

Lesson Seven – Sabbath – check text

The purpose of this page is to check back into the text of the doctrine after you take the test and check your answers. The test questions and answers are derived from the doctrine presented

in this lesson. In the table below you will see the number of the question and to the right a link

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DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

1] The seventh-day Sabbath is taught and kept holy in accordance with biblical instruction. Instituted at Creation, reaffirmed to Israel as a part of the covenant at Sinai and taught by Jesus Christ who is the Messenger of the New Covenant, the observance of the Sabbath is considered basic to a Christian's relationship with God.

DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

2] The Church of God continues to observe the seventh-day as did Jesus and the New Testament Church. The Sabbath was established by God at Creation week; it was made for man, reaffirmed by Jesus, taught by the apostles and kept down through the centuries by faithful Christians. The importance of the Sabbath in the Old Testament cannot be disputed. Its continued observance is exemplified in the New Testament which confirms Sabbath-keeping as a fundamental practice of Jesus and the apostolic Church. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

3] The original twofold functions of the Sabbath in the Old Testament were not ceremonial. The Sabbath (1) provided needed rest for the body and the psyche; and (2) gave opportunity for closer contact with God through study and prayer. When God established Israel as His people, the Sabbath was utilized as the time for congregational services, a commanded assembly of all the people. These needs are still very much extant in the 21st century.

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4] The weekly Sabbath celebration serves as a reminder that God is Creator by its regular

memorial of the Sabbath of Creation. It also affords a view toward a future new creation resulting from God's Kingdom on earth.

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5] While a simple, straightforward command from God to keep the Sabbath would be sufficient for us to keep it, an understanding of the Sabbath's purpose and intent is helpful and enlightening. The purpose behind most laws is clear, and that which lies behind the Old Testament commands about the Sabbath is evident. Once this purpose is understood, it becomes obvious why no New Testament restatement of the basic command was necessary or even likely. The New Testament discussions and examples concern *how* to keep the Sabbath (in spirit rather than in a rigid, legalistic manner), *not whether* to keep it. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

6] The most important New Testament statement on the Sabbath was spoken by Jesus Christ as quoted in Mark 2:27-28. Jesus not only affirms the Sabbath command, He also instructs us about its purpose. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath: therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath." Thus, it is apparent that the Sabbath was made for men, for his spiritual and physical benefit. It provides the means for loving God to a greater degree by direct worship and, indirectly, by the spiritual renewal which enables one to keep up a constant direction of mind toward godly matters throughout the week. It is in our earnest attempt to express loyalty and love toward our Creator and to worship Him in spirit and in truth that we, as Christians, continue to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

DOCTRINAL EXPOSITION

7] The English word "Sabbath" is basically an anglicized pronunciation of a Hebrew word meaning "rest" or "repose." This Hebrew noun is itself evidently related to the verb "to stop, rest or *cease*." This same verb is found in ordinary usage (e.g. Lam. 5:14, "The elders have *ceased* from the gate"). *Ceasing* "is exactly what God did on the seventh day of Creation week. In the Hebrew, Genesis 2:2 literally says that God *sabbathed*"—*ceased*" or rested—on the seventh day from all His work.

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8] By definition, the Sabbath is a weekly holy day, a solemn rest, an appointed feast, a holy convocation (Lev. 23:3). As such it is a period of time of approximately 24 hours reckoned from Friday evening sunset until Saturday evening sunset. The period of observation is borne out by the direct statement in Leviticus 23:32 on observing an annual Sabbath, "from evening to evening."

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Old Testament Period

9] The initial and cardinal passage about the Sabbath is contained in the Creation account which reads: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had made, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it"

(Gen. 2:1-3).

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10] Since from the beginning the Sabbath is associated with Creation week and specifically the creation of man, the Sabbath's universal or cosmopolitan perspective sets it above any uniquely Israelite law and practice. The Creation Sabbath is presented in much the same way that the later prophets envisioned it—namely as an observance for all mankind, for the Gentile as well as for the Israelite. Therefore, while the Sabbath was later a functional part of the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 20-24), its purpose and place are clearly much broader than that. (For example, Isaiah 66:23 shows that all nations will be observing the Sabbath during the millennial reign of Christ.)

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11] In Exodus 16 the Sabbath is once again explicitly mentioned. This chapter records God's revealing of which day was indeed the seventh of the week—the Sabbath—to the nation of Israel. God's great efforts to show Israel His true Sabbath would, of course, be natural in light of the importance given the Sabbath in the Creation account. He would surely want His chosen people to know which day He had earmarked as "blessed and sanctified."

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12] The account of Exodus 16 shows the great importance God places on a specific period of time for the Sabbath. The true Sabbath could never be just one day, any day, out of seven. God caused special miracles to ratify the holiness of the Sabbath—double the normal amount of manna was found on the sixth day and the extra manna did not spoil when left until morning as it would have on any other day. And when some Israelites went looking for manna on the Sabbath, God told Moses, "How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and my laws?" (v. 28). This statement is especially relevant since it took place *before* the covenant at Sinai, proving both that the Sabbath predated that covenant and that it is included as one of God's commandments and laws.

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13] The additional significance of the account of Exodus 16 lies in the fact that it shows the *supreme importance* of the Sabbath to God. The fact that God revealed and maintained the identity of His Sabbath to Israel by the daily and the weekly miracles of the manna—along with the clear example of the types of punishment meted out upon those who broke the Sabbath as recorded in these verses—reemphasizes that God's original Sabbath command was a law of extreme importance. The fact that the events described in Exodus 16 actually occurred in Israel *before* the institution of the covenant at Sinai corroborates the truth that the Sabbath was *not*, as some contend, only part of God's specific pact with that nation and hence of significance to no other people. But even then, the inclusion of the Sabbath by God in His covenant with Israel—His clear delineation of the Sabbath as one of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20—only *adds weight* to its importance, rather than detracting from it. At the making of the Sinai covenant the Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments recorded on the tablets of stone and kept inside the ark of the covenant. Other terms of the covenant were considered of less significance as was shown by their being kept outside the ark. Once again, it

is only logical that God would include in His covenant those laws and principles He knew would be good for Israel, especially because Israel was a nation He hoped would be the example and showcase to the world.

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14] Under the Sinai covenant, the Sabbath had national significance; its observance involved the entire community. God showed this by adding to the original Genesis command a communal responsibility of Sabbath-keeping which involved children, male and female servants and even *animals and strangers* within Israel's boundaries (Ex. 20:10).

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15] God's Sabbath command of Exodus 20:8, "Remember the Sabbath . . . to keep it holy" represents an example of God definitely tutoring His special people in the obedience of a universal law, rather than His singling out one nation for obedience to an exclusive law not meant for the rest of mankind. The admonition, "Remember," itself indicates that this commandment is not instituting the Sabbath for the first time, but rather enjoining Israel to keep and retain what is already in existence. The Sabbath was in existence before Israel. Some quote Nehemiah 9:13-14 as disproof of this. Actually, these verses show the opposite. God gave Israel right and true and good laws, statutes and commandments, and He *made known* to them His Sabbath. It does *not say* He originated or instituted the Sabbath with them—it says He made it *known* to them. Israel had *lost* knowledge of it at that time, as Gentiles have today. But God revealed the Sabbath to Israel, who was to become His covenant nation. God did not create the Sabbath at Sinai, but rather made it fully known at that time.

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16] Just as the Sabbath was commanded before the covenant of Exodus 20-24, so the Sabbath was also given as a separate covenant with special significance in Exodus 31:12-17. It is referred to as a "sign" (Hebrew 'ot) of the special relationship between God and Israel. (Signs referred to elsewhere as evidence of covenants are: the rainbow in regard to God's covenant with mankind, Genesis 9:8-17; and circumcision as a sign of the covenant with Abraham, Genesis 17:1-14.)

