

The Sabbath and Its Relation to Christ and the Church in the New Covenant

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INTRODUCTION

In this article I will examine the subject of the Sabbath or Sabbath day and its relation to Christ and the Church in the new covenant. There has been much debate about Sabbatarianism in the history of the Church. Is the Sabbath still relevant for today? Should the Sabbath be observed by Christians? Which day is the Sabbath? Is it Saturday, the seventh day of the week, or Sunday, the first day of the week, or is it one day in seven that one arbitrarily chooses to rest on? Has the Sabbath been changed from Saturday (the seventh day), to Sunday (the first day of the week) in commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus? The subject of the Sabbath has also been a dividing line between Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology.¹ There has been some misunderstanding on this subject in both camps and it is the intent of this paper to offer up a solution to this question by examining the Sabbath from a Christocentric, as well as a Christotelic perspective. I will do so in three

steps: (1) describe my hermeneutical approach to the subject; (2) discuss the Sabbath in the OT; and (3) discuss how the Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ by specifically focusing on four key biblical texts which are important to the discussion, namely, Matthew 11:28-30; 12:1-14; John 5:1-18, and Hebrews 3:7-4:11, before I draw my observations to an overall conclusion.

HERMENEUTICAL AND EXEGETICAL APPROACH

We are constrained by the NT texts to observe that all things contained in the OT including the Sabbath, have their focal point and ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Jesus, the Master Exegete of Scripture (John 1:18),² after his resurrection, on the walk to Emmaus with the two disciples declared: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that *everything written about me* in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44-45, italics mine).

It should be noted in this text, that Jesus presents the structure of the OT according to tripartite division found in the Hebrew Bible, known by the acronym “Tanak,” the *Torah* (the Law of Moses), the *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), and the *Ketuv'im* (the Writings).³ Jesus made the profound statement that *everything* written about him was contained in *all* of the OT, not just part of it. In order to understand this truth, Jesus had to “open their minds.”⁴ This indicates that it was Jesus himself who was the first to teach early Christians to read and examine the OT via Christological lenses.⁵ The OT was to be interpreted by the NT with Christ at the forefront, as the ideal reference point of all Scripture. This has been the hermeneutical and exegetical tool when it comes to the interpretation of the OT in the history of the Church as enunciated by Augustine, “In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed.”⁶ Both Testaments are of course, “revelation,” but Augustine saw and understood the OT as progressive revelation which reaches its revelatory apex in the NT revelation particularly in the Incarnation (John 1:14) which is the revelation of God *par excellence* (cf. John 1:18). This revelation would also be further extrapolated with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). Jesus himself understood that his own words and actions would progressively be understood at a later time.⁷

When this hermeneutical methodology of interpreting the OT by the NT paradigm is neglected, and one does the opposite, this will inevitably result in confusion, particularly in the areas of the supremacy of the new covenant over the old, the nature of election as seen in the national election of national Israel where one could be part of the elect nation, but not necessarily be one of the spiritually elect. By contrast, *all* members of the new covenant are elected by the triune God and shall never perish (John 10:28). This confusion has also led to the debate between paedobaptism (infant baptism) and credobaptism (baptism for believers only). This would also include the confusion of baptism with circumcision as corresponding “signs” of the new and old covenant. The question of the Sabbath also falls into this category.

Many in the Reformed community argue that the Sabbath laws of the OT, or the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, commands the keeping and observing of the Sabbath, as the paradigm for the new covenant church to observe the Christian “Sabbath,” i.e., Sunday.⁸ There is an inconsistency here. The Sabbath is the particular name for the seventh day of the week, and never the first day of the week. Benjamin Warfield for instance speaks of the Sabbath as Sunday, “You naturally dwell on the joy of the Sabbath. *This is the day* of gladness and triumph, on which the Lord broke the bonds of the grave, abolishing death and bringing life and immortality to light.”⁹ Warfield also collapses the terms “Sabbath” and “Lord’s day” together, “the Lord’s day” was also known “from the creation of the world [as] God’s day,”¹⁰ an allusion to Genesis 2:2-3, which is actually referring to the seventh day, not the first day of the week. He also equates the two terms by stating, “the Sabbath is the Lord’s day.”¹¹ There is no biblical justification for these assertions. Another problem with interpreting the NT by the OT, rather than vice versa, leads to the common but unbiblical assertion that the day of worship was changed from Saturday to Sunday, or from the Sabbath to the Lord’s day.¹² This tension is a result of trying to maintain the validity of the Decalogue on the one hand, while on the other hand, trying to avoid the literal reading of the fourth commandment regarding the seventh day Sabbath. The resolution to this tension is to argue what I have chosen to call the “transference theory,” i.e., the fourth commandment has been amended, so that the Sabbath now becomes the first day of the week. Such a claim is baseless and should be rejected. The driving force to this interpretation is not the Bible, but ecclesiastical tradition.¹³

In John 5:38-40 Jesus also speaks of the relationship of the Scriptures to him: “and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” Jesus charges his hearers with not having the word of God abiding in them, for if they did, they would have recognized him as the one who was sent by the Father. Jesus thus forges a link between the Scriptures and himself. That the “word” that Jesus has in mind here is the Scriptures is evident from the following verse (v. 39) where Jesus mentions that even though they search the Scriptures and they assume that they have eternal life in them, the Scriptures instead point away from themselves and bear witness rather, to Jesus who is the true life giver, the one who can actually give eternal life to his own (John 1:4; 6:40; 10:28). The indictment against his hearers is that the Life-Giving One is in their midst, and yet they refuse to come to him to have life which they presuppose is in the Scriptures. Thus, as in Luke 24:44-45, Jesus asserts that he is indeed the subject and focal point of all the Scriptures. To focus on the Scriptures without seeing the One to whom they collectively point to is to miss eternal life. Jesus also demonstrates that the biblical writers pointed away from themselves and directed the attention to the Messiah.

After dealing with the overall testimony of “the Scriptures” concerning himself (John 5:39), he then speaks of the one biblical writer who was perhaps considered the most important and revered biblical prophet of the Jews, namely Moses. In John 5:45-47 Jesus states: “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

Just as in the case of the written Scriptures, Jesus accuses his hearers of placing their hope on Moses rather than the one he wrote about. Like the Scriptures, Moses pointed away from himself to the one who was to come. Thus Moses, and by extension his writings, will stand as a witness in judgment against the Jewish unbelievers who have rejected the Messiah the focal point that Moses pointed to. Jesus states that to believe in Moses should logically lead one to believe in him on the basis that Moses wrote about him. Moreover, to believe in the writings of Moses, is to believe in the words of Jesus the Messiah, whom Moses wrote about.¹⁴ Conversely,

not to believe the writings of Moses is to disbelieve in the words of Jesus. The thrust of this passage is clear. The focus is not Moses or his writings, but rather the referent to whom Moses and his writings point to. What Jesus says of himself in relation to the Scriptures is what Paul will later describe as the contrast between the shadow and the reality (cf. Col 2:16-17). The words of Jesus regarding his relationship to the Scriptures, and Moses appears to be an expansion and description on the earlier confession of the apostle Philip to Nathaniel regarding Jesus, that, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:45).

