does not say that camels have more parasites than cows do, or that fish-eating herons are more hazardous than fish-eating ducks. He simply gives rules without giving reasons. We are not told why honeybees are unclean but honey can be eaten. We are not told why bottom-feeding carp may be eaten but bottom-feeding catfish cannot, or why grasshoppers are permitted but crabs are not. Or we might wonder whether camel's milk and human milk are equally forbidden.

If anyone touched a dead unclean animal, he would be unclean until evening (Leviticus

¹ *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "Clean and Unclean Animals," volume 4, page 110.

11:24-26). However, the same penalty applied to Israelites who touched a dead clean animal or ate any of it (Leviticus 11:39-40; 17:15). Leviticus 5:2-6 prescribes the additional penalty of a sin offering and a guilt offering even for accidental touching.

Purpose of the rules

Why did God give these rules? Leviticus 11:44-45 gives this reason: Since God is holy (separate), he wanted his people to be holy and distinct from other cultures. He wanted them to make distinctions in what they could do and what they should not. It was a reminder of holiness.

Leviticus 20:24-26 gives a similar reason: God set the Israelites apart from the nations, so they must therefore make a distinction between animals. “I am the Lord your God, who has set you apart from the nations. You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals.... You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.”

The rules in Deuteronomy 14 begin (verse 2) and end (verse 21) with a similar setting apart. If the Israelites found something dead, they were not allowed to eat it, but a Gentile could eat it. “Do not eat anything you find already dead. You may give it to an alien living in any of your towns, and he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner. But you are a people holy to the Lord your God.”

God did not claim that this set of laws would benefit their health.

The meat was unclean, but it could be given or sold to a Gentile. But God would not encourage something harmful to be sold. This verse shows that the distinction between clean and unclean was designed for Israelites, not for health. Israelites had different rules than Gentiles; the rules about uncleanness separated the Israelite nation from Gentile nations.

Years later, Ezekiel criticized the priests for their failure to teach the people the difference between the clean and the unclean. They were failing to do their duty under the old covenant — failing to discern leprosy from nonleprosy and failing to discriminate against those who had touched corpses and people with discharges. A similar criticism was given by Malachi: The people and priests were giving defective offerings. When the prophets criticized Levitical functions, they were not telling us what we are required to do today.

Ezekiel predicted a time when the priests would do their duty, teaching the difference between clean and unclean (Ezekiel 44:23). But in his prophecies of correct worship, he also included sacrifices (Ezekiel 20:40; 45:17) and a requirement for circumcision (Ezekiel 44:9). When the prophets made predictions about worship, they were not telling us what we are required to do today.

Health benefits?

The Bible never indicates that the uncleanness of meat was different from any other sorts of uncleanness. It served similar purposes. The Bible doesn't make any claims about health benefits in these chapters. Although we can see some health benefits to avoiding certain types of meat, these benefits appear to be incidental rather than the primary purpose of the list. If

the problem was parasites, for example, the simple solution would have been to require thorough cooking. Moreover, clean animals can have parasites, just as unclean animals can.

If health were the primary purpose, then God didn't include enough laws. If God wanted to give us health laws, he would need to spend more time advocating exercise and sleep rather than forbidding seagulls and bats, which few people want to eat anyway. He would need to tell us about which mushrooms are dangerous, and which herbs increase our chances for cancer. He would need to tell us about the more dangerous health hazards.

Using human reason and scientific data, we might be able to discern some health benefits to avoiding certain types of unclean meat, but we cannot with biblical authority say that they are *all* harmful to health. The rules presumably did not harm the Israelites' health, but neither did God claim that this set of laws would benefit their health. He promised to help their health if they obeyed the entire covenant (Deuteronomy 7:15), but this was described as a supernatural blessing, not simply a natural result of a better diet. The laws were given in terms of holiness, not health. Holiness and health may overlap, but they are not synonymous.

Rules not for Gentiles

God told the Israelites to make a distinction between the clean and the unclean because he had made a distinction between the Israelites and the Gentiles. Under the new covenant, however, God does not make a distinction between Israelites and Gentiles. He dwells in us all. We all have access to God equally — God hears our prayers whether we have touched a dead body or not, whether we have eaten pork or not. He calls on us to be holy, but in matters of the heart rather than external rules that have no connection with morality. Just as circumcision is now a matter of the heart, so also is the distinction between the clean and the unclean (Hebrews 10:22; James 4:8).

Jews have traditionally considered their dietary rules to be unnecessary for Gentiles. Gentiles need to observe these restrictions only if they want to become proselytes and come under the covenant made at Sinai. Gentiles could be saved, the rabbis taught, by observing laws that go back to Noah, and avoiding unclean meat was not part of their requirements. In this way, the Jews acknowledged that Genesis does not forbid the eating of unclean meat, and that it is a ceremonial matter, not a moral one. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* defines Noachian laws:

laws which were supposed by the Rabbis to have been binding upon mankind at large even before the revelation at Sinai, and which are still binding upon non-Jews.... They declared that the following six commandments were enjoined upon Adam:

(1) not to worship idols; (2) not to blaspheme the name of God; (3) to establish courts of justice; (4) not to kill; (5) not to commit adultery; and (6) not to rob.... A seventh commandment was added after the Flood — not to eat flesh that had been cut from a living animal.... He who observed the seven Noachian laws was regarded as a domiciled alien...as one of the pious of the Gentiles, and was assured of a

portion in the world to come.²

Christians today have a relationship with God based on the covenant of faith and promise made with Abraham (Galatians 3:6-9). Faith leads us to worship and obey our Lord and Savior, but ceremonial laws are no longer required. Laws that were added at Sinai do not set aside or add to the Abrahamic covenant (verses 15-17). Circumcision is an example: It was added after the promise was given to Abraham, and is not necessary for Christians today. Circumcision may or may not have health benefits, but they are incidental and not a basis for religious requirement.

Although the distinction between clean and unclean animals existed before Abraham for sacrificial purposes, the meat of unclean animals was not a prohibited *food* until after the old covenant had been made. Under the old covenant, unclean meats were a matter of ethnic separation and worship regulation, and the rules are therefore not a matter of sin today — just as it is not a sin to touch a dead body or to have a skin disease or sleep in the same bed at certain times of the month.

Even if Cornelius had been eating pork, he was not unclean. That distinction was no longer valid.

Clean and unclean in the New Testament

In Mark 7:15-19, Jesus said, “Nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’... For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” Jesus was addressing the Pharisees’ practice of handwashing before every meal (verse 3). This washing was not because of their concern for personal hygiene, but because they did not want their eating to make them ceremonially unclean. Jesus worded his analysis of their practice with a general statement that applies to foods as well as hands and utensils.

In the Old Testament, uncleanness was a matter of external matters. Even touching an unclean thing, let alone eating it, could defile a person. Therefore, Jesus’ statement that nothing entering a person defiled him or made him unclean went against a basic principle of that whole system. A person was defiled by what came out of his heart, not by what physically touched his body. God looks on the heart, not the stomach; he judges our attitudes, not our diets.

Peter’s vision in Acts 10

Peter was given a vision of many animals and told to kill and eat (verse 13). He protested, saying that he had never eaten anything common or unclean, but the command was given again and again.

The vision was then explained: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (verse 15). Peter also explained the vision: “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean” (verse 28). Therefore, even if Cornelius had been eating pork, he was

² “Laws, Noachian,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, pp. 648-49). Talmudic references are *Aboda Zara* 64b and *Sanhedrin* 56ab; see also *Sibylline Oracles* 4:24-34.

neither common nor unclean. Those distinctions were no longer valid. His food could not make him unclean.

In the vision, the common and unclean animals represented Gentiles. In vision, the animals were called cleansed. Peter understood from this that Gentiles were cleansed. But would Peter understand this conclusion if unclean animals were not in fact declared clean? If the animal remained unclean, wouldn't the person it represented also remain unclean? God was showing Peter that Christians were no longer separate from Gentiles — his people included Gentiles. The laws of separation no longer applied. The purpose of the laws of unclean meats no longer applied. The meats that were commonly eaten among the Gentiles did not make them religiously unacceptable.

This passage does not directly say that God cleansed all foods, but many readers have seen that implication. There is certainly nothing in Acts 10 to counteract that implication — nor is there any discussion of unclean meat in Acts 15, when the Jerusalem council decided that Gentile converts did not have to keep the Law of Moses. Since the Jewish rabbis did not think that Gentiles were required to avoid pork unless they became circumcised, and the council was inspired to conclude that circumcision was not required, the implication in this historical context is that the council did not require Gentiles to quit eating unclean meats.

Learning over time

In the vision, why did Peter refuse to eat the unclean animals? Because he did not yet understand that they could be considered clean. He did not understand the implications of Jesus' comment. He did not yet understand that common meat could be eaten, or that he could fellowship with Gentiles. In his own experience as a Jew and as a Jewish Christian, he had "never eaten anything impure or unclean" (Acts 10:14).

Unclean and common

Why did Peter use both "unclean" (*akathartos*) and "common" (*koinos*)? Some have suggested that *koinos* refers to clean animals made temporarily unclean by proximity to unclean animals. The two words have different root words, but their meanings overlap. *Koinos* was the uncleanness that the Pharisees were concerned about in Mark 7. The verb form of the word, *koinoō* (to make something common), is used in Hebrews 9:13 to refer to the ceremonial uncleanness that had to be cleansed by the water made with the ashes of a red heifer, and the Hebrew word for that is the same word as used for unclean animals. *Koinos* and *akathartos* have basically the same meaning.

The Louw and Nida lexicon lists *koinos* as a synonym of *akathartos*, saying: "It is possible that there is some subtle distinction in meaning, particularly on a connotative level, between *koinos* and *akathartos* in Ac 10.14, but it is difficult to determine the precise differences of meaning on the basis of existing contexts. The two terms are probably used in Ac 10.14 primarily for the sake of emphasis." Such repetition, using similar words or phrases, was a common Jewish form of emphasis.

Which word is original?

The Greek text of Mark 7:19b is disputed. In the text used by the King James translators, the participle “cleansing” seems to be part of the words of Jesus. In this version, Jesus says, “Foods cannot make people unclean, since they go through the body, thus purifying all foods.” In this version, Jesus is talking about the digestive system and elimination.

There are two problems with this textual version and interpretation. First, the New Testament does not use the word *katharizō* with the meaning of “purge” in any other passage. It normally refers to cleansing in a religious sense, either through ceremonies or by a cleansing of the conscience through forgiveness. The context in this passage is ceremonial cleansing. Second, the digestive process and bowel movements can get rid of dirt, but soil particles were not the concern of the Pharisees. The context is ceremonial cleanness, and the digestive process cannot make anyone or anything religiously clean.

The Greek text used in most manuscripts, and used by most translations, differs by only one Greek letter from that used by the King James translators. One version has the letter omicron; the other has an omega. The different letter links the participle “cleansing” with the “he” in verse 18. The thought is this: “He said [most of verses 18-19], cleansing all foods.” Thus verse 19b is not Jesus’ words but Mark’s comment about the significance of what Jesus had said. That is why many translations place verse 19b outside the quotation marks. The Greek text they are using requires this. Mark explains that Jesus’ principle can be applied to all foods, including meats.

The text of verse 19b is debatable, but our understanding of clean and unclean meats does not depend on this one word. The broader context is Jesus’ teaching that foods do not defile people. Under the new covenant, pork does not cut anyone off from God. Paul echoed Jesus’ words when he wrote that all foods are clean. Many Christians accept Mark 7:15-19 (in either textual version) as clear evidence that all meats may be eaten.

Peter’s understanding was incomplete, and he learned a bit at a time. Moreover, he did not perfectly live up to what he understood, as Paul points out in Galatians 2. Peter withdrew from Gentile tables when legalistic Jewish Christians came to Antioch, and Paul rightly criticized Peter’s double standard. Those legalistic believers would have known from Jesus’ teachings that handwashing and other nonbiblical rules were wrong. Yet they were still making separations between Jews and Gentiles.

Paul notes that Peter normally ate with Gentiles, not considering them unclean (Galatians 2:12). Peter lived “like a Gentile and not like a Jew.” It is permissible for a Christian to live like a Gentile. Peter concluded that the church should not “force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs” (verse 14).

“All foods are clean”

We turn next to Romans 14, which tells us that all foods are clean, and it discusses the delicate matter of handling people in the same congregation who disagree as to what foods

are permissible. One of the issues in Romans 14 is vegetarianism, but Paul's explanation of the subject applies to meats, too, especially when he says, "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean" (verse 14). He says something similar in verse 20: "All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble."

The Roman church included both Jews and Gentiles, and some of the Jewish Christians may have been vegetarians because they distrusted the ritual cleanness of all meats. Whether that is the case or not, Paul's statements are principles that may be applied to all matters of clean and unclean foods. When Paul said that no food is unclean, he used the Greek word *koinos*, which means common or ordinary, unclean or defiled. He clearly said that all foods are clean, using *katharos*, the same word Jews used for cleanness and clean animals.

The category of uncleanness was a religious, ceremonial category that ended with the old covenant.