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17] Why was God's Sabbath day singled out in Exodus 31 as a sign? Because of its nature. Many other nations kept some of the laws of God in one form or another. Some had fairly tight moral laws, usually criminal ones. But none kept the Sabbath day. It was the one law of God that would make Israel stand out. It would act as a sign to show that Israel was the nation of God. It would also keep Israel knowledgeable of God as Creator—the one true God who made everything. When the nations of the ten tribes of Israel later gave up this Sabbath sign, they were lost to history. But the Jews continue to keep it to this day, and are known by it. It is even called "Jewish" by others. The Sabbath is the *one* commandment of the ten that will maintain a direct line to God.

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18] This Sabbath covenant of Exodus was to be "perpetual." With reference to this, some quote passages referring to the sacrificial system being "forever" (e.g. Ex. 29:28) and conclude that when the Bible uses the term "forever," it does not mean that at all. This is not correct. The word in Hebrew translated "forever" in most instances is *olam*. It can mean "the world" or even "the age." From this we can come to the basic meaning of *olam*, that of *continuousness*. It essentially gives the concept of a situation in which there is no end in sight; this does not have to mean that there *is* no end, just that *no* end is seen from the immediate perspective. In some scriptures (e.g. Ex. 21:6) *olam* obviously means "continuously," whereas in others (e.g. Ps. 10:16) the same word means "eternally." What about "forever" in Exodus 31? The key idea to remember is that *olam* means to do something *continually* or that some condition exists *continually*. So we must go by the context. In the case of a command of God we can say that it is in force until God says differently. In the case of Exodus 31 the Sabbath *remains* between God and His people. God never did say stop. God still only deals with Israel—Abraham's seed—but in the New Testament, "Israel" has become spiritual and all peoples can, through Christ, become "Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29), which promise—salvation—"is of the Jews" (John. 4:22). Everyone has to become a part of Israel in order to enter into God's covenantal relationship. The Church is the Israel of God (Rom. 9:6-8). So the Sabbath remains a sign to show just who is in that covenantal relationship with God, just who the true Church is or who the people of God are. This Sabbath covenant is not the same as the Sinai covenant of Exodus 20-24. So the modification of that Sinaitic covenant to the New Covenant does not necessarily affect the Sabbath covenant.

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19] Ezekiel 20:12 shows that God gave Israel *His* Sabbath as a sign for another reason as well: so that they would continually know who was the God that *sanctified* them. This means that the Sabbath is one means by which God sanctifies a method God has chosen of consecration by setting apart for a holy purpose. Certainly sanctification is even more important in the spiritual sense of the New Covenant than it was in the physical sense of the Sinai covenant. Consequently the meaning, impact and importance of the Sabbath in its widest spiritual intent under the New Covenant, far from being diminished, must in fact be intensified for Christians.

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20] Since the Sabbath began at Creation—not with the Sinaitic covenant with Israel—and then was made a *special sign* in a covenant forever with Israel, we still know the Sabbath as God's covenant people today: it is still the same sign.

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21] Once again, the purpose of the special Sabbath covenant of Exodus 31 was to earmark Sabbath observance as a distinguishing practice that would help identify God's people among the world's populace. Thus it served to differentiate the true believers from the nonbelievers, God's people from the heathen, and not merely the civil Israelite nation from the Egyptian or Canaanite nations. Since the Sabbath was an important *religious* command of God, its observance helped to identify God's *religious* system and not merely a civil system or ethnic group. For this reason this special Sabbath Covenant applies today, with the same spiritually

binding significance for all who wish to become and remain a part of God's true Church.

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22] Leviticus 23 enumerates the Sabbath as one of the appointed feasts of the Lord. Other passing references in the Pentateuch and historical books do not shed significant further light on what has already been mentioned. However, several important scriptures are found in the later prophets.

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23] One of the greatest indictments against the people for Sabbath-breaking—along with a warning that such action would result in the overthrow of Jerusalem—was made by the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 17:19-27). Jeremiah was ordered to stand in the gates of Jerusalem and warn the leaders and people: "Take heed for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day, or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers" (vv. 21-22).

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24] Verses 24-26 promises that if the people should keep the Sabbath day holy they should be blessed, and the city of Jerusalem should remain forever. But verse 27 goes on to warn of the dire consequences of negligence in regard to the Sabbath: "then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched." This threat was made good: the city of Jerusalem was overthrown, its palaces and Temple burned and the nation of Judah taken into captivity. Disobedience toward the Sabbath command was evidently widespread among the people in the latter years of the period of the monarchy. Jeremiah 17:23 confirms this fact: the people of Jerusalem did not heed Jeremiah's warning to keep the Sabbath ("they obeyed not, neither inclined their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear, nor receive instruction").

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25] Ezekiel also speaks quite strongly against breaking the Sabbath and considers it one of the main reasons why Israel went into captivity. The lengthy passage in 20:10-26 is a scorching, indictment of the continual disobedience of the nation. The captivity was the fulfillment of a promise in the wilderness: "Moreover I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries, because they had not executed my ordinances, but had rejected my statutes and profaned my Sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their fathers' idols" (vv. 23-24). This is a very succinct summary of the cause of the Exile. Clearly, one of the major reasons was profanation of the Sabbath.

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26] Isaiah also emphasized the importance of the Sabbath for Israel:

"If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure (pursuing your own business) on my holy day, and call the

Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; . . . I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth" (Is. 58:13-14).

27] However, more universal in nature is the promise to the Gentile ("the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord") who shall keep the Sabbath. Not only shall they be accepted, but those unfortunate enough to be eunuchs shall receive something far greater than children for their faithful Sabbath observance (Is. 56:3-7). While this promise is set in the context of national Israel, its international scope cannot be ignored.

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28] The captives in time were freed and some returned to Palestine. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe their return and their attempts to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and its Temple. Nehemiah 10 records a special covenant made by some of the people, including Nehemiah, in which they "entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord" (v. 29). Among the provisions of this covenant was that "if the peoples of the land bring in wares or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day" (v. 31). These verses make it obvious that Nehemiah and the people deeply recognized the seriousness of *Sabbath-breaking* and its part in bringing about their captivity.

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29] Nevertheless, it did not take long for the emergence of a certain laxity in this regard. Nehemiah soon found himself confronting a situation in which the Sabbath was treated as an ordinary business day. He met the problem head on and apparently solved it for the time being (Neh., 13:15-22).

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30] During the intertestamental period a great reawakening took place among the Jewish community with respect to the importance of God's laws. One catalyst was the remembrance of the exiles; another was the slaughter and persecution brought about by Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C. The Jewish community "built a wall" around the law by adding regulations far beyond the biblical statements in an attempt to make it "impossible" for anyone to even approach breaking the law: the example of the Sabbath is a classic one.

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31] Hence, as we approach the time of Christ's ministry, we find that the Sabbath, due to man's sincere but exaggerated interpretations, had become not a joy but a burden—something not originally intended by God. As a result, Christ had to set out to clarify the true "spirit" of the law.

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32] There is great emphasis on the Sabbath throughout the Old Testament. Much is also written about Sabbath observance in the New Testament. The emphasis changes, however, from a nationalistic system of communal Sabbath-keeping, fulfilling the letter of the law, to an individual responsibility of personal worship on the Sabbath, fulfilling the spirit of the-law. The issues discussed in the New Testament *never* deal with *whether* the Sabbath should be kept. This would be utterly impossible as we will see. Rather, the questions deal with *how* the Sabbath should be kept.

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33] The seventh-day Sabbath is observed today by only a few, because it is generally assumed that the New Testament shows the abolition of any need to keep the Sabbath. This assumption is rejected by the Church of God. Granted, there is no explicit statement such as, "Christians must keep the Sabbath." When we actually go back to the New Testament environment, however, the fact that we should keep the Sabbath is so plain that no such statement is required.

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34] A clear understanding of the Sabbath in the New Testament requires a brief summary of the state of Sabbath observance among Jews during Christ's time.

