



# Sabbath

The aim of the *All in the Family* series is to explore the breadth of belief and practice that exists amongst FIEC churches on matters that our Doctrinal Basis doesn't touch on and yet are important in church life.

For each subject we ask a variety of church leaders to respond to the same questions, with an emphasis on seeing how belief shapes practice in a local church.

In this collection on the Sabbath, the responses are:

1. *Christian Sabbath observed as part of God's eternal moral law - Paul Gibson*
2. *Christian Sabbath observed as a creation ordinance - Reuben Hunter*
3. *The Sabbath fulfilled in Christ - Andy Robinson*

These papers can also be found online at: [fiec.org.uk/resources/series/all-in-the-family](http://fiec.org.uk/resources/series/all-in-the-family)

---

## Paper #1: Paul Gibson

**About the author:** *Paul has been pastor of Wheelock Heath Baptist Church in South Cheshire since 2013. Before training for ministry at Oak Hill College he was a secondary school History teacher. He is married to Helen and they have two young children.*

**Viewpoint:** *Christian Sabbath observed as part of God's eternal moral law*

**Church:** *Wheelock Heath Baptist Church is an independent church meeting in Sandbach and Winterley, south Cheshire. Our elders subscribe to the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, seeing this as a faithful summary of Scriptural teaching, and this is the teaching standard of the church. As such we love the truths rediscovered and vigorously taught by the Reformers - the historic doctrines of grace with their emphasis on Scripture alone and justification by faith alone. We believe that Christians should keep the Fourth Commandment by setting aside the first day of the week (Sunday) as a day of rest & worship – and we seek to emphasise that this is not meant as a burden, but a delight (Isa 58:13) – a good gift of God's grace that brings refreshment, blessing & joy.*

*Our membership is diverse in geography (members live in several towns & villages, mainly in south Cheshire), age, Christian maturity, background, and views on secondary theological issues, but we share together a common faith in the gospel, love for the Lord Jesus, and desire to follow him. As a church family we are committed to the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ in south Cheshire, and we seek to work together with one another, and with other evangelical churches, to make Christ known.*

## **1) How do you understand the relationship between the Sabbath commands in the OT law and the account of creation in Gen 1-2?**

Central to Gen 1:1 – 2:3 is the Sabbath as the culmination of all that has gone before. Gen 2:2-3 shows the Sabbath woven into creation, a creation ordinance like work and marriage. God blesses the Sabbath (2:3) – the third thing to receive God's blessing alongside creation (v22) and humanity (v28): it is clearly immensely significant. God also declares this day alone to be 'holy'.

Gen 2:2 tells us that on the seventh day God 'rested from all his work.' Clearly this is anthropomorphic language – speaking of God in human terms. God has not literally exerted himself in creating; he is not tired; he does not literally need rest. Yet God does rest – from his work of creating (v2), not from his ongoing work of providence. Why does God tell us that he rested? God has just made man in his image (1:27), and now he rests, giving his image-bearers a model: God worked for six days and then rested on the seventh, and we image-bearers get the privilege of imitating our Creator.

In Ex 20:8-11, the Fourth Commandment is explicitly grounded in creation. The reason God's people must rest on the seventh day is because God did so; they are to imitate him. As well as drawing the requirement to rest from Gen 2:2-3, Ex 20:8 also speaks of keeping the Sabbath day 'holy', because the Lord 'made it holy' (v11). This implies the day is not merely for rest but also for worshipping God. Deut 5:15 shows that the Sabbath is grounded not only in creation, but also redemption, pointing forward to our eternal rest.

The grounding of the Fourth Commandment in creation helps answer the key question of whether this command is solely part of the Mosaic Law and covenant, or whether it transcends it. The Mosaic Law in itself is part of that covenant, but it is important theologically to insist that God's essential moral law does not change. If God's moral law stays the same from creation onwards, we

can be confident that his standards have not changed, and the law Adam disobeyed and the law Israel disobeyed is in essence the same law Christ has perfectly obeyed in our place (Rom 5:19), and there is not some new law that God will now require us to obey to be fully justified: Christ has obeyed God's unchanging law, and that is enough.

Rom 2:14-15 speaks of this moral law being written on the hearts of Gentiles who do not have the law (they have never heard it) but know it through conscience. The law in this sense was written on Adam's heart and that of every person. There seem to be good reasons to see this moral law as summarised in the two great love commands and in the Ten Commandments (these are closely related – Rom 13:8-10; James 2:8-11; Matt 22:40 – with love for God summarising commandments 1-4 and love for neighbour commandments 5-10). The Decalogue is distinct from the other Mosaic laws: it is spoken directly by God, not mediated through Moses (Ex 20:1); after the Ten Words God "added nothing more" (Deut 5:22); it is written by the finger of God on tablets of stone (Ex 31:18); and the Commandments are often referred to by Jesus when asked about God's requirements (e.g. Lk 18:20).

Furthermore, there is evidence that the laws in the Decalogue were known before the Mosaic covenant was instituted at Sinai. For example, God expects even Abimelech, who is not one of God's covenant people, to avoid adultery (Ex 20) – the law is written on his heart. Regarding the Sabbath, God's people are expected to keep the Sabbath holy prior to the Sinai covenant (Ex 16:21-30). So the Ten Commandments are not restricted to the Mosaic covenant, but are God's eternal moral law dating back to Eden.

