

The Baptist Faith and Message:

VIII. The Lord's Day

The first day of the week is the Lord's Day. It is a Christian institution for regular observance. It commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead and should include exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private. Activities on the Lord's Day should be commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Day is the day we go to church and are not supposed to work or do things like mowing the lawn! Discussions about the Lord's Day usually center on what we should not do more than what we should do. In all seriousness, some people believe that the failure of our society to properly observe a day of rest on Sunday is bringing judgment on the church and America in general. As such, it is important that we grasp a right understanding of the Lord's Day lest we call down God's judgment on our nation or be found inappropriately judging others. Like with other doctrines, Christians are divided as to their understanding of the Lord's Day. On one side, we have the "sabbatarians," and on the other side, the "non-sabbatarians." While it is an over-simplification, the sabbatarians believe that Christians (and for some, all humanity) remain under a commandment to observe a day of rest and worship on Sunday, whereas Christian non-sabbatarians do not believe it is a binding obligation, even though they welcome the day of corporate worship. While accommodating both perspectives, the BF&M favors a non-sabbatarian position. Given that Southern Baptists generally have a more new covenant perspective of the law, it is not surprising that the BF&M places more emphasis on conscience than commandment.

The first day of the week is the Lord's Day.

The phrase, "the Lord's day," is only used once in all of Scripture. John the Apostle uses it in Revelation chapter 1 when he says "I was in the spirit on the Lord's day." The "Lord's Day" should not be confused with or considered synonymous with "the day of the Lord." The former phrase pertains to worship by God's people, and the latter phrase pertains, in most cases, to occasions of God's judgment and wrath. The fact that the phrase "the Lord's day" is used in Scripture shows that it is not a theological term (e.g., Trinity), but is a biblical term that was in common usage by the time John wrote Revelation. When he wrote the phrase, "the Lord's day," his readers understood what he meant. The NT informs us that "the Lord's day" appears to be a specific day of the week, which in our weekly cycle is Sunday. In the Scriptures, all Christian gatherings after His resurrection occur on the first day of the week, for example:

- His appearance among the disciples on the day of His resurrection;
- His appearance among them again seven days later;
- when the disciples at Troas came together to break bread and hear Paul preach;
- Paul's instructions to the Corinthians, and other churches in Galatia, that an offering for the saints be collected on the first day of the week; and
- Christian gatherings never being referred to specifically as a sabbath.

It seems that by the time John wrote Revelation, the day of Christian worship, by the decades of regular corporate worship on the first day of the week based on the example and teaching of the Apostles, had become commonly called the Lord's Day (now a proper noun). Ever since, Christians have gathered for corporate worship on Sundays. Notably, in no place in the NT are Christians encouraged to worship corporately on Saturday or found observing the Jewish Sabbath without evoking a rebuke. Christian sabbatarians⁸ and non-sabbatarians essentially agree that the day for corporate Christian worship is Sunday.

The Baptist Faith and Message:

VIII. The Lord's Day

It is a Christian institution for regular observance.

The BF&M identifies the Lord's Day as a Christian institution and does not refer to it as an ordinance, law or commandment. Also, the use of the word "institution" suggests that the Lord's Day was instituted (i.e., had its origin) in the Christian era and is applicable only to Christians and not humanity in general. Here, a difference of opinion arises in whether or not the "regular" observance of the day is a binding obligation on all mankind and/or Christians grounded in a creation ordinance and/or a perpetual moral law, including the 4th commandment. (Just as a reminder, the 4th commandment is "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.") In either case, the BF&M states that the Lord's Day is a day which should be observed regularly, presumably weekly. In doing so, the BF&M statement remains agreeable to either position because both sabbatarians and non-sabbatarians believe in regular observance; they just disagree on the reason or motive for it. Nevertheless, rather than avoiding the issue, it is worthwhile to expend a few words here to explain the basis for the disagreement.

Was a weekly sabbath instituted for mankind at creation? If the Bible teaches that God has established at creation that all mankind shall observe a day of rest at the end of six consecutive days of labor, then all mankind is under a perpetual hebdomadal (seven day cycle) obligation to cease from their labors. Writing from the Christian sabbatarian position in the 20th century, Arthur W. Pink states, "...failure to keep the Sabbath holy is a sin of the first magnitude." The establishment of a sabbath ordinance for man in Genesis 2 is based on God resting from His creative work, blessing and sanctifying the seventh day. However, God Himself does not refer to it as a "sabbath" in the Genesis 2 account. In the book of Genesis, there is no positive, explicit command to Adam or man to observe a weekly sabbath. God says He blessed and sanctified the day when He rested. He does not say that every 7th day from then on shall always be sanctified. (We would have no way to know what that day is after thousands of years anyway. Nor would we have any idea on what day Adam would have rested from his labors either. Thus, either way, the starting point for such a law has long been lost. It has only been since the Mosaic institution and establishment of their calendar that a particular day could be established. Here some would respond that all that the obligation is a day of rest after six days of work and that the specific day does not matter.)