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35] G.F. Moore, the well-known scholar of early Judaism, states: "The two fundamental observances of Judaism are circumcision and the Sabbath" (*Judaism*, II, 16). This was as true in the first century A.D. as at any other time. Both practices were referred to as "signs" (Hebrew *'ot*) and an "eternal covenants" (*berit 'olam*) in the Old Testament. I Maccabees 2:32ff describes a group of Jews who were slaughtered because they refused to defend themselves on the Sabbath. As a result, Mattathias and his followers determined to fight in self-defense on that day if necessary, but even then they would not take the offensive (I Macc. 2:41; 11 Macc. 8:26ff).

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36] The book of Jubilees (2nd century B.C.) gives some detailed regulations for the Sabbath.. Things forbidden included preparing food, taking anything between houses, drawing water, riding on an animal or ship, making war or having sexual relations (2:29-30; 50:8,12). The Qumran community had a number of the same regulations. Other prohibitions included going more than a thousand cubits from one's town, helping an animal out of a pit or in giving birth, and apparently even using an instrument to save a human being from water or fire (Damascus Covenant 10.14-11.18).

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37] Recent scholarly studies have emphasized the extreme strictness in, and rigorous administration of, Sabbath observance in the days of Jesus, even when compared to the later

Rabbinic writings in the Mishnah. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

38] Therefore, when Jesus was called into account for doing certain things on the Sabbath, it was not for violating specified Old Testament prohibitions, but for disavowal of noninspired, traditional regulations concerning the Sabbath. The Old Testament did not forbid one to pick ears of grain on the Sabbath to eat on the spot. Yet when Jesus and His disciples did this He was called to account. The reason? Because the religious leaders had classified picking ears as "reaping" and rubbing loose the grain as "threshing." [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

39] The incident of the disciples plucking grain to eat in the fields (Mt. 12:1-8; Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 6:1-5) was no violation of property law since this was specifically permitted in the Old Testament (Deut. 23:25). They were accused only of Sabbath-breaking. Jesus did not defend their actions on the grounds that the Sabbath was done away. Rather, He used relevant analogies: David and the showbread (KJ.V—"bread of the Presence," RSV) and the priests in the temple. It was only after He had shown that the actions of the disciples were not a true violation of the Sabbath that He asserted, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath: therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27-28). By this means He showed not that the Sabbath was done away but rather the correct spirit in which to keep the Sabbath. Jesus was clearly a Sabbath-keeper, not a Sabbath-breaker. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

40] Similarly, it was forbidden by extra-biblical Jewish law to treat a sickness when the sick person's life was in no immediate danger. Although being watched by the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (Mt. 12:9-14; Mk. 3:1-6; Lk. 6:6-11). To defend Himself He used the analogy of pulling a sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath. This shows that it was not His intent to break the Sabbath but to show that relieving suffering was wholly consistent with the purpose of the day. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

41] Similarly, when He healed a cripple who had been ill 38 years, He told the man to pick UP his pallet and go home (John. 5:8). This carrying of a few ounces of weight was in no way a violation of the law against bearing a burden on the Sabbath (Jer. 17:21,22,27). It was only in the opinion of certain onlooking religious leaders that He had violated the Sabbath discussions given in the gospels. (Other healings are also described in such passages as John 9; Luke 13:10-13; 14:2-4.)
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42] One passage is undisputed, at least insofar as a clear reference to Sabbath observance after Jesus' own lifetime is concerned. This is Matthew 24:20: "Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath." This admonition is directed at Jesus' own followers. And such instructions would have had little place in a non-Sabbath-keeping community. Scholars are almost unanimous in agreeing that this refers at least to a time as late as the 66-70 war against Rome, long after Jesus' death. (The dual implications of this prophecy also show that Jesus knew that the Sabbath would be kept by His people millennia later in the "time of the end.")

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43] In addition, Christ's own example of attending the weekly synagogue is significant. In Luke 4, Jesus attends the synagogue on the Sabbath day in His own city "as His custom was" (v. 16). Evidently it had not been His custom heretofore to *speak* in the synagogue since the listeners were astonished at his teaching. This indicates He attended regular services as a means of Sabbath observance rather than just for the purpose of teaching. And it is impossible to overemphasize the importance of Christ's own example since He told His disciples to teach all nations those things that He had commanded them (Mt. 28:20).

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44] Thus, we may conclude that the picture of Jesus as a lawbreaker or antinomian radical, while maintained in some fundamentalist circles, is easily refuted by the scriptures and is also generally rejected by scholarship.

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45] The argument that Christians today need not do what Jesus Himself did and taught is refuted by Matthew 28:20, as mentioned above, where the disciples are told to teach what Jesus had commanded them. Furthermore, Matthew 11:13 shows that "all the prophets and the law" were in effect until John; this means that Jesus' own actions and teachings were more than simply fulfilling the Sinai Covenant—they were setting the proper example for all Christians for all time.

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46] It is abundantly clear that the Jerusalem Church never gave up Sabbath observance during the New Testament era. On Paul's last visit to Jerusalem (about 58-60 A.D.), James and all the elders of the Church told Paul how the thousands of converted Jews "are all zealous ["ardent upholders," Moffatt] of the law" (Acts 21:20). In such an environment, it is inconceivable that the cherished and holy Sabbath would no longer be kept.

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47] In his letter to the Church in Rome in this same time period, 55-59 A.D., Paul reminds them that the Gentiles "have been made partakers of *their spiritual things*" in a direct reference to the poor saints in the *Jerusalem* Church for whom Paul was asking physical contributions (Rom. 15:26-27). One cannot imagine that "partaking of their spiritual things" would not include worship on the Sabbath, since it was fully revered by the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and constituted a significant part of their spiritual lives. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

48] The first ministerial conference in the apostolic Church is highly informative both for what was said and for what was not said (Acts 15). In the year 49-50 A.D., the issue of whether circumcision was required for salvation caused such dissension in the Church that Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the apostles and elders. Various issues of current interest were discussed—issues such as idolatry, fornication and certain eating

laws—but the Sabbath was not discussed at all. It was not relevant. Why? Because it simply was not an issue. Nobody in all Christianity was as yet teaching that the Sabbath did not have to be observed and kept holy by the Church. Just the opposite, in fact, appears to have been the case. James, who seems to have been in charge, concluded by referring to what was actually happening in that crucial time. "For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues" (Acts 15:21). As S. Bacchiocchi, a scholar who has researched the question, writes:

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"We should note that James' statement refers specifically to the Gentile Christians outside Judea. It is therefore significant to notice that the Gentile Christians (possibly former "Proselytes or God-fearers") were still attending synagogue, listening to the reading and exposition of the Scriptures "every Sabbath." The total silence of the Council on such an important matter as a new day of worship [or elimination or even denigration of the long-standing day of worship] would seem to indicate that such a problem had not yet arisen.

49] Thus it can be seen that Acts 15:21 is a very interesting scripture, albeit, perhaps, somewhat enigmatic. James does not make a big issue about what he is saying; apparently, he does not have to. He is simply explaining why this major conference would only rule on a few things for the Gentile Christians to abstain from: "pollution of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:20). Obviously, there were other things Christians had to abstain from, such as dishonoring parents, killing, lying, etc., but James is simply saying that all these other responsibilities of Christians were well known since God's laws were read every Sabbath in the synagogue.

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50] As far as circumcision was concerned, a specific Church ruling was made, in accordance with the binding and loosing authority given by God (Mt. 16:19), not to require it for Gentile Christians.

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51] The traditional anti-Sabbath rejoinder to Acts 15 asks how the requirement for Sabbath observance can be left in while at the same time the requirement for circumcision is ruled out? Or phrased another way, why would not the abrogation of the Sabbath commandment be included *within* the abrogation of circumcision which symbolized the Sinai covenant?

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52] The answer is almost fully contained in the question itself. Circumcision of the flesh indeed symbolized the Sinaitic covenant which had now been superseded by the terms of the New Covenant. But the Sabbath far transcended the covenant at Sinai in *both* directions: it was instituted at Creation, long before Sinai; and it also foreshadows the future millennial rest in the Kingdom of God. The Sabbath, in fact, shall be observed following the return of Christ when

the fullness of the New Covenant shall spread over all the earth (Is. 66:23).