## **2) How does a Christian now relate to the 4th commandment and apply the other regulations concerning the Sabbath in the OT law?**

The NT makes clear that the Mosaic covenant is now obsolete (Heb 8:13). Furthermore, we are no longer 'under law' (Rom 6:14): the Mosaic Law in its entirety (insofar as it is tied up with the Mosaic covenant) is no longer binding. However, Christians are still called to obey law (1 Cor 9:21), not to be justified, but as an expression of love for Christ (Jn 14:15). So the question is, which law must we obey? Several passages suggest Christians must still obey the Ten Commandments, including the Fourth, as God's moral law which transcends the Mosaic covenant.

For example, in Jer 31:31-34 one of God's gracious new covenant blessings is to 'put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts' (v33). This cannot mean that God's people will be free to disregard God's law; rather, they will have a new desire and strength to obey it. But to which law does this refer? Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy is closely linked to Ezekiel's prophecy that God will give his people a heart of flesh and give them the Spirit to move them to keep his laws (Ezek 36:27). These prophecies are an elaboration of God's earlier promise, in the context of Sinai, to circumcise his people's hearts so they will keep his laws (Deut 30:6). So Jer 31:33 seems to speak about the same law given at Sinai being written on the heart of new covenant believers. In particular, the Decalogue seems to be in view. Paul picks up Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy in 2 Cor 3:3 and contrasts the letter (law) written on tablets of stone – the Decalogue – with the

letter written on the heart (new covenant). The same law once written on tablets of stone is now written on our hearts, that we may obey it.

Other passages also imply that God's moral law has not changed. Jesus himself often quotes from the Decalogue when asked what standard God requires. Rom 7:14-25 is hotly disputed but in my view refers to Paul's struggle as a Christian (he desires to keep God's law, v18, and delights in God's law, v22, which describe a believer's experience). If so, the Christian should keep God's law. Which law? The law that includes the commandment not to covet (v7-12), i.e. the Ten Commandments.

If the Ten Commandments are indeed God's eternal moral law, then this includes the Fourth Commandment. With the change to the first day (discussed in question 3), Christians should still observe one day in seven. Firstly, it is a day of rest from our normal secular work for the whole day (though there are exceptions for acts of necessity and mercy, as discussed in question 3). Secondly, it is a day of worship (a day holy to the Lord: Gen 2:3; Ex 20:8, 11). As such it is a great blessing – a delight (Isa 58:13) – how generous God is to give us a day when we get to rest and worship him together!

While the moral law remains binding because it transcends the Mosaic Law, the Mosaic Law itself is tied up with the Mosaic covenant and therefore no longer binding. Therefore Christians do not need to keep the other Sabbath regulations in the OT law. For the Christian, Sunday is not to be a day burdened by long lists of regulations but a day God has graciously given for our benefit, that we may rest and worship him together.

### **3) How do the NT references to the Sabbath (e.g. Mark 2:23-3:6, John 5:1-18, Col 2:16-17), the Lord's Day (Rev 1:10), the observance of special days (Rom 14:5, Gal 4:10) and the Sabbath rest of Heb 3-4 inform your views?**

It is a common fallacy to think Jesus attacked Sabbath-keeping. Rather, he clarified the Sabbath against misinterpretations by the religious elites. In Lk 13:10-17 the synagogue leader is indignant that Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Jesus sets the woman free (v12, 16), delighting the people (v17) – he liberates people to enjoy the Sabbath, freeing it from the hedges the Pharisees have put around it which have turned it into a burden, freeing it to be a day of joy and renewal.

Likewise in Mk 2-3, Jesus does not abolish the Sabbath but declares he is Lord of it (2:28), with the right to define its proper interpretation. Again Jesus sets the Sabbath free from the Pharisees' restrictive interpretation, showing that it is a day when people rest from their normal work but are free to do acts of necessity (obtaining food, 2:23-26) and acts of mercy (healing the sick, 3:1-5). "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (2:27) – it is a gift for our benefit, joy, refreshing and blessing.

In Jn 5:1-18 the Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of Sabbath-breaking (v18). This accusation must be false, because, even if the Fourth Commandment is not binding on Christians, Jesus must perfectly obey God's law so that his perfect obedience may be imputed to us (Rom 5:19). The Father is always

working (v17): he rested from the work of creation on the seventh day but continued his work of providence; likewise Jesus kept the Fourth Commandment but continued to do work that is legitimate on the Sabbath, including acts of healing.

Rev 1:10 points to the change in day from seventh to first. John speaks of the Lord's Day as a day distinct from the other six, following a pattern of Christians meeting on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). The early Christians met on the day Jesus was raised, as a day to remember God's redemption and re-creation through Jesus' resurrection (cf. Deut 5:15).

As such the Lord's Day symbolises the eternal rest which Jesus has won for us. This eternal rest is primarily in view in Heb 3-4. Our weekly day of rest and worship is a foretaste of the greater rest to come.

On the surface, the most difficult passages for this position are Col 2:16-17, Gal 4:10 and Rom 14:5. In Colossians, Paul speaks of "a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day" as shadows of things to come, and therefore not binding on Christians. What are these celebrations? This threefold combination of events is often found together in the OT (e.g. 2 Chron 31:3; Neh 10:32-3) to speak of old covenant ceremonial days; when the three appear together they are bound up with sacrificial offerings – all of which was exclusive to the Israelites, unlike the Fourth Commandment where the rest was a universal command (including the foreigner). Therefore it seems best to view 'Sabbath days' here as referring to the Jewish ceremonial calendar, certainly including other Sabbaths on top of the seventh day (e.g. Ex 23:10-12; Lev 25:4, 8-10), and possibly including the seventh day Sabbath which has now been replaced by the Lord's Day. Jewish Christians were free to observe such ceremonial days, but not to impose them as necessary for all Christians. They are shadows now fulfilled in Christ (v17).