Some consider His blessing and sanctifying the 7th day as a sign of a covenant of rest. So, if there is such a commandment or ordinance for all mankind, it is inferred from God's example. Also, by means of deduction, some theologians have concluded that God imprinted "the moral law," including the weekly sabbath, on Adam's "heart" at his creation. Adam would have then taught his posterity the sabbath requirement along with the rest of the ten commandments, which the sabbatarians say embodies the moral law. Problematic in this deduction is a context for Adam and Eve to understand the ten commandments. They would have no basis to understand, at the time of its imprint in their conscience, the meaning of most of the moral law, including a 7th day sabbath. In what context could they understand honoring their father and mother, the committing of adultery or murder, stealing, lying or coveting? Only after the fall would they have begun to appreciate some of the laws, but the others would have still been confusing to say the least. (Possibly they became cognizant of each commandment as the circumstances of their lives required it.) Another concern is that, until the giving of manna in the time of Moses, no sabbath of a weekly or special nature is mentioned in the Scriptures. Certainly, the antediluvians and the patriarchs worshipped and built altars for worshipping God. Although at the time of the giving of the law to Moses, God referred to the 7th day of creation as His sabbath, this still does not prove that there was a weekly sabbath requirement on man prior to the giving of manna. Furthermore,

The Baptist Faith and Message:

VIII. The Lord's Day

God had many complaints about humanity prior to the giving of the law at Sinai, but He never complains that man was not observing His sabbath. And yet further, after the giving of the law to Moses, God does not condemn gentiles for not keeping a weekly sabbath. Thus, if one wants to make a deductive argument for a perpetual sabbath obligation, the OT witness seems more against it than in favor of it.

Essentially all sabbatarians believe that the Lord's Day is the Christian observance of the 4th commandment, the Jewish weekly sabbath, moved to a new day in the new covenant, which to them is simply a new administration of the old covenant. Based on God's being unchangeable (His immutability), they insist that God cannot change His perpetual moral law. But, in the new administration of the same covenant of grace that was the old covenant, the sabbath observance has been moved from the last day of week to the first day of the week to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus and to distinguish the Christian Sabbath from the Jewish Sabbath. However, if the law is based in immutability, how can the day be changed from the last day of the week to the first day without bringing into question God's immutability? The justification to change the day also appears to be by inference.

Christian sabbatarians say that the perpetuity of the sabbath is reaffirmed in the NT. However, in His exposition of the law in His sermon on the mount, Jesus addresses every one of the ten commandments except the 4th commandment. Non-sabbatarians view all of the Jewish sabbaths as a type (or foreshadow) of the true sabbath rest found in Christ. When addressing the Jews, Jesus acknowledged the Jewish sabbath and kept it in accordance with its original intent. I say original intent because Jesus, being God, certainly understood the purpose of sabbath and how it had been perverted by the Jewish leaders. When Jesus is accused of sabbath braking by healing people on the sabbath, He informs them that 1) it is appropriate to do good works on the sabbath and, more importantly, 2) He is Lord of the sabbath and says that it was made for man (i.e., man's authority over the it) rather than man being made for the sabbath (i.e., the sabbath's authority over man.) Because Christ is our sabbath, we have entered into His rest by faith. He is truly a perpetual sabbath, which will be fully realized by us in eternity.

Chapters 3 and 4 of Hebrews are used both by sabbatarians and non-sabbatarians to support their positions. The sabbatarians place particular emphasis on the Heb 4:9, "There remaineth therefore a rest (sabbatismos) to the people of God," and use it to show that the 4th commandment remains in effect in the Christian era. As alluded to earlier, non-sabbatarians view this rest as resting from our works of the law and our eternal rest in Christ, the sabbaton. God's rest from His work at creation, the Mosaic Sabbath law, the entering into Canaan, the end of sacrifices, all point to Christ resting from His work on the cross. Whoever by faith, trusts in Christ's work enters into that rest with Him. v10, "for he that is entered into His rest, he has also ceased from his own works, as God did from His." The context for this verse is not sabbath observance, but rather justification by faith. If a man would be justified he must cease law keeping as means to it. "By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified." In v12 when he says "let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief," it affirms that the context is believing (i.e., faith) rather than law keeping.

Another good indication that there is not a continuing sabbath law is Paul's writings in regard to Christian liberty pertaining to the observance of days. In Romans 14:5, 6 where he says: "One man esteemeth one day above another: another [man] esteemeth everyday alike. Let everyman be fully persuaded in his own mind. V6. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day to the Lord he doth not regard it..." These verses appear

The Baptist Faith and Message:

VIII. The Lord's Day

to place observance of days in the realm of the individual's conscience as opposed to a perpetual law. If the Holy Spirit makes it a matter of personal conviction, then a law of God it would seem not to be.

In Colossians 2:16, 17 Paul writes: v16 "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: v17 which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." Although sabbatarians claim that the sabbath days here are ceremonial sabbaths and not the weekly sabbath, the comprehensiveness of the statement does not appear to support that interpretation. The special sabbaths are specifically addressed as holydays and new moons (e.g., festival sabbaths) within the verse.