Following in the footsteps of Jesus and taking their cue from him, the NT writers understood that the OT and everything in it cumulatively pointed to Christ. Paul thus writes, “For Christ is the end (or goal) of the law for righteousness for all who believe” (Rom 10:4). The word *telos* has as its primary meaning “end,” but it also can mean “purpose” and goal.”¹⁵ Moreover, Paul also calls the dietary and calendrical aspects of the law a *skia* (“shadow”) of what is to come, but the reality or substance is Christ (Col 2:16-17). Paul writes: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:16-17). The use of the word *skia* is also employed by the writer of Hebrews to refer to the Levitical priesthood (Heb 8:5), and also to “the law” (Heb 10:1). The Sabbath is part of the law, and as such is also part of the shadow as we see in Col 2:16-17. It is interesting that the only place where the word “Sabbath” appears in the Pauline letters is in Col 2:16, and hence this word is a Pauline *hapax legomenon*. The mere absence of the word “Sabbath” in Paul’s letters is intriguing. The Jews were identified by three main signs or markers: 1) circumcision, 2) dietary restrictions, and 3) the Sabbath. Paul deals extensively with circumcision in his letters, and dietary restrictions to some extent, but he only mentions the Sabbath by name only once in Colossians 2:16. Paul appears to be arguing as the writer of Hebrews does, that the law which in context appears to be referring to the Mosaic law, has reached its end and goal in Christ, and this would necessarily have to include the Sabbath. This militates against the view of some Reformed writers such as Warfield who argues that all of the Decalogue, which includes the Sabbath commandment, is “authoritative for all time.”¹⁶

The text of Colossians 2:16-17 posed some difficulty for Warfield's Sabbatarianism. Warfield does not see the setting aside of the Sabbath in this text, but attempts rather to interpret it as simply Paul "emancipating his readers from the shadow-ordinances of the Old Dispensation."¹⁷ Yet, according to Warfield, Paul still expects the Colossian Christians to keep the Sabbath which Warfield interprets as the Lord's day. Warfield again comments, "It is simply unimaginable that he [Paul] could have allowed that any precept of this fundamental proclamation of essential morality [the Decalogue] could pass into desuetude."¹⁸

The text clearly points out that the weekly Sabbath is part of the shadow whose substance is Christ, the one to whom it points to. The Sabbath is placed alongside of the new moons, and annual feast days. In Colossians 2:16 Paul goes in a descending order from annual celebrations (feast/festival days), to monthly celebrations (new moons), to weekly celebrations (the Sabbath). This is wholly in keeping with the calendar of the Mosaic law. The weekly Sabbath is mentioned along with the feast days (Lev 23), sacrifices were to be offered on the weekly Sabbath, the new moons, and the feast days (Num 28-29; 1 Chron 23:31; 2 Chron 2:4; 8:13; 31:3; Neh 10:33; Isa 1:13-14; Ezek 45:17; Hos 2:11). Thus, the weekly Sabbath, with the new moons, and annual feast days are part of the shadow, and the reality, which is Christ has come. One hardly embraces the shadow when the reality is present before us. Paul expresses similar concerns in Galatians, a very strong letter aimed at the Judaizers who seek to bring Gentiles under the mantle of the Mosaic law and Judaism as a means of salvation. In Galatians 4:10-11 Paul states, "You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain." Here it will be noted that Paul reverses the order, going from days, to months, and seasons and years. Considering that the major theme of Galatians is countenancing the Judaizers,¹⁹ the best view is that Paul is addressing Jewish calendrical observances.²⁰

It has also been observed that in the NT, we find nine of the ten commandments repeated and even cited, except for the fourth commandment. Warfield openly acknowledged that, "We have no such formal commentary from our Lord's lips on the Fourth Commandment."²¹ The conspicuous absence of the fourth commandment presents it seems, an indicator, that in the new covenant the Sabbath is no longer in force, because with the setting aside

of the Mosaic law, the sign of the Mosaic law, the Sabbath, has also been set aside. This view seems to be buttressed by a number of indicators in the NT:

- At the Council of Jerusalem, Gentile believers were to abide by a number of rules laid down by the apostles, but the Sabbath command is not one of them (Acts 15:28-29).
- Jesus mentions thirteen moral sins that arise from the sinful heart, and Sabbath breaking is not one of them (Mark 7:21-22).
- Paul lists twenty sins in Romans 1:29-32 and Sabbath breaking is not included among them.
- Paul lists ten sins that bar one's entrance into the Kingdom of God and Sabbath breaking is absent from the list (1 Cor 6:9-10).
- Paul lists fifteen sins that also bars one's entrance into the Kingdom of God and Sabbath breaking is not among them (Gal 5:19-21).
- Paul lists eighteen sins and Sabbath breaking is not one of them (2 Tim 3:1-4).
- A total of thirteen sins are mentioned that bar one's entrance into the holy city, New Jerusalem, and Sabbath breaking is not one of them (Rev 21:8; 22:15).

The nine commandments which are repeated and reiterated in the NT become part of the "law of Christ" (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2; cf. Rom 8:2, "the law of the Spirit of life;" "the law of liberty" [Jam 1:25; 2:12;]²² "the royal law" [Jam 2:8], all of which can be subsumed under the "law of Christ") which is the new covenant law that believers are to adhere to.²³

THE SABBATH IN THE OT

The Sabbath is the proper biblical name for the seventh day of the week, which in the English speaking world is our Saturday. The Scriptures identify the Sabbath as "the seventh day" which is "a Sabbath to Yahweh your God" (Exod 20:10), and it is patterned after the creation week of six days of labor, and the seventh day of rest (Exod 20:9). The seventh day is thus marked out as the day when Yahweh ceased from his creative work (Gen 2:2-3; cf. Exod 20:11). The Sabbath begins on Friday at sunset, and ends on Saturday at sunset. This reckoning of time is modeled after the creation week which was temporally marked by the sequence of evening and morning (Gen 1:5). The biblical day therefore begins at sunset. For all intents and purposes, the

only day of the week that is given the name “Sabbath” is the seventh day of the week (Exod 31:15; 35:2; Lev 23:3). The only exception to this rule was the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:31; 23:32) which was the *only day* outside the seventh day that was called a “Sabbath,” and specifically “a Sabbath of solemn rest” (Lev 16:31). The Sabbatical year also shared the same language (Lev 25:4).²⁴ The Sabbath and the Day of the Atonement are the only two days in which any and all work are prohibited.²⁵

The first time the word “Sabbath” is used as a noun in the Bible is in Exodus 16:23.²⁶ The people of Israel have been recently redeemed from Egypt, they have crossed the Red Sea and are in the wilderness of Sinai. What is instructive in the first use of the word “Sabbath” in Exodus 16:23, is that God has to teach the people of Israel which day is the Sabbath, and this is done principally by the giving of the manna from heaven. On the sixth day a double portion of manna will fall so that there will be enough manna for the Sabbath, where no collection of the manna is to be made. This would seem to indicate that the Sabbath was not observed prior to Israel’s post-exodus experience.²⁷ The Sabbath later becomes part of the Decalogue where it is formally and officially commanded. The fact that the Sabbath was enjoined on Israel in a post-exodus context is also evident from Nehemiah 9:13-14: “You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made *known* to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant” (*italics mine*).²⁸