Likewise in Galatians, Paul is thinking more broadly of the many festivals in the Jewish calendar (hence his reference to months, seasons and years, as well as days). Paul is especially blunt with the Galatians as some were insisting on the observance of the Mosaic law as part of the basis for justification. Paul rejects the law as a basis for justification and also makes clear Christians are no longer bound by the Mosaic Law in itself – but does not reject the moral law in the life of believers (5:14). Again 4:10 probably speaks about Jewish ceremonial laws, not the new covenant Lord's Day. Surely Paul would not have despaired that he had laboured in vain simply because he saw them gathering together to worship God on the first day of every week – but when he saw them insisting on observing all the Mosaic rules about special days, he knew he must warn against this.

In Romans Paul again probably has in mind the various Sabbaths and days in the busy Jewish festival calendar. Jewish Christians may observe these if they choose, but not impose them on others.

**4) What in your view must or should a Christian do on the Sabbath/Lord's Day? What must or should they not do?**

As the Lord's Day is a gracious gift from God, the primary emphasis should be not on what we must or must not do, but on what we get to do. We live in a society where stress, overwork and burnout are endemic, including among Christians. How generous God is then to give us a day when we get to rest from our normal work. This is counter-cultural, desperately needed, and enables us to do our work better having had a day completely away from it.

Likewise how good it is that we get to meet with God's people and worship him corporately. God works primarily through the ordinary public means of grace, hence the early believers found it a delight, not an imposition, to devote themselves to meet together around the apostles' teaching, fellowship, sharing the Lord's Supper, and prayer (Acts 2:42). How kind God is to give us a day set aside for this – and why therefore would we not want to meet morning & evening, if our circumstances allow? And how kind God is to enable us often to continue sharing fellowship & deepening gospel relationships during the afternoon, whether through a church lunch or hospitality in each other's homes.

All the things we should do are therefore a tremendous blessing, not a burden: we should rest for the whole day from our normal secular work (with the exception of those vocations which are acts of necessity or mercy, such as working in a hospital); and we should worship God corporately if we are able to (i.e. not prohibited by illness, etc.). If possible Christians should commit to morning and evening worship, as the whole day is holy to the Lord, not just a couple of hours of it.

Beyond this, there is no need for a list of restrictions of specific things we should not do. The emphasis must be on the joy & blessing of rest and worship, not on paralyzing people with lists of prohibitions.

## **5) How does your view of the Sabbath and/or Lord's day shape...**

### *a. ...the ministry of your church?*

We have two Sunday services, morning and evening, and we encourage people to come to both. We pray that gathering on the Lord's Day will be a delight to God's people, not a burden. We rejoice that, as we gather, God gives generously to us through the means of grace. Through his word read, preached and sung, and through the Lord's Supper, he feeds us with Jesus and his loveliness, and reminds us of the gospel blessings of being united with Christ. He gives us the immense privilege of responding to his grace in praise and prayer. Therefore we want our services to be full of Christ, full of grace and comfort, full of the gospel, full of refreshment.

We teach on the topic of the Lord's Day when it comes up in the exposition of Scripture, and we teach it primarily as God's generous gift to us – we GET to have a day of rest & worship!

### *b. ...your expectations of church members? (if you don't think the Sabbath is binding, how else do you urge attendance and commitment?)*

We expect regular attendance from church members, except when they are unable to because they are engaged in works of necessity or mercy in their secular job, or they are sick or on holiday or otherwise unavoidably detained elsewhere. We strongly encourage attendance twice on a Sunday, and discuss the importance of this when interviewing prospective new members. We also encourage fellowship together during the afternoon, by encouraging hospitality, and from time to time sharing a church lunch together.

Where a member has a job that means they must work on a Sunday, but the work does not involve acts of necessity or mercy, we would encourage them, if possible, to negotiate with their employer so they can have Sundays off, or if that is not possible, arrange their timetable so they can attend at least one service or the other every week, or seek alternative employment, where possible. We want to be full of grace here – not laying burdens but helping members see the goodness of the Lord's Day and the benefits they will get from taking steps to enable them to observe it more closely.

### *c. ...your own practice as a Christian?*

As parents Helen and I want our children to see the Lord's Day as a delight, a gift from God, something we get to enjoy together. Therefore we prioritise all coming together to the morning service, and staying for a good length of time with God's people after the formal 'service'. When we can, we all come in the evening, and the children enjoy being up a bit later! When that is not possible, either Helen or I will come to the evening service.

We aim, as often as possible, to share fellowship with other Christians in the afternoon, typically by inviting people for lunch, which all four of us really enjoy. In other parts of the day, we might have a quiz on the children's catechism, or watch a Colin Buchanan DVD, but we also might play a game or go to the park. I try to finish my sermon prep before the Lord's Day so that Sundays are a day when Daddy is around and involved with the children, not a day when I am locked in my study.

If we are on holiday, we make it a top priority to meet with believers at a local evangelical church.