Paul was not careful to restrict his statements or their application, even for a church area he had not been in before, even though it contained both Jews and Gentiles. Paul's Gentile readers in Rome would have understood that pork was a food, and from Paul's letter, they would have concluded that it was clean or OK to eat.

Don't judge others

But Paul knew that some people would not accept his analysis. He did not demand that they agree — he told them to do what they thought they should, and he cautioned others to avoid offending them.

Paul wrote to the strong in faith: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (verse 1). Is the matter of unclean meat a disputable matter? In a congregation containing Jews and Gentiles, yes. Some people's belief may allow them to eat all meats, but other people may believe that they ought to abstain from pork and shrimp. "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does" (verse 3). It is not wrong to abstain, but it is wrong to condemn someone else.

"Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls.... We will all stand before God's judgment seat," Paul advised in verses 4 and 10. "He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God" (verse 6). Whether we eat or whether we abstain, we should do it in an attitude of submission to Christ.

If a person thinks that eating pork is a sin, then he or she should avoid pork. "The man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin" (verse 23). Each person must be fully convinced about the way to serve the Lord (verse 5). It's not that all ways are equally acceptable, but that each person should be fully convinced. The attitude is more important than the action itself. It's the inside of a person that counts most.

Don't offend others

Paul also cautions that the strong should not flaunt their liberty. “It is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble” (verse 20). “If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil” (verses 15-16). “Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way” (verse 13).

Some Christians believe it is wrong to eat pork. Their experience would be similar to Peter's. They have not eaten pork or shrimp. It would be wrong for anyone to pressure such people into eating pork. “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall” (verse 21).

“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food,” Paul says to everyone (verse 20). Do not let disputable matters lead to dissention and judging within the church. “Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (verse 22). That does not mean that you have to keep your beliefs secret, of course (Paul did not) — it means that your belief affects your own relationship with God; it should not intrude into other peoples' relationships with God.

When Paul wrote that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and we should honor God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), he was talking about sexual sins, not about health. The holiness that God wants is in our morality, not in our diets. We are sanctified in our hearts, not in dietary customs. If we are discerning good from evil in our morality, then we are automatically obedient to the purpose of the clean/unclean rules about discharges and sores and meats.

Consecrated by the word of God

The last relevant scripture is 1 Timothy 4:3-5, which says that all food may be eaten if it is “consecrated by the word of God.” Does the Bible consecrate all meats? Romans 14:20 says yes — all are clean. Everything that God has created is good (1 Timothy 4:4). This passage does not comment on whether all meats are good for our health, just as it does not say that all vegetables are good for food. Whether it is good for food is up to people to judge, just as it was in the days after Noah's flood. The distinctions given in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 do not tell us.

The New Testament says that all meats are “clean” — the category of uncleanness was a religious, ceremonial category that ended with the old covenant. God's people were commanded to avoid unclean animals only within the old covenant. The law began when the old covenant began and ended when the old covenant was made obsolete by the death of Christ. The New Testament specifically says that all foods are, for religious purposes, clean.

Are any meats unhealthful? Yes, but that category is not exactly the same group of animals forbidden under the old covenant. Whether a meat is good for food is determined not by a ceremonial category, but by scientific research. The church does not make such

decisions, and should not forbid its members to eat any particular kind of meat.

Some people may avoid pork just in case it might be harmful to health. That is certainly permissible, but we cannot make that a religious requirement for those who do not have such beliefs. The Bible does not say that those rules had anything to do with health, so we cannot preach that they do. Some meats are harmful to health, but the church is not in the business of enforcing dietary rules, whether they concern meat or vegetables or minerals.

The distinction between clean and unclean animals was for sacrificial and ceremonial purposes and, later, to distinguish Israelites from Gentiles. The rules affected participation in the sacrificial system — and that context is now obsolete. The rules are not requirements today. The New Testament tells us that food cannot make us spiritually or physically unclean. All food is clean. It is not a sin to eat pork or shrimp or beef. The kingdom of God is not based on food or drink, but on “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

Review 18

- Old Testament rules about clean and unclean were for ceremonial status and ethnic identity, not health.
- The new covenant is concerned about moral holiness, not dietary or external cleanliness.
- Jesus ignored some of the rules of clean and unclean.
- If God can cleanse people, can he also declare all foods clean?
- Is diet a disputed matter? How can the church avoid controversies about health and diet?

19

Annual festivals

As part of his covenant with the Israelites, God commanded them to observe various annual festivals. These festivals symbolized facets of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Now that Christ has redeemed us, are these festivals still required under the new covenant? Let us examine the Old and New Testament evidence.

Passover

Just before the Israelites left Egypt, God revised the Israelites' calendar and commanded a festival. On the 10th day of the month Abib (in the spring), the Israelites were to select lambs. On the 14th day, they were to kill the lambs and put some of the blood on their doorframes. They were to roast them and eat them with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, with their cloaks and sandals on, with their staffs in their hands, ready to depart Egypt, and all leftovers were to be burned (Exodus 12:1-10). If Gentiles wished to participate, the men had to be circumcised (verses 43-49). The day was commanded as a lasting ordinance for future generations; it was to be a commemorative celebration, a festival (verses 14, 24-25).

Three festival seasons are mentioned in the Sinaitic covenant (Exodus 23:14-17), but Passover is not mentioned by name. However, it is mentioned in the summary of the Sinaitic covenant given to Moses later (Exodus 34:25b). In Leviticus 23:4-5, the Passover is called a sacred assembly. Although work was forbidden on other festivals, there was no such requirement for the 14th.

In Numbers 9:2-5, the Passover was again commanded, but no details were given, other than referring to previously given "rules and regulations." Provision was made for an observance of Passover in the second month for people who were unable to participate in the month Abib (verses 6-14). Requirements were that it must be done at evening, that it must be eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, that no meat be left until morning, and that no bones should be broken.

Deuteronomy 16:1-7 established the tabernacle as the site for Passover observances, rather than at the homes of the people. In the morning after the Passover, they were to return to their tents (verse 7b). Otherwise the regulations were the same as before. Soon after this, the Israelites celebrated the Passover on the plains of Jericho (Joshua 5:10).

Unleavened Bread

The week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread was closely associated with the Passover, since it started on the 15th, right after the Passover lambs were killed. It was instituted in Egypt (Exodus 12:15-20). Leaven (yeast) was to be removed on the first day (verse 15), and no leaven was to be in the homes for seven days (verse 19). Sacred assemblies were held on the first and seventh days, and ordinary work was forbidden on those days, except for food preparation. It was “a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.” Even aliens had to abide by the rules (verse 19). Flat, unleavened bread (matzos) was the only bread allowed for this week.

The night of the 15th became a commemoration of the escape from Egypt (verses 17, 42; 13:3-9). The festival was commanded within the Sinaitic covenant as a memorial of the Exodus (Exodus 23:15), and the festival was repeated in the covenant made with Moses and Israel (Exodus 34:18). It was described again in Leviticus 23:6-8, but no new regulations were added. Numbers 28:17-25 prescribed extra sacrifices for the entire week.

Deuteronomy 16:3-8 repeated the regulations and indicated that the Passover lamb was sacrificed on the evening of the first day of unleavened bread (verse 4b). The unleavened bread was a reminder that the Israelites left Egypt in haste (verse 3); they did not have time to put yeast in their dough and let it rise (Exodus 12:34, 39).

When the Israelites entered the land of Canaan after the Passover, they ate unleavened bread (Joshua 5:11). Solomon offered sacrifices as required in the book of Moses (2 Chronicles 8:12-13). In Hezekiah’s day, the people celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread in the second month (2 Chronicles 30:13, 21), even though that wasn’t the official date for it. Then they celebrated it another seven days (verse 23). The festival was restored again by Josiah and Ezra (2 Chronicles 35:17; Ezra 6:22).

In Ezekiel’s vision of the restored temple and sacrificial system, the Festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread was included (Ezekiel 45:21-24).

Jesus would have brought Passover lambs to be sacrificed in Jerusalem.

Firstfruits

Associated with the Festival of Unleavened Bread was the ceremony of waving the firstfruits, the first part of the spring grain harvest. Before any new grain could be eaten, some grain had to be waved before God, with lamb, grain, oil and wine offerings (Leviticus 23:10-14). This ceremony involved the priests, and there was little for the people to do. It was not a Sabbath or a sacred assembly. The ceremony could not apply in the wilderness; it was to be in force only after the Israelites entered the land (verse 10), and then it was to be a lasting ordinance wherever they lived (verse 14b).

Fifty days after the wavesheaf offering, at the end of the grain harvest, was the festival now known as Pentecost (a Greek word meaning *fiftieth*), which was a sacred assembly, a day on which regular work was forbidden (verses 15-21). Leavened loaves were to be offered with animals, grain and drink offerings — “a lasting ordinance for generations to come,

wherever you live.”

This festival was included in the Sinaitic covenant (Exodus 23:16) and in the restatement of that covenant (Exodus 34:22). Additional offerings were commanded in Numbers 28:26-31. The festival was commanded again in Deuteronomy 16:9-11, with the theme of rejoicing at the central tabernacle site.

Festival of Trumpets

On the first day of Tishri, the seventh month, was a festival of blowing trumpets. It was a day of rest and a sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:23-25; Numbers 29:1).

Day of Atonement

On the 10th of Tishri was the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). No work at all was to be done on this “sabbath of rest,” and there was a sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7). Fasting was required; anyone who worked or did not fast was cut off from the people. Sacrificial rituals for this day are in Leviticus 16. That chapter also repeated the requirements for the people — even Gentiles — to fast and avoid work (verse 29). The purpose of the fasting is given in verse 30: “because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you.”

Festival of Tabernacles

The autumn harvest festival was the third main festival season (Exodus 23:17; 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:16; 2 Chronicles 8:12-13). The first day of the seven-day festival was a sacred assembly on which regular work was forbidden (Leviticus 23:33-36a; Numbers 29:12). The people were to collect fruit, palm fronds and leafy branches and live in crude shelters for seven days. It was a lasting ordinance for all “native-born Israelites,” reminding them of the Exodus from Egypt (Leviticus 23:39-43).

The festival was to be kept at a central site, and it was a time for joy and celebration that included Gentiles who lived among the Israelites (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). Every seventh year, in the sabbatical year in which crops were not harvested and slaves were released, the law was to be read publicly during this festival (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). In those years, it would have been a festival of liberation rather than a harvest festival.

Ezekiel predicted a restoration of this festival (Ezekiel 45:25); Hosea also mentioned it in a prophecy (Hosea 12:9). The most specific prophecy about this festival is in Zechariah 14:16-19 — even Gentile nations would be required to go to Jerusalem to keep the festival, or else they would suffer drought.

The Festival of Tabernacles lasted seven days, but the eighth day was also a sacred assembly and a day of rest (Leviticus 23:36b, 39b; Numbers 29:35). This day was called “the closing assembly” (Leviticus 23:36b).

Sabbatical years

The old covenant also stipulated that the land was not to be cultivated every seventh year

(Exodus 23:10-11). The land was to lie fallow, and vineyards and olive trees were to be left untended so poor people and wild animals could eat the fruit. The land was to observe a sabbath year (Leviticus 25:1-7). God warned the people that if they were persistently rebellious, he would ensure that the land had its sabbaths (Leviticus 26:34). And it came to pass — the land was given its sabbath rests (2 Chronicles 36:21).

Nehemiah, in pledging allegiance to God's laws, restored the land sabbath (Nehemiah 10:31). He also indicated that the seventh year was a time for canceling debts, in keeping with Deuteronomy 15:1-11. It was also the time for freeing Hebrew slaves (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 31:10-13; Jeremiah 34:14).

Similarly, every 50th year was to be a festive year, a jubilee year. Liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land, and farmlands were to be returned to the families originally having them (Leviticus 25:8-10). It was also a sabbatical year for the land, since the people were not to sow or reap or harvest (verses 11-12).

Why have I taken so much space to describe these festivals? For one thing, I know Christians who keep these festivals. I once thought that they were required, and I kept them. And the evidence for their validity is similar to that for the weekly Sabbath. These festivals were an important way that the Israelites showed loyalty and love for God. Jesus kept these festivals, too. If these holy convocations can be set aside in the new covenant, as they are, then it should be no surprise that the weekly Sabbath is, too.

Jesus and the annual festivals

At the time of Jesus, the festivals were being observed regularly at Herod's temple. Although some Jews may have been lax about festival observance, others were faithful to the covenant. Scribes and Pharisees helped keep people aware of the festivals. Synagogues had been built, and the law was taught weekly.

Jesus went to the festivals, although there is no evidence that he journeyed to Jerusalem for every festival in every year. When he was an infant in Egypt, for example, he probably did not — nor was it expected of Jews who lived there. After he moved back to Nazareth, his family went to Jerusalem every Passover season (Luke 2:41), so Jesus would have been familiar with the sacrificial rituals. Assuming that Joseph died and Jesus became head of the family, he would have brought Passover lambs to be sacrificed in Jerusalem.