One of the important features of the Sabbath is that it is given to a redeemed people, and thus the Sabbath has a redemptive aspect to it. Those who enter the true rest of the Sabbath are the truly redeemed, the elect of God as we shall see below. The uniqueness of the Sabbath being revealed only to post-exodus Israel is also evident in the language of Deuteronomy 5:2-3, “The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb [or Sinai]. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.” This would imply that prior to post-exodus Israel, the Sabbath was not observed. The reference to “our fathers” may suggest the patriarchs, or the forefathers who were in bondage in Egypt. From Genesis 1:1 to Exodus 16:22 there is no mention of the Sabbath by name. There is no evidence at all in Genesis that Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Seth, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or any of the sons of Jacob or even the tribes

in Egypt observed the Sabbath.²⁹ This notable absence was disturbing to some Jews. In the collection of the Pseudepigrapha, the book of Jubilees, also called “the Little Genesis,” recounts how the patriarchs including Noah, Abraham, and Jacob observed the annual feast days such as Pentecost before the law was given at Sinai.³⁰

The Sabbath also becomes a “sign” between God and Israel (Exod 31:13, 17), and it would seem to follow from this that the Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant.³¹ The Sabbath was a unique sign between God and Israel, and not between God and the nations. The Sabbath was a covenant sign to Israel alone. For this reason, while the nations are condemned in Scripture for all types of moral transgressions, they are never condemned for Sabbath breaking as Israel is (Jer 17:19-27; Ezek 20:13, 16, 21, 24; 22:8, 26; 23:38). The Sabbath was uniquely given to Israel as a covenant sign.³² One of the notable distinctives about the Sabbath was the severe penalty for violating it. The breaking of the Sabbath by working on it was punishable by death (Exod 31:14-15; 35:2).³³ This injunction is put into practice in the narrative of the man picking up sticks on the Sabbath.³⁴ The verdict of Yahweh is swift, the man is to be immediately put to death (Num 15:32-36). Why is the violation of the Sabbath punishable by death? In the OT, the Sabbath is the only day which if profaned, can bring the death penalty. While the Day of Atonement as noted was the only other day called a “Sabbath,” its profanation did not bring about the death penalty as the seventh day does. To violate the Sabbath was to breach the covenant relation between Israel and Yahweh. Is it possible that the death penalty for breaching the Sabbath is so severe because the Sabbath represented Christ? I propose this as a speculation.

THE SABBATH AND ITS FULFILLMENT IN CHRIST

We have noted above that the Sabbath is part of the law that pointed to Christ (Col 2:16-17) who is its ultimate end and goal (Rom 10:4). The gospel accounts relate a number of events and sayings of Jesus that were related to the Sabbath. Whenever the Sabbath is mentioned in relation to Jesus in the gospels there is invariably tension, especially between Jesus and the religious leaders. The Sabbath narratives as I will refer to them, usually involve didactic lessons whereby Jesus is teaching a profound truth about the Sabbath, but in almost all cases, the Sabbath narratives involve opportunities for Jesus to

heal the sick, in fact Jesus seems to deliberately heal on the Sabbath.³⁵ Jesus teaches and heals on the Sabbath. The healings of Jesus on the Sabbath, and in general seem to indicate a foretaste of the coming Kingdom. In the person of Jesus the King, the Kingdom of God is present and active (“the kingdom of God is in your midst;” Luke 17:20-21 NASB). In his healing of the blind, deaf, crippled, and raising of the dead, Jesus was demonstrating what the Kingdom of God will look like when it is fully manifested. There will be no blindness, deafness, disabilities, no death (cf. Rev 21:4; 22:3). The healings on the Sabbath resulted in rejoicing, liberation, and praising God. The One who walked in the Garden of Eden with Adam and fellowshiped with him is walking once more in the midst of sinful humanity, and he is in the process of working, restoring that broken fellowship and in so doing restores what the Sabbath was meant to be, a time of refreshing fellowship with the Creator. The coming Kingdom is the entrance into the eternal Sabbath rest realized through the King. A clear connection is thus being made between Jesus and the Sabbath.

The way Jesus conducted himself on the Sabbath was perceived as controversial and was one of the reasons the religious sought to kill him on charges of Sabbath breaking (John 5:18). Jesus himself recognized that he was the object to which the Sabbath pointed. In the two versions of the Decalogue (Exod 20; Deut 5), two things are said about why the Sabbath is to be kept. In Exodus 20:8-11 the Sabbath is to be *remembered* in imitation of God’s creative work of heaven and earth in six days, and resting on the seventh day.³⁶ In Deuteronomy 5:12-15, the Sabbath is to be *observed* in celebration of Israel’s release and emancipation from slavery and bondage. The commands “remember” and “observe” are covenantal terms. In inaugurating the sign of the New Covenant, Jesus commanded that we keep the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper in “remembrance” of him (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:24-25), and that we are to disciple and teach the nations who receive baptism in the name of the triune God to “observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:20). These two aspects of the Sabbath, rest and release are fulfilled in Christ. In Christ we find rest (Matt 11:28-30; Heb 3:7-4:11). We are also released and emancipated from the bondage of sin. Jesus taught that everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin (John 8:34). One can be physically free, but spiritually remain in bondage. Jesus asserts that he alone has the power to set us free from the bondage of sin, “if the Son sets you free, you will be

free indeed" (John 8:36). This theme is repeated in the NT, "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev 1:5).

The gospel of Matthew, considered the most Jewish of the gospels with an intended Jewish audience, addresses the issue of the Sabbath and its relation to Jesus in only one section, Matthew 12 where we find the narrative of Jesus with his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath.³⁷ This narrative is followed by another one where Jesus heals a person on the same Sabbath. However, an extremely important preface to Matthew 12 lies in Matthew 11:28-30 which sets the stage for what follows.

Matthew 11:28-30

After declaring that all things have been given to him by the Father, and that no one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son, and that the Son reserves the sovereign right to reveal the Father to whoever he chooses (Matt 11:27; cf. Luke 10:22), Jesus proceeds to make the following statement in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Jesus makes mention of a contrast between labor and rest. He commands people to come to him and he promises to give them rest, even rest to their souls. Jesus is declaring himself to be the Sabbath, the one who ideally and truly gives eternal rest, not a twenty-four hour rest once in a seven day week. The weekly Sabbath had a transiency in that it came and went, it did not endure or remain permanently. Jesus idealizes what the Sabbath points to. It is instructive to realize that in the creation account in Genesis 1, the recurring phrase of "evening and morning" is used for the six days of creation (Gen 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). The only day that does not have an "evening and morning" reference is the seventh day. The reason the seventh day has no mention of "evening and morning" may be suggestive that the seventh day was intended to be on-going, where the first human couple would enjoy non-ending fellowship with God in a state of eternal rest. This rest was based on an unfettered fellowship with God. God walked in the garden and communed with Adam and Eve, and this presence seems to have been a physical one (cf. Gen 3:8).³⁸ Another important aspect of this rest that the first human couple had with God is that it also involved work. God

placed the man in Eden to “work it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). In the pre-Fall state, work was blessed, it was enjoyable. Yet in the midst of this work, Adam and Eve enjoyed rest in their fellowship with God. However, with the Fall a number of things changed. Direct fellowship with God was broken and severed, and man was separated from God (Gen 3:8-10). Work which was intended to be enjoyable coupled with rest in fellowship with God, now became cumbersome, hard, and would involve working the ground with sweat and becoming tired. The divine rest which they enjoyed with God was lost.

