

Position Paper – The Sabbath

Statement of the Problem

Many Christians today struggle with observance of the Sabbath. Are we to rest on the Jewish Sabbath which has traditionally been Saturday? Are we to rest on the Lord's Day, Sunday? Is there still a Sabbath requirement in the New Testament age? And what is meant by rest? These questions and others are important and need to be answered from Scripture.

Summary Answer

The New Testament has not removed the obligation of believers to honor the Sabbath which is to be one day of rest per every seven days. Although the Bible does not designate a calendar day of the week for the Sabbath, the nearly uniform practice of the church to celebrate the Sabbath on Sunday suggests we should do the same in order to promote the regular assembly of believers. The focus of our Sundays should be the remembering of God's work of creation and the triumph of the cross as seen in the resurrection of Jesus and eternal Sabbath rest of salvation. This should move us to all levels of worship and ministry, both private and public. As B.B. Warfield once said: *"In one word, the Sabbath is the Lord's day, not ours; and on it is to be done the Lord's work, not ours; and that is our 'rest.'"* Warfield further said: *"Man's true rest is not a rest from human, earthly labor, but a rest for divine heavenly labor....We are to rest from our own things that we may give ourselves to the things of God."*

Every man and woman must evaluate whether their proposed Sunday activities will constitute "divine heavenly labor." At a minimum, God's labors involve the sacrificial service of others. We can't serve others if we always return home and lock ourselves indoors every week after the worship service. Nor can we serve others if we aren't willing to be hospitable to the poor, the naked, and the oppressed. These labels need not apply only to the *physically* poor, naked, and oppressed. There are many families attending and visiting our church that are spiritually poor, naked, and oppressed who need healing through the warm sharing of grace and hospitality. For those who extend this mercy to others on the Sabbath, God promises rich blessings indeed!

Definition

Hebrew: Shabbat - To rest

Greek: Sabbaton - To rest (transliterated from the Hebrew)

Exegesis – Old Testament

The first reference to the Sabbath is found in Gen 2:1-3: *“Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.”*

Genesis, of course, predates the giving of the Law through Moses. Because of this, we should see the blessing and sanctification of the seventh day as separate from any question of civil, ceremonial, or religious law. Moses does not explain in Genesis what it meant to bless and set apart the seventh day, but a hint is given in Ex 16:22-30 (also before the Law at Sinai): *“And so it was, on the sixth day, that they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. And all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. Then he said to them, ‘This is what the LORD has said: ‘Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.’ So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. Then Moses said, ‘Eat that today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none.’”* It seems then, that Israel, at least, knew of the Sabbath principle prior to the Law, and it is likely that God’s people from the time of Adam knew of the principle. That principle was to rest on one day out of every seven.

The Sabbath was set in stone, so to speak, at Sinai. We read in Ex 20:8-11: *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”*

Here we are explicitly told what it means to hallow the Sabbath day – it is to be a time of rest and no labor. Notice that the emphasis is upon the seventh day of a seven day period. This is called the Sabbath Day. Significantly, God defines the Sabbath in isolation from any established calendar. The Bible doesn’t say that Saturday must be the Sabbath, nor does it even say the “seventh day of the week,” but rather that the Sabbath is the seventh day after six days of labor. Arguably this could make any day of the calendar week a Sabbath if it occurred after six days of work.

What was the consequence of breaking the Sabbath? Ex 31:14-17 tells us: *“You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout*

their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed."

The consequence of disobedience was death. This may seem harsh, but God clearly states that the observation of the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between Himself and the children of Israel "forever." Thus, while many see the Sabbath as a practical time of refreshment (which even God acknowledges), the Sabbath also represents God's covenant of grace, that grace being seen in His appointment of man to take dominion of the earth under His sovereign guidance and provision.