Jesus taught during Passover seasons (John 2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55). His most famous Passover was his last (Matthew 26:26-29), and then he himself was sacrificed as our Passover lamb (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

Jesus taught during the Festival of Tabernacles (John 7:2-14), including its last day (verse 37). Although he taught during the festivals, he did not specifically comment on their meaning. He taught about living waters, for example, but he did not say that his message had anything to do with the festivals. Rather, it was about the Holy Spirit and faith in Jesus (verses 38-39). Jesus also kept Hanukkah, the Festival of Dedication (John 10:22).

There is only one festival that the Lord commanded Christians to observe. "Do this in remembrance of me," he said at his last meal (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24). He told his

disciples to commemorate his suffering and death by sharing bread and wine.

Annual festivals in the early church

The early church, composed entirely of Jewish Christians, continued to keep the festivals. They were assembled in one place on Pentecost (Acts 2:1) — but that is not unusual, since they often met together for prayer (Luke 24:53; Acts 1:14). On Pentecost, they were sitting in a “house,” not necessarily in the temple (Acts 2:2).

The next mention of a festival is in Acts 12:3-4. Herod arrested Peter during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, intending to prosecute him after the Passover season. Although the early church probably kept these festivals, these verses do not tell us that; the festivals are mentioned simply to tell us what time of year this happened. This passage is neither a command nor an example. The mere mention of a festival does not imply a command for its observance (cf. John 10:22).

The next mention is Acts 18:21 (in many texts; other Greek texts do not have this passage). Paul was debating with Jews in the synagogue at Ephesus (verse 19). They wanted him to stay longer, but he refused, saying, “I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem” (NKJ). Paul probably kept some of the festivals, just as he kept Jewish customs such as cutting his hair after a vow (Acts 18:18) and participating in purification rituals at the temple (Acts 21:26). Just because he did something does not mean that we have to follow his specific example. If we must literally follow all specific biblical examples set by both Jesus and Paul, then it would be necessary to observe the festivals in Jerusalem. That is the way that they were commanded.

Paul could have kept the festival in Ephesus if he wanted to (1 Corinthians 16:8; Acts 16:13). Although the Old Testament required festivals to be kept in Jerusalem, Paul didn’t have to go there; the requirement was not deemed applicable to Jews who lived outside of the Promised Land. However, he may have wanted to be in Jerusalem because there would be a large crowd of people to preach to. The text doesn’t tell us his motive.

Paul sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Acts 20:6). This verse, like 12:3-4, simply tells us when this happened; it does not say that Christians kept the festival, nor does it command us to. Similarly, Acts 20:16 tells us that Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. Although Paul probably planned to keep the festival in Jerusalem, the text does not tell us that he did; it simply tells us when he wanted to arrive. He could just as easily have kept the festival with the Ephesian church if he wanted to.

Acts 27:9 tells us that sailing was dangerous after “the Fast,” referring to the Day of Atonement. This text does not say anything about Christians observing this day (although they may have); it is simply a calendar marker in the story. Since Gentile churches were often associated with synagogues, the readers could have known when the Fast was because they knew when the Jewish festivals were.

Paul praised the Thessalonians for becoming imitators of the churches in Judea (1 Thessalonians 2:14). Did this involve festival-keeping? Not necessarily. The churches in Judea observed various Jewish customs, and we see in Acts 15 and Galatians 2 that they had

many traditions that weren't binding on Gentiles. If the Thessalonians were imitating *everything* the Judean churches did, their example isn't authoritative for us today. Actually, the context of 1 Thessalonians 2:14 tells us the way in which the Thessalonians were imitating the Judeans: They accepted the gospel as the word of God (verse 13) and were willing to accept persecution from their countrymen (verse 14b).

“Let us keep the Festival”

“Let us keep the Festival,” Paul told the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 5:8). Some have taken this to be a command to observe the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and as first glance it does appear to be a command for festival observance, but this is not what the passage teaches. First, let us note the context: In verses 1-5, Paul tells the Corinthians to put a sinful brother out of their fellowship. Then in verse 6, he writes, “Don't you know that a little leaven works through the whole batch of dough?” This proverb is similar to a modern one: “One rotten apple can ruin the whole bunch.” If Paul had written that, he would have been comparing rot to sin, indicating that rot must be removed before it spreads. In a similar metaphor in verse 6, Paul is comparing yeast to sin — and sin, if it's not corrected, can spread through the whole community.

When Paul says, “Get rid of the old yeast” (1 Corinthians 5:7), he is still speaking figuratively about disfellowshipping the sinful brother, not telling them to get rid of physical leaven. “Yeast” is still being used as a figure of speech for the sinful person. It would be like writing, Get rid of the rot.

When Paul says that the Corinthians are already unleavened — that they are a “new batch without yeast” — he is comparing the people to a lump of dough. He is not saying that their homes have all leaven removed, or that yeast has been removed from their diets. It is the Christian community itself that is, figuratively, the new batch of dough. This evidence in the text tells us that Paul is speaking metaphorically.

Further evidence that Paul is speaking spiritually is the last part of verse 7: The Corinthians are to put out spiritual leaven, and they are already unleavened, because Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed. They are spiritually cleansed by the atoning death of Jesus Christ, and they therefore ought to eliminate sin from their community. Christ's sacrifice on the cross is not a logical reason to put leaven out of our homes for one week, but it is a logical reason to put sin out throughout the year.

Paul was not addressing the topic of physical leaven. If he had wanted to forbid physical leaven, he would have said, “Put the leaven out, for the law has commanded us to.” Christ's crucifixion did not have anything to do with physical leaven, but it does remove spiritual leaven. It is the Corinthian Christian community, not their homes or their diets, that is said to be unleavened. Christ has declared them to be holy (1 Corinthians 1:2; Hebrews 10:10), so they ought to act like it. Sanctification is a process as well as an initial event (Hebrews 10:14).

Paul is telling them to put blatant sin out of their fellowship so they can be a group of people who live in holiness, since they have been sanctified or declared holy by the sacrifice

of Christ. They had leaven (i.e., the sinful member) in their midst, but Christ had made them unleavened (forgiven), so they had the logical duty to put the sinful member out of their fellowship. Paul is teaching the Corinthians to live up to what they already were. They were already cleansed; now they needed to continue to remain free from sin and corruption.

Paul says that Christ is our Passover. However, Jesus' sacrifice has changed the way the Passover is observed; it has also changed the way we strive to be unleavened, as Paul brings out in verse 8.

A better way to keep the festival

“Therefore” — because Christ has been sacrificed for us — “let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast...” Does this imply that we can keep the festival with new yeast? Of course not. Paul isn't talking about physical leaven, or else he wouldn't need the word “old.” Paul is contrasting the old lifestyle of sin with the new Christian lifestyle of holiness. Paul is telling the Corinthians to keep the festival in a new way, concerned about sincerity and truth. The old leaven he's talking about is clearly identified as “malice and wickedness” — that's the sort of thing we must put out. That's what the festival had pictured all along.

Now, Christians are to keep the festival with unleavenness (the word “bread” is not in the Greek). Again, Paul is not talking about being physically de-leavened — he clearly says that the unleavenness he is talking about is “sincerity and truth.” We are to keep the festival in the new spiritual way, by eliminating sin.

Christianity is a continuous festival, a celebration of the salvation we have in Christ. The festival symbolism, eliminating leaven, is fulfilled by the elimination of guilt and sin through the atoning work of Christ and his sanctifying work in our lives. For Christians, sincerity and truth characterize our complete devotion to and worship of our Lord and Savior. If we are circumcised in heart, we are not required to submit to the physical rite of circumcision, since we have fulfilled the spiritual principle that the physical rite pictured. Likewise, when we live in sincerity, truth and holiness, we are not required to remove yeast from our homes, since we have already fulfilled the spiritual meaning that the physical ritual pictured.

Could the Corinthians understand Paul's symbolism if they were not observing the festivals? Yes. They could understand Jesus' role as a Lamb of God without killing Passover lambs, and they could understand the spiritual fulfillment of sacrifices without killing any animals. Since the church in Corinth began in a synagogue, and there were Jews in Corinth, even the Gentile Christians could have understood the allusions without actually keeping the festival in the old covenant way. Some of the Christians in Corinth may have even kept the festivals in an old covenant way, but that in itself does not indicate that the festivals are required for all Christians.

The festival symbolism is fulfilled by the work of Christ in our lives.

Don't let others pressure you

Colossians 2:16 says, “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.” First, we

should note the connecting word “therefore” — it links verse 16 with the previous verses. Because Christ has circumcised us spiritually, forgiven us and given us new life, for that reason we should not allow anyone to judge us regarding various rituals.

Apparently the Colossian heretics taught that certain customs were required, and Paul is telling the Christians that they should ignore the heretics’ criticisms because of what Christ had done for them. The false teachings were probably a combination of Jewish customs and ascetic restrictions. The Christians were eating and drinking things that the heretics disapproved of (perhaps meat and wine), and the Christians’ behavior on festivals wasn’t what the heretics said was necessary. Perhaps the Christians were observing these days with less rigor than the heretics demanded, or perhaps they were not observing these days at all.

The Greek words translated “with regard to” literally mean “in part,” but there is no evidence that the Christians were observing only part of the festivals (such as all but the sacrifices). The words are a Greek idiom meaning with regard to, with respect to, in connection with, concerning, etc. The Christians were not to allow others to judge them in connection with or regarding what they did on a Jewish festival. But how could they stop other people’s attitudes? They could not; all they could do is make sure that the criticisms did not cause them to change their behavior as if it were necessary for salvation. That is probably what Paul meant. Christian behavior should not be determined by external pressures.

The clearest point in the whole passage is that we shouldn’t let people judge us regarding these things — not other Christians, not even people in our own fellowship. Salvation doesn’t depend on our observance of dietary rules or specific festivals. Christ is the judge, and we are to obey him rather than human traditions.

Does this verse imply that we can be saved whether we keep these days or not? Yes. That harmonizes well with the principle Paul gave in another situation (Romans 14:4-6). Some people regard the day as special to the Lord, and others regard it as optional, also basing their belief on their desire to obey the Lord. Each should be fully convinced, bringing every thought into submission to the Lord, but we are not to judge each other, since Christ is our Lord and our Judge. We are not to let others judge us (that is, pressure us to change our behavior because of their opinions), and we are not to judge others regarding food and drink and festivals.

Shadows pointing to Christ

Festivals, new moons and Sabbaths are shadows pointing to the reality, which is Christ (Colossians 2:17). The tabernacle and laws of sacrifices were also shadows (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). All these things had symbolic significance, but Christ fulfilled the symbolism of the old covenant rites. The old covenant specified holy places and holy times, but the New Testament does not label any time as “holy.” Just as in the case of circumcision, when we have been given the spiritual reality, we are not bound by physical worship rules.

Although Christians may observe the festivals as celebrations of various aspects of salvation, nothing in the New Testament says that they are required. In Colossians 2:16, the old covenant festivals are placed in the same category as new moon observances. Christ does

not require us to observe them, nor does he forbid us to observe them. Festivals can be helpful if they emphasize what Christ has done for us, but they can also take our attention away from Christ.

Weekly and annual sabbaths

Some of the arguments for the weekly Sabbath apply to the annual festivals, too. The Sabbath and festivals were instituted by God himself; so were the sacrifices and the tabernacle. The festivals are “feasts of the Lord,” but the tabernacle and sacrifices were, too. The festivals were commanded forever, but so were some of the sacrifices and so was circumcision. None of these are requirements for Christians today.

The new covenant is significantly different from the old; worship requirements have been greatly transformed. The Sabbaths are not signs or proofs of true Christianity and are not a basis for judging whether someone is in the faith.

Two festivals were instituted before Sinai, but circumcision was also instituted before Sinai, and it is not a requirement. Christians are inheritors of the covenant of promise that God made with Abraham because of his faith, and laws that were added afterwards cannot change the promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Even the festivals commanded before Sinai were given through Moses and are part of “the Law of Moses.” They were historically conditioned, linked to the agricultural seasons of a specific nation in a specific land, linked to physical salvation and physical promises.

The Sabbath and the festivals were commanded within the old covenant, and *only* within the old covenant. The terms of that covenant are not binding on Christians today. Observances instituted in the old covenant are obsolete unless we have evidence that they are also part of the new covenant. If we are to teach something as a requirement for people in a new covenant relationship with God, it must be based on the new covenant, not the old.

The prophets predicted a restoration of the festivals, but they also predicted sacrifices (e.g., Zechariah 14:20-21) and circumcision (Ezekiel 44:9). Their prophecies cannot be used to make requirements for the church in this age.

Faulty arguments

Jesus observed the weekly and annual Sabbaths because 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, etc. He also observed Hanukkah. Christians should be careful about using his example in cultural, time-bound circumstances.

We should instead focus on what he actually taught, and the meaning of what he *did* for us. If we were to teach circumcision as a requirement, for example, then we would be denying the significance of what Jesus did, even though Jesus never said anything against circumcision itself. We would be failing to recognize the new covenant that he brought; the same is true if we require other obsolete laws.

The early church observed the festivals, since the first Christians were Jewish. They also

observed circumcision and other customs that were not binding on Gentile believers. It was certainly permissible for Jewish believers to continue observing their traditions, but their example is not authoritative unless there is evidence that Gentiles were also required to observe these laws. God gave the Holy Spirit on one festival, but he never told us to commemorate that event with a required assembly (although many Christian churches observe Pentecost, it is by tradition rather than command); he gave the Spirit on other days, too. Later history shows a few Christians keeping the festivals, but some kept circumcision, too. Their example isn't authoritative. Our standard must be the Bible, particularly the new covenant.