## **6) What relevance do you think the Sabbath has for our wider society?**

If, as argued above, the Fourth Commandment is part of God's eternal moral law, it has much relevance as it is binding on all people, not just Christians. It is striking that in Ex 20:10 the Sabbath is to be observed not only by God's covenant people but also by foreigners residing in Israelite towns: they too needed a day of rest.

It is not hard to see the relevance of the Fourth Commandment to wider society today: secular culture so often drives people to push more and do more; many employers expect too high a workload, and many people are worn out and over-stressed. God's way is so much better for us – and so as Christians we should present God's way positively, not embarrassed by it but showing what a good gift it is, and how much society would benefit from a day of rest each week.

## *Recommended Reading*

- Iain D. Campbell, *On the First Day of the Week: God, the Christian and the Sabbath* (Leominster: Day One, 2005).
  - Joseph A. Pipa, *The Lord's Day* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1997).
- 

## Paper #2: Reuben Hunter

**About the author:** *Reuben is pastor of Trinity West Church in Shepherd's Bush, West London. Originally from Northern Ireland, he moved to London thirteen years ago to study on the Cornhill Training Course and followed that with a pastoral internship at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. After further theological study at Oak Hill College he worked as an assistant pastor in St Albans from where he moved with his family to plant Trinity West. Reuben is married to Louisa and they have three small children.*

**Viewpoint:** *Christian Sabbath observed as a creation ordinance*

**Church:** *Trinity West Church was planted in January 2013 with a core group of twenty (who differed in their views on the Sabbath). The church was established around core values that seek to hold the Gospel at the centre of our life together, whilst taking seriously the community the Gospel creates and our responsibility to reach out to the local area in which the church is planted. The church does not make a particular view of the Sabbath a requirement for membership, and a breadth of views would be held across the church.*

### 1) How do you understand the relationship between the Sabbath commands in the OT law and the account of creation in Gen 1-2?

The Sabbath commands in the OT law are most explicit in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Both command the observance of a Sabbath day, but do so for different but complimentary reasons. Exodus 20:8-11 ties the Sabbath back to God's rest at the climax of the creation account in Genesis, and Deuteronomy to God's rescue and redemption of His people in the events of the Exodus. In the explicit linking of the commandment to creation, two important points are being made: first, that the Sabbath marks the completion of God's work of creation. That which He starts, He finishes and whilst He could have created everything in an instant He chose an historical process. In the course of the days of creation there was an 'already' and a 'not yet' that was seen through to completion; creation was consummated and rest enjoyed and this eschatological pattern provides the basis for how God works redemptively, and the certainty of future final Sabbath rest for His people (c.f. Hebrews 4:9).

The second point is that the link to creation is made to give humanity a pattern to imitate. This is a point of debate in the church, and no doubt others in this discussion will take a different view, because it is argued that the focus of the Genesis text is on God's rest and not that of Adam or Eve.



It is certainly the case that the text is silent as to Adam and Eve's behaviour at this point, but we should not hear that silence as ruling out an analogous rest for humanity. I say this for two reasons:

1. **The Six-Plus-One pattern** – When we consider the earlier point about God's ability to create in an instant, but His choosing six days and one of rest, it raises the question: why did He choose that pattern? He could have created in three days or even less, and He didn't rest because of fatigue. The rest of the completed work could have come at any point, so why six-plus-one if not to be imitated by humanity?
2. **The Language of Exodus 20:11** – The Exodus commandment requires Israel to keep the Sabbath because of the creation event. 'Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy ... For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day...' (emphasis added).

An explicit link is being made between God's rest on the seventh day and the rest prescribed for Israel. John Frame comments:

*"Exodus 20:11 sees an identity between these [God's and Israel's Sabbaths]. It teaches that when God took his own rest from his creative labours and rested on the seventh day, which he hallowed and blessed, he also hallowed and blessed a human Sabbath, a Sabbath for man (Mark 2:27). In other words, when God blessed his own Sabbath rest in Genesis 2:3, he blessed it as a model for human imitation."<sup>1</sup>*

Sabbath is, therefore, given to man as man and should be seen as a creation ordinance, and as such, appropriate for every age. This point is made explicit when the pre-Sinai manna regulations are given in Exodus 16 (c.f. 16:26).

This link between Sabbath and creation ties its meaning firstly to rest, and all humanity are obligated to keep it, and will be refreshed by doing so, but the Deuteronomy passage further develops the reason for God's people keeping the Sabbath day:

"Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you ... You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." (Deuteronomy 5:12, 15)

Here the purpose of the Sabbath day is remembering the redemption that God has won for His people in the Exodus. So if in tying Sabbath to creation the purpose is rest, here in Deuteronomy the purpose is remembrance for worship (c.f. Lev 23:3). John Calvin argues that this is the primary

---

<sup>1</sup> John M Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008) 532.

goal of the Sabbath day<sup>2</sup>, and the purpose of resting from work is only to enable time for worship. I don't, however, think one need take priority over the other. The Sabbath is given to man as a gift (Mark 2:27) to enable both physical rest from the toil that daily work has become post-fall, and to enable the gathered worship of God's people.

## 2) How does a Christian now relate to the 4th commandment and apply the other regulations concerning the Sabbath in the OT law?