One may wonder if God was serious about prescribing the death penalty for Sabbath breakers. Num 15:32-36 tells us: *"Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.' So, as the LORD commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died."*

Not only could profaning the Sabbath lead to death for the individual, it could lead to condemnation of an entire nation. Jer 17:21-27 reads: *"Thus says the LORD: 'Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers. But they did not obey nor incline their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear nor receive instruction. 'And it shall be, if you heed Me carefully,' says the LORD, 'to bring no burden through the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but hallow the Sabbath day, to do no work in it, then shall enter the gates of this city kings and princes sitting on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their princes, accompanied by the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and this city shall remain forever. And they shall come from the cities of Judah and from the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin and from the lowland, from the mountains and from the South, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and incense, bringing sacrifices of praise to the house of the LORD. But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched.'"*

It behooved the children of Israel, therefore, to understand exactly what they could and could not do on the Sabbath. They weren't to work, and obviously, from the previous passages, they could not gather sticks or bear any burdens on the Sabbath. But what else should they do or not do? Isaiah 56:2 helps us in this regard: *"Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who lays hold on it; who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing any evil."* Here, a special emphasis is placed upon moral conduct on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is far more than a rest day. It is a time when a special focus is placed upon God. We are not to seek our own ways, pleasure, or words, but our delight is to be found in God.

In the intervening period between the Old Testament prophets and the time of Christ, the Sabbath was modified by the rabbis. Men and women were not to work, they were not to bear arms, and soon, they were proscribed from doing a great many things. Two entire treatises of the Mishna, the Shabbat and Erubhin, are devoted to the details of Sabbath observance. In Shabbat 7:2 we learn, for example, of 39 prohibited activities: Sowing; Plowing; Reaping; Binding sheaves; Threshing; Winnowing; Selecting; Grinding; Sifting; Kneading; Baking; Shearing wool; Washing

wool; Beating wool; Dyeing wool; Spinning; Weaving; Making two loops; Weaving two threads; Separating two threads; Tying; Untying; Sewing stitches; Tearing; Trapping; Slaughtering; Flaying; Salting meat; Curing hide; Scraping hide; Cutting hide up; Writing two or more letters; Erasing two or more letters; Building; Tearing something down; Extinguishing a fire; Kindling a fire; Putting the finishing touch on an object; and Transporting an object between a private domain and the public domain, or within the public domain.

Exegesis – New Testament

As one can tell from the rabbinic literature, Israel had turned the Sabbath into a plethora of dos and don'ts. We can better understand, therefore, Matt 12:1-8, where we read: *“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, ‘Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!’ But He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”*

Jesus not only plucked grain to eat from the fields on the Sabbath, but He also healed people. Matt 12:9 says: *“Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’ – that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, ‘What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”* Here we have the implied corollary from Isaiah 56:2. Man was to cease from doing evil on the Sabbath, which by implication would suggest that he should, in particular, engage in good activities on the Sabbath. Of course, these activities were not “labor” in its normal sense. Nor were they purely recreational activities. They were specific acts either corresponding to necessity (hunger) or to the glory of God and mercy towards others (miraculous healings).

There are a few other passages in the New Testament that speak of the Sabbath. One is Rom 14:5-10: *“One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”*

Does Paul abrogate the requirement of Sabbath observation in Romans 14? It is interesting to note that Sabbath observance is not mentioned in the letter sent to the Gentile Christians from

the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Furthermore, Paul says in Col 2:16-17: “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.” Clearly, Paul eliminated the ceremonial aspect of the Levitical Sabbaths as they had come to be defined – the day and mode of observation. But did he eliminate the Sabbath entirely, particularly the Genesis principle of resting one day out of seven? Did he eliminate the Fourth Commandment?

In Eph 6:1-3, Paul repeats the Fifth Commandment: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother,’ which is the first commandment with promise: ‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’” For those who believe that Paul’s statements about Christian liberty remove the Christian’s obligation to obey God’s Law, here is a clear recitation of one of the Ten Commandments, demonstrating that Paul did not believe that freedom from enslavement to the Law was a license to disregard the Law. Paul summarizes most of the other Commandments as well in Ephesians. Is it possible that Paul would isolate the Fourth Commandment from the other nine?

A final important passage is Heb 4:1-10: “Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: ‘So I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest,’ although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works;’ and again in this place: ‘They shall not enter My rest.’ Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, again He designates a certain day, saying in David, ‘Today,’ after such a long time, as it has been said: ‘Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.’ For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.”

