

Should Christians Keep the Sabbath?

It is not my intention to fully explain the subject of Sabbath-keeping in this Appendix; to accomplish that I would have to write another book. But, I found it necessary to raise a few important points because I believe that **the doctrine of the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath is an attempt to enslave under the Old Testament Law not only the Gentile Christians** (a thing that it is impossible to be accomplished without circumcision), **but also those of the circumcision whom the Lord Jesus has set free** (Galatians 4:4,5).

The doctrine which declares that Christians must keep the seventh-day Sabbath, **perverts the gospel of grace, enslaves believers, imparts fear and guilt and it is not based on the New Testament.** So are the relative doctrines which imply that:

1. In the last days, the faith and obedience of Christians will be tested.
2. The test will be the keeping of the Sabbath.
3. Their salvation will depend on whether they have kept the Sabbath.
4. The Sabbath is the “**seal of God**”.

5. Those who worship God on the first day of the week have received the **“mark of the beast”!**

Those who declare the foregoing **false teachings**, ignore the fact that **the “seal” with which Christians are sealed for the day of redemption, is the Holy Spirit** (Ephesians 4:30; 1:13,14; 2 Corinthians 1:22).

If the Body of Christ were to observe the seventh-day Sabbath, which guidelines must they follow in order to observe it? According to the guidelines of the Old Testament, or the rules of the New? The New Testament says that if Christians keep the Law of the Old Testament, they will be under condemnation --- they will be cursed (Galatians 3:10). On the other hand, if we must observe the seventh-day Sabbath according to New Testament guidelines, **are there any?** The answer is **“NO!”**

Some might say we must follow the example of our Lord Jesus who kept the Sabbath. Are they forgetting the fact that Jesus was born **“under the law”** (Galatians 4:4), and that He was **circumcised** as prescribed by the law? (Luke 2:21) Yet, if Christians circumcise, Paul said that **“Christ will be of no benefit”** to them (Galatians 5:2,3).

Did those who believed in Christ in the first days of the Church have to keep the seventh-day Sabbath in order to be saved, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and to enjoy a personal relationship with God? The answer is **“No!”** They enjoyed all of the above because of their faith in Jesus --- not because of works of the law (Galatians 3:2). **Why would God change the requirement for salvation today?** It is clear that those who believe so **have not fully understood the depth of the grace of God**, neither have they

realized **who was to keep the Old Testament Law and why.**

It was on Mount Sinai (Horeb) where God made a covenant with Israel, the people He delivered from Egypt. God wrote this covenant on two tables of stone. **This covenant was the Ten Commandments** (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13). **God did not make this Covenant with Adam.** Therefore, God did not command the entire human race to keep the seventh day of the week in order to remember His rest. **Neither** did God make this Covenant with Noah, **nor** with Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. **It was made only with those at Horeb** (Sinai). In Deuteronomy 5:2,3, we read:

“The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all of those of us alive here today.”

Those who became “the covenant people” at Sinai, were **the circumcised** descendants of their patriarch Abraham. In Genesis 17, God made a covenant with Abram. God said to him,

“I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly...Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham...And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you...As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is

my covenant, which you shall keep between me and you and your descendants after you; Every male among you shall be circumcised...and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you...So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (verses 1-14)

Other scriptures which show the importance of circumcision are Exodus 4:24-26; Joshua 5:2-5.

In Leviticus 12:3 God repeated the commandment of circumcision, **indicating its importance in the Sinaitic Covenant**. The rule was clear. A person who would enter the covenant and keep it, **had to** be circumcised! For instance, if a foreigner wanted to participate in the Passover celebration, the law said:

“This is the ordinance of the Passover: no foreigner is to eat of it;...if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come to celebrate it;...But no uncircumcised person may eat of it.” (Exodus 12:43,44,48. Author’s emphasis).

From the foregoing verses we realize that without circumcision in the flesh, **no one could keep --- not even the smallest part --- of the Mosaic Law! An uncircumcised person was not even allowed to go near the Passover table in order to partake from it! A supposed “spiritual circumcision of the heart”, as some claim, was not sufficient!** For this reason, those who previously were Pharisees and had kept the Law of Moses in all their lives, and who

now had believed in Christ, said that the Gentile Christians **ought to be circumcised** in order to keep the Law of Moses.

In view of the above, let's examine Acts 15. In verse 5, we read:

“But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them (the Gentiles who had become Christians) and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.’” (Author’s parenthesis)

From the above we see that it was well understood that **without circumcision in the flesh, no one had the right to keep the law**. It is evident that those early believers who had belonged to the party of the Pharisees, continued, at least for a while, to keep the Law of Moses. Because their understanding was not yet clear on this matter, they thought that those who became Christians from the nations had to do the same. For this reason, the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter (Acts 15:6). After they had a big debate, Peter said to them:

“Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us (who have kept the law of Moses) and them (who have never kept the law, being uncircumcised Gentiles), but cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we

have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (Verses 7-11; author’s parenthesis)

It is clear from the above that the apostle Peter, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, **set a standard** for the uncircumcised Gentiles who joined the Church:

They did not have to keep the law of Moses in order to receive God’s saving grace and therefore, they did not have to be circumcised!