How one answers this question involves the wider question about the place of the law in the Christian life. I take it that all sides in the discussion agree that Jesus has fulfilled the OT law, so the disagreements surround what that fulfilment means. My own view is that when Jesus says in Matthew 5:18 that "until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" that He does not mean to abrogate any part of it, rather to demonstrate its true depth and show how love for God and not legalism is to motivate obedience. The whole law dies with Christ and the whole law rises with Him and this means that the signs and shadows give way to the reality. With this outworking of God's redemptive purposes, whilst the law still serves to show God's people how to live in order to please Him, certain aspects are observed in different ways and some laws change in their application (e.g. physical circumcision comes to an end and is replaced by heart circumcision and baptism; Passover comes to an end and is replaced by the Lord's Supper).

This means the Christian relates to the fourth commandment, and to any of the other OT Sabbath requirements, by recognising its abiding significance and carefully discerning how it applies to their life 'in Christ'. As I argued in the first question, we should observe the Sabbath because of its role as a creation ordinance (it was 'made for man' (Mark 2:27)), but also when Jesus identifies Himself as 'Lord of the Sabbath' He is not simply showing Himself to be divine, but assuming the ongoing significance of the day by declaring and demonstrating what sort of 'work' is appropriate on it, e.g. works of mercy and necessity.

Jesus clashed often with the Pharisees over the Sabbath and had ample opportunity to clearly state that it was coming to an end, but he didn't do this. Instead He *"affirmed the Sabbath as a blessing to man, a time of resting, worshipping, eating, drinking and healing."*<sup>3</sup>

The redemptive historical move from Old to New covenant, however, has also brought change. The reordering of history that Jesus brings through His resurrection means that now the church is given a new day for rest, remembrance and worship. Jesus rises (Mark 16:2) He appears to His followers (John 20:19), He gives His Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1), He gave the Apostle John a vision (Revelation 1:10) all on the first day of the week. We then see this pattern taken up in the early church when Paul instructed the churches to put aside a collection on that day (1 Corinthians 16:2) and the Apostle John refers to it (Revelation 1:10) as the Lord's Day.

---

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). 2.8.28. There is some discussion about whether Calvin's position on the Sabbath changed between writing the *Institutes* and his sermons on Genesis.

<sup>3</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 558

The fourth commandment comes to us then as the Christian Sabbath, the Lord's Day, to be enjoyed in rest from our work; worship in remembrance, with the Lord's people, of the redemption that was won for us in Christ; and works of mercy and necessity.<sup>4</sup>

### **3) How do the NT references to the Sabbath (e.g. Mark 2:23-3:6, John 5:1-18, Col 2:16-17), the Lord's Day (Rev 1:10), the observance of special days (Rom 14:5, Gal 4:10) and the Sabbath rest of Heb 3-4 inform your views?**

I have touched on the Mark passage already as I think that alongside the main point that runs through this section about the deity of Jesus, it highlights the purpose of the Sabbath to be about blessing and mercy. The Pharisees, as was so often their way, in missing the point of the law turned something that was designed by God to be a blessing into a burden. The Sabbath, according to Jesus, was "for man" (v.27) and saving life and doing good are especially appropriate on that day.

John 5:1-18 is another staggering claim to deity as Jesus identifies Himself with God: "My Father is working until now, and I am working." This is not a rationale for Sabbath work that anyone else can use (!) but a similar point is being made as in Mark 2. It is entirely fitting that showing mercy to those in need should take place on the Sabbath.

I take Colossians 2:16-17 along with Romans 14:5 and Galatians 4:9-11 as the basis for the strongest case against the continuance of a Sabbath in the New Covenant. Calvin thought it was so obvious that only "*madmen cannot see what observance the apostle means.*"<sup>5</sup> But, rushing in where angels fear to tread, for the reasons already stated, I disagree with him at this point. I think the issue in question in these verses relates to confusion around days for the early Jewish Christians. Historians tell us that many of those converted from Judaism continued to keep a seventh-day Sabbath, as well as meeting with fellow Christians for worship the following day. As with any who come to Christ from strongly religious backgrounds they remained connected with their old practices for a time, but as Christianity became more distinct from Judaism this started to change. There was, however, in the early church this ambiguity and my reading of the Romans, Galatians and Colossians passages is that they are addressing a Judaizing error, insisting that Christians were required to keep the Jewish Sabbath, that grew out of this confusion.

Hebrews 3:7-4:13 is an important passage for all sides of this discussion. The writer is urging Jewish Christians not to return to Judaism and he wants to discourage hard-heartedness such that they press on and enter God's rest (4:3-4). Reference to God's rest in these verses takes us back to the creation account which, as we noted above, are the basis of the Sabbath command in the Decalogue. But the writer also tells us that "there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (4:9) which has a future focus. The word for 'Sabbath rest' here could be translated 'Sabbath

---

<sup>4</sup> To say that this privilege is abrogated in the New Covenant puts us in a worse position than those under the Old.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.33.

keeping' but as John Frame notes: *"the term self-evidently refers to the future rest, of which Canaan is a type, the final reward of the believer. The final reward is to join God in the rest he entered into at creation."*<sup>6</sup> These verses do not directly tell believers to observe a weekly Sabbath, but looking back to the explicit connection to creation, while also taking up the future focus that makes it clear that 'Sabbath' is not experienced in its fullness by the believer at the first coming of Jesus, I take it that weekly Sabbath observance is still valid. *"If what the Sabbath symbolises is still future, then weekly Sabbath observance performs a vital function; it is a reminder of and a participation in that final reality."*<sup>7</sup>

#### **4) What in your view must or should a Christian do on the Sabbath/Lord's Day? What must or should they not do?**

The Sabbath discussion is usually defined by this question, particularly in the negative, and this is where I feel I will depart from those who may share my theological convictions up to this point.