Paul kept some festivals in Jerusalem, but he was away for most of them. He also kept other Jewish customs, so we can't just assume that we have to do everything he did. We need to discern which details of their lives were based on the culture they lived in, and which were based on the new life in Christ. Paul considered himself under the law of Christ, not under the law of the old covenant (1 Corinthians 9:19-21). Today, we are to obey the commands of Jesus (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus commanded a commemoration of his death, but he otherwise did not command Christians to observe any festivals. Likewise, Paul did not command Gentiles to keep the festivals. In referring to the Festival of Unleavened Bread, he spiritualized it, saying that Christians were to rejoice in sincerity and truth. And he told the Colossians to ignore what others might say regarding Jewish festivals and Sabbaths. They were symbolic shadows, so they did not matter. The reality to which they had pointed had come. They had symbolic significance, but so did circumcision and the sacrifices. They are meaningful, but that in itself does not mean that observance is required.

How many details are needed?

Moreover, if the festivals were required, we would have to ask how many of the customs are required. Can we say that one physical custom (unleavened bread) is still required but another physical custom (bitter herbs) is not? Or we might consider that the old covenant required not only temporary dwellings, but also homemade, substandard dwellings. Can we say that one aspect of the shelters is important, but the others are not? If we say that tree-branch booths are not practical in our climate, are we using convenience to limit our obedience?

The Israelites were told to celebrate the Feast of Ingathering with fruit, "palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars" (Leviticus 23:40). This passage tells us when the Feast should be observed. It tells us how to celebrate: with sacrifices, palm fronds, etc. It tells us who the festival is for: "native-born Israelites" (verse 42). It tells us why: the festival commemorates the beginning of the nation. It is arbitrary to insist on the dates for the festival (which appear to be based on climate in one part of the world), but ignore other details.

The Bible simply doesn't tell us that one part of the passage is to be obeyed forever and the next part is temporary. If we are to accept one verse as authoritative, shouldn't we accept the next verse, too? If we are to accept the weekly Sabbath, shouldn't we also accept the biblical instructions for it, which tell us to stay home?

The simple truth is that all these are *not* requirements under the new covenant. They are part of “the Law of Moses” that is not a requirement for membership in the Christian community (Acts 15). We may not understand precisely how Jesus fulfilled the symbolism of leavened loaves and other festival rituals, but we do know that in the New Testament our relationship with God is based on faith in Christ. He is our atoning sacrifice, so there is no reason to fast on the Day of Atonement, since we do not believe that atonement is made for us on that particular day. Since we have been given salvation in Christ, we are already abiding by the purpose of the festivals; we have begun to experience the reality that the festivals only pointed to.

Optional observances

Those who wish to abstain from leavened bread during that festival are free to do so, but there is no requirement to do so. We are spiritually unleavened through faith in the sacrificed Lamb of God, and there is therefore no need to physically perform something that was only a shadow of the reality. However, there is a danger in doing such optional things: they tempt us to think that we are more obedient and better than others. They tempt us to look to ourselves instead of to Christ for our salvation.

Similarly, those who want to fast on the Day of Atonement are free to do so, but they do not have to. It is not more righteous or holy to do so. Through his sacrificial death, Jesus Christ has already made us “at one” with God. At its best, the Day of Atonement is a celebration both of Christ’s atoning work and of the reconciliation with God that we have been given because of his work. Although fasting can be a spiritually valuable discipline, there is no new covenant requirement to continue the old covenant practice of fasting on this particular day to acknowledge one’s spiritual separation from God. Our fast days and worship days are not determined by the Hebrew calendar, which was given to Israel alone as part of the old covenant.

Paul did not require Jewish Christians to stop practicing their customs, but he did require them not to impose those customs on Gentile converts (Galatians 2:14-15). The law was a guardian that could lead us to Christ (Galatians 3:24), and if the festivals lead us to Christ, they are good. But they are not a substitute for Christ; they cannot save us. Nor are they a required addition to faith in Christ. People who keep the festivals, or the Sabbath, are not better Christians than those who do not. The important thing is whether people have faith in Christ and obey him. If we have faith, we are already fulfilling the purpose of Israel’s worship rules. We are saved by grace through faith, not by performance of specific old covenant customs.

Review

- The Israelite annual festivals were designed for the agricultural seasons of Palestine.
- Jesus kept the festivals and other obsolete laws.
- Paul used the festival as a metaphor of morality — when we live in sincerity and truth, we have already fulfilled the symbolism.
- The symbolism of Atonement has been fulfilled in Christ.
- Question: What is more educational: a date on a calendar, or a tree-branch booth? Should we encourage the educational aspects of the festivals?

20

Tithing

Many Christian churches are quite willing to do away with Sabbaths and dietary laws, but some are not willing to do away with tithing. They preach that church members should give 10 percent of their income to the church. Why is this old covenant law different — or is it? If we examine this law in the same way that we have examined others, what can we conclude? Let's look at the evidence, starting in the Old Testament.

Evidence in Genesis

The first biblical mention of tithing is in Genesis 14. After four foreign kings had taken Lot captive, Abraham attacked them and recovered all the booty. After his victory, the king of Sodom came out to meet him, and so did Melchizedek, a priest of God. Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and then Abraham “gave him a tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:20).

The Bible does not say whether Abraham had ever tithed before, or ever tithed later.
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The text does not tell us whether Abraham had ever tithed before, or ever tithed afterwards. But it does show that Abraham was generous. He gave the rest of his booty to the king of Sodom (verses 23-24). Abraham kept all of God's laws that were relevant in his day (Genesis 26:5), but Genesis does not tell us whether tithing was a law in Abraham's day. Many of God's decrees and requirements were built around the nation of Israel and the Levitical priesthood and tabernacle. Abraham could not have kept such decrees and laws. He may have tithed regularly, but we cannot prove it.

The next mention of tithing is in Genesis 28:20-22. Jacob had a miraculous dream. In the morning, he vowed to tithe if God helped him during his journey. He was trying to make a bargain with God. He wanted special help, and in return for that help, he was willing to worship God, and to tithe as a part of that worship. Tithing may have been part of the common worship practices of that time and culture — or it may have expressed an extra level of devotion.

Tithing in ancient Israel

In the Law of Moses, biblical commands about tithing generally concern grain, wine and oil. A different system of giving was required for some animals. In the last plague on Egypt, God killed the firstborn male of every animal and human, but he spared the Israelites and their animals. Therefore, God claimed ownership of every Israelite firstborn and firstling male animal (Exodus 13:2; Numbers 3:13).

This applied not only to the generation that left Egypt, but every future generation as well. “Clean” firstlings were to be given to the priests and sacrificed (Numbers 18:15-17); priests and people ate them during the festivals (Deuteronomy 15:19-20; 12:6, 17; 14:23). Firstlings of unclean animals and humans were to be redeemed (Exodus 13:12-15; 34:19-20). This continued to be the law in Nehemiah’s day (Nehemiah 10:36) and in Jesus’ day (Luke 2:23). The people also gave firstfruits of their harvest (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Leviticus 2:14), but these firstfruits do not seem to be a fixed percentage.

A different system of giving was required for some animals.

Tithing was required on flocks: “every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd’s rod” (Leviticus 27:32). Was this in addition to the firstlings, or was it instead of firstlings? We do not know exactly how these laws would be administered.

“A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord” (Leviticus 27:30). The tithes and firstfruits belonged to God, and he gave them to the Levites (Numbers 18:12-13, 21, 24). They could keep 90 percent of what they were given, but had to give 10 percent as an offering (verses 26-32).

Tithing was done in the days of Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 31:5-6), Nehemiah (Nehemiah 10:35-39; 12:44) and Jesus (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42). In Malachi’s day, tithing was required (Malachi 3:8-10), and physical blessings were promised for obedience, just as physical blessings were promised for obedience to the old covenant.

The people were supposed to take their tithes to the festival site, and eat them.

Two or three tithes?

In ancient Israel, a tithe of all agricultural produce belonged to the Lord; ten percent of the crop was “holy to the Lord” (Leviticus 27:30). Ten percent of the herds were also holy (verse 32). God then gave these tithes to the Levites: “I give to the Levites *all* the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting” (Numbers 18:21).

However, Deuteronomy 12:5-7 says that the people were supposed to take their tithes to the festival site, and eat them! “You must not eat in your own towns the tithe of your grain and new wine and oil, or the firstborn of your herds and flocks, or whatever you have vowed to give, or your freewill offerings or special gifts. Instead, you are to eat them in the presence of the LORD your God at the place the LORD your God will choose” (verses 17-18). Deuteronomy

14:23 is similar.

Some people conclude that Deuteronomy is talking about a different tithe than Leviticus and Numbers are. They believe that Deuteronomy is talking about a *second* tithe, which was to be used only for festival expenses. This conclusion is based in large part on the logic that the same tithe could not be given to the Levites *and* eaten by the people at the festivals. However, this assumption may be wrong. For one thing, it would mean that Deuteronomy says *nothing* about first tithe, nothing about the financial support of the Levites, even though Deuteronomy was the “second law,” the re-stating of the basic laws of Israel.

Dual use of holy property

A study of “firstlings” shows that the same animals can be given to the Levites *and* eaten by the people. It is possible to have two tithes, but it is not possible to have two sets of *firstborn* animals. Yet we find that firstlings were holy, given to the Levites, *and* they were eaten by the people. These were *compatible* uses, which suggests that a single tithe could also have the same

Firstlings were holy, given to the Levites, *and* they were eaten by the people.

compatible purposes. The firstling verses are in the *same* chapters as the tithing verses cited above. The *same financial system* is being discussed.

The firstborn animals belong to the Lord (Leviticus 27:26). God then gave all firstborn animals to the Levites (Numbers 18:15). The firstborn of all clean animals had to be sacrificed and the meat given to the Levites (verses 16-18). However, the people were also told to take the firstborn animals with them to the festivals and eat “in the presence of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 12:6-7). “You must not eat in your own towns...the firstborn of your herds and flocks.... Instead, you are to eat them in the presence of the LORD your God at the place the LORD your God will choose” (verses 17-18). Deuteronomy 14:23 is similar. The people were *sharing* the firstborn animals with the Levites.

Deuteronomy 15:19-20 describes the dual uses of the firstborn animals: “Set apart for the LORD your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks.... Each year you and your family are to eat them in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose.” The firstborn animals were taken to the festivals, sacrificed, and shared with the Levites.

Holy things could be given to the Levites *and* eaten at the festivals. Just as firstlings had dual use, the tithe could, too. The tithe for Levites and the tithe for festivals may have been the *same* tithe. Ten percent was enough to cover all worship expenses, including festival meals and the support of the Levitical system. God simply designated more than one use for his ten percent.

It is true that first-century Jews had a two or three-tithe system. The apocryphal book of Tobit mentions it; so does Josephus. The translators of the Septuagint seem to have understood it this way, too. However, we cannot accept them as authoritative. First-century Jews sometimes commanded more than was really required.

At the end of every three years of farming, the Israelites were to set aside a tithe for the Levites, resident aliens, orphans and widows (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12-15). It is not

clear whether this was an additional use of a previous tithe, or an additional tithe.

Tithing in the New Testament

Is tithing required in the new covenant? Tithing is mentioned only three or four times in the New Testament. Jesus acknowledged that the Pharisees were very careful about tithing (Luke 18:12), and he said that they should not leave it undone (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42). Tithing was a law at the time Jesus spoke. Jesus did not criticize the Pharisees for tithing, but for treating tithing as more important than mercy, love, justice and faithfulness.

Tithing was a law at the time Jesus spoke.

The only other New Testament mention of tithing is in Hebrews. The fact that Abraham was blessed by and paid tithes to Melchizedek illustrates the superiority of Melchizedek and Jesus Christ over the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 7:1-10). The passage then goes on to note that “when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law” (verse 12).

There was a change of the priesthood from the Levites to Jesus Christ, and this implies a change in the law that assigned the Levites to be priests. How much has been changed? Hebrews says that the old covenant is obsolete. The package of laws that commanded tithes to be given to the Levites is obsolete.

Honor God with our blessings

But it is still a valid principle that humans should honor God by voluntarily returning some of the blessings he gives them. However, the only place that a percentage is specified is within the old covenant.

Under the old covenant, tithing was required for the support of the old covenant ministers. The Israelites were required to give 10 percent — and their blessing was only a physical one! Christians in the new covenant have much better blessings — spiritual ones. How much more willingly ought we to give in thankfulness for the eternal blessings we have in Christ Jesus?

The Israelites were commanded to give 10 percent under a covenant that could not make them perfect (Hebrews 7:19; 9:9). How much more joyfully should we give to God under the new covenant? We have the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which does cleanse our conscience (Hebrews 9:14). Should we give less than a tithe, when the blessings we have are so much more glorious than those of the Israelites? Should we respond to God’s grace by giving less than before?