One other evidence against there being a legal requirement for a weekly Christian sabbath is the absence of sabbath breaking in any of the condemnatory lists of behaviors or practices in the NT. These lists tend to be thorough and address every aspect of life. Thus, consistent with the OT, the NT offers no rebuke for failure to observe a weekly sabbath or the Lord's Day.

It commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead and should include exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private.

The Lord's Day certainly commemorates His resurrection that occurred on the first day of the week. As already pointed out, all of His recorded post-resurrection appearances were also on the first day of the week. The NT witness shows us that the churches gathered for preaching and the collection of offerings showing that it was a day of corporate worship. We call it the Lord's Day because that is what John the Apostle called it when he spoke of what happened during his private worship. Thus, the Lord's Day is not simply the day we go to church for corporate worship, but also for private worship.

Activities on the Lord's Day should be commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

This sentence was added in the BF&M 2000 to replace the following final clause that completed the prior sentence in the BF&M 1925 & 1963

...both public and private, **and by refraining from worldly amusements, and resting from secular employments, works of necessity and mercy only excepted. {my emphasis}**

Obviously, there was a significant shift toward liberty of the conscience and away from dictating what specific activities are acceptable on the Lord's Day. The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, taking many cues from the Presbyterian Westminster Confession, adopted the view that the Lord's Day was, for all intents and purposes, an ordinance. The general rules, most of which were taken from OT sabbath laws, that they gave for appropriate Lord's Day observance were works in the categories of piety, necessity, and mercy. The works of piety involved the professional ministry, lay ministry, and private worship. The works of necessity were activities like milking your cow that could not be postponed (without causing the cow significant discomfort). Many would not light a fire on the Lord's Day due to the prohibition of the same laid upon the Jews in the OT. Works of mercy involved activities like taking care of the sick or putting out a house fire. These were more grounded in a sabbatarian perspective. The former BF&M versions took a legalistic approach specifying that persons should refrain from worldly amusements (e.g., sports, movies, etc.). Also, doing any secular work was forbidden, unless it pertained to essential

The Baptist Faith and Message:

VIII. The Lord's Day

services such as fire-fighting, police, or hospital services. In earlier times, when we were a much more agrarian society, it was easier to apply the piety, necessity and mercy rules. However, as society has become more interconnected and interdependent due to technological advances, applying these rules, particularly works of necessity, has become much more difficult. The necessity of working on the Lord's Day now has much broader implications. Turning the lights on and flushing the toilet at the church on the Lord's Day requires people to be at work at the public utilities. There are godly Southern Baptist brethren who prepare their food on Saturday to avoid turning on their electric stove on Sunday, harkening back to the Mosaic prohibition of lighting a fire; but, they still turn on their the lights. This is a particular problem for Christian sabbatarians who believe in a perpetual sabbath law. It invariably leads to legalism. And, before you know it, the easy yoke of Christ is cast off and the heavy one of the law that Jesus said could not be borne is put back on.

Southern Baptists have noted the difficulty in applying these rules in our day and have revised the BF&M language to be more consistent with the non-sabbatarian, new covenant perspective that Paul taught in Romans and Colossians. Appropriate activities are determined by the individual's conscience under the Lordship of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Those who regard the day as a binding law should employ the day in a manner (if they can) that will not break the law or cause anyone else to break it. They should also not judge those who do not regard the Lord's Day as a law. Conversely, those who regard the day as set aside by the actions of the resurrected Lord and the example of the apostles for corporate and private worship should employ the day following their example and using it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They also should not judge those who observe it as a law.

Although most non-sabbatarians would agree that the Mosaic covenant, including the 4th commandment, ended at the cross, very few (and none that I know) believe that laws are no longer in effect (i.e., antinomianism). The Scripture says that where there is no law there is no sin; thus, because we still sin, laws must still be in effect. Except for the 4th commandment, Jesus explicitly "upgrades" the other commandments from our actions to our thoughts. In saying that the old covenant ended, non-sabbatarians are not saying that law ended. Paul faced the same misconception about grace. "Shall we sin so that grace may abound? God forbid!" "Christians" who use their liberty as a license to sin are in grave danger. True Christians have the Holy Spirit at work in their conscience making them willing to do His good pleasure. If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed. So, live by the new covenant law, love. Christians should prayerfully examine their beliefs in regard to the Lord's Day. May God grant us wisdom and lead us into all truth.

§ Note: I have not included Seventh Day Adventists in my discussion of sabbatarianism. They hold that the seventh day (Saturday) is a perpetual ordinance for the worship of God and, therefore, they have public worship on Saturday. Some evangelicals consider them a Christian denomination; others consider them to be a cult. Because one of their founders claimed to have received revelation, in the form of a vision from the Lord, which is given credence by some of the denomination, I am reluctant to wholesale include the denomination as bona fide Christian even though they hold many fundamental orthodox beliefs. I would say, in regard to their sabbatarian view, they are consistent with their belief that the 4th commandment is still in effect because, unlike other sabbatarians, they keep the 4th commandment on its appointed day and time, sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, as did the Israelites.