We see in the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30 a return and recapitulation of this pre-Fall state. He calls those to himself who are tired, those who labor due to the effects of a fallen world and promises them rest. Another echo is seen in the statement where Jesus speaks of taking his yoke upon us. The yoke was an instrument of labor which was intended to keep two beasts of labor in unison to till the ground. The yoke is also identified by Jesus as his teaching, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me” (Matt 11:29). He is gentle and lowly of heart, not as a slave master who abuses and cares nothing for his slave. The yoke Jesus places on us is “easy and light.” Elsewhere in Scripture, the “yoke” is usually spoken of negatively (“yoke of slavery;” Gal 5:1; Mosaic law is also called a “yoke” which is difficult to bear; Acts 15:10). The yoke of Jesus is not heavy and burdensome (like that of the Pharisees; Matt 23:4), but manageable and enjoyable.³⁹ In speaking of the yoke, Jesus not only promises rest, but also offers us work, to work for him. In this text, we hear an echo of the pattern of Genesis 2:15, to work in Eden and enjoy rest in fellowship with God. In fellowship with Jesus, one enters God’s rest, for Jesus the Messiah is the Sabbath of God.

Matthew 12:1-14

Immediately after proclaiming himself to be the true Sabbath of God, Matthew 12:1-14 leads the reader into a Sabbath narrative where Jesus goes through the grain fields and his disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath. This is no mere coincidence. Matthew is clearly tying the Sabbath narrative to what Jesus had just said about himself in Matthew 11:28-30. A number of points should be noted. Jesus responds to the charge that his disciples are breaking the Sabbath by recounting the story of David and his men who when they were hungry and ate the bread of the Presence which was forbidden to all save the priests (Matt 12:3-4; cf. 1 Sam 21:1-6). David as the messianic king

is of such importance that the law of the consecrated bread of the presence is overruled. Jesus demonstrates by comparison an *a fortiori* argument, from the principle of the lesser to the greater, that as the Son of David, he is on a greater mission with his disciples than David and his men were. The mission of Jesus and his disciples overrules the Sabbath for the object of the Sabbath, the true Sabbath is present among them.

Another important point Jesus alludes to is the principle that divine work or service does not violate the Sabbath but rather overrules it. For this reason Jesus calls attention to the fact that the priests profane (or “desecrate;” NET, NIV; “break;” NRSV; NASB; NJB) the Sabbath⁴⁰ and yet are not guilty (Matt 12:5). In the same manner, and much more so, Jesus and his disciples are on divine duty or service even on the Sabbath without incurring any guilt. Jesus further demonstrates his supremacy over the shadow of the Sabbath by declaring “something greater than the temple is here” (Matt 12:6). If he is greater than the temple, then he is greater than the priests, and as the priests are not subject to the Sabbath while in the temple service, much more is the Messiah in his divine service exempt from the Sabbath which is his shadow. In Matthew 12 Jesus declares himself to be greater in three areas: (1) “something greater than the temple is here” (Matt 12:6); (2) “something greater than Jonah is here” (Matt 12:41); (3) “something greater than Solomon is here” (Matt 12:42).

In these three statements, Jesus declares himself as the Messiah to be greater than the temple (priests), greater than Jonah (prophets), and greater than Solomon (kings). In summary, Jesus not only declares himself to be the Sabbath as we saw in Matthew 11:28-30, but as Messiah, he is the true Priest, Prophet, and King *par excellence*. It is clear that Jesus understood himself to be the climax and pinnacle of the law and the prophets.⁴¹ Jesus also declares himself to be the Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8). He is not subject to the Sabbath, but as the one to whom it points, he is Lord over it and therefore supreme over it.⁴² By calling himself “Lord of the Sabbath” Jesus is also making an extraordinary claim to deity. R. T. France notes that in ascribing this title to himself, Jesus makes “the most extraordinary claim to an authority on a par with that of God himself.”⁴³ That Jesus makes a claim to deity as “Lord of the Sabbath” is reinforced when we consider the fact that God refers to the Sabbath as “my Sabbaths” (Exod 31:13; Lev 19:3, 30; 26:2; Isa 56:4), and by extension, its Lord.

John 5:1-18

The idea of rest and divine work as complimentary aspects that we have first seen in Genesis is also seen in the ministry of Jesus in John 5:1-18. In this narrative, Jesus heals a crippled man on the Sabbath and commands him to take up his bed and walk (John 5:8). Jesus knows full well that this will elicit a negative response from the religious leaders. Carrying a bed or mat would constitute work and thus a violation of the Sabbath.⁴⁴ This act of Jesus prompted him to be persecuted and opposed by the religious leaders (John 5:16).⁴⁵ Jesus then makes the following statement on that Sabbath, “My Father is *working* until now, and I am *working*” (John 5:17; italics mine). This echoes again the theme in Genesis 2:15 that in the pre-Fall state, work was to be done while at the same time enjoying God’s rest (Gen 2:2-3). Here Jesus speaks of the Father and the Son working on the Sabbath. We see again here an echo of the ‘Lord of the Sabbath’ statement which Jesus made in Matthew 12:8 that he is not subject to the Sabbath, but rather, the Sabbath is subject to him and his Father. Divine providence remains active even on the Sabbath, which would also include divine healing. The idea of God working on the Sabbath would sound blasphemous to some Jews. The writer of *Jubilees* maintained that God and the angels rested on the Sabbath day (*Jub.* 2:17-18, 21, 30).⁴⁶ The claim of Jesus that God works on the Sabbath would have been offensive to those who held such a view. If divine providence were to cease, all life including the universe would cease to exist. Christ holds the cosmos together (Col 1:17), and “he upholds [“sustains”; NET] the universe by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3).

It is interesting that Jesus indicates that the Father has been working “until now.” This indicates that even though God ceased from his creative work in terms of the physical universe (Gen 2:2-3), he did not cease from his work of providence, and following the Fall, he did not cease from his work of redemption which continues to this very day. His sovereignty includes his sustaining and ordering of all things in creation even on the Sabbath itself. Raymond Brown makes the inquisitive observation that, “The fact that people are born and die on the Sabbath shows that God is at work, giving life, rewarding good, and punishing evil.”⁴⁷ This explains why various Scripture passages speak of God as presently active and still working, especially in the redemption of his people, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6),

and “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). God’s work of redemption is ultimately centered on Christ. Jesus said, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29).

In John 5:18 the basis for wanting to do away with Jesus is twofold: 1) he broke the Sabbath, and 2) he claimed God was his Father, thereby making himself equal with God. The claim to deity as we have seen was also made in Matthew 12:8 in Jesus’ claim to being “Lord of the Sabbath.” The charge was also made in Matthew 12 that the disciples and Jesus by association were also guilty of Sabbath breaking. But, did Jesus break the Sabbath? If so, would this constitute a sin as a breach of the Decalogue? If Jesus did in fact sin, then this would disqualify him from being the perfect sinless atoning sacrifice for the people of God. Jesus did not sin by healing on the Sabbath or for allowing his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath. We have seen that to be in divine service is to overrule the Sabbath law. Another approach to this question is to consider the word for “breaking” which is *eluen*, the third person imperfect indicative verb from the root word *luō*. The verb *luō* can have a wide range of meanings such as to loose or “unite,” “set free,” “destroy,” “dismiss,” “transgress,” “permit,” “do away with,” “put an end to”⁴⁸ even “abolish.”⁴⁹ Is it possible that what John is saying is that Jesus was “loosing” the Sabbath, rather than “breaking” it? All the translations seem to favor the meaning of “breaking” in John 5:18. While this translation (“loosing” the Sabbath) may be possible on grammatical grounds, it is better to understand the text as Jesus overruling the Sabbath as the Son who does what the Father does (John 5:19) in working together to bring about the purpose of the divine counsel (cf. Eph 1:11).