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53] The picture of the early Gentile Church in Acts illustrates continued Sabbath observance. From Acts 13 we learn that the apostles Paul and Barnabas preached in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia on the Sabbath (v. 14). They were so successful that they were asked back the next Sabbath. Acts 13:42-43 is then an interesting passage. It shows that the Jews rejected Paul's strong message and went *out* of the synagogue. But the *Gentiles* wanted to hear more and beseeched Paul to preach *to them the next Sabbath*. Here are Gentiles, not asking to meet on a Sunday or a weekday evening, but on *the Sabbath*. The next Sabbath almost the whole city came to hear Paul speak (v. 44). Notice that the Jews were not a part of this; they were angry with Paul (v. 45). This was a *Gentile* meeting (v. 48)—on the Sabbath! They knew the significance of the Sabbath day. If Paul had wanted to meet with the Gentiles on a Sunday, he could easily have said: "We can just assemble tomorrow on the Lord's day." But this is not the case. They all waited *a whole week—then* on the following Sabbath day we find Paul preaching to a whole Gentile city! He was not trying to impress the Jews. They had turned from him. But Paul kept the Sabbath, and here endorses it for the entire Gentile world.

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54] In Acts 16:13 Paul goes out to a place of prayer (apparently because there was no synagogue). It was, in fact, Paul's custom to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath (Acts 17:1-2). While these occasions were used as opportunities to spread the gospel, as would be natural, they are certainly also further examples of Paul's worshipping God specifically on the Sabbath.

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55] The point that needs to be understood is that meeting on the Sabbath was completely normal for the Gentiles. There was nothing extraordinary about it, nothing to make an issue out of. What we find recorded in the book of Acts are some matter-of-fact comments by Luke concerning what occurred. It was common knowledge—and Theophilus (to whom the book was written, Acts 1:1) took for granted this fact—that the entire Church, Gentile and Jewish, met on the Sabbath as spiritual Israelites. This is what would be expected: Paul preaching on the Sabbath and then meeting with Gentiles on the same day. it was nothing unusual. So we can now examine Acts alongside the gospels and still *find no* teaching—not even a hint of one—that the Sabbath day was removed or changed. On the contrary, we find Jesus and Paul keeping it, teaching on it and meeting with others to worship God on it—all on the Sabbath.

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56] It is also significant that the Sabbath is called the Sabbath. This was not the common Greek way of referring to the seventh day of the week. So, Luke is actually giving additional meaning to the Sabbath by referring to it by name. He does not call it the "Jewish Sabbath" but simply "the Sabbath." (The Hebrew—or Aramaic—word was, in fact, borrowed by the New Testament writers.)

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57] Acts was written years after the resurrection of Jesus and the establishment of the Church in Gentile as well as Jewish areas. If the Sabbath had been removed, it should have been long since gone. The date was probably in the middle or late 60's A.D. It was not common for Gentiles to call the seventh day of the week "the Sabbath," any more than it is common in the United States to call Saturday the Sabbath (And Theophilus, to whom the book was written, could have been a Gentile.) So, when Luke says that Paul went into the synagogue on the *Sabbath*, he is commenting in effect that this was God's Sabbath or rest day, for he calls it just that. The connotation would be the same today if we heard someone call Saturday "the Sabbath"; we would think it significant and probably assume that that person kept Saturday as his Sabbath or rest day. The same goes for Luke 23:56. The women rested on the Sabbath *according to the fourth commandment.* "This is not meant as a mere historical narrative but as a comment on that day actually *being* the Sabbath. Calling the seventh day Sabbath then is very significant, especially around 63 A.D. when Luke wrote his gospel. There is more concrete evidence in Acts that Paul and all the apostles kept the Sabbath. Perhaps the strongest proof is that they were never accused by the Jews of breaking it. Notice in this regard John 5:9-18 and 9:13-16. Here these men thought Jesus had broken the Sabbath by healing on that day. They wanted to kill Him for this and claimed the legal right to do so. This was serious. It was a major issue to them. Then, in the latter passage, some of them conclude that Jesus could not be of God, because He did not keep the Sabbath. What we find in Acts are similar vicious attacks on Paul but a stark contrast regarding accusations about not keeping the Sabbath.

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58] The Jews from Palestine were really after Paul. They wanted to find something against him. He was constantly under attack. But he was never even *accused* of breaking the Sabbath as was Jesus. This proves that he never even *appeared* to break it, much less did he actually teach against it. Paul, in reality, kept more of the laws of the Sinaitic Covenant than he had to (Acts 21:17-27), so obviously he kept the Sabbath which was considered so much more important. Paul was not lying or giving witness to something that was not true. James was not fooled. Acts 21:24 is true: that *is* what Paul did—he kept the law even to the extent of "the customs." So it is plain he also kept the Sabbath. The Ten Commandments or moral living are not even in question. James was not implying in verses 21-24 that Paul was Sabbath-breaking, or lying, or killing or otherwise breaking the law. There would have been no question on those big matters. The question was how many of the ceremonies and rituals should a converted Jew continue to keep?

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59] We can be absolutely sure that the Jerusalem Church kept the Sabbath. James and the others had *favor* with the people—even priests obeyed the faith (Acts 2:47; 6:7). This would have been utterly impossible if the Church had been meeting on Sunday (or any other day) and breaking the Sabbath. If that had been the case, it would have been mentioned as the major accusation against, and problem for, the Church. The Church was indeed persecuted by the religious leaders of the day, but *not* for Sabbath-breaking.

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60] Scholars recognize that the Palestinian Christian churches continued in Sabbath

observance even after the break with Judaism. While the apostle Paul is considered by some as an instigator of a full-scale departure from Jewish law, such an interpretation depends in part on interpretations of documents outside and later than the New Testament.

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61] In several instances Paul appeals to Jesus' teachings as backing for his own commands. We find three such major examples in I Corinthians alone: in chapter 7 (on marriage); in chapter 9 (on support of the ministry); and in chapter 11 (on the "Lord's Supper"). If Jesus had done away with the Sabbath, it is inconceivable that Paul would have been ignorant of the fact. Yet if Jesus had done away with the Sabbath and Paul knew of it, *it is absolutely inconceivable that Paul would not have cited this as proof* of his own alleged teachings against the Sabbath, if such he had had.

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62] Certain scriptures in Paul's writings are often adduced as proof of his alleged attitude that Sabbath observance is unnecessary or even evil. For example, it is often held that Romans 14:5-6 shows that it does not matter which day one keeps holy, but this is actually nowhere stated. Since eating is mentioned several times in the passage, some commentators suggest it may be a question of fast days or something else to do with food. Verse 5 speaks of esteeming one day above another but says nothing about the reason for the preference. The word "esteem" (Greek *krino*) is not otherwise used of keeping a holy day. Similarly, in verse 6, the word *phroneo* ("regardeth," KJV; "observes," RSV) is not otherwise used to refer to the observance of festivals. To use this passage as proof that Paul no longer believed Sabbath observance to be necessary requires anti-Sabbatarians to demonstrate that this is in fact what lies behind the statement—something that has not been done up to this time. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

63] The reference to "days, and months, and seasons, and years" in Galatians 4: 10 is frequently applied to the Jewish Sabbath and holy day observance. The basis for this is the apparent Jewish identity of those causing problems in Galatia. That the troublemakers had certain characteristics which would gain them the label "Jewish" is correct (e.g. circumcision), but this still does not delineate the situation. Was it Pharisaic, was it Essenic, was it some sort of syncretistic group? What part did astrology play? What was the makeup of the Galatian congregation? Such things are often assumed rather than proved. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

64] The fact is, we do not know anything about the group causing the problem other than what the epistle itself tells us. To assume more than this is not to rely on the evidence. Why does Paul speak of their "turning back" to the "weak and miserable *stoicheia*"(v. 9)? These Galatians do not seem to be former Jews, since they are receiving circumcision— something Jews would already have. Unless one takes the "turning back" as purely a metaphorical expression, one would assume they are going back to their former pagan conditions. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

65] Further evidence is found in the vocabulary here. Why would one speak of "days" (*hemerai*), "months" (*menai*), "seasons" (*kairoi*) and "years" (*eniautoi*), if one had the Old Testament festivals in mind? One would expect to see "Sabbath," "festival days" (*heorte*), or similar words but not vague references to "days" and problematic and unspecified comments about "seasons" and "years." It is strange that Paul manages not to use a single normal word for the weekly or annual celebrations, if that is what he had in mind. We can only conclude that the passage cannot legitimately be used as evidence of Sabbath abolition. Indeed, in the Gentile world, up to one third of the days of the year were special in one way or another, with certain restrictions, etc. In addition, certain months were considered sacred. The Jews never observed any months.