The old covenant gave us condemnation; the new covenant gives us justification and peace with God. How much more should we be willing to give freely and generously so God’s work can be done in the world — to proclaim the gospel, to declare the new covenant ministry that gives us true life, and gives that message of life to others?

Christians are obligated to give financial support.

Christians are generous

A person who loves Jesus Christ does not worry about whether tithing is commanded in the New Testament. A person who is transformed by Christ to be more like Christ is generous. Such a person wants to give as much as possible to support the gospel and to support needy members. Christians should give generously — but giving is a result of their relationship with God, not a way to earn it. We are given grace through faith, not through tithing. But shouldn't we be willing to give more than the minimum?

Some people act as if Christ liberates us from the law so that we can keep more for ourselves. That is false — he liberates us from the penalty of the law so that we can be free to serve him more, as loving children and not merely as slaves. He frees us so we can have faith instead of selfishness.

When it comes to money, the real question is, Is your heart in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Are you putting your money where your heart is? You can tell where your heart is by seeing where you are putting your money. “Where you treasure is, there will your heart be also,” Jesus said (Matthew 6:21).

Paul wanted their gift to be done in sincere love, not from compulsion.

In the new covenant church, there are financial needs — to support the poor, and to support the gospel by supporting those who preach it. Christians are obligated to give financial support for these needs. Let's see how Paul explained this obligation in

his second letter to the Corinthians.

Giving in the new covenant

Paul describes himself as a minister of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6), which has much greater glory than the old (verse 8). Because of what Christ did for him in the new covenant, Christ's love compelled Paul to preach the gospel, the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Paul exhorted the Corinthians “not to receive God's grace in vain” (6:1). How were they in danger of doing this? Paul had gone out of his way to serve them, but they were withholding their affections from him (6:3-12). He asked them for a fair exchange, for them to open their hearts to him (6:13).

Paul told the Corinthians that they had a duty to give something in response to what they had been given. This response comes in terms of morality (6:14-7:1), which the Corinthians had done (7:8-13), and in terms of affection, which the Corinthians had also done (7:2-7), and in financial generosity, which Paul addresses in chapter 8. This is the way that the Corinthians had closed their hearts to Paul and withheld their affections.

Sacrificial generosity

Paul cited the example of the Macedonian churches, who had given generously, even to the point of self-sacrifice, for the benefit of others (8:1-5). The example is powerful; the implications are strong that the Corinthians needed to respond to Paul's sacrifices by making

sacrifices themselves. But Paul did not make a command (verse 8). Instead, he asked first for a turning of the heart. He wanted the Corinthians to give themselves to the Lord first, and then to support Paul. He wanted their gift to be done in sincere love, not from compulsion (verses 5, 8). Paul reminded them that Christ had become poor for their sakes; the implication is that the Corinthians should make financial sacrifices in return.

But then Paul reduced the pressure, reminding the Corinthians that they could not give more than they had (verse 12). Nor did they have to impoverish themselves to enrich others; Paul was only aiming for equity (verses 13-14). Paul again expressed confidence in their willingness to give, and added the peer pressure of the Macedonian example and the boasting he had done in Macedonia about the generosity of the Corinthians (8:24-9:5).

Paul again noted that the offering must be done willingly, not from compulsion or given grudgingly (verses 5, 7). He reminded them that God rewards generosity (verses 6-11) and that a good example causes people to praise God and puts the gospel in a favorable setting (verses 12-14). This was a collection for the poor in Judea. But Paul said nothing about tithing. Rather, he appealed to the new covenant environment: Christ had made many sacrifices for them, so they ought to be willing to make a few sacrifices to help one another.

In asking for this offering, Paul was making a financial sacrifice himself. He had a right to receive financial support, but instead of that, he was asking that the offering be given to others. Paul had not asked for any financial support from Corinth (11:7-11; 12:13-16). Instead, he had been supported by Macedonians (11:9).

Paul said nothing about tithing. Rather, he appealed to the new covenant.

Paul had a right to be supported by the Corinthians, but he did not use it (1 Corinthians 9:3-15). This passage in Paul's *first* letter to Corinth tells us more about our Christian duty to give financial support to the gospel. Let's look at it in more detail. Paul explains to the Corinthians that love requires self-sacrifice, and he gives an example from his own ministry. In this example, Paul is giving up his rights to avoid offending the Corinthians. Though he is free, he chooses to be a servant for the sake of the gospel.

The rights of an apostle

“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (verses 1-2).

Apparently some people in the Corinthian church did not respect Paul, did not accept him as a genuine apostle and were refusing to give him any support. Paul replies that he has full apostolic credentials, but even by a lesser definition, they should accept him as an apostle because he is the one who brought the gospel to them. And because of that, he has certain rights.

“This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for

a living?” (verses 3-6).

Other apostles are being given support — enough to support their wives, too. The Corinthians apparently agree that those apostles have a right to financial support, but they deny it for Paul. (The other apostles were conveniently far away, barely aware of the Corinthians and unlikely to ask them for support.)

This is not fair, says Paul. Barnabas and I are doing the same kind of work, and we should be able to have the same kind of support. Paul gives some examples from secular society: “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain’” (verses 7-8, quoting from Deuteronomy 25:4).

This law is not simply about animals, Paul says. It is a principle that applies to people, too. “Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest” (1 Corinthians 9:9-10). Yes, people should be paid for the work they do.

If the work is worth doing, it is worth supporting.

The Lord’s command

Paul then applies the principle to his own situation: “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more?” (verses 11-12). In other words: If I have given you the gospel, you should be willing to support me as I preach the gospel. If I have given you something of eternal value, surely you should be willing to give me things of temporary value.

We have this right, Paul says, “but we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (verse 12). Paul is willing to set aside his rights — the gospel is more important to him than his own privileges. Paul’s example is relevant for many modern situations, and his comments challenge those who receive money as well as those who should give. All sides are called to self-sacrifice for the sake of the gospel.

This is common sense, Paul seems to say. The principle is true for oxen, soldiers, farmers and shepherds. If the work is worth doing, it is worth supporting, and this is true in religion, too: “Don’t you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?” (verse 13).

To clinch the argument, Paul quotes Jesus: “In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (verse 14, perhaps alluding to Luke 10:7). But then Paul again notes, “I have not used any of these rights” (1 Corinthians 9:15).

A command Paul did not obey

Paul clearly calls this a command of the Lord, and just as clearly says he does not obey the command. He makes his living by making tents — he understands the Lord’s command more as a command for *giving* than for receiving. The focus is on the responsibility of believers to support the work of the gospel.

The priority for Paul is not money, but the gospel. He willingly sets aside his right to financial support so that people will not think his message is just a speech designed to get money. Some Greek orators made their living by traveling and entertaining audiences with speeches. Others formed schools and charged students for lectures. Paul does not want anyone to think his message is motivated by selfish concerns.

But Paul’s willingness to support himself does not change the Lord’s command. Ministers of the gospel have a right to financial support, and believers have an obligation to provide support. But Paul is not asking for his own support. “I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast” (verse 15).

Even in this letter, Paul is not asking the Corinthians to support him. His request may have been for the collection he was coordinating for the believers in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). He wants to make it clear that he does not preach for his own benefit. Rather, he preaches because the Lord commanded him to preach. The gospel is his priority: “When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach.

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me” (1 Corinthians 9:16-17). Paul feels compelled, not quite sure whether he is a volunteer or a slave. As he does his duty, he also feels rewarded.

Those who receive spiritual blessings must be willing to share material things.

“What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it” (verse 18). Paul felt good in being able to preach without asking for money. That approach may be good when preaching to unbelievers, but eventually the time comes, as it has here for Paul, when believers must be taught about the Lord’s command. Those who accept the gospel of grace must become gracious, must become generous.

A slave of everyone

Paul again uses himself as an illustration of how believers should respond to the gospel with self-sacrifice: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (verse 19). His goal is the gospel, not himself. He sets aside his rights, gives up his freedom, to do the work Jesus has given him.

“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” (verse 20).

What does it mean to be “under the law”? Jesus was born “under the law” (Galatians 4:4), under the old covenant. Jews were under the law, and Paul obeyed the law when he was with Jews. Why? To win the Jews, to help them accept the gospel.

But Paul also says he is not under the law. Rather, he is free to live like a Gentile (Galatians 2:14), to live as though he does not have the law, as we see in 1 Corinthians 9:21: “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.” Paul continued to obey Christ even when he was not living under the Law of Moses. He was breaking the Law of Moses but not disobeying Christ.

Paul’s priority is to win people, to make the gospel attractive. He is obligated by the law of Christ to set aside his personal preferences so that he can serve others. He uses his freedom in Christ to be a slave, to adapt his behavior to the situation. His main goal is not to uphold tradition or to fight tradition, nor to side with one ethnic group or another, but to preach Christ.

“To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (verses 22-23). Paul does not want to disqualify himself (verse 27) by living a self-centered life. He goes out of his way to serve others, to serve the gospel. His example is consistent with his message: the message that God loved the world so much that he sent Jesus to die for us. Although we were enemies, Jesus gave up his rights and gave up his life as a ransom for us.

The example Jesus set includes a command for all of us: Those who receive spiritual blessings must be willing to share material things. Gospel workers should be able to receive financial benefits from their spiritual work.

But notice that throughout his appeal, Paul does not cite any laws of tithing. He says that priests received benefits from their work, but he does not cite any percentage. Their example is cited in the same way as the example of soldiers, vineyard workers, herdsmen, oxen, plowers and threshers. It is simply a general principle. As Jesus said, “The worker deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7).

Paul cited the oxen and wages scriptures again in 1 Timothy 5:17-18. Elders, especially those who preach and teach, should be honored financially as well as with respect.

Jesus and money

Jesus commanded, “Those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14). This implies that people who *believe* the gospel should provide a living for some who preach. There is a financial duty, and there is a promised reward for generosity (though that reward may not be physical or financial).

Christians have received riches of God’s grace, and are to respond with generosity and giving. Christians are called to a life of service, sharing and stewardship. We have an obligation to do good. When we give ourselves to the Lord, we will give generously. Jesus often taught about money.

“Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me,” said Jesus to a rich man (Luke 18:22). He said the same thing to his disciples (Luke 12:33). The new covenant demands all that we have, and that is fair, since Jesus gave all he had for us. He praised a widow who put two coins into the temple treasury, because she gave “all she had” (Luke 21:2).

Wealth is often an enemy of faith. It can “choke” people and cause them to be spiritually unfruitful (Luke 8:14). “Woe to you who are rich,” Jesus warned (Luke 6:24). He warned us about the dangers of greed (Luke 12:15) and warned about the danger of storing up wealth for self without being “rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21). When we use wealth to help others, we gain “treasure in heaven” (verse 33). This helps us have our heart in heavenly things instead of earthly, temporary things (verse 34).

“No servant can serve two masters.... You cannot serve both God and money” (Luke 16:13). But money competes for our allegiance; it tempts us to seek our own desires rather than the needs of the kingdom. After the rich man went away sad, Jesus exclaimed: “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom” (Luke 18:24-25).

A need to give

Christians have a need to give, to share their resources and blessings with others. They have a duty to support the preaching of the gospel, to give financial support to their spiritual leaders, and the church needs this support.

The old covenant required 10 percent. The new covenant does not specify a percentage, and since we do not have a clear command from Scripture, we cannot command a precise percentage for Christians today. However, the new covenant admonishes people to give what they can, and tithing still provides an instructive point of comparison.

For some people, 10 percent may be too much. But some will be able to give more, and some are doing so. Christians should examine their own circumstances and the better blessings they have been given in the new covenant through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us and the gift of the Holy Spirit to us. Money should be given to the church for its collective work of preaching the gospel and the expenses involved in the local ministry and congregational needs.

The old covenant required simple percentages. Everyone knew how much was required. The new covenant has no set percentages. Instead, it requires more soul-searching, more training for the conscience, more selfless love for others, more faith, more voluntary sacrifice and less compulsion. It tests our values, what we treasure most, and where our hearts are. Are we generous, or not?

Review

- Israelites were commanded to tithe on crops and give the firstborn of animals.
- The only commands for tithing are in the old covenant.

- In the new covenant, we have better blessings and promises. Shouldn't we respond with more generosity?
- What did Jesus command about supporting gospel workers?
- Does the Holy Spirit make us more generous, or less?
- Is money an enemy of faith? Which do we want more?
- Paul, despite extensive instruction about giving, never recommends tithing — he always bases his appeal on generosity of the heart.

21

Behavioral expectations in the new covenant

The most important command of the Bible is this: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:37). John states it this way: “This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 3:23). People will be saved or condemned on the basis of this command (Mark 16:16; John 3:18).

Jesus also told us the second most important command: “The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:39). John states it this way: “and to love one another as he commanded us” (1 John 3:23, last part).

The New Testament contains <i>hundreds of</i> commands.

This is the visible evidence of Christianity (John 13:35). “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20-21). And this command, because it is so broad, fulfills the Law and the Prophets (Romans 13:10; Galatians 5:14; Matthew 7:12).

Hundreds of commands

The New Testament contains *hundreds* of commands. All of them come under the general heading of love, for God is love. Everything he commands is an expression of love.