Just as the priests who work in the temple break or profane the Sabbath are “guiltless,” (Matt 12:5) because of their divine service, so Jesus and his Father are also about their work in the divine service. Thus as the Father works, so the Son works (John 5:17), as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son raises the dead and gives them life (John 5:21), so that ultimately all should honor the Son even as they honor the Father. To dishonor the Son is to dishonor the Father (John 5:23).

Hebrews 3:7-4:11

In the entire NT, Hebrews 3:7-4:11 is the only passage that addresses the Sabbath rest that believers enter into in Christ. The fact that this letter was

written to a Jewish audience, in which there both believers and unbelievers (those who were tempted to fall back into Judaism; Heb 5:11-6:12), the issue of Sabbath rest becomes even more important as it would have been a Jewish identity marker. As we saw in Matthew 12:1-12 and John 5:1-18, so in Hebrews there is also an emphasis on the supremacy of Christ over all things. Christ is the “heir of all things” and also the divine agent of creation through whom God created the world or cosmos (Heb 1:2). The deity of Christ is also a central feature in Hebrews (1:2-3, 8-12). He is “better” than the angels (Heb 1), he has a better name than the angels. Christ is superior to the prophets of the OT, because as God’s Son he is the one that God speaks through in these last days (Heb 1:1-2). Christ as the Son is greater than Moses, who was a faithful servant (Heb 3:1-6). The priesthood of Christ, after the order of Melchizedek is greater than the priesthood of Aaron (Heb 7:11). Christ holds his priesthood permanently and without transfer, whereas the Levitical priesthood continued through succession (Heb 7:23-24). Christ the High Priest possesses indestructible life (Heb 7:16), whereas the Levitical priests were subject to death (Heb 7:23). Christ is a guarantor of a “better covenant” (Heb 7:22), the Aaronic priests were imperfect, Christ is perfect (Heb 7:26-28), Christ is a better and greater high priest, and is the mediator of a “better covenant” based on “better promises” (Heb 8:6). He is also “the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb 9:15; 12:24), which in context is the better covenant just mentioned. Christ’s sacrifice is better and greater than the Levitical sacrifices, Christ’s sacrifice is “once for all,” and thus denotes finality, whereas the Levitical sacrifices were repetitive and daily (Heb 9:23-26). The very idea of the inauguration of a new covenant is nested within the OT itself in Jeremiah 31:31-34 which is also quoted in Hebrews 8:8-12. In Jeremiah 31:31 the promise is made of a new covenant God will make with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. This new covenant is “not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt” (Jer 31:32), clearly a reference to the Mosaic covenant at Sinai. The new covenant will be far different, it involves God writing his laws in his people’s minds and hearts and they will all know him from the least to the greatest (Jer 31:33-34). All in the new covenant know the Lord and are his elect.

The two references to Christ having sat down at the right hand of God communicate his finished work (Heb 1:3; 10:12), whereas the references

to the standing of the priests in offering up of sacrifices communicate their on-going work (Heb 10:11) Christ's sacrifice was perfect, while the Levitical sacrifices were imperfect (Heb 10:1-10). It is clear that the writer of Hebrews has a Christocentric theme that dominates the majority of his letter. For this reason, the Jewish audience in this letter is exhorted to look not to Moses (cf. John 5:45-47), but to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2).

Returning to Heb 3:7-4:11 we see here another area in which Christ is supreme and better. As we saw in Matthew 11:28-30; 12:1-12 and John 5:1-18, there is an emphasis in this section on "rest" and "works." That Christ is the reference point is made clear in Hebrews 3:14, "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." The text begins by quoting from Psalm 95:7-11 which recounts the wilderness rebellion of Israel against God as recounted in Numbers 14. The writer of Hebrews takes this text and applies it to the present situation in the church, thus showing that Scripture is God speaking in the present.⁵⁰ Just as the Israelites of old in the wilderness wanderings went through a period of testing, and many fell away in unbelief, so the Jewish audience of Hebrews is also going through a period of testing, and some are experiencing unbelief, and are in danger of falling away. The writer of Hebrews focuses on the word "today" as well as "rest" and "works." The word "today" is in the emphatic position as it appears first in the citation.⁵¹ It should be noted that this "rest" is called "my rest," i.e., God's rest (Heb 4:3). Hebrews 3:16-19 indicates that many of the Israelites who had been physically redeemed from Egypt nevertheless were spiritually lost as they rebelled against God in the wilderness. They no doubt also observed the seventh day Sabbath during the wilderness wanderings and experienced physical rest, but the point the writer of Hebrews attempts to show is that such rebels never experienced true rest, spiritual rest in Christ, and as such, they did not enter into God's rest. The reason they did not enter God's rest was due to unbelief (Heb 3:19). This shows that one can keep the Sabbath all one's life, but not experience the true Sabbath rest in salvation in Christ. One can keep the Sabbath, but not have the Sabbath.

The promise of entering into this rest is still available, and this rest is not dependent on observing a literal day (Heb 4:1). There is however a sense of urgency, that while it is still "today" one should endeavor to enter that rest.⁵² This rest is entered into, not by ceasing from physical labor, but by

believing, “For we who have believed enter that rest” (Heb 4:3). The writer quotes from Genesis 2:2⁵³ in Hebrews 4:4 which speaks of God’s rest from his creative work of the physical universe (cf. Heb 4:3c), and then quotes from Psalm 95:11 which speaks of God’s spiritual rest. The thrust of the comparison between Genesis 2:2 and Psalm 95:11 is on the word “rest.” If God rested on the seventh day, why does he still speak of his rest millennia later through David in Psalm 95:11?⁵⁴ The writer of Hebrews also comments that even following the wilderness wanderings, Joshua who led the Israelites into the promised land did not give them or guarantee this spiritual rest (Heb 4:8), because there was still disobedience, unbelief, and rebellion across the Jordan (e.g., Achan’s sin; Josh 7). If Joshua did give them rest, God would not have spoken about entering his rest long after Joshua as testified in Psalm 95:11. It should be noted that just as Jesus is greater than Moses, so here, he is greater than Joshua. Joshua did not give Israel rest, but Jesus does give rest to those who believe on him.