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66] Colossians 2:16 is the first scripture to give a certain reference to the Sabbath and annual, holy days. Yet again we have a problem of background. We evidently have a syncretistic group exploiting the Church at Colossae. Certain ascetic practices of pagan philosophies are mentioned (Col 2:8, 18-23). Therefore, it is not surprising that Paul says, "Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink," since some people apparently *were* passing judgment. Of course, eating and drinking are only a "shadow" . (forerunner) of what is to come, but the solid "body" (ultimate goal) belongs to Christ. Does that mean we should no longer eat and drink? Hardly. Paul is showing that the ascetic practices some wished to enforce were of little real substance, Any eating or abstinence is not the end but only a means to an end. A Sabbath observer could say the same about the Sabbath and holy days. They are—not were—a shadow of what is to come; and therefore are still important and necessary, just as eating and drinking are.

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67] What is Paul specifically instructing the Colossian Church? From our historical perspective, it is difficult to know for sure. Could Paul be encouraging the Colossians who were being troubled by pagan Gentiles who were criticizing the new converts for *keeping* the Sabbath? Or was Paul allaying the fears of brethren who were being criticized by strict, proselytizing Jews for the manner in which they kept the Sabbath? (Since Jesus taught the Sabbath as a *blessing for man* and not as a *burden upon man*, some extremely zealous Judaic factions might well have been claiming that the new converts were breaking the Sabbath when in fact these converts were keeping it precisely as Jesus Himself had done.) In either case, Colossians 2:16 is transformed into a clear statement evidencing that Gentile Christians *were* keeping the Sabbath. What is absolutely certain is that Paul is not speaking against Sabbath observance. If he were teaching against the Sabbath in Colossians 2, the discussion in the New Testament would have been enormous. No such discussion or dissension exists. [back to top](#)
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68] The fact that Paul expected Gentiles to keep the law is demonstrated in many scriptures throughout the book of Romans (e.g. Rom. 3:31; 7:12, 22; etc.) Romans 2:25-29 is especially interesting and direct, though often overlooked. Here uncircumcised *Gentiles* are admonished to be circumcised of the heart (v. 29) and to become Jews inwardly by keeping "the righteousness of the law" (v. 26) and by fulfilling the law (v. 27). (Obviously Paul could

not have meant the full Sinaitic Covenant in his use of the term "law" here, since circumcision was a part of the law.) Only with God's Holy Spirit, through Christ, can a human being fulfill the righteousness of the law (Rom. 8:4) and "delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22).

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69] Aside from the actual New Testament verses in which Sabbath observance is directly mentioned, the question of *why* the Sabbath law is not repeated as a direct command must be addressed. A comparison of the treatment in the New Testament of the law of circumcision and the Sabbath (the two great pillars of the Jewish faith in Christ's time) will illustrate the problem, and supply the solution. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

70] Sabbath observance was a practice among all Jews, in Palestine as well as in the diaspora. In fact, Sabbath observance was very influential in the Roman world as a whole among non-Jews. *

* This is clear from the number of references in various writers in the First centuries B.C. and A.D. Horace shows that many people had "joined" the Jews or at least were careful of what they did on the Sabbath to avoid offending Jewish scruples (*Satires* 1.4.14ff; 1.9.60ff). Ovid indicates that many young Roman maidens frequented the synagogue on the Sabbath (*Ars amatoria* 1.75 and 415). Other writers indicating widespread Jewish influence, often with Sabbath observance of some sort, include Tibullus (1.3.13ff); Seneca (*Epistle* 2.40); and Juvenal (*Satire* 14.96ff). One historian summarized the situation as follows: "an observance of the Sabbath ... became very common in some quarters of Rome under the Empire" (Dill, *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, 84).

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71] Circumcision was also a major pillar of the Jewish faith. For a male to become a full proselyte to Judaism, circumcision was required. Not unnaturally, few males were willing to take this course, yet this did not prevent many from becoming "God-fearers" or "semi-proselytes." This was especially popular outside Palestine—in the diaspora. It was considered sufficient to accept belief in one God and to adopt a minimum of other commandments, such as the Sabbath, the dietary laws and basic ethical requirements. Even though such individuals were not converts, strictly speaking, they were encouraged by Jewish leaders and evidently expected to share in the favor of God as much as Jews by birth (see for example, G.F. Moore, *Judaism* II, 325; G. Bornkamm, *Paul* 10; K.G. Kuhn, TDNT VI, 731). [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

72] However, even the "God-fearers" who were not forced to experience removal of the foreskin still had to observe the Sabbath, the second major tenet of Judaism. This poses a rather obvious but crucial question: *if circumcision—which was not a universal requirement for Gentiles anyway—is such a major issue in the New Testament, why is the Sabbath not even an issue of controversy?* [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

73] We have to remember that we are not dealing with a minor point. On an unimportant issue, the silence of the New Testament might be purely accidental. But we are dealing with one of the two *major pillars* of the Jewish religion at the time.

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74] It hardly needs pointing out, of course, that circumcision was an important issue in the early years of the apostolic Church. So long as the only new converts were Jews, no problem arose. But it was not long before the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10-11). God clearly gave His Spirit without requiring circumcision. When Peter was called into question about it, his answer seemed to have quieted any objections. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

75] However, it was not completely settled, because it came up again, requiring the council of Acts 15. Even then circumcision must have been a problem, because Paul continues to mention it. Those troubling the Galatians were evidently teaching circumcision, so that Paul in exasperation, sarcastically wishes they would slip and castrate themselves (Gal. 5:12). He says many times that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision—physically—is of any spiritual consequence (I Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:6). It is *spiritual* circumcision of the heart—that counts (Rom. 2:29 ff).

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76] This "pillar" of Judaism was so important that it received considerable attention throughout the New Testament. Despite precedents in conversion without circumcision, the subject was debated quite vigorously in the early Church. Yet the other pillar—the Sabbath—does not receive anywhere near comparable treatment. A silence at this point seems hardly accidental. Considering the historical situation, silence undoubtedly means that the Sabbath was a nonissue—never challenged or questioned. The required conclusion must therefore be that Sabbath observance was both taught and obeyed by the early Church.

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77] Sabbath observance was so important in the Jewish religion that there are statements in Talmudic literature to the effect that Sabbath observance is the equivalent of the Abrahamic Covenant, and that the law of the Sabbath was said to be equal to all the other laws and commandments in the Torah! (*Mekhilta* 63; *Pesikta Rabbti* 23; Palestinian Talmud *Berachot* 3; *Nedarim* 38; *Exodus Rabba* 25.) Although these are post-first century texts, they illustrate what is also clear from the earliest records: The acknowledged importance of the Sabbath to Judaism is highly relevant for achieving an accurate understanding of New Testament teaching regarding Sabbath observance for the Christian.

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78] The enormous importance of the Sabbath in first century Judaism is powerful corroboratory evidence that neither Jesus nor any of His apostles following, ever "did away" with Sabbath observance on the day God created for rest and worship. The few scriptures (primarily in Paul's writings) often quoted in an attempt to end the obligation of Christians to keep the Sabbath, pale by comparison with the overwhelming significance of the Sabbath. If the apostles had dared to eliminate the Sabbath, surely a gargantuan conflict would have exploded into the New Testament record. Compare the major controversy in the New Testament Church over circumcision (e.g., Acts 15), which was declared to be unnecessary or

optional for Christians, with the relatively minor controversy over *how a Christian should observe* the Sabbath (in contradistinction to the "customary" rigorous regulations of common Jewish law).

