THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE SABBATH

A RESEARCH PAPER
PRESENTED TO DR. KON HWON YANG

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
OLD TESTAMENT INTRODUCTION, S1112-31

BY
BRIAN WATSON
DECEMBER 2, 2013
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Introduction

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance and influence of the Ten Commandments. Spoken directly by Yahweh to Israel, written by him on tablets of stone, the “ten words” form the heart of the covenant made with Israel at Sinai. One could say these words created the nation of Israel. Yet their influence extends far beyond Sinai, to the Christian life (as evidenced by their prominent place in many catechisms), and to Western civilization. As Mark Rooker observes, “The influence of the Ten Commandments on the Western world is beyond doubt. No other document has had such a great influence on Western culture.”¹ Fittingly, the Decalogue appears prominently on the U.S. Supreme Court building and some have even argued that these commandments form the basis of all Western law.²

A study of the Ten Commandments is necessary to understanding the history of redemption as well as contemporary Christian ethics. The following is a brief study of the Decalogue followed by an examination of the Sabbath, the subject of the fourth commandment.

The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments were initially given to Israel at Mount Sinai. They come at the head of the covenant that Yahweh made with Israel through the mediation of Moses.


Technically, they are the “ten words” (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4). They were spoken by Yahweh directly to the Israelites in Exodus 20:3-17. “Only the Ten Commandments are given directly by God; the rest of the Law is mediated to them through Moses.” Additionally, the Ten Commandments are directed to each Israelite, as indicated by the use of second person masculine verbs. Another unique feature of these ten “words” is that they were written by Yahweh himself on tablets of stone. Exodus 31:19 explicitly states that they were written by “the finger of God.” It is quite possible that these were the first words of the Bible committed to writing.

Since the Ten Commandments serve as the chief principles of the Law given to Israel at Sinai, and since they are even equated with the Sinai covenant (Deut. 4:13), something about this covenant must be said. After delivering the Israelites out of Egypt by means of ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, Yahweh brought them to Sinai, where he told Moses to deliver a message to the people: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:4-6a).

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5 See also Exod. 32:15-16. Deut. 4:12-13 indicates that it was the Ten Commandments, synonymous with the Sinai covenant itself, that were written on the stone tablets.

6 Waltke and Yu make that claim (*Old Testament Theology*, 414), which is supported by Exod. 24:12; Deut. 5:22; 9:10-11.

7 The text of the Bible used here is the English Standard Version.
Yahweh graciously delivered Israel out of Pharaoh’s hands. “By reason of having rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, Yahweh had a claim on his chosen people.”

The reason he redeemed the Israelites was to bring them to himself, to be his people. “The Lord did not deliver Israel for her own sake, henceforth to live independently, but rather for relationship with him. In effect, this relationship with the Lord is the goal of the Egyptian deliverance.”

He also made a covenant with them: if they would obey his commands, they would be his treasured possession among all the nations, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

Many biblical scholars have observed that the form of the Sinai covenant is similar to that of Hittite suzerainty treaties of the second millennium B.C. Such treaties, between a superior (a king, or suzerain) and an inferior party (vassals), consisted of several common elements: a preamble identifying the suzerain; a historical prologue, recounting the accomplishments of the suzerain on behalf of the vassals; stipulations that present obligations of the vassal to the suzerain; provisions for a deposit of the covenant in a sacred place and periodic public readings of the covenant; witnesses called to testify to the covenant treaty; blessings and curses that signify what will happen if the vassal obeys or disobeys the suzerain; and a ratification ceremony, complete with a binding symbol, such as the slaughtering of an animal.

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elements are also part of the Sinai covenant. However, unlike other ancient Near East treaties, the covenant made at Sinai was issued by God, not a human king. According to Bruce Waltke, “No other ancient Near Eastern religion attests a bûrîṯ (“covenant”) between a god and his people outside of Israel.” Also, in other ANE treaties, laws were given by human kings, but here the Law was given by Yahweh himself. Future human kings of Israel would be subject to the Law given by Yahweh (Deut. 17:14-20).