There is clearly a distinction made in the rest spoken of in Genesis 2:2 and Psalm 95:11 (written long after the Sabbath was given to Israel in the Torah). The writer then focuses on the word “today” to indicate that the rest of God is still available and can be entered in the immediate present through faith. It is also noteworthy that the reference to “today” is not specific to any particular day of the week, it is not called the Sabbath day⁵⁵ nor the Lord’s day, but refers rather to the very moment where one turns in faith to Christ which can be any day of the week. The fact that we can be certain that the writer of Hebrews is not referring to a particular day of the week is that an unbeliever can in fact keep the Sabbath which would dismantle the whole argument of this text. That unbelievers cannot enter into God’s rest is the main argument of the text. That rest can only be entered through faith. The emphasis is to act now in the present. There remains according to the writer of Hebrews a sabbatismos (“a rest”) (KJV, NKJV), “sabbatic rest” (YLT), “Sabbath rest” (ESV, NASB, NET, NIV).⁵⁶ Louw and Nida note that sabbatismos refers to “a period of rest”⁵⁷ for the people of God (Heb 4:9). This word is a hapax legomenon in the NT as it only appears here. It should be noted that the word “Sabbath” itself is not used in Hebrews 3:7-4:11. Believers are not being commanded to observe the Sabbath day, rather they are told to enter by faith in Christ into a period of rest, to go on “sabbatical.” That rest again is entered via faith. When believers enter into

God's rest, they also cease from their works as God did from his creative work (Heb 4:10; cf. Gen 2:2). There is a now/not yet tension here as well as we find other NT texts. We enter now into God's rest, but when we are finally in the presence of Christ we will experience that rest in its fullest expression. We see this communicated in Revelation 14:13, "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'" The implicit object of faith is Christ through whom we enter into God's rest, those who do not enter that rest are those who do not believe (Heb 4:11). The rest of the seventh day which Adam and Eve were to enjoy as an on-going reality was lost due to sin, but in Christ, that rest is restored. Believers are exhorted to strive to enter into that rest lest they fall through disobedience.

CONCLUSION

We have seen in this paper the importance of relating the OT to the NT especially in the area of the Sabbath and its relation to Christ and the Church in the new covenant. The exegetical method however as it has always been in the history of the Church is to interpret the OT by the NT. To neglect this method is to entertain confusion. We saw from the example of Jesus himself that the methodology he employed and taught us was to read the OT with him as the reference point, in other words, to read the OT through Christological lenses. We examined a number of passages where Jesus did this and where he emphasized the importance of the overall testimony of the Scriptures having him as their focal point.

I noted that the apostolic writers faithfully and consistently followed this method. When we looked at the Sabbath, we noted that it was seen as part of the shadow that pointed to Christ (Col 2:16-17). I noted that the Sabbath contrary to Covenant Theology was not a creation ordinance but was the sign of the Mosaic covenant given at Sinai. It was not observed or known prior to Sinai. I argued that the seventh day in Genesis communicated an on-going rest that the first humans entered into in fellowship with God which was later broken by the entrance of sin through their rebellion. The seventh day is only mentioned as "the Sabbath" through Moses and given uniquely to Israel. It was not given to the nations nor were they ever condemned for

Sabbath breaking. Even though the Sabbath was part of the Mosaic law it nevertheless like everything else in the OT, pointed to Christ. The Sabbath commandment emphasized rest and deliverance from slavery. We saw how Christ fulfills these aspects in a fuller way. Christ gives permanent rest and complete deliverance from the bondage of sin to his people.

We primarily explored four key texts, namely Matthew 11:28-30; 12:1-14; John 5:1-18, and Hebrews 3:7-4:11. We saw how the gospel writers focused on Jesus' words and ministry in the Sabbath narratives. Jesus clearly identifies himself as the Sabbath in Matthew 11:28-30 who gives rest. In Matthew 12:1-14 Jesus demonstrates that he is "Lord of the Sabbath," thus making a divine claim over the Sabbath. Jesus pointed to his supremacy over the Sabbath, the temple, the prophets, and the kings thus presenting himself as Priest, Prophet, and King. In John 5:1-18 Jesus performs the divine service of healing on the Sabbath and claiming that just as the Father works until now, so he too as the Son is working. Divine service and providence overrules the Sabbath. Jesus shows a recapitulation to the original creation before the Fall where rest and work were complimentary. Adam and Eve worked and kept the garden, but they rested in God's presence. The coming of Jesus and his miraculous works on the Sabbath were a foretaste of the coming Kingdom where God's people will enter into the eternal Sabbath where there is no pain or suffering, no death, because they are in Christ, the true Sabbath.

Finally, we examined Hebrews 3:7-4:11 where the writer speaks of God's rest which is not a day, but a period of rest which God has promised to those who believe, not to those who disbelieve. Israel in the OT is used as an example to warn against unbelief and testing. Unbelievers can keep the Sabbath (as many ancient Israelites did), but that does not mean they have entered into God's rest. Only in Christ can this rest be realized. It is realized in tension, as a now-not yet reality. We enter into God's rest now through faith in Christ, but then in its fullest expression when we either enter into the presence of Christ at death (Rev 14:13), or when Christ returns. While the Sabbath has reached its ultimate fulfillment in Christ, its place in God's purposes must not be forgotten. It served the purpose of functioning as a covenant sign for Israel, but as a shadow, it pointed to something far greater. While the Sabbath could bring physical rest, it was only temporary, it came and went, and the reminder of the Fall, of labor and hard work would return when it ended. The Sabbath however was a pointer, a sign that pointed away from

itself to the One who can give eternal rest, and those who experience that rest become members of the new covenant, the body of Christ, the Church. The ultimate question is not whether we keep the Sabbath, but whether the Sabbath keeps us. Those who are in Christ are kept by him, and have already entered into his Sabbath rest.

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- ¹ For a fuller treatment on the question of the Sabbath in Christian history see D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982); Christopher John Donato, ed., *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2011).
 - ² John 1:18 says, "No one has seen God at any time. The unique God, who is in the bosom of the Father, that one has exegeted [him]" (author's translation). Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture citations will generally be taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).
 - ³ The tripartite division of the Hebrew Bible is also implied in other NT passages such as Matt 23:35; Luke 11:51 where Jesus scans the OT Scriptures from the "blood of Abel," the first martyr (Gen 4:8), to the last martyr Zechariah (2 Chron 24:21). Genesis was the first book of the Hebrew Bible and 2 Chronicles was the last book. This would seem to suggest contrary to some liberal critics, that the OT canon was already established and intact in the first century A.D. The OT therefore serves as a *complete* witness to the Messiah Jesus.
 - ⁴ It is interesting that it was the "minds" of the disciples that had to be opened, not their eyes. Paul says something similar but in the negative when he states that the god of this age has blinded the "minds" of those who do not believe the gospel (2 Cor 4:4).
 - ⁵ This point was made decades ago by C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (Welwyn, Hertfordshire: James Nisbet, 1952), 110. See also Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX.: Baylor University Press, 2014).
 - ⁶ Augustine, *Anti-Pelagian Writings* 27 [XV].
 - ⁷ John 13:7, "Jesus answered him, 'What I am doing you do not understand *now*, but *afterward* you will understand'" (italics mine); John 16:12, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them *now*" (italics mine).
 - ⁸ See for instance B. B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield. Volume 1* (John E. Meeter, ed.; Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), 310-311. Warfield even goes to the extent of arguing that the Decalogue was not for Israel only, but is "equally incumbent upon all men, everywhere." Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 312. Charles Spurgeon also used the word "Sabbath" to refer to Sunday and believed the Sabbath commandment was still in force as part of the "moral law".
 - ⁹ *Ibid.*, 308 (italics mine).
 - ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 309.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 318. Warfield then argues, "Christ took the Sabbath into the grave with him and brought the Lord's Day out of the grave with him on the resurrection morn" (319). Warfield seems to confuse matters by now distinguishing the Sabbath from the Lord's day after he had just equated them.
 - ¹² While there is no biblical evidence for these assertions, the early Church Fathers did later argue that Christians should not worship on the Sabbath, but rather on the Lord's day (Sunday). They saw a transition from the seventh day to the eighth day (Sunday) as a sign of the New Covenant, a new beginning in God's salvific plan. The Patristic evidence indicates a move away from the Sabbath to Sunday as the Lord's day. The Church Fathers contrary to many Reformed theologians, were at least consistent in distinguishing the Sabbath from the Lord's day and did not equate the two days. To worship on the Sabbath was seen by the Fathers as a form of 'Judaizing'. On the Sabbath and the Church Fathers see R. J. Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, ed. D. A. Carson, 251-298.
 - ¹³ Warfield acknowledges this point when he states, "It is true enough that we have *no record* of a commandment of our Lord's requiring a *change in the day of the observance of the Sabbath*. Neither has *any of the apostles* to whom he committed the task of founding his Church given us such a commandment" (Warfield, *Selected*

Shorter Writings, 319) (italics mine).