I grew up in a country where government legislation meant that shops did not open on a Sunday until the late 1980s and pubs remained closed until the very late 1990s. I remember visiting a park as a child only to discover that some local Christians had chained up the swings to stop people breaking the Sabbath. These restrictions, however well meant, are mistaken and I think much of the criticism of the 'Sabbatarian' position is down to how it has been implemented rather than the purpose it is supposed to serve in the life of the church.

In terms of what Christians *must* do, I would say that means regularly observing the physical rest from their regular labours that the day affords. They must also regularly worship with the gathered assembly of God's people. Hebrews 10:25 tells us that we "must not forsake meeting together" and the same responsibilities that a believer has to serve those around them, including those who are in need, remain binding on the Sabbath as well.

This affords a significant amount of liberty for us, and I think it is summarised well in the answer offered to Q103 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

***Q. What is God's will for you in the fourth commandment?***

***A. First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I diligently attend to the assembly of God's people to learn what God's word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life, I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through His Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.***

Beyond this, Christians *should* see the day as a blessing, a gift given from God for our good, and they should seek to use it as much to that end as possible. They should also see it as an opportunity to show work colleagues and neighbours that they are a forward looking people, not

---

<sup>6</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of The Christian Life*, 559

<sup>7</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of The Christian Life*, 560

owned by their jobs in the way so many are. Taking a break from work, meeting with the Lord and His people, eating and drinking together as a foretaste of the final Sabbath, having a snooze, using the time to read Scripture or theologically rich books, enjoying the chance to re-calibrate our lives around the One who is most important.

Where Christians need to work on the Lord's Day to provide for their family, or out of some other necessity, or in the case of mercy and care for others, this too is right and proper. But when it comes to what they *should not* do, I think Christians err when they waste the day by neglecting, or allowing themselves to be distracted by lesser things.

## **5) How does your view of the Sabbath and/or Lord's day shape...**

### *a. ...the ministry of your church?*

We encourage people to see Sunday as a day for the Lord and for His people. We meet in the morning for worship and we meet in the evenings for our weekly church prayer meeting. We also encourage people to practise hospitality in the day and occasional discipleship meetings might also happen in the afternoon. We want church members to see it as the old Puritan phrase described, 'a market day for the soul'.

### *b. ...your expectations of church members? (if you don't think the Sabbath is binding, how else do you urge attendance and commitment?)*

We expect members to be committed to the formal gatherings of the church, and to see Sunday as the high point of the week. That said, the position I have outlined here is not a requirement for membership at Trinity West Church and there will be a divergence of views across the church.

### *c. ...your own practice as a Christian?*

Our family sees Sunday as a day for the Lord and His people. We worship together in the mornings, we eat a great meal together, usually with others from the church, we go to the park, we might read together or watch Bible story DVDs (my children are young), I will go to the church prayer meeting and occasionally when we get a babysitter my wife will come too. We would self-consciously not 'go shopping' in the 'doing the shopping' sense but we have no problem using a shop. We would not watch something on T.V that prevented us being together as a family or missing a church service, but we might watch it at another time in the day. We don't enrol our children in Sunday sports because it would mean missing church, but we might play sports at a different time in the day.

## **6) What relevance do you think the Sabbath has for our wider society?**

This is an important question, not unrelated to the question above about the role of God's law in society, that I don't have space to address here. Wherever you stand in that discussion, I'm not sure anyone would disagree that a day of rest that challenges the two big corporate emotions of

greed and fear, would be a good thing. A day where people can work on their relationships, where parents can spend undistracted time with their children, and where the church is given liberty to preach the Gospel of a God who has won eternal rest for those He loves through His Son, would be a good thing.

### ***Recommended Reading***

- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).
- John Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008).
- J Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996).
- D.A Carson (ed), *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (selected chapters), (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1999).

---

## **Paper #3: Andy Robinson**

**About the author:** *Andy has been working as one of the pastors of Woodstock Road Baptist Church in Oxford since 2003. Prior that he spent four years working with UCCF as a Staff Worker. He was born in Manchester so considers himself in exile down south!*

**Viewpoint:** *The Sabbath fulfilled in Christ*

**Church:** *Woodstock Road Baptist Church is situated around a mile and a half from Oxford city centre. Because of our location we end up with a diverse congregation- some students, both British and international, find their way to us along with those from a nearby estate and others who have lived in Oxford all their lives. It is a joy to see the Gospel of Christ unite us across a variety of social and ethnic differences. That also means that people come to us from a variety of Christian backgrounds with a range of opinions on different matters including the Sabbath.*

### **1) How do you understand the relationship between the Sabbath commands in the OT law and the account of creation in Gen 1-2?**

The Sabbath appears to be the principal sign of the old covenant (Exodus 31:13-17). The reason for Sabbath observance most commonly given in the Old Testament Law is the order of creation as seen in Gen 1-2. God's people were to refrain from work on the seventh day and regard it as holy because of the Lord's rest on the seventh day of creation. The fact that there seems to be a link between creation and the Sabbath is, to my mind, the strongest argument for the abiding force of a command to keep the Sabbath as a literal day a week free from work. However, it is worth noting that some creation ordinances do get redefined in the light of the new covenant- for instance "Be fruitful and increase in number" cannot be seen as an ongoing command to Christians despite it coming before the Fall because singleness is now regarded positively in the new covenant. So, whilst the Sabbath commands are drawn from creation- particularly in Exodus- that doesn't necessarily mean they shouldn't be reapplied in the light of Christ. It should also be noted

that in the OT Law, the Sabbath is to be an opportunity to remember God's redemption of His people from slavery (Deut 5:15) which clearly points forward to a greater rescue.