The apostles and the elders did not get together to decide which “**part**” of the Law of Moses the Gentile Christians would have to keep, but whether they had to keep **the whole law**. **They understood that the person who keeps one part of the law must keep the whole law or else he would be cursed** (Galatians 3:10). Therefore, the debate attacked the very foundation of the matter: **Circumcision!**

Circumcision was **the initiation ceremony for one entering the Old Covenant and to keep its law!** It was **after** that ritual was accomplished that the person had the right to observe the law!

Therefore, the question of whether the Christians must keep the Sabbath and the rest of the law of Moses, surfaced as a problem in the Church of the first century, and those saints to whom the faith was delivered **once for all time** (Jude 3), took care of it under the direction of the Holy Spirit and **decreed that Christians did not have to keep it!** They made it clear that we receive salvation and the Holy Spirit by God’s grace because of our faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8,9)!

Thus, the matter is very simple: **Those who try to complicate and change the decree which was given on this matter by the Council of Jerusalem, as it is laid out in Acts 15, are ambassadors of a different gospel. Paul said that they and their gospel are cursed** (Galatians 1:8,9).

Those who wish to keep the Old Testament law are free to do so — **but first, they should be circumcised. They cannot hide behind the idea of a “spiritual circumcision of the heart” only, because the Old Testament Law they wish to keep, is a law of the letter --- not of the spirit.** The Old Testament Law does not allow for a “spiritual circumcision of the heart” only. **It first demands a physical circumcision;** and if any Christians decide to be circumcised, Galatians 5:2-4 will apply to them. There it says:

“...every man who receives circumcision...is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ...you have fallen from grace.” (Author’s emphasis)

Other points to consider

The apostle Paul, who was one of the great defenders of Christian freedom, compared the Old and New Covenants to the two women of Abraham. He said that the Old Covenant, which was made between God and the children of Israel at Sinai, produces slaves, while the New Covenant produces **children of freedom**. Let’s read his words in Galatians 4:21-26:

“Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free

woman through promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.”

Thus, those who enslave themselves under the Sinaitic Covenant have separated themselves from Christ, because He brought deliverance to the captives and His New Covenant in His blood produces **children of freedom**.

2. In Galatians 3:23-25, Paul compares the law of the Old Covenant to a “custodian”. He said,

“Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian;” (Author’s emphasis)

From the above it is clear that those Hebrews who became Christians **were no longer under the Old Testament Law**.

3. In Galatians 4:10,11, Paul wrote,

“You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I am afraid I have laboured over you in vain.”

What does the expression “*days, and months, and seasons, and years*” refer to? It refers to the appointed days or cele-

brations which **the circumcised covenant people** had to keep forever according to the Law. **The seventh-day Sabbath** was only one of them (Leviticus 23:3). Others were:

- a) **The Passover** (Leviticus 23:5; Exodus 12:14).
- b) **The Feast of Unleavened Bread** (Exodus 12:17).
- c) **First Fruits** (Leviticus 23:10-14).
- d) **Pentecost** (Leviticus 23:15-21).
- e) **Blowing of the Trumpets** (Leviticus 23:23-23).
- f) **Day of Atonement** (Leviticus 16:29,31).
- g) **Feasts of Booths** (Leviticus 23:33-44).
- h) **New Moons** (2 Chronicles 2:4).
- i) **Sabbatical Years** (Leviticus 25:2-7).
- j) **Jubilee** (Leviticus 25:8-12, 20, 21).

Thus, Paul's "*days*" refer to the seventh-day Sabbaths; "*months*" to the New Moons; "*seasons*" to the seasonal celebrations such as Passover, Feast of the Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Pentecost, etc; and "*years*" to Sabbatical years and Jubilee.

Other scriptures which use the same **ascending** order of "*days*", "*months*", "*seasons*", referring to the seventh-day Sabbaths, to the New Moons, and to fixed festivals, are: 1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; 8:12,13; 31:3; Ezekiel

45:17. Other verses may refer to the same celebrations in a **descending** order, that is, “*fixed festivals*”, “*New Moons*”, and “*Sabbaths*”, as it appears in Colossians 2:16. There, Paul said, “*Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you...with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath*”.

Therefore, in this verse, the word “*Sabbath*” **does not refer to the seasonal or yearly celebrations, neither does it refer to Sabbatical years**, as some people preach, but **it refers to the seventh day of each week**.