- ¹⁴ Deut 18:18-19 is a passage where Moses “wrote” and spoke of the Prophet like Moses who was to come. This “Prophet” is taken to be the Messiah. The NT takes it for granted that Jesus is the fulfillment of Deut 18:18-19 (see John 7:40; Acts 3:19-26; 7:37, 52). That Deut 18:18-19 was viewed as a Messianic text among some Jews seems to be evident in the Jewish sect of Qumran. Geza Vermes argues that Deut 18:18-19 appears in the Messianic Anthology or *Testimonia* (messianic proof texts) found in Cave 4. The text 4Q175, lists Deut 18:18-19 as the first of three messianic proof texts. Some saw the “Prophet” as a precursor to the Messiah, while others saw him as a “new Moses” (a view which the gospel of Matthew seems to share). See Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 87, 495. These differences of opinion regarding “the Prophet” also seemed to be present in the first century and attested in the NT (see John 1:19-22). Notwithstanding the differences of opinion, the passage of Deut 18:18-19 was linked to a Messianic context.
- ¹⁵ See *telos*, BDAG, *BibleWorks 6.0.009i* (BibleWorks, 2003).
- ¹⁶ Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 316.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 321.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Some commentators see a reference here to Jewish Gnostic observances but this is not the most natural reading of the text. See Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 193; Riesenfeld, *TDNT* 8:148; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 276.
- ²⁰ **Excursus:** Which day(s) did early Christians assemble for worship according to Paul’s Letters? What seems certain according to Paul’s letter to the Romans is that there were some in the Christian community who observed one day above another, which most probably was the Sabbath, but Paul does not specify the day as such. Most commentators seem to be in agreement on this point. For example, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 842; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans 8-16* (Minneapolis, MN.: Augsburg Fortress, 1945, 2008), 821. Others esteemed all days to be alike (Rom 14:5). Paul calls for every Christian believer to follow their conscience in this area and what is of utmost importance is their relationship with the Lord irrespective of which day they regard as special. These various views on the issue of days became points of friction within two of the Christian communities Paul corresponded with, namely Rome (Rom 14:5-6), and Galatia (Gal 4:10). When the subject of the observance of days do appear in the Pauline letters, they seem to appear in a context of conflict either internally as we see in Rom 14:5-6, or externally, by those outside who wish to impose a legalistic observance of days as seen in Gal 4:10 (cf. Col 2:16). Despite such conflict, Paul does not appear to be dogmatic on this issue, nor does he ever give orders that Christians ought to observe any specific day, or any days at all as a special religious observance. What Paul appears to resist is the imposition of any one day or days on Christian believers as a means of attaining one’s right standing before God. Paul appears to be opposing a legalistic observance of a specific day or days. If Paul did have one particular day in mind for Christian worship, then it would seem that the situation over the observance of days in Rom 14:5-6 would have been the opportune moment for Paul to elaborate and clarify which day he believed was fit for Christian worship. It is noteworthy that Paul avoids mentioning any one specific day. Paul is silent on this issue.

When Paul does mention the observance of any day as in Rom 14:5-6, he leaves it up to the independent conscience of the Christian believer on the condition that they regard or observe the day as unto the Lord (Rom 14:6). As already noted, Paul does not specify in Rom 14:6 any particular day by name (whether Sabbath or Sunday), but seems to imply it can be any day. Paul simply refers to “the day” (Rom 14:6), without qualifying it. Paul shows that there is freedom in this area as he readily acknowledges that there are some that regard one day as more better than another, while another esteems all days alike (Rom 14:5). The observance of days is not to be a contentious issue among Christian believers according to Paul. This would seem to indicate that Paul was not a Sabbatarian in the strictest sense of the term, although from his words in Rom 14:5-6 he would not necessarily be opposed to one who observed or regarded the Sabbath as long as it was to the Lord, and without passing judgment on others to do the same. The same could be said of any other day including Sunday or the Lord’s day. As Moo, *Romans*, 842 notes, Paul “does not commend, or command, one practice or the other.” Some may appeal to 1 Cor 16:1-2 that Paul commands observance on the first day of the week for Christian worship. However, while the text certainly shows that there was a habitual gathering of believers on every first day of the week, the focus is on the collection of funds to help the Christian believers in Judea (1 Cor 16:3). Is this gathering on the first day of the week to worship, or

to raise funds for the Jerusalem saints? The idea of assembled worship is implied, but it is not explicit. It is implied in that giving is part of Christian worship (2 Cor 9). To interpret Paul's words in 1 Cor 16:2 as indicating a rigid observance of the first day of the week seems to run counter to Paul's overall position on the observance of days as a point of conscientious freedom by the Christian believer. The imposition of any day on a Christian believer as a means to secure their salvation or right standing before God appears to be vehemently denounced and opposed by Paul, especially as we see in his letter to the Galatians.

- ²¹ Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 317. Warfield however tries to make up for this absence by stating in this same passage that we can see the commentary of Christ's life that is just as "illuminating". However, this is confusing at best. Jesus also observed the Jewish feasts, kosher laws, and other sundry rules contained in the Law or Torah. The Jews viewed the Law/Torah as a unit, a package deal, incapable of being broken into different pieces or laws. For this reason Paul warns the Galatian Christians that if they receive circumcision they become debtors to the *whole* law (Gal 5:3), not just part of it. The Greek adjective *holos* carries the meaning of "whole," "entire," "all".
- ²² On the "law of liberty," see Dan G. McCartney, *James* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 122-123.
- ²³ The law of Christ or Messiah seems to have been prophesied or anticipated in the messianic text of Isa 42:4, "He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. Isaiah 42 is believed to be the first of the "Servant Songs" in Isaiah. The Servant is recognized by some to be the Messiah.
- ²⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 337.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Reformed theologians usually point to Gen 2:2-3 to justify the Sabbath being a "creation ordinance" which is to be observed as Warfield for instance argues (Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 309). The problem with this position is that 1) the noun Sabbath does not appear in Gen 2:2-3 but the verb means to "stop," "cease," "rest," see *BDB* 992, and 2) there is no command or imperative in Genesis to keep the seventh day as a day of rest or worship. To read a Sabbath command into Gen 2:2-3 as many Reformed theologians do is an exercise in eisegesis, not exegesis.
- ²⁷ Brevard Childs disagrees, "The sabbath command is not given to Israel for the first time at Sinai ... but at Sinai Israel is only exhorted to remember what had been an obligation from the beginning." Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1974), 416. Childs however provides no evidence for his assertion but only assumes based on Gen 2:2-3 that the Sabbath was already known and observed. The text of Genesis provides no support for Sabbath keeping of any kind and the word 'Sabbath' is completely absent in Genesis. Childs' position is purely speculative at this point. Warfield makes a similar argument, "Israel was a people to whom the Sabbath was already known, and which needed not to be informed, but only to be reminded of it: *Remember the Sabbath day...*" Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 311 (italics in original). Warfield assumes the Sabbath was known to Israel before the exodus as a creation ordinance. The command in the Decalogue for Israel to remember the Sabbath presupposes that they already did know of the Sabbath, and indeed they did, for they were already taught about the Sabbath in Exodus 16 where the word "Sabbath" appears for the first time in the Hebrew Bible.
- ²⁸ Also Ezek 20:12, "Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them" (Italics mine).
- ²⁹ This argument was also made by Church Father, Justin Martyr to Trypho the Jew in his *Dialogue with Trypho* 19. Justin also included circumcision and argued before the covenant was made with Abraham (Gen 17) many of the faithful men of God (Abel, Enoch, Seth, Noah) were uncircumcised and yet walked with God and found favor in his sight. Gen 26:5 states, "because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." This does not mean that Abraham knew the Mosaic law which would be anachronistic, but rather that Abraham was fully and completely obedient to God. The reference to "Abraham obeyed my voice" is reminiscent of Gen 22:18 of the sacrifice of Isaac. See K. A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2005), 405.
- ³⁰ *Jubilees* 6:17-22; 15:1-4; 16:20-31; 22:1-2; 44:1-4.
- ³¹ The word "sign" is also used of the rainbow in the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:12-13, 17) which is expressly said to be "sign of the covenant." Genesis 17:11 uses virtually the same language in dealing with circumcision as the "sign of the covenant" between God and Abraham and by extension, his physical descendants. The blood of the Passover lamb which was to be placed on the door posts is also said to be a "sign" of protection from God's judgment (Exod 12:13).