Although some of Paul’s comments about the law seem negative, Paul himself gave us hundreds of commands. He is not against law in itself, but he argues that the Law of Moses is no longer valid. In regard to the Mosaic law, he could say, “I myself am not under the law.” But in regard to obeying the Lord, he said, “I am under Christ’s law” (1 Corinthians 9:20-21).

In many of Paul’s letters, he begins by explaining some theological principles and ends with some practical application of those principles in the way we live. The book of Romans ends with numerous commands:

- “Love must be sincere.
- Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.
- Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.
- Honor one another above yourselves.
- Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.
- Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
- Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.
- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
- Live in harmony with one another.
- Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.
- Do not be conceited.
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil.
- Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.
- If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.
- Do not take revenge” (Romans 12:9-18).

And there are more commands in this chapter, and in the remaining chapters. Paul has some rather definite ideas as to how Christians ought to live, how we ought to respond to the grace God has given us in Jesus Christ. All this is part of the new covenant; we are not lacking for guidance on how to live!

Put on the new way

The book of Galatians has some critical words about the law, but it also has some commands of its own — new covenant commands. Paul even unites the concepts of liberty and obligation: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). Paul lists some behaviors that the Galatians should avoid (verses 19-21) and some that they should include (verses 22-26).

Ephesians also has direct advice for Christians. Paul begins his exhortations in this way: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

The gospel has implications for the way we should live and think.

We are to put off the old self, and put on the new self, which God is creating in us to be more like Jesus (verses 22-24). Then there are some very practical admonitions. For example: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (verse 25). The Christian lifestyle is summarized in this way: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1-2).

The gospel of Christ has implications for the way we should live and think (Philippians 2:1-7; 4:8). When we identify ourselves as followers of Christ, we are to eliminate evil: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:5-10).

Obedience expresses faith in God’s wisdom and love.

Five reasons to obey God

If God saves us by grace, apart from the good works that we do (Titus 3:5), why should we obey him? If there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) and our salvation is not in jeopardy, why should we struggle to obey?

- 1) The simplest reason is: It’s our duty. Through his death on the cross, Christ has purchased us (Acts 20:28), and it is only fair that we do what he says. We are children of God, and we are to do what he commands. Of course, we do not obey in order to be saved. Salvation comes first, and obedience should follow. But obedience goes deeper than duty. Obedience should come from the heart, done because we *want* to, not grudgingly, because we have to. So why should we *want* to obey? There are three main reasons: faith, hope and love.
- 2) In faith, we believe that God’s commands are for our own good. He loves us and wants to help us, not to give us unnecessary burdens. As our Creator, he has the wisdom to know how we should live, what works best and what causes the most happiness in the long run. And we have to trust him in that; his perspective is much better than ours. Obedience expresses faith in his wisdom and love. Obedience is what he made us for (Ephesians 2:10), and life works better if we are in tune with the way we were made.
- 3) Obedience also involves hope in a future blessing. If there is no future life, then Christianity would be foolish (1 Corinthians 15:14-18). Jesus promised that his disciples would find eternal life worth far more than anything they might have to give up in this age (Mark 10:29-30). Everyone who is saved will have the joy of knowing God in eternal life, but there are also rewards in addition to eternal joy. Jesus encouraged his disciples to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 19-21). Several of his parables indicate that we will be rewarded for what we do in this life. God rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6). Paul also wrote about rewards: “The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does” (Ephesians 6:8). This is not talking about salvation, but about rewards in addition to salvation. He described the judgment as a fire that tests the quality of every person’s

work. “If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward” (1 Corinthians 3:14). If it is burned up, he will lose it, but he will still be saved (verse 15).

- 4) But reward is not the only reason we work, for we are children of the King, not employees who do only what we get paid for. Our fourth motive for obedience is love. This includes love for people around us, because they will be better off if we obey God than if we do not. God’s instructions are sensible, not arbitrary rules. They help people get along with other people. But most of all, it is our love for God that causes us to want to obey him. He has done so much for us, that we cannot help but be thankful and want to please him. “If you love me,” Jesus says, “you will obey what I command” (John 14:15). “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching” (verse 23). John later wrote, “This is love for God: to obey his commands” (1 John 5:3). “The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar.... But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him” (1 John 2:4-5).
- We are children,
not employees who
do only what we
get rewarded for.
- 5) Our love for God means that we want to bring him favorable publicity, so that others will come to love him, too. Obedience serves as a witness to God and the gospel. Obedience says that God is great and good and wise, and we adore him. Obedience says that God is important, that he is valuable, and that he deserves our loyalty. Let your good deeds be seen, Jesus said, so that people can see them “and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). A bad example will bring the gospel into disrepute (Titus 2:5). But a good example can help people be favorably disposed to God. “Live such good lives among the pagans,” Peter wrote, “that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Peter 2:12). “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). Help the gospel be associated with good things, not bad.
- Help the gospel be
associated with
good things, not
bad.

It is easy to find dozens of commands in the new covenant. Almost every book in the New Testament has lists of things we should do, ways in which we can conform more closely to Christ. Most of the commands are easy to understand. They are plain, and yet very demanding. They demand all our time, all our emotions, all our thoughts and all our actions. In this life, we will never achieve all they ask.

Contrast with the Sabbath

We might briefly contrast these clear commands with the idea of a Christian Sabbath-day command. The New Testament has space for all sorts of commands, from obvious things to subtle things, but it never commands the Sabbath. This would be odd if the Sabbath were

an important command. We find sweeping statements that make the old covenant law obsolete, but unlike other commands, we never find the Sabbath commanded again or made an exception to the rule. Paul and John say a lot about the godly behavior that springs from Christian faith and love, but the Sabbath is simply never commanded.

Paul dealt with numerous problems of Christian living, and he listed numerous sins that characterize people who will not inherit the kingdom of God, but he never mentions Sabbath breaking. In describing sins of the Gentiles (Romans 1), he says nothing about the Sabbath. If the Sabbath is essential, it is certainly surprising that no one is ever criticized for ignoring it.

If the Sabbath is essential, it is surprising that no one is criticized for ignoring it.

In the first-century Roman Empire, slaves would have found it particularly difficult to keep the Sabbath. Some of them had unconverted, harsh masters (1 Peter 2:18). Some parts of the Roman Empire didn't even use a seven-day week.

But Peter and Paul did not have to answer questions about how slaves could keep the Sabbath. Why not? Because slaves didn't have to keep the Sabbath.

For one thing, first-century Jews did not believe that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath. For another, the decision at Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, was that converted, Spirit-filled Gentiles were not required to become circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Little is said about the Sabbath because it was not a problem.

Instead, the Sabbath was a neutral matter, neither commanded nor forbidden. People were free to rest on that day if they chose, or to use the day in other ways, as long as they did what they did to the Lord (Romans 14:5-6).

Likewise, the New Testament does not say that any other day ought to be a day of rest. There is no command to keep the first day, either as a day of meeting or a day of rest. It is neither commanded nor forbidden. Christians are free to work these things out for themselves. We are commanded to assemble together for worship, but we are not commanded when (Hebrews 10:25).

The important thing is not which day we observe, but whether we have faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He is the test commandment, the center of faith, the standard by which we will be judged. He is the answer to our deepest need.

The human problem

The message of Jesus is good news for all who feel their guilt.

Everyone has some concept of right and wrong, and everyone has done something wrong even by his or her own definition. "To err is human," says a common proverb. Everyone has betrayed a friend, broken a promise or hurt someone's feelings. Everyone has experienced the feeling of guilt. People therefore want God to stay away from them. They do not want a day of judgment, because they know they cannot stand before God with a clear conscience. They know they should obey him, but they also know that they have not. They are ashamed and guilty.

How can their guilt be erased? How can the conscience be cleared? "To forgive is

divine,” the proverb concludes. God himself will forgive. Many people know the proverb, but somehow do not believe that God is divine enough to forgive their sins. They still feel guilty. They still fear the appearance of God and the day of judgment.

However, God has already appeared — in the person of Jesus Christ. He did not come to condemn, but to save. He brought a message of forgiveness, and he died on a cross to guarantee that we may be forgiven. The message of Jesus, the message of the cross, is good news for all who feel their guilt. Jesus, the divine human, has paid the penalty for us. Forgiveness is given freely to all who are humble enough to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel is that even when we were sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). He did not come to save the righteous (there is no such person), but the sinners (Matthew 9:13). What are we supposed to do to be saved? Believe the gospel — just trust in Christ. He has done what we need.

Problem: Everyone falls short of what God commands (Romans 3:9-10, 23). Even people who do not have the law, know that they don’t always live up to what is right.

Another problem: the penalty of sin is death (Romans 6:23; 5:12).

Good news: Jesus paid the penalty for us (2 Corinthians 5:14-15; 1 Peter 2:24). Our sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ! (Acts 2:38; 10:43; 13:38-39; Romans 3:24). God is perfect, but human beings are not. God is holy, humans are not. No one deserves to live forever with God. No one can claim such an eternal blessing as a right. No one can claim to have *earned* the right to be with God forever. On judgment day, no one can say: “You have to let me in. I’ve been good enough.” No one is ever “good enough” to obligate God to do anything for them. What we deserve is death.

When judgment day comes, everyone will need mercy.

The role of faith

However, God does want us to live with him forever. He loves us and wants us, so he paid the penalty for us, as a gift. God loves us so much that he sent his only Son to die for our sins, for us. Through faith in him our sins are forgiven and we are given eternal life with God (John 3:16).

This is wonderful news, that God wants to live with us! However, sin continues to live in us (Romans 7:17-23). We all struggle with sin. No one can live perfectly (1 John 1:8, 10). No one is able to live up to the perfection that God commands. We are unable to be perfect and holy in the way God is perfect and holy (Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:15-16). Therefore, we have a continuing need for God’s mercy and forgiveness. No one can say, “I’ve been so good that I deserve to live with God forever.”

When judgment day comes, everyone will need mercy. Because all Christians sin, we continue to need God’s grace — and the good news is that we continue to be forgiven and made clean through the atoning work of our Savior. Salvation is a gift from start to finish.

Paul sometimes talks about forgiveness by using the term

Can anyone be declared righteous by obeying God’s law? Absolutely not!

justification, which means not only forgiveness but also giving us the status of being just or righteous. Christians are not just declared neutral, but are declared good and righteous, acceptable to God. How can this be? Let's take a closer look at what Paul wrote about justification.

Can a person be declared righteous by obeying God's law? Absolutely not! "We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28). "A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16). "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law" (Galatians 3:11). "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:5).

How then can we be declared righteous and acceptable to God? Through faith in Christ — and only through faith! "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).

We "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Romans 5:1-2). "The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified *by faith*" (Galatians 3:24).

Our need for grace

We are incapable of earning our salvation. We can never perform enough good deeds to make up for the fact that we are sinners. We can never be saved on the basis of righteous things we have done. Salvation is always by God's mercy and his grace.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). This gift has been made possible by the death of Jesus on the cross. He paid the penalty of our sins, and through faith in him — by accepting what he has done for us — we are clean and forgiven.

God's grace does not mean we are given permission to sin (Romans 3:31; 6:1). Paul specifically says that God created us to do good works (Ephesians 2:10), and that grace teaches us to quit sinning (Titus 2:11-12). Throughout the New Testament, we are exhorted to obey God, and we are warned about sin. But regardless of how obedient we might be, salvation does not come from our good works, but through the grace of God given to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

Regardless of how obedient we might be, salvation does not come from our good works, but through the grace of God.

Of all humans, Paul had an excellent claim to his own righteousness, both in the Old Testament law and in zeal for Jesus Christ. But he did not trust in his own works. "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ...in regard to the law, a Pharisee...as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my

Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Philippians 3:4-9).

The perfect righteousness that we need for salvation cannot come from ourselves. It can come only from Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel is that his righteousness is given to us by faith, not by works of the law. It is in Christ that “we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

“Christ Jesus has become...our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). He becomes our righteousness, and in him we become the righteousness of God. Through faith in him, we are justified — counted among the righteous.

At the pearly gates

Many Christians haven’t fully understood the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ.

Jesus’ death covers all our sins; that is the *only* excuse we have to live with God forever.

Many people still think that salvation is by faith plus works. The truth is that works can’t save us at all, since even at their best they fall short of what God has commanded.

As an illustration, let’s suppose that people are at the gates of paradise, and the gatekeeper asks, “Why should I let you in?” And many Christians would say: “Because I’ve been good. I went to church every week, I always gave a generous offering, I read the Bible every day, I never took anything that wasn’t mine, I never looked at pornography, etc.” Alcohol abstainers would mention what they did, and Sabbath keepers would mention what they did.

But the gatekeeper would reply: “So what? You didn’t do everything perfectly. And even if you would have, those things wouldn’t erase your sins and corruption. If that’s what God wanted, he could make machines to do those things.”

The correct reply, in contrast, is that we rely in faith on the sacrifice and righteousness of Jesus Christ, knowing we have nothing to offer God. His death covers all our sins; that is the only excuse we have to live with God forever. Salvation is given to us because of God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ, nothing else. The faith and love God has granted us lead us into obedience and wholehearted devotion to him, but salvation does not depend on our success in obedience, or else we would never be saved. Since our obedience is never perfect, it can never count for salvation.