4. Those who believe that today’s Christians must keep the Old Testament Law, use Revelation 12:17 and 14:12 as a basis for their doctrine. There, it speaks about those who “*keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus*”.

“See?” they say. “Here it speaks about those who keep the Ten Commandments.”

The above reasoning does not stand. In the foregoing verses, the words “**Ten Commandments**” do not appear. Then, which commandments of God do those who have the testimony or the faith of Christ keep?

The fact that they bear testimony to Christ proves that they are believers in Christ. **As believers in Christ, they are partakers of the New Covenant which Jesus established in His blood** (Luke 22:20). As children of the Jerusalem above they are free; they are not slaves under the regulations and the laws of the Sinaitic Covenant (Galatians 4:21-26). They worship the Father in Spirit and Truth --- **not ac-**

According to the regulations for worship of the first covenant.

In Hebrews chapters eight and nine, the writer of the letter pointed out that **the first covenant was not faultless** (chapter 8:7). In verse 13 he says:

“In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first (the Old Covenant) as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” (Author’s parenthesis and emphasis)

Whose words did the writer of the above verse recall? Who was the first Person who talked about a **“new covenant”**? According to Matthew 26:28, the One who spoke about the new covenant was the Lord Jesus Christ. By naming His covenant **“new”**, He automatically made the first covenant of Sinai **“old”**. **On the day of His death, His Covenant came into effect, (because every covenant comes into effect after the person who made it dies), while, at the same time, the old covenant died.** Indeed, the apostle Paul said that Jesus took the old covenant out of the way by symbolically **nailing it to the cross** (Colossians 2:13,14).

Therefore, looking at the first covenant **as a thing of the past**, the Christian writer of the letter to the Hebrews went on to explain **which things were included in that first covenant** that were now **obsolete**. When we read his account, we notice that the verbs are **in the past tense**. He wrote:

“Now even this first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and

the bread of Presence; it is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, which contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant;" (Hebrews 9:1-4).

From these words we see that **the tables of the covenant, the Ten Commandments, were part of, in fact, the basis for the worship regulations of the Old Covenant, which, as far as Christians are concerned, was a thing of the past.** However, the important question still remains:

Which commandments of God must Christians keep?
Are there any in the New Testament? Yes, there are! One is written in Matthew 17:5. There, we read,

"While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him."

In 1 John 3:23 the apostle John presents **two more** commandments which God gave to Christians:

- a) **Believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ.**
- b) **Love one another.**

From the foregoing, we observe that God's commandments to the followers of Jesus are only **three**, and the two of them command us to believe and to obey His Son! Thus, **since we must hear or obey His Son, we must keep the commandments of His Son!** For this reason, in John 14:

15, we hear Jesus saying, “*If ye love me, keep my commandments”* and in John 15:10, we hear Him saying, “*If you keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.*”

The Lord Jesus was the only One who kept all of His Father’s commandments without failing. Now He expects His followers to keep **His commandments**. His commandments are not many, neither are they burdensome. These are:

- a) **Love one another** (John 13:34).
- b) **Preach** (Mark 16:15).
- c) **Teach** (Matthew 28:19).
- d) **Baptize** (Matthew 28:19).
- e) “**...this do in remembrance of me.**” (Luke 22:19).

5. Christians who wish to subject themselves to the Old Testament Law should seriously consider the following point:

The covenant people who kept the seventh-day Sabbath **did not enter God’s rest because of unbelief** (Hebrews 3:19). On the other hand, the followers of Christ **enter God’s rest because of their faith in Jesus** (Hebrews 4:3).

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews declares that **the one who** enters God’s rest, “*he also hath rested from his own*

works, as God did from his” (Hebrew 4:10). And immediately after these words, as Christians don’t have to do the works of the Mosaic Law in order to receive salvation (because they receive it through faith in Christ), he encourages the Christian Hebrews to be diligent to enter God’s rest (i.e., to stop keeping the Law of the Old Testament) so that they will not be **guilty of disobedience** (verse 11; from the Greek text).

Dear Reader, if you wish to keep one day holier than the rest for the Lord, (whether it is Saturday or Sunday), you are free to do so (Romans 14:4-6). However, do not turn **your decision** into law. Do not try to enslave, under **your law**, those **from the nations** who received God’s saving grace because they believed in Christ, neither should you try to enslave again under the Law of Moses those **of the circumcision** whom Christ has set free (Galatians 4:4,5; 5:1). Praise His Name!

<p>For a more comprehensive study on the above subject, see the book, “Sabbath in Crisis” by Dale Ratzlaff. Life Assurance Ministries, 19109 North 71st Drive, Glendale, AZ, 85308, USA</p>