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79] Since the Sabbath was considered by the Jews to be so important—as important as all the rest of the law put together in some circles (see above)—*if* Jesus and His apostles had taught and practiced the total abrogation of the Sabbath commandment as is often claimed, then the religious controversy and disputations should perforce have filled the gospels, the book of Acts and all the epistles. *There is no such enormous controversy in the New Testament records, and therefore we can only conclude that the Sabbath was not abrogated!*

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80] This would also explain why we do not find repeated reaffirmations of the Sabbath as a command of God. It is mentioned, of course (as already shown), but everybody in the New Testament world already knew about or believed in the importance of the Sabbath. There was not the slightest doubt or uncertainty. To have emphasized Sabbath-keeping in the New Testament would have been like the proverbial "carrying coals to Newcastle" or "taking ice to the Eskimos in winter." The issue that Jesus (and later the apostles) addressed was not whether to observe the Sabbath—it had always been revered as the fourth of the Ten Commandments—but rather *how* to observe the Sabbath in the light of the restrictive concepts of the day.

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81] Commonly available historical scholarship testifies to the fact that Christians kept the Sabbath even after New Testament times. Eusebius reports that even the liberal wing of the Jewish Christians "shared in the impiety of the former class (radical wing), in that they were equally zealous to insist on the literal observance of the law." S. Bacchiocchi writes that around 80-90 A.D. "the Rabbinical authorities reconstituted at Jamnia [after the fall of Jerusalem] introduced a test, in the form of a curse to be pronounced in the famous daily prayer *Shemoneh Esreh* by any participant in the synagogue service, against the Christians. The fact that a test had to be introduced to detect the presence of Christians in the synagogue would seem to indicate, as J. Parkes observes, that Judeo-Christians still frequent the synagogue. It would therefore appear that no radical break with Judaism took place until the year 135 A.D."

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82] It was after 135 A.D., when the Romans crushed the Bar Kokhba revolt and forbade the traditional observance of many Jewish laws including the Sabbath, that the new Gentile leaders of the Jerusalem Church probably began to adopt the weekly Sunday observance, thereby establishing Sunday as their day of worship. This became necessary in order to eliminate any possible association with Judaism—and any resultant suspicion—in the eyes of the Roman overlords.

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83] Nevertheless, the observance of the Sabbath was such a strong tradition that it continued alongside Sunday for several centuries even in large portions of Catholic Christianity. For example, the so-called *Apostolic Constitutions* (about 375-400) exhort the faithful to assemble "on the Sabbath day and . . . the Lord's day" (2.59. 1). Both days are to be feasts (7.23.2); Christian slaves are to be allowed to rest on both of them (8.33. 1). Even though Sunday is given a slightly higher value, the Sabbath is to be celebrated as the memorial of Creation and a time for godliness (7.36.1-2)

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84] One of the great Catholic theologians of east, Gregory of Nyssa (about 335-394), writes, "With what face will you dare to behold the Lord's day if you have despised the Sabbath? . . . For they are sister days" (De Castig 2). Even the noted Alexandrian theologian Oricren, the source of so much of later Catholic theology, wrote in his *Hom. in Num.* 23.4:

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"Leaving on one side, therefore, the Jewish observances of the Sabbath, let us see of what kind the observance of the Sabbath ought to be for the Christian. On the Sabbath no worldly affairs ought to be undertaken. If, therefore, you abstain from all secular works, and do nothing worldly, but employ yourself in spiritual works, and come to church and give ear to the Scripture lections and to sermons,.... this is the observance of the Sabbath for the Christian."

85] Even as late as the 5th century, we find the Sabbath still being remembered in Catholic Christianity, with the notable exceptions of Rome and Alexandria. The church historian, Socrates, writing about 440, states: [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

"Almost all churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the Sabbath of every week, yet the Christians at Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this" (5.22).

86] His contemporary Sozomen similarly tells us, "The people of Constantinople, and almost everywhere, assemble together on the Sabbath, as well as the first day of the week, which custom is never observed at Rome or at Alexandria" (7.19).

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Sabbath Analogy of God's Plan

87] The Sabbath day has two great overall purposes according to the Bible: 1) It looks back as a witness to the physical creation; 2) it looks forward as a shadow to the spiritual rest)and creation. (A third purpose can be listed as well: the Sabbath was to be remembrance of the God

who brought Israel out of Egypt, Deut. 5:15.) God does things in type and antitype, in "shadow" and in "substance."

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88] When God created the earth in *six* days and then rested on the seventh, this completed the physical creation. There is no more physical creation going on. The works are finished as Genesis 2:2-3 and Hebrews 4:3 attest. So the Sabbath day looks back to that Creation, the week of the physical creation (Ex. 20: 11; 31:17). It is then a memorial, which helps us to remember the Creator who made everything. It keeps Him fully in mind every week.

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89] But God also has a great spiritual plan—a spiritual creation—which is now in progress (2 Cor. 5:17). There is a new Creation, and the Sabbath also looks forward to that. Hebrews 4:1-11 refers to a *rest* for God's people. It is a yet future *rest* that we are to strive to enter—the ultimate rest in the Kingdom of God. The seven-day week (v.4) is a picture of this spiritual week God has instituted. God rested—so man shall too. Therefore, the Sabbath day each week also, looks forward to that future rest—when the whole earth shall be at rest—when all shall be taught the way of God. Hebrews 4 shows this clearly and verse 9 is particularly relevant. It says, "There remaineth *therefore* a rest [*sabbatismos*—*ſabbatizing*]"I to the people of God." So, because of the future *rest* (*katapausis*) spiritual Israel is to enter, there remains for us a *sabbatismos* or "sabbatizing." This means that we will keep that future Sabbath of millennial rest as we now keep the weekly Sabbath to look forward to it. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

90] In other words, the Sabbath is both a *memorial* and a *shadow*. It is a memorial of Creation and a shadow of the coming future rest of God's people following the return of Jesus Christ. The Sabbath did not originate with the law of Moses or with the Sinaitic covenant with physical Israel—so it does not pass with that covenant; rather it originated with Creation and looks back as a memorial to it. The Sabbath is also a shadow, looking forward to the *yet* future time of the Millennium. A shadow remains as long as the substance is still future. So it *remains*—looking *forward* to that time. And when that time comes, the Sabbath shall still be kept (Is. 66:23) although no longer as a shadow but as a memorial to the then contemporary reality of Christ's millennial rule.

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91] It was a widespread belief in both intertestamental Judaism and the early Church that the seven days of Creation were an analogy of God's plan for man. This belief held that the first six days represent the entirety of human history in which man is allowed to go his own way under the sway of Satan the devil, and the seventh day on which God rested represents the millennial rest when God Himself sets up His own rule and Kingdom over the earth. Such a Kingdom is described in a number of Old Testament passages (e.g. Is. 2:2-4; 11; Mic. 4:1-8).

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92] Moreover, two New Testament passages refer explicitly to this future Kingdom.

Revelation 20:1-10 describes a time when Jesus Christ Himself returns to the earth and has Satan bound. The righteous will rule. The time of this rule is specifically described as "a thousand years" (vv.4,6). As we have seen, Hebrews 3:7-14; 11 draws a lengthy analogy with the Sabbath rest which physical Israel had never entered into. Christians have a chance to enter into this rest if they do not harden their hearts as the Israelites did. In Hebrews 4:9 this eschatological rest is explicitly connected with the seventh-day Sabbath rest. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

Sabbath in the Millennium

93] As already mentioned, the weekly Sabbath day was taken as a sign of a millennial "Sabbath" of one thousand years in which God (Jesus Christ) would rule directly over the whole earth. The Kingdom of God was already awaited by the Old Testament prophets. Some of the descriptions of it include references to worship on the weekly and annual Sabbaths. For example, Isaiah 66:10 ff describes the restoration of Jerusalem as the capital of the world and the rule of God, over all nations. The righteous are vindicated and rebellions punished. Verse 23 states "From one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the Lord." Sabbath worship is envisioned for all peoples, not just for Israelites. (The new moon was often treated as a semi-holiday because of its importance for calendrical purposes. However, it is nowhere explicitly designated a holy day. See further discussion under "Annual Holy Days.")