Many have taken this passage to imply the abrogation of the Sabbath for New Testament Christians. However, its better use is to help us understand that the reasons why God commanded the Israelites to observe the Sabbath transcended mere practical purposes. The Sabbath observance in Israel was a foreshadowing and type of the rest to be had in Christ. Just as in the Pauline passages, the ceremonial aspects of Sabbath celebration were done away with in Christ. When the veil was parted, the ceremony of Israel was laid aside. But Christ also said that not one “jot or tittle” would depart from the Law, for He had come to “fulfill” the Law, “not abolish it.” Thus, we must see in Hebrews a fuller explanation of the purpose of the Sabbath. It not only mirrors God’s own activity in the creation of the world, but it looks back upon and “acts out” the salvation of God’s people who find an eternal “Sabbath” in Christ. Even more important, the attitude of resting under the lighter burden of Christ’s yoke becomes the focus of the Christian’s life every day and is attenuated in his honoring of a Sabbath day every week.

Preliminary Summary of Biblical Position

- The Sabbath was observed before the Law was given to Moses
- The Sabbath was made a normative principle by God in Genesis
- One is to cease from his normal labors one day out of seven
- Rest does not eliminate necessary activity or service to God
- Observance of the Sabbath is to be joyful; glorifying God
- The Sabbath was not abrogated by the New Testament, but rather was given greater meaning and clarification

Westminster Confession and History

Given that Christians should still observe a Sabbath day each week, what principles should we follow? Can we go to the park with other families on Sunday? Can we watch sports on television? Can we garden?

The Westminster Confession, Chapter 21 states: *“This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”* We can see that the “duties of necessity and mercy” are taken from the illustrative examples of Christ above. Also, we can see the heart of the Isaiah passages in the WCF’s language of being taken up in the “public and private exercise of worship.”

That leaves us only one task: we need to determine what is justifiably a “thing of God.” The WCF speaks of “preparing our hearts.” We can see adequate preparation mirrored in the activity of the Israelites when they gathered a double portion on the sixth day in anticipation of the seventh day rest. We, too, are to work six days and take care of all our needs during this time so that we can rest on the seventh day. Much Sabbath breaking is caused by failure to schedule wisely the six days of the week God has given us for our labor. It is our duty to finish each week’s obligations before our Sabbath observance begins. We should make sure we have completed our weekly tasks before Sunday, work such as lawn care, house work, home work, business deals, inventories, shopping, gassing up the car, ironing our clothes, and other such chores.

As Bob Burrige has commented: *“Most people plan, prepare and pack in advance to be ready to leave in time for vacation trips so they won’t miss a minute of their time off. They plan for days off by working hard to get office work out of the way. They plan for months for weddings, babies and holidays. But do we, as God’s thankful children, go through the simple preparations needed to keep a Sabbath Day holy? Do we plan how the day will be spent so that we do all God says we ought to do that day?”*

Burrige continues: *“What a wonderful tradition for our families to learn, if we would show our children a good example of Sabbath preparations. Before the Passover season God instituted preparations for families to engage in together so that all would appreciate the solemnity of the occasion. Similarly, we could be sure our clothes are ready and laid out, simple meals are planned to reduce housework that day, and a Sabbath family prayer could be said to prepare our hearts for keeping the day holy.”* In our preparations, we

should begin the process of separating our business from God's business. Many of our routine tasks will be completed, our projects paused, and our hobbies put on hold.

Next, the WCF speaks of worldly employment and recreations. The employment portion is easy enough, though many Christians still struggle with the desire to continue their employment on Sundays. But what about worldly recreations? Are these ever "things of God?"

Our recreations today are different from those in the time of Moses, or those when the Westminster Assembly drafted this chapter of its confession. Many become confused at this expression and imagine that it means we are to avoid any enjoyment on Sundays, any fun activities with our children, or all appreciation of God's creation at a beach or park.

One of the issues at the time the Confession was written was the abuse by the Church of England in its imposition of the Book of Sports which required attendance at state sponsored events on Sundays. In addition to demanding the attendance of all churchgoers, the English government also attempted to regulate the schedule, and to some degree the content, of worship on Sundays. Understanding this historical context, we see that the use of the term "recreations," in the minds of the Westminster Divines, likely meant to cease from those recreational activities that interfered with proper worship of God. Today we use the term "recreation" to include every activity that we enjoy outside of our vocations. In order to filter out allowable recreations from those that interfere with our worship of God, we should ask if such activities will turn our thoughts to God and not hinder our faithful attendance at worship, engagement in good works, and fellowship with God's people.