## **2) How does a Christian now relate to the 4th commandment and apply the other regulations concerning the Sabbath in the OT law?**

How a Christian should relate to the Sabbath is part of a much bigger question - what is the role of the OT Law in the life of the believer? Personally, I am not convinced by the argument that the civil and ceremonial law is fulfilled in Christ and is no longer binding on the believer whilst the moral law has lasting force. It seems to me that the Scriptures never divide the law in this way - the whole of the law is fulfilled in Christ (which is why Jesus himself keeps the Sabbath law if not the Pharisaical interpretation of it) who then calls us to live under His law. This seems to be where Paul is heading when he talks about not being under the law (almost certainly a reference to the Law of Moses) but under the law of Christ (1 Cor 9:20-21). Likewise 2 Cor 3:7ff and Romans 7:1-6 seem to indicate a strong discontinuity between the old and new covenants. The essence of the new covenant is gazing on Christ by the Spirit. The Lord Jesus- not the Law of Moses- is our ultimate source of authority when it comes to ethical conduct. So the question becomes- in what way does Jesus call His disciples to keep the Sabbath? Does he re-state the Fourth Commandment? I would want to argue that the new covenant applies the Sabbath differently from the observance of a single day of rest- as detailed below.

## **3) How do the NT references to the Sabbath (e.g. Mark 2:23-3:6, John 5:1-18, Col 2:16-17), the Lord's Day (Rev 1:10), the observance of special days (Rom 14:5, Gal 4:10) and the Sabbath rest of Heb 3-4 inform your views?**

This appears to be the central question, for the New Testament has to be our inspired way of understanding the application of the Old Testament to the Christian believer.

Jesus teaches that the Sabbath is given for the good of human beings (Mark 2:27). Why is it so good for us? I want to argue that it is good for us because it points us to Christ Himself. Jesus submits to the Sabbath law- he can only pay for our sin if He Himself has kept God's Law. But He also claims a superiority over the Sabbath as the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). In what way is Jesus superior to the Sabbath? In this regard - He provides a deeper and better rest. That seems to be the burden of Matthew 11:28-12:14 where Jesus promises rest for the weary, claims to be the Lord of the Sabbath and then provides physical restoration on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is fulfilled in Jesus who offers rest to His people.

That's why Paul argues as he does in Colossians 2. He tells the believers not to allow themselves to be judged on their attitude towards various days, including the Sabbath. The reason is because these days are a shadow of the reality that is to come. They are fulfilled in Christ. Putting these things together, I would teach that the Sabbath shows us the importance of rest from our work- and we are to find rest supremely in Christ, the one who restores us to God on the basis of His grace rather than our works.

Hebrews 3-4 pursues the same theme in a slightly different way. The creation account is cited picking up the Lord's rest on the seventh day (Hebrews 4:5). The point being made though is not about a specific day of the week- rather that the seventh day in the Genesis account never ends. Since the end of the sixth day, God has, in some sense, been at rest. God invites His people into that rest, speaking of enjoying a relationship with Him in the place He has appointed. Initially this was the Promised Land given under Joshua but Psalm 95 indicates that there is another rest still to be given. The implied argument of Hebrews 4 is that it is Christ who offers us access to this deeper and more long lasting Sabbath rest- relating to God without reliance on our works. It seems to me that this is partly our experience now and we will enjoy this fully in the new creation - the ultimate Promised Land. We are to enter that rest through Christ rather than turning from Him- the temptation that it appears the Hebrews were facing.

So there appears to be a broad consistency in the New Testament handling of the Sabbath. It is never applied to believers as a special day that must be kept - rather it points us to Christ, the Lord and fulfilment of the Sabbath, who is the one who leads us into the rest of God.

So what should we make of the Lord's Day (Rev 1:10)? It appears that it became common for the church to meet on the first day of the week to praise the Lord (perhaps implied in 1 Cor 16:2) and celebrate His resurrection. However, there isn't evidence to suggest that the early church now regarded this as the Sabbath.

Finally, it is worth noting that Romans 14 teaches us how to handle different opinions on this subject. I do think that Paul's reference to sacred days in Romans 14:5 includes reference to the Sabbath - some will regard it as sacred and others not. He regards it as a matter where each needs to be convinced in their own mind. We should not judge those who regard every day as the same but equally, those of us who do not hold a sabbatarian position need to be careful to respect the consciences of those within our congregations who do.

#### **4) What in your view must or should a Christian do on the Sabbath/Lord's Day? What must or should they not do?**

As indicated above I believe the Sabbath points to Christ and so I don't think that any day of the week should be regarded as the Sabbath today. In terms of the Lord's Day I don't see any specific commands that are attached to that so I would be wary of laying down too much in terms of what a Christian should or should not do on a Sunday. However, it seems natural for those who are united with Christ to want to meet with His people to celebrate His resurrection. It is the appropriate response for those who know and love the Lord.