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94] Ezekiel 40-48 describes Israel and the future Temple in prophetic vision. Regular observance of the weekly Sabbath and other holy days shall be established alongside a reinstated priesthood and temple ritual. The Passover and Feast of Tabernacles are discussed in 45:21-25. The weekly Sabbath is mentioned in 44:24; 45:17; 46:1,3,4,12. Then, as now, there shall be physical human beings with the same basic needs that human beings have always had. The physical and spiritual needs for the Sabbath then shall be the same as they are now and as they have been in the past.

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Principles for Observing the Sabbath

95] Genesis 2:3 reveals that God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it—set it apart as a holy day—because He rested from all His work. God did not rest because He was tired (cf Is. 40:28); He rested because He was creating something new by the very act of His resting. He was putting His holy presence into the seventh day of the week and setting the precedent for what all mankind should later do. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

96] The Sabbath in the Sinaitic covenant and in later administrations was often hedged about with very strict legal ordinances about what could or could not be done on that day. These regulations had the purpose of teaching respect for the day and helping lead to the proper understanding of the day and its intent. Jesus looked beyond these legalistic ordinances surrounding the day and pointed to the true purpose of the day. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

97] The Sabbath is a definite day, the seventh day of the week, established by God at creation. To alter its observance to one day—just any day—in seven makes it lose its original meaning. Of course, modern man is aware of geographical locations in which the sun does not set below the horizon every 24 hours. The polar regions in summer are one example; outer space is another. Yet, just as individuals in such locations do not lose track of time in relation to the rest of the world, the basic time of the seventh day of the week on earth can still be known. Despite lack of a clear time of sunset, an appropriate demarcation of the Sabbath day can still be determined.

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98] That period of time defined broadly as "evening and morning" was blessed and hallowed. To hallow or sanctify is to make holy or set apart for holy use. When originally defined, the days of creation week were defined only in the broad terms of "evening" [the 12-hour night/dark portion of a 24-hour period] and "morning" [the 12-hour day/light portion of a 24-hour period]. It is the individual's responsibility, considering the local geographic configuration or latitude, to determine as best he is able, a full 24-hour cycle of time. (From the commencement of the night, following an evening sunset until the end of the next evening sunset, 24-hours will elapse). Scandinavians certainly have more need of a broader meaning of the "evening and morning" cycle than do people who live in the tropics.

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99] Christians must keep the day in the spirit. And a true spiritual understanding of the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath obviates the need for detailed regulations; indeed, detailed regulations cannot substitute for a proper spiritual understanding. To attempt to draw detailed lines of Sabbath do's and don'ts would be of little use and would only confuse those seeking to gain understanding of the real intent of the Sabbath, which must come from the Spirit of God. Yet some guidelines *are necessary*—especially for the new convert. Therefore, a rather broad discussion is given here as a means of pointing to a proper understanding of the day.

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100] The Sabbath is a special day, a *holy* day, a day specifically devoted to God and to spiritual matters. It is not a day for regular business (Is. 58:13) but a time to turn from the cares and concerns of the mundane life to the things of God. It is a day in which to rejoice, to enjoy, to rest and have time for God and for one's family. The concept of rest does not mean inactivity though, since spiritual activity is quite important. Physical activity *per se* is not prohibited since certain kinds may be conducive to a better observance of the day (Mt. 12:1).

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101] Jesus' example of doing good on the Sabbath is a farther indication that physical activity as such is not prohibited (e.g. Mt. 12:9-13; John. 9:1-14). Doing good by helping others is very much in keeping with the intent of the Sabbath. Relieving the sufferings or taking care of the immediate needs of others is at the heart of Christian love. Since the purpose of the Sabbath is to lead to a more profound understanding of this godly love, activity which promotes

this is certainly in harmony with the Sabbath command. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

102] On the other hand, whatever does not contribute to a proper use of the Sabbath is out of keeping with it. Doing one's normal business, earning a living, becoming burdened with the mundane cares of daily life, following purely physical pursuits to the exclusion of spiritual ones, or regularly participating in activities which prevent the needed rest of mind and body, are contrary to the purpose of the Sabbath. These all defeat its very intent—the reason why it was given to man—because they do not generate the benefits that the Sabbath was created to give.

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103] It is not the responsibility of the Church to create an encyclopedic handbook for Sabbath observance. The Church teaches the *broad principles* and the members apply them in situations as they arise. The Church cannot legislate on every last situation that may be encountered. Each member must be educated and encouraged to make *personal value judgments* according to his own character and conscience within the general guidelines provided by the Church.

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104] It is the duty of the ministry of the Church to teach the profound spiritual *meaning* of the seventh day from a biblical perspective. The ministry must teach both what the *letter of the law* says and what the *spirit* of the Sabbath law is.

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105] The most important declaration regarding Sabbath Observance was Jesus' statement that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27). God created the Sabbath day to serve man—not vice versa. Man was not intended to be *enslaved* to a period of time. Sabbath observance should not be allowed to become an end in itself. Rather, the day is to serve and *help* those who observe it. The Sabbath was created, as Christ pointed out, *for the service of mankind*. It was the day upon which God "rested"—that is, ceased from His labors of creation—"and was refreshed" (Ex. 31:17). The example is clear: God rested, therefore man also should rest from his weekly labors. When man observes the Sabbath day, he is imitating his Creator and commemorating the creation itself. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

106] The Israelites were instructed to cease from their usual food-gathering labors on the seventh day as God Himself had set the example (Ex. 16:29-30). The day was to be a time of "solemn rest, a holy Sabbath" (verse 23). [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

107] In the giving of the Decalogue at Sinai, the command concerning the Sabbath became the "fourth commandment." The Israelites were instructed to keep the seventh day holy:

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"Remember the Sabbath day, *to keep it holy*. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it" (Ex. 20:8-11, emphasis ours).

108] The theocracy of Israel was primarily an agrarian society. "Work" most often meant farm labor of one kind or another. That is why the commandment included cattle or oxen (cf. Deut. 5:14). In context, it is clear that labor which involved planting, plowing and harvesting is what was being forbidden on the seventh day (cf. Ex. 34:21). There is a parallel between this *kind* of labor and the work of God at Creation—hence the discussion of Creation in Exodus 20:11.

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109] As the community of Israel developed sophistication within the context of a national theocracy, the implications of the fourth commandment extended into other areas. In the special "Sabbath covenant" section (Ex. 31:12-17), the command to rest applied to "any work" (v. 14). In short, *the Sabbath is a day when God's people cease from their usual workday labors as did God*. The fact that we are imitating God's example when we do so *shows our special relationship with God*—it shows that we are "His people."