Most instructive is Isa 58. There God tells Isaiah to explain to Israel their transgression against God's Sabbath law. The people thought themselves righteous by fasting every Sabbath day, and yet God had not answered their prayers, nor honored their fasts. God says in verse 3: *"In the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day, to make your voice heard on high."*

It seems that while the Israelites themselves "rested" on the Sabbath, they did not allow their laborers to rest. And while the laborers worked, the Israelites "afflicted" themselves, thinking that God would be fooled by their false piety. But God was not fooled. He asks: *"Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul?"* The answer is clearly "No." God did not intend the Sabbath to be a day of morose silence. He continues: *"Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?"*

And then God defines the true "fast" of the Sabbath: *"Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'"*

The true fast of the Sabbath is to cease from our labors and focus upon God's labors. And God's labors involve the sacrificial service of others. We can't serve others if we always return home and lock ourselves indoors every week after the worship service. We can't serve others if we aren't willing to be hospitable to the poor, the naked, and the oppressed. And these labels need not apply only to the physically poor, naked, and oppressed. There are many families attending and visiting our church that are spiritually poor, naked, and oppressed who need healing through

the warm sharing of grace and hospitality. Were these not the very types of services that Jesus performed on the Sabbath; services that disturbed the Pharisees and yet did not bring condemnation upon Christ?

God continues in verse 9: *“If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, If you extend your soul to the hungry And satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell In. If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

What a promise to those who cease from their own activities and focus upon others on the Sabbath! Man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man – a day of service; a different kind of work in which our rest is to set us free for heavenly labor. These are the “duties of mercy;” the true “things of God.”

Frequently Asked Questions

The intent of the church position papers is to speak clearly when the Bible speaks clearly and otherwise to communicate Biblical principles so that men and women can make wise decisions in specific circumstances that the Bible does not address. The following are common questions that arise concerning the Sabbath.

Q. My job requires me to work on Sundays. Is that alright?

A. The Numbers 15 passage demonstrates God's condemnation for a man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath. Isaiah 58 shows God's further condemnation of those who employed others to do their work on the Sabbath. Clearly, then, these passages suggest that we are not to work on the Lord's Day. We are also commanded to walk uprightly and obediently before God in all things. Thus, we would advise an individual whose job required them to work on Sundays to communicate to their employer their wish not to work on the Sabbath. Often, employers will make exceptions or allowances for those employees that have religious convictions.

It may be that an employer will not allow the employee time off on Sundays. If this is the case, our advice is to find another job as soon as practicably possible. Obedience to God's Word often requires sacrifice, but God always blesses obedience.

Q. I work for the hospital, must I not work on Sundays?

A. Acts of necessity (pulling an animal out of a ditch) or mercy (healing) are allowable on the Sabbath. We regard emergency services like police, fire, medical, even military, as being in the category of acts of necessity. However, we would encourage individuals to let their employers know that, where practicably possible, they desire not to work on Sundays unless it truly is necessary.

Q. I understand that hospitality can be considered an act of ministry on the Sabbath. Does that hospitality extend to recreational events like hosting a picnic or afternoon fellowship? In other words, can I play in a church softball game, throw a horseshoe, or go biking with a fellow church member?

A. This is probably the area of greatest controversy regarding the Sabbath. Many times this question is asked from the perspective: "What am I not allowed to do?" That question can be answered rather quickly: we are not to pursue solely our own amusement on the Lord's Day.

Another question often asked is: "Can I engage in activities that are recreational if they are pursued in the context of church social events?" The Bible does not say we are to adopt dour expressions and gloomy demeanors on the Sabbath. We *are* to delight in the Sabbath. However, we are to delight in doing the things of God. Fellowship can be a powerful ministry for those who need to be nurtured and disciplined. If our activities are conducive to fellowship and result in the deepening of friendships and the discipling of fellow believers, then perhaps those activities would be contemplated in passages like Isaiah 58. We decline, however, to make a list of "allowable activities," preferring instead to give the cautions above and allowing each individual to let their Spirit-led conscience be their guide.