The law can deceive us

This is where the law can deceive us. I used to keep some of the old covenant laws, and they gave me visible evidence that I was trying harder than most people to obey God. The fact that most Christians did *not* keep these laws made it even more deceptive for me, for that was further evidence that I was more

Obedience to laws that make us different can deceive us into thinking that our diligence is worth something.

obedient than others, and I assumed that God was impressed with what I was doing.

I was different, so I assumed I was special. In that, I was deceived. All my emphasis on law-keeping had distracted me away from Christ. Although I trusted in him for my salvation, I preferred to look at something more visible — my works, something that I could boast in. But as Ephesians 2:9 says, our salvation is not of works, so that no one can boast. No one can get into the kingdom of God thinking that they did it themselves. But as I learned that the old covenant laws were not even required, I could see how flimsy my boast was. All my “obedience” counted for nothing but well-meaning mistakes!

Obedience — especially to laws that most Christians don’t keep — can deceive us into thinking that our diligence is worth something to God. No, Christ had to die on the cross for us just as much as he did for the prostitute and the child-molester. That hurts our pride, but it is true.

Even so, obedience is important. If we have faith in our Lord, we will obey him. We live for our King who died for us and now lives for us and in us (2 Corinthians 5:15). Our deepest allegiance is with him forever.

Words for salvation

The Bible sometimes describes salvation with the word *redemption*. This word comes from the ancient slave market. People who could not pay their debts were sold into slavery. If their friends and relatives were able to get enough money to pay the debt, then they could redeem or buy the person back from slavery.

We cannot work our way out of slavery, but Christ is able to pay our debt for us.

To use this figure of speech for salvation, we see that we have a debt to sin that we cannot pay, and we find ourselves in the slavery of sin. We cannot work our way out of slavery, but Christ is able to pay our debt for us. His death on the cross redeemed us out of sin and debt. He purchased us, and we became his slaves. We are now obligated to our new Master, and we owe him our obedience and loyalty (Romans 6:15-18).

Of course, God values us much more than slaves. We are his children and heirs; we are his friends and family, members of his household. And through our Savior Jesus Christ, even our broken personal relationship with God is restored! To describe this, the Bible uses the term *reconciliation*. We were once enemies of God, working against him. But through Christ, we are reconciled to him, made friends again. Once we were rebels; now we are allies. We have given our allegiance to God because of what he has done for us. Let’s see how Paul develops this concept.

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is

Those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them.

this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Romans 5:8-11).

We were reconciled — made acceptable to God — through the cross of Christ. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Because he died for us, we therefore have an obligation: “He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (verse 15). We are to live for him, doing his work, living in the way he wants. Our new life is in Christ (verse 17).

Because Jesus died for us, we now live for him. We obey him. We have a new life. This is described in other places as being “born again” (John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:23). Our purpose and orientation in life is changed by our new relationship with God.

Our new identity as God’s children has practical results in the way we live. As he is living in us, he is also changing our hearts and minds toward his purposes. The Holy Spirit leads us to continue to put off old ways and to put on Christlike ways. Because Jesus loved us, we love him, and we love the people he loves.

“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel” (Colossians 1:21-23).

As part of our love for God and neighbor, we support the “message of reconciliation” —

God puts us into a community of other believers, for fellowship, for mutual assistance and encouragement, and for growing in the faith.

the good news that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ — the good news that forgiveness is given through faith in him (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). As Christians, we are Christ’s representatives, and God is making his appeal to humanity through us. Just as Paul did, we urge people to be reconciled to God through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

A chosen people

Peter says that Christians are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” And why have we been chosen? “That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Once we were not God’s people — we were alienated from him. Now, through the reconciliation given to us through Christ, through the mercy of God, we are now his people, his children (verse 10).

How then should we live? Peter continues: “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (verses 11-12).

As Christ saves us, the Holy Spirit puts us into a body, the body of Christ, the church of God. God puts us into a community of other believers, for fellowship, for mutual assistance

and encouragement, for growing in the faith. Throughout the New Testament, believers are often found meeting together. Although their homes may be scattered among unbelievers, they form a new community, the church.

In the church, we are learning to love each other, to be reconciled to each other, to help each other. We worship God together, we pray together, we study the Bible together and encourage each other in the faith. And together, we reach out to share the gospel with those who walk in darkness.

As an organized community, the church encourages its members to serve others, each according to his or her ability. But our interactions are not just with one another — they are also spiritual. Our fellowship is also with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As we express love to one another, we also express love for God, since God wants us to love one another.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:9-11).

Review

- The New Testament gives us a lot of guidance on how we should live.
- Obedience is not an attempt to earn salvation, but is an expression of faith, hope, and love. Which reason motivates you most?
- Although the New Testament has space for hundreds of commands, it does not command the Sabbath.
- Law-keeping can never make us good enough for salvation. Christ is our only hope of salvation.
- Question: How do we live for Christ? (2 Corinthians 5:15)

Appendix 1

Brief answers for questions about the Sabbath

The Bible says, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8). God’s people were told to rest on the seventh day of every week. Nevertheless, most Christians today do not observe the seventh-day Sabbath — they say it is obsolete. This appendix explains why. We will examine the major questions and give brief answers. Chapters 9-16 give longer explanations for each question, but this appendix will give a concise overview.

1. Was the Sabbath commanded at creation, even before humanity sinned?

There is no evidence in the Bible that God commanded the Sabbath before the days of Moses. Genesis says that God rested, but nowhere does it say that the first humans were commanded to follow his example. Before humans sinned, they lived in a blessed and holy time, in which they were in a state of peace with God, trustful and obedient. They did not need to labor in the way they later did. They did not need to set aside a day for communion with God, for they had it continually. The first human did not need to rest on the second day of his life.

God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, but that does not mean that he required people to rest on it. As the Jubilee year shows (Leviticus 25:8-12), time can be holy without requiring a rest. In the days of Moses, the creation week was used as a pattern for commanding the seventh-day Sabbath, but that *pattern* does not prove that the Sabbath existed ever since creation.

When the effect on our lives is so great, we need a clear command, not a questionable inference.

If God commands the Sabbath, then we should keep it, of course, even if we have to adjust our schedules, suffer financially, and alienate our families. But if God does not require the Sabbath, then it would be wrong to put this unnecessary burden on anyone. When the effect on our lives is so great, we need to make sure that we have a clear command from God, not a questionable inference. Genesis does not command the Sabbath, never mentions the word, and never pictures anyone as keeping it.

Abraham kept all of God’s commands (Genesis 26:5), but this does not mean that he

kept all the annual festivals, sacrificed his firstborn animals, or did any of the other laws that Moses gave. This verse tells us that Abraham was obedient to all the laws that applied to *him*, but it doesn't tell us *which laws applied*. The Jewish Talmud says that Abraham did *not* keep the Sabbath; the Jews believed that the Sabbath was given, as the Bible describes, through Moses to the Israelite people.

2. The Sabbath was called holy time. Doesn't it remain holy forever?

Not necessarily. In ancient Israel's worship system, many things and places were holy. Firstborn animals and children were holy (Exodus 13:1-2), but they are not holy in the same way today. The Jubilee Year was holy, but it is not so today. The laws of holiness told the Jews how to worship God, and although we might think that worship laws telling us how to show love to God are the most important, the fact is that *many* of ancient Israel's worship laws are now obsolete. God does not expect us to worship him in exactly the same way that the Israelites did.

3. The Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. Shouldn't Christians keep the Ten Commandments?

Christians generally agree that nine of the Ten Commandments still apply today. The last six commandments are quoted several times in the New Testament — but it is a mistake to *assume* that the Sabbath command is also commanded today. We are asking *whether* all Ten of the Commandments are still required — we cannot assume in advance that all Ten *must* stay together. We need to see what the Bible says about it.

The Bible refers to the Ten Commandments as a group in only three places. They are called the covenant that God made with his people through Moses (Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 4:13) — and that covenant is now obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). Christians are not required to keep “the law of Moses” (Acts 15). The law-code of Moses, although containing some eternally-valid laws, also contains some temporary laws that became obsolete when Jesus Christ came. All Christians agree that *some* of these God-given laws became obsolete; but does the list of obsolete laws include the Sabbath? We cannot judge the law by its neighbors — we cannot *assume* that it is valid, nor can we *assume* it is obsolete.

To answer our question, we must turn to the New Testament. Although some of the commandments are quoted at various places in the New Testament, the only place in the New Testament where the Ten Commandments are mentioned *as a group* is in 2 Corinthians 3. There, Paul talks about tablets of stone when Moses' face was shining in glory (verses 3, 7). Clearly, Paul is talking about the Ten Commandments. Notice what he says: They are the letter that kills, a ministry of death and condemnation, which came in glory but its glory is now fading away (verses 6-11). The new covenant, in contrast, is a ministry that brings life, is much more glorious, and is a ministry that does not fade away.

Paul did not praise the Ten Commandments as part of the Christian way of life. Rather, he pointed out ways in which the gospel of Jesus Christ is *different* from the Ten Commandments. They were part of a ministry that was fading away. Since Paul says that the ministry of the letter is fading, it should be no surprise if we find that one of the Ten was a

temporary command. *Something* about those stone tablets is fading away; we cannot assume that all Ten Commandments are eternal.

4. Didn't Exodus 31:16 declare the Sabbath to be a perpetual covenant between God and his people?

Yes, but so was circumcision (Genesis 17:13) and the weekly showbread (Leviticus 24:8). The same Hebrew word is used to say that the Day of Atonement is a lasting ordinance, and the Levitical priesthood will continue (Leviticus 16:29; Exodus 29:9; 40:15). Obviously, the Hebrew word does not mean eternal. The covenant that God made with the Israelites is now obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).

God gave the Sabbath to the Israelites as a sign between God and the Israelites (Exodus 31:17). The Sabbath made the Israelites different from other nations — but Paul says that the laws that separated Jews and Gentiles have been done away by the cross of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-18).

5. Didn't Isaiah say that Gentiles would be blessed for keeping the Sabbath?

Yes, he did. He also said Gentiles will offer burnt offerings and sacrifices (Isaiah 56:7). The prophets predicted that people will observe new moons (Isaiah 66:23; Ezekiel 46:3), discriminate against uncircumcised people (Isaiah 52:1-2; Ezekiel 44:9), sacrifice in the temple (Ezekiel 20:40; Zechariah 14:20-21) and observe other laws that Christians do not need to. The prophets lived under the old covenant, and they described devotion to God in terms of the old covenant. We cannot assume that these apply to Christians in this age.

6. Jesus kept the Sabbath. Shouldn't we follow his example?

True, Jesus kept the Sabbath. He kept all the Jewish laws, because he was born under the law and kept it perfectly (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 4:15). He killed Passover lambs, tithed to the Levites, told cleansed people to make offerings commanded by Moses (Matthew 8:4), and he observed Hanukkah (John 10:22). He would have worn blue threads on his garments (Numbers 15:38) and done a lot of other things that Christians aren't required to imitate. When we look at the example he set, we must remember the historical context.

What kind of example did Jesus set on the Sabbath? The Bible never says that he rested — we are told only of his *activity*. He never commands anyone to keep the Sabbath, nor praises anyone for it. Rather, he constantly criticized people who had rules about what could or could not be done on the Sabbath. He always taught more freedom, never any restrictions. Although he told people to be very strict about some laws (Matthew 5:21, 28, etc.), he was always liberal about the Sabbath.

<p>Jesus criticized their rules about what could or could not be done on the Sabbath.</p>

Jesus always compared the Sabbath to ceremonial laws, not to moral laws. When his disciples were picking grain, he used the example of the showbread, and the work of the priests in the temple (Matthew 12:3-6). Those rituals were just as important as the Sabbath. He said that circumcision could be done on the Sabbath (John 7:22), which indicates that

circumcision is a more important law than the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a ritual law — it says that behavior that is perfectly good one day, is forbidden on another, simply because the earth has rotated. But true morality does not change from one day of the week to another. When ritual laws became obsolete when Jesus died, it should be no surprise that the ritual of the Sabbath also became obsolete.

Jesus said that daily chores could be done on the Sabbath (Luke 13:15). Even hard labor could be done in an emergency (Luke 14:5). He told a healed man to carry his sleeping mat, even though there was no hurry (John 5:8). He even used the word “work” to describe his activity (verse 17). Many Christians follow *this* example. They remember that Jesus consistently criticized the Sabbath rules of the Pharisees, and that he treated it as a ritual law.

7. Jesus said the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27).

Circumcision was made for man, too. All of God’s laws, even the obsolete ones, were made for humans. The Sabbath law was made to benefit humans, to serve them, not become an unpleasant burden. Jesus said this to argue for liberty, not for making requirements. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath — he has authority over it, and he can set it aside if he wants to.

8. Luke 23:56 tells us that even 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?

The women rested on the Sabbath, but their example does not tell us whether that commandment is still in effect. They did not yet understand that God no longer required ritual laws. Luke’s readers might have wondered why the women rested even though they were faced with an urgent need, so Luke told them why — 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 same word to describe the rules that divided Jews from Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15), but Paul says that those commandments do not have any validity for his readers. The word “commandment” does not imply any validity or permanence. Luke is simply using ordinary words to explain why the women rested. He is not commanding his readers to follow that example.