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110] Isaiah 58 sheds more light on the meaning of the Sabbath day in Israel:

"If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure; or talking idly; then you shall take: delight in the Lord" (Is. 58:13-14). [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

111] In short, the Sabbath is *God's day*. *It is a day devoted to God and to Godly activities*. It is holy. It is hallowed. It is a day to be honored. It is a time to "delight in the Lord" as opposed to one's own mundane business affairs. It should be carefully noted that the term "seeking your own pleasure" (RSV—"finding thine own pleasure," KJV) in Isaiah 58:13 does not, in the Hebrew, have reference to personal enjoyment. The word "pleasure" is *khephets* in Hebrew. In the Jewish Publication Society translation of 1917, it is rendered "thine own business." The *New English Bible* makes the meaning clearer than either the *King James Version* or the *Revised Standard Version*:

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"If you cease to tread the Sabbath underfoot, and keep my holy day free from your own affairs, if you call the Sabbath *a day of joy* . . . if you honor it by *not plying your trade*, not seeking *your own interest* or attending to *your own affairs*..." [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

112] This translation shows the true intention of the words "your own pleasure." The Hebrew term rendered "pleasure" is often translated "desire" or "purpose" in other passages (e.g. I King 5:8-10; Eccles. 3:1,17; etc.). The Jewish translation speaks of "pursuing their own business" and "thy wonted ways." The Hebrew *khephets* is *not* addressing the question of *pleasurable* activities that are illegal on the seventh day. If pleasure were not present, how could the day possible be a delight?
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113] This scripture—Isaiah 58:13—has been erroneously applied by some to such activities as television-viewing, swimming, listening to music, marital relations and even reading the weekly comics in the newspaper. Of course, any of these activities could violate the spirit of the Sabbath day if they were to be *abused* or overdone. Of and by themselves they are not wrong. What *is* wrong is any activity which interferes with or detracts from the joy, rest and spiritual intention of the day. If any activity works *against* the spirit of the Sabbath, it is wrong, no matter what it is.
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114] The main concern of most scriptures pertaining to the Sabbath is that *one should not pursue his usual business or work activities on that day*. One should have more of God and less of himself in his thoughts on the Sabbath. It is a day *to honor God*, to remember His creation, and to *rest*. Obviously then, it should not be a day of violent physical activity of any kind—work or play. It is a day of restfulness. It is a time to unwind and to draw close to God. One's own thoughts of business, money-making, buying and selling, or one's job, should be minimized if not forgotten. The cares of the week are left behind. It is a day to "take it easy" and to worship God. This is the *spirit* of the day.
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115] This background should help put things in perspective. Jesus provided additional insight into the intention of the when He said, "*it is lawful to do, good on the Sabbath*" (Mt. 12:12). He was speaking of such things as healing, or pulling a stranded animal out of a ditch or similar activities. Jesus was expounding the *spirit* of the day in these examples. By the ox in the ditch" example (Lk. 14:5), He showed that it is not that all physical activity is wrong on the Sabbath—but that the kind of physical activity which is involved in earning a living or in doing business is. Pulling an ox out of a ditch can involve considerable expenditure of physical effort, yet it is not wrong because it is "doing good." It is a matter of capturing the spirit of the law and ordering one's priorities aright. If we can do good for a domestic animal, how much more for a human being who is of infinitely more value (Mt. 1-2:9-13)? [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

116] The sect of the Pharisees had missed the point of the Sabbath law. They thought that virtually any physical effort, except for a very limited amount, was wrong. Christ showed that what is important is not the effort, but the *kind* of effort and the *direction* of that effort. Doing *good—serving people* who are in dire need—is not wrong on the Sabbath day. Serving one's own business interests *is* wrong. What about doing one's own business on the Sabbath if that business is "doing good"—in the health services, for example? Obviously, emergencies and responsibility for human welfare follow Jesus' own examples regarding doing good on the Sabbath. Yet there can be a fine line between such responsibilities and the regular full-time work of the normal week. One who truly desires to keep God's Sabbath will not seek an excuse to regularly engage in work on the Sabbath, yet will be instantly ready to aid fellow human beings who are in need of help.

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117] With these basic guidelines in mind, it should be evident that the individual must evaluate each situation that confronts him as it arises. He or she must answer several basic questions: will this activity violate *the spirit and intent* of the Sabbath day? Can I do it in faith? If there is doubt in the person's mind, if the activity contemplated is questionable, it is probably best to avoid it (Rom. 14:23). If it would offend his conscience—or that of others in the Church—he should avoid the activity. Paul said "if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall" (I Cor. 8:13). [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

118] These guidelines are what the Church provides to its members as the *basis* for their personal decision making. It is not the duty of the ministry to spell out and rule on every last kind of activity in the human realm! It is in its spiritual significance. It is the individual's responsibility to interpret that teaching in the light of his or her own situation.

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119] By way of clarification, the following examples may be instructive:

120] It is obviously out of step with the spirit of the Sabbath day to participate in violent physical sports activities. Can one "keep the Sabbath holy" while charging down a football field or a basketball court? In competitive sports, one must go all out to the point of exhaustion to win. The Sabbath is a day of *rest*. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

121] The Sabbath would not be a day to dig up the garden, or plow or harvest in a major way. But there is nothing wrong with watering the lawn or pulling up a few carrots or breaking of stalks of celery for a fresh salad. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

122] One should not do the entire week's shopping on a Saturday; one should plan ahead. But if the baby needs milk, and you are out of it, there is nothing wrong with picking up a quart

or two. There is a principle here. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

123] As a rule, Christians should avoid getting into situations where Sabbath observance becomes difficult. As we have always said it is best to remain far from the edge of the cliff. Why trouble your conscience? This is especially true concerning business matters. Partnerships with non-Church members can be difficult in this respect. One has to remember that, for a Christian, there is a balance between the proper keeping of the Sabbath for himself and his Christian duty to treat his neighbor with the utmost respect and outgoing concern. Herein lies the ever-present danger of the two extremes: 1) a Christian can delude himself into not helping his family or his fellow man because of his self-righteous desire to "perfectly" keep the Sabbath holy; 2) the same Christian can delude himself just as convincingly into not keeping the Sabbath because he has persuaded himself that others "need" him to work. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

124] There is no simple solution to this dilemma: no formula to apply, or panacea to discover. God designed our minds and His law so that we would have to confront difficult and unique situations throughout our Christian lives. How we handle each of these situations shall determine the quality of the character we are building; that is what building character is all about. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

125] In all this, we should remember that Israel was a self contained, controllable, theocratic community. In today's world, on the other hand, Christians cannot control the circumstances of their environments except to a very limited extent. We are sent into the world (John. 17:18). We must coexist with a world that, for the most part, does not obey God. Our situation is quite different from that of ancient Israel. [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

126] The Church therefore advises its members to use vision and foresight in planning business ventures that could present problems in the future. They are encouraged to avoid awkward and difficult situations. Oftentimes we are presented with difficult choices. In the developing nations, for example, certain activities on the Sabbath are compulsory by law. Those failing to comply can be shot or imprisoned! If a man is to be imprisoned and taken from his family who rely upon him to support and provide for them, it is far better that he perform a public service on the Sabbath (e.g. garbage disposal) if the law requires it, than to allow this to happen. God places heavy emphasis in the New Testament on a man's responsibility to provide for his own family. He who fails to do so is considered to be "worse than an infidel" (I Tim. 5:8). [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

127] In certain parts of Europe, it is possible to lose custody of one's children if one does not send them to school on the Sabbath. If this were to happen, parents would have no control over their children, whatsoever. Moreover, they would still end up going to school on the Sabbath. It is *better* to allow them to attend school that half-day than to lose them altogether!

Of course, it is not ideal, but it is the best thing to do under the circumstances.

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128] The Sabbath is a means of honoring and worshipping God. We can honor and worship Him in the privacy of our homes by having the time to draw closer to Him. This can be accomplished by rest, prayer, reflection (meditation) on His ways and by reading His handbook of life—the Bible.

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129] We should also more formally show honor and worship to God by assembling with His true Church on His Sabbath. The Sabbath is called a "holy convocation" (Lev. 23:3). The book of Hebrews states that God's Church must not neglect "to meet together" (Heb. 10:25). J. B. Phillips translates this verse: "And let us not hold aloof from our church meetings. "

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130] The Sabbath demonstrates one's recognition of God as Creator, both past and future, and as Lord of our lives. If we do not set aside the Sabbath day—not just any day of the week, but the day specifically ordained, sanctified and commanded by God and His Word—perhaps it is because of a disinclination or "inability" to serve Him and put Him first. One's respect for the Sabbath is one means (among many) of showing one's true attitude toward God and His rulership.

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131] Keeping the Sabbath in its full spiritual intent is a means of developing and demonstrating godly love. It is also a solemn command from God, who wants only the best for His creation. Physically and mentally, the Sabbath renews the body to do more in six days than could be done in seven without such rest. Spiritually, it shows respect and love toward God. God's Sabbath is surely "for men" (Mk. 2:27). [back to top](#) [back to answers](#)

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