- ³² That the Gentiles were exempt from observing the Sabbath is also seen in *Jub.* 2:31, “The Creator of all blessed it [the Sabbath], 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 ... keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth.”
- ³³ Some offences like breaking the Sabbath were punishable by death but also included the phrase being “cut off from among his people.” This phrase is difficult to interpret in the OT. The *TWOT* notes concerning this phrase, “there is the metaphorical meaning to root out, eliminate, remove, excommunicate or destroy by a violent act of man or nature. It is sometimes difficult in a given context to know whether the person(s) who is “cut off” is to be killed or only excommunicated.” R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1048b. Context ultimately is the determining key to interpretation.
- ³⁴ While at first glance this would appear as a harmless act or mistake, the gathering of wood it would seem was done with the intent of kindling a fire, which was also prohibited on the Sabbath (Exod 35:3). The man in this narrative would thus appear to be guilty not only in his act, but also in his intent. It is interesting that the prohibition of kindling a fire on the Sabbath (Exod 35:3), follows immediately from the prohibition of profaning the Sabbath (Exod 35:2). Numbers 15:32-36 seems to be the narrative example or version of the Sabbatarian prohibitions in Exodus 35:2-3. On the narrative story in Numbers 15:32-36 see A. Phillips, “The Case of the Woodgatherer Reconsidered,” *Vetus Testamentum* 19 (1969): 125-128; J. Weingreen, “The Case of the Woodgatherer (Numbers XV 32-36),” *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1966): 361-364.
- ³⁵ On Jesus teaching on the Sabbath see Mark 1:21; 2:23-28; 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31; 6:1-6; 13:10. On Jesus healing on the Sabbath see Matt 12:8-12; Mark 3:1-5; Luke 6:6-9; 13:11-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-18; 7:22-23; 9:1-34.
- ³⁶ There is an interesting parallel between the creative week of Gen 1 and the final week of Jesus, the Passion Week. God creates humans (and humanity by extension) on the sixth day (Gen 1:26-27, 31). Jesus dies on the sixth day to purchase a new humanity (Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:31, 42). God rests on the seventh day from his creative work (Gen 2:2-3), Jesus rests in the tomb on the seventh day (the Sabbath) after his redemptive work (Luke 23:55-56). God creates light on the first day of the week (Gen 1:3, 5), and Jesus rises on the first day of the week (Luke 24:1; John 20:1). Jesus is the one “who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim 1:10).
- ³⁷ Plucking grain on the Sabbath would constitute ‘reaping’ and ‘threshing,’ and thus according to *Tractate Shabbath*, a rabbinic treatise, would constitute work and thus result in a desecrating of the Sabbath.
- ³⁸ The physical presence of God is implied in the fact that Adam and Eve hid themselves from God among the trees of the garden. They would not need to hide from a spiritual invisible presence as there would be no place to hide. The first fellowship between God and humans was by means of a physical manifestation, which will be fully realized again when the God-man Jesus Christ gathers his elect to himself in his eternal kingdom.
- ³⁹ Note the words in 1 John 5:3, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”
- ⁴⁰ The word used for “profane,” “desecrate,” and “break” is the Greek word *bebēloō* which carries a negative connotation. See J. P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2nd ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 53.33.
- ⁴¹ This is reinforced in the Transfiguration narrative accounts where the Son is to be listened to, and to whom Moses (law) and Elijah (the prophets) bear witness (Matt 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36).
- ⁴² The word “lord” (*kurios*) in Matt 12:8 is in the emphatic position as it comes first in the sentence. In other words, the emphasis is not on the Sabbath, but on Christ’s Lordship over the Sabbath.
- ⁴³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 463.
- ⁴⁴ This would be based on rabbinic law *Mishnah Shabbat* 7:2; 10:5 and probably Jer 17:21-27 which forbids carrying a burden on the Sabbath day and was later interpreted to include any type of burden. Rabbinic regulations such as the *Mishnah* as a text is later than the NT but its rules may come from NT times.
- ⁴⁵ What is startling in this narrative is the extent to which legalism blinds a person. A man who was crippled for 38 years is healed by Jesus on the Sabbath, and all the religious leaders could think of was the Sabbath was violated instead of praising and giving thanks to God that a crippled was healed. When legalism pervades one’s life, there is little room to see and experience the grace of God.
- ⁴⁶ According to *Jub.* 15:25-27 the angels at the time of their creation were created already circumcised!
- ⁴⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 345 n28.
- ⁴⁸ See Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 18.18; 37.127; 20.53; 15.139; 36.30; 37.47; 13.38 and 13.100.

- ⁴⁹ BDAG s.v. *luō* goes so far as to say that the meaning of this *luō* in John 5:18 is that “in John, Jesus is accused not of breaking the Sabbath, but of doing away [with] it as an ordinance”.
- ⁵⁰ We encounter a similar case in Matt 22:31-32 citing Exod 3:5.
- ⁵¹ David L. Allen, *Hebrews* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010), 257.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 264.
- ⁵³ This is the only place in NT where this text is quoted.
- ⁵⁴ While this Psalm (95) is attributed to David, this psalm was probably not written by David. It was common to attribute the book of Psalms to “David”. See Allen, *Hebrews*, 278.
- ⁵⁵ If the writer of Hebrews was a strict Sabbatarian, this would have been the opportune moment to identify which day of the week Christians should observe, but he is silent on this subject simply because this is not his point at all.
- ⁵⁶ The NJB reading “a seventh-day rest” seems to be overly strained and in my opinion, not a proper translation of *sabbatismos*.
- ⁵⁷ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 67.185 (italics mine). Also BDAG s.v. *sabbatismos* refers to this word as “a special period of rest for God’s people modeled after the traditional sabbath” and that it is being used figuratively in Heb