9. Jesus said that his disciples should pray not to flee on the Sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Doesn’t this mean that we should be keeping it?

No. It is permissible to flee for your life on the Sabbath. But Jesus said that people *in Judea* (verse 16) could find it difficult, just as they would find it difficult but not sinful to flee in winter (verse 20). This verse does not say whether the disciples would be keeping the Sabbath or not — it just recognizes that other people in Judea would be, so it would be difficult for the disciples to flee when city gates were closed, shops were closed, etc. This verse does not command the Sabbath — it only shows that it would be difficult for people in

We are abiding by the purpose of the Sabbath command when we put our faith in Christ. It is in him that we find the rest that we need.

Judea to flee on the Sabbath.

10. Hebrews 4:9 says a Sabbath-rest still remains for believers today.

Hebrews 4 is talking about a future rest. People did not have this rest in Joshua's day, nor when Psalm 95 was written (verse 8), so this chapter is not talking about the weekly Sabbath. This rest is entered by faith in Christ (verse 2). By using the word "Sabbath-rest," Hebrews is saying that the weekly Sabbath symbolized the real rest that God wants his people to enter. Just as the Levitical sacrifices symbolized the work of Christ, the weekly Sabbath pictured our final salvation. This symbolism says nothing about whether Christians should continue observing the symbols.

In one way, symbols are obsolete, but in another way, they are still required. Circumcision is a great example. Christians do not have to be physically circumcised (Romans 2:29) — but we should be circumcised in the heart. We are to keep this ritual law, but we do so in the spirit, not the letter. In one sense, Christ has made the law obsolete; in another way, he has transformed it and still requires it in its transformed way. The same is true of the Levitical rituals: although we do not offer animal sacrifices, we are obedient to those laws when we have faith that Jesus Christ fulfilled those sacrifices. The requirement has been transformed.

The example of Paul, like that of Jesus, is always liberty.

In a similar way, since the Sabbath points toward our final salvation, and this salvation is in Christ, we are abiding by the *purpose* of the Sabbath command when we put our faith in Christ. It is in him that we find the rest that we need (Matthew 11:28-30). The requirement for rest has been transformed to focus on Christ rather than a day of the week. If we have faith in him, we are entering God's rest and we are therefore keeping the spiritual intent of the Sabbath.

11. Revelation says that the end-time people of God will be keeping God's commandments (Revelation 12:17).

This verse does not say *which* commandments are still valid. It is wrong to assume that it means the Ten, when God has actually given many more commandments than that.

Paul pointed out ways in which the gospel is *different* from the Ten Commandments.

12. Didn't Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, keep the Sabbath?

When Paul was preaching the gospel in a new city, his custom was to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2). But this does not mean that he *kept* the Sabbath. Paul wanted to preach to Jews first, and the best place to do this was in a synagogue, and the best day to do it was the Sabbath, when the Jews were there. It was simply a good evangelistic strategy to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. However, Paul never taught anyone to keep the Sabbath.

Paul sometimes kept Jewish laws such as circumcision, making vows, and participating in temple rituals (Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:26). When he was with Jews, he lived like they did —

but he was not under the old covenant (1 Corinthians 9:20). When with Gentiles, he could live like a Gentile, just as Peter could (verse 21; Galatians 2:14). In the first century, neither Jews nor Gentiles believed that Gentiles should keep the Sabbath. If Paul had a different view, we should expect to see some evidence, but there is none.

In the Gentile cities of Lystra, Derbe and Athens, nothing is said about the Sabbath. In some places, Paul preached every day (Acts 17:17; 19:9). When he was in Troas, we do not hear anything about the Sabbath. Rather, the church waited until the first day of the week to come together and break bread (Acts 20:7). The example of Paul, like that of Jesus, is always liberty, and makes no restrictions or commandments about the Sabbath.

Before we see what Paul taught about the Sabbath, let us summarize our observations.

- 1) The first place we see a *command* for the Sabbath is in the law of Moses.
- 2) The law of Moses contains many commands that Christians do not have to keep.
- 3) Even laws that came before Moses, such as circumcision, can be obsolete.
- 4) To see which laws are obsolete, we need to study the New Testament.
- 5) The New Testament never commands the Sabbath.
- 6) Jesus always criticizes Sabbath rules, and never tells anyone to be careful about what they do on the Sabbath.
- 7) Jesus always groups the Sabbath with ceremonial and ritual laws.
- 8) Peter and Paul could live like Gentiles if they wanted to.
- 9) Paul said that *something* about the Ten Commandments was fading away.

Because of the cross, regulations about the Sabbath are obsolete.

Should Christians keep the seventh-day Sabbath? Is the command clear enough to require people to lose their jobs and alienate their families? No — the only place that the Sabbath is commanded is in a covenant that the New Testament calls obsolete. True, the New Testament does not explicitly say that the Sabbath is obsolete. Instead, it says much more — that the entire old covenant is obsolete. It says that Christians do not have to keep the law of Moses. It says a large category of law is no longer required, and it never tells Christians to keep the Sabbath. *None* of the Sabbatarian arguments proves that the Sabbath is still commanded.

If the Sabbath were required, it is surprising that the New Testament never repeats the command. It has space for all sorts of other commands, from holy kisses to avoiding idolatry, but it never commands the Sabbath. It never criticizes anyone for breaking it. Paul dealt with numerous problems of Christian living, but he never tells slaves or others how to keep the Sabbath. He lists numerous sins that can keep a person out of the kingdom of God, but he never mentions the Sabbath. If the Sabbath is important, the silence of the New Testament is astounding.

But the evidence against the Sabbath goes even further than what we have covered. The New Testament not only *fails to command* the Sabbath — it says that it is *wrong to require it*.

13. Christians should not judge others about the Sabbath.

The only time that Paul mentions the Sabbath by name is in Colossians 2:16-17. He

says, “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.” Here, Paul groups the weekly Sabbath with the annual festivals, the monthly rituals, and eating and drinking restrictions of Judaism.

There is no translation problem here — Paul is talking about the weekly Sabbath and saying that it, like the other rituals of Judaism, is not a basis for judging. The Christians at Colossae should not let other people judge them by what they do on the Sabbath day — and in the same way, they should not judge other Christians by what *they* do on the Sabbath. In other words, they are not to say it is wrong for other Christians to be working on the Sabbath. Christians should not let anyone make them feel guilty for what they do on the Sabbath.

The reason for this, Paul says, is because Christ is the reality that these rituals symbolized. Since Christ has canceled our debts (verse 14), we should *therefore* not let anyone criticize us for what we do on the Sabbath. Because of the cross, the regulations about the Sabbath (as well as the new moons and annual festivals) are obsolete.

Paul told the Galatians that the promises of salvation were given to Abraham (Galatians 2:16). Then a law was added 430 years later—all the laws added through Moses (verse 17). This law was temporary, in effect only until “the Seed” (Christ) had come (verse 19). This law was put into effect until Christ, but now that he has come, we are not under the supervision of that law (verses 24-25). The New Testament message is consistent: the old covenant, the law of Moses, is obsolete. If a command (such as the Sabbath) can be found *only* within the temporary law, then it is not likely to still be required.

14. In Christianity, every day may be treated alike.

In Romans 14, Paul writes that some Christians consider “one day more sacred than another,” whereas other Christians consider “every day alike.” In the Roman church, partly composed of Jews and partly composed of Gentiles, it is obvious what kind of days might be considered sacred.

But Paul says, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” In other words, he is saying that it is permissible for a Christian to think that every day is alike! He did not feel any need to explain that one day of the week should be considered different. He was quite content for Christians to consider them all the same. His concern here, as it was in Colossians, was that Christians should not judge one another about their different customs (verse 4).

Paul was indifferent about the question of days — and the only reason that he could be indifferent about it, was that he considered the Sabbath command to be obsolete. If Christians work on the Sabbath, we are not to judge them or call them wrong, because they are not wrong. The Sabbath command does not apply. First-century Jews did not think that the Sabbath applied to Gentiles, anyway. Paul would have had an uphill battle if he had wanted to teach otherwise. The reason that Paul could be so indifferent about days, that he could tell people not to judge one another about them, is that they were not commanded.

15. God accepts us on the basis of Christ, not on whether we keep a certain day of the week.

The Sabbath (or any other distinctive practice) can deceive a person and subtly reduce the importance of Jesus Christ. The tendency is to think, “I please God because I keep the Sabbath. I am counted as one of his people because I keep the Sabbath.” But God knows us as his people through Christ, not through a day of the week. The Bible says that the *only* reason that we please God is because of Jesus Christ:

“He saved us, *not because of righteous things we had done*, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7; see also 2 Timothy 1:9).

No matter how many laws we keep, we are sinners, and the only reason that we can be saved is because Jesus died for our sins. But a focus on laws, especially laws that make us different from other people, tends to put the focus back onto ourselves—and what we do. For some people, the badge of betterness is a certain style of worship. For others, it is a certain belief, or the avoidance of alcohol, or a style of dress. For Sabbatarians, it is the Sabbath. Not everyone falls into this trap, of course, but the more distinctive the doctrines, the more likely that people will value them too highly.

Suppose we come to the Day of Judgment and we are asked, “Why should we let *you* into the kingdom of God?” How will we answer? Will we talk about what laws we kept? Or will we trust in Christ alone? Will we try to claim *part* of the credit? The Bible says that our only basis of salvation is faith in Christ,

If a valid law counts for nothing, what good does it do to keep an obsolete one?

and that no one has *anything* to boast about (Ephesians 2:8-9). Our works don’t count for anything; our only hope is Jesus Christ, and any doctrine or practice that obscures this fact is an enemy of faith. Anything that tempts us to look at what *we* do, tempts us to take away some of the trust that we should be giving to Christ.

Christians try to obey God, but our obedience does not count anything for our salvation. There are many reasons to obey God (faith in his wisdom, gratitude for his mercy, personal love for him, desire to spread the gospel, etc.), but salvation is not one of them. Salvation is a gift; obedience is a response — and that is for laws that are still valid in the New Testament era. If obeying a valid law counts for nothing, what good does it do to keep an obsolete one?

Of course, Christians may refrain from work one day a week if they wish. Spiritual disciplines like that *can* be helpful to a person’s spiritual growth, but they can also become obstacles, if people begin to think that these particular practices make them better than others. And these practices can become spiritually dangerous, if people think that everyone else ought to measure up to the way they worship God. Christians should not place themselves “under the law” (Galatians 3:25) as if the laws of Moses still had authority over them.

Jesus criticized people who taught requirements that God did not have: “You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and

you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” (Luke 11:46). When we teach requirements, we need to be very careful.

The Sabbath has nothing to do with salvation, and nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was never part of the message of the New Testament church. The message is always one of liberty, never one of restrictions on a particular day of the week. God accepts us because of Jesus Christ, not because of anything that we do. It is by grace, not works. We are to trust in Christ for our salvation.

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Review

- The Sabbath was not commanded at creation.
- It was commanded only within the Sinai covenant, which is now obsolete.
- Jesus criticized Sabbath rules and set an example of activity, never of rest.
- Jesus showed that the Sabbath was a ritual law, like sacrifices and circumcision.
- The apostolic example is liberty on the Sabbath, not restrictions.
- The New Testament says that the Sabbath is not something on which we will be judged.
- We are saved by grace, not by rules that make us different.

Appendix 2

For further reading

You might find some of the following materials helpful:

- Anderson, Brian. "Old Testament Tithing vs. New Testament Giving." Milpitas Bible Fellowship. www.solidrock.net/publications/anderson/sermons/ot.tithing.vs.nt.giving.html
- Bacchiocchi, Samuele. *From Sabbath to Sunday*. Biblical Perspectives, 1987. A book with an unusual theory about early church history, by a Seventh-day Adventist.
- Carson, D.A., editor. *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*. Zondervan, 1982, or Wipf & Stock, 2000. Scholars examine Scripture and history.
- Dorsey, David. "The Law of Moses and the Christian: A New Approach to an Old Problem." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (Sept. 1991): 321-334.
- Morrison, Michael. *Which Old Testament Laws Apply to Christians Today?* Worldwide Church of God, 1997. Available online at www.wcg.org/lit/law/otl/ Also see also the numerous articles at www.wcg.org/lit/law/
- Ratzlaff, Dale. *Sabbath in Christ*. Life Assurance Ministries, 2003. A book against the Sabbath, by a former Adventist.
- Strand, Kenneth, editor. *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*. Review & Herald, 1982. A pro-Sabbath book by Adventists.
- Strickland, Wayne, editor. *Five Views on Law and Gospel*. Zondervan, 1996. Chapters are written by Greg Bahnsen, Walter Kaiser, Douglas Moo, Wayne Strickland, and Willem Vangemeren.
- Swartley, Willard. *Sabbath, Slavery, War and Women*. Herald Press, 1983. This book presents arguments for and against four issues as a springboard for discussing the way we interpret the Bible.
- Thielman, Frank. *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach*. InterVarsity, 1994. A scholar looks at what Paul wrote.