#### **5) How does your view of the Sabbath and/or Lord's day shape...**

*a. ...the ministry of your church?*



In teaching on the Sabbath I want explicitly to point to Christ as the source of our rest. That has significant pastoral implications that go beyond what one does on a certain day of the week. I recall a conversation with a student who had just started coming to the church. He gave me a long list of things that he felt he could and couldn't do on the Lord's Day. However, it didn't take long before it became obvious, by his own admission, that he lacked a sense of peace and joy in knowing the Lord. I suggested that we meet up regularly and we worked our way through Colossians together. The end of Colossians 2 was a real eye opener for him - I think he became convinced that he was obsessing over the shadows when he should have been caught up with Christ. He became a significantly more joyful Christian as a result. I mention this with a degree of hesitancy in that I am not suggesting that those who would have a different perspective from me on this issue automatically lack peace and joy! And actually I have tended to steer clear of trying to persuade people in the church of my view on the Sabbath and, in this instance, I wasn't particularly concerned about whether the student changed his mind on the Lord's Day or not. However, I am very keen that people in the church have a deep sense of what the Sabbath points to - ultimate rest in Christ.

We also want to take Romans 14 seriously as a church. There are plenty of people in Woodstock Road who would differ from the line I am presenting here. I do believe we have a responsibility to respect each other's consciences - and we seek to avoid doing things on a Sunday that would make life difficult for some.

We also believe that it is right and healthy for us to spend a fair amount of Sunday together - as early Christians did - to rejoice in the Lord Jesus and encourage each other. We meet twice as a church on a Sunday and around half the Sundays in the year we will have a lunch available for the whole church, provided by different homegroups. In truth, it is probably our understanding of what the church should be that leads us to do this rather than a view of a particular day - but it is beneficial for us.

*b. ...your expectations of church members? (if you don't think the Sabbath is binding, how else do you urge attendance and commitment?)*

We would encourage church members to join together on a Sunday to praise God, hear from Him and spur one another on - but that would largely emerge from our understanding of our responsibilities in being part of the church. If you are united with Christ and, therefore, with each other why wouldn't you want to meet to praise Him and enjoy being part of a family together?

In terms of attendance I want to encourage people to make wise decisions. For instance, I wouldn't necessarily criticise a church member wanting to help a friend in need who met them on a Sunday evening because no other time was possible. I don't think somebody who is exhausted who chooses to rest at home on a Sunday evening has sinned. Having said that, I think we do want to say - and probably need to say more clearly as a church - that there are few things better and more important in this world than being the family of God meeting together in His presence with His Word being heard. Why wouldn't you want to be there?

### *c. ...your own practice as a Christian?*

As a pastor I don't always find Sundays to be particularly restful - though I do love being with God's people as we meet with Him together. However, over the years, I have reflected on the impact that the Sabbath and its fulfilment in Christ should have on my Christian life. It does teach me that there has to be limits to my work. My tendency is to work too hard and arrogantly assume that everything depends on my efforts. My experience is that when my thinking heads in this direction then thoughts of the Lord and His glory drift away. So I need to be reminded that my work has its limits. And Sabbath principles also remind me that ultimate rest is found in rejoicing in and remembering the Lord and His salvation.

As I have reflected on that in the last couple of years it has meant that I have been more ruthless about taking a day off each week as a beneficial discipline in reminding me that work has limits. But if ultimate rest is found in Christ then I want to be wise in how I use that time off. Of course I can enjoy leisure activities (and a doctrine of creation would lead me not to negate these) but my experience is that consciously choosing rest with Christ- a walk where I spend time praising Christ, being aware of His presence with me, quietly meditating on His Word for the good of my own soul- is much more deeply refreshing and re-energising for the week ahead.

In some ways the above may sound like a traditional Sabbath - resting from work to remember Christ. That is probably right - I would simply suggest that I have got to it from wanting to enjoy rest in Christ rather than Law. It probably shouldn't surprise us that if the new covenant life is living by the Spirit that He directs us to a life not a million miles away from the Law which He inspired.

## **6) What relevance do you think the Sabbath has for our wider society?**

Similar to what I write above I would want to argue that the principles of Sabbath give us limits to work and a redefinition of rest.

It is an obvious point to make but for many in our culture work can become all consuming. That may be for financial reasons but it is often because work has become the ultimate source of a person's worth- I am somebody because I am good at my job, respected at work and so on. The Sabbath teaches us the limits of that- I am not defined simply by what I do. There is a God who calls me to relate to Him.

I also want to suggest that Sabbath redefines rest. We need to know that in a society where the leisure industry is exploding, where there are a massive array of options for entertainment and yet where people end up exhausted and disillusionment. The cry of the Lord of the Sabbath is "Come to me, all who are weary and I will give you rest." An exhausted restless society needs to hear the message of Christ.

If I am honest, I wouldn't argue for Christians to moralise about working on a Sunday. However, I do want to use the principles that lie behind the Sabbath as an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel - the limits of our efforts to achieve and the offer of rest in Christ.

### ***Recommended Reading***

- D.A Carson (ed), *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1999). This seems to be the most comprehensive work arguing for the position detailed above.

Because the Sabbath issue is part of the broader question of the role of the Law in the life of the believer the following works have been helpful for me:

- Stanley N. Gundry et al, *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Zondervan, 1996). The section by Douglas Moo is closest to the argument I am pursuing.
- Thomas Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law* (Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010).