The Ten Commandments themselves are not laws, for they lack specificity and they do not stipulate punishments. Specific, individual laws are found in Exodus 21-23, as well as in the rest of the Pentateuch. The relationship between the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law might be likened to that of the Constitution of the United States to federal law: the former is “legally binding in a most basic, foundational way” while the latter deals with specific applications of those foundational principles. As Rooker notes, “Many have noted that all 613 laws of the Torah correspond to the 613 letters of the Ten Commandments in Exod 20, hence the Decalogue appears to represent the embodiment of all laws and statutes of the Pentateuch.”

Not only do the Ten Commandments embody the laws of the Torah, but they also reveal God’s will. The stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were written were placed in the ark of the covenant (Deut. 10:1-5), which resided in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle

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and, later, the temple. In Waltke’s view, “It is thus fair to speak of it [the Decalogue] as the eternal moral law of God, an expression of God himself. They are part of God’s identity, a central part of God’s self-revelation.”

Though explicit references to the Ten Commandments in the rest of Scripture are limited, they form the basis for all of the other commandments within the Bible. Significantly, Jesus makes reference to all ten of the Decalogue, though, as we shall see, the Sabbath commandment is transformed in the New Testament. Since these laws are spoken by Yahweh directly to Israel, were written by him, were deposited in the most holy piece of furniture, the ark, in the Most Holy Place, and are repeated throughout the Bible, it logical to conclude that they represent God’s eternal will. Though delivered to Israel within a covenant relationship, they are objective, timeless truths.

Moreover, the Ten Commandments reveal something about what Yahweh is like. “At Sinai God spells out for his people what it means to be the people of God. . . . What he does tell them reflects in various ways his own character.”

God’s People Living in God’s Place under God’s Rule

Before looking at the content of the Decalogue, one must first consider the purpose of the covenant made at Sinai. That purpose is revealed in Exodus 19:4-6, quoted above. “These verses are, in effect, Israel’s ‘mission statement’, defining Israel’s purpose as the people of God, and the

16 Waltke and Yu, An Old Testament Theology, 413.


18 It is worth noting that the tabernacle was modeled after a heavenly reality (Exod. 25:40; Heb. 8:5; 9:23).

role of the law in that purpose.”20 Yahweh first presented the mission of Israel to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” As a holy nation of royal priests, Israel would “image” Yahweh to the other nations. In short, the Israelites were meant to live as God’s people, in God’s special place (the Promised Land), under God’s rule.21

Douglas Stuart suggests four ways that Israel was supposed to serve as a kingdom of priests. First, Israel was supposed to be an example to the nations of how to live under God’s rule. Second, Israel “would proclaim the truth of God and invite people from other nations to accept him in faith as shown by confession of belief in him and acceptance of his covenant.” Third, Israel was supposed to intercede for the world by offering up sacrifices to God. Fourth, Israel was supposed to be stewards of God’s revealed truth preserved in Scripture.22 In short, Yahweh would use Israel both to reveal himself to the world and to invite the world into a relationship with him, to receive his blessings.

Yahweh would strategically place Israel in Canaan to perform this priestly function for the world. “Since Israel is located geographically on the one and only communications link between the great superpowers of the ancient world (Egypt and Mesopotamia), in this position


21 Goldsworthy (Gospel and Kingdom, 54) describes the kingdom of God as “ (a) God’s people (b) in God’s place (c) under God’s rule.”

22 Stuart, Exodus, 423.
she will show the nations how to have a right relationship to God, how to treat each other in a truly human way, and how to faithfully steward the earth’s resources.”

Israel would only function in such a way if her people would obey Yahweh’s word, as summarized in the “Ten Words.” Just as Yahweh created the world by his word, he created the nation of Israel by his word. Adam and Eve were created to “image” God to the rest of the world (Gen. 1:26-27); the task of Israel was no different.

**The Core of the Ten Commandments**

Two key verses in the Pentateuch sum up the essence of the Decalogue: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5); and, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18b). Jesus said that all the Law and Prophets depend on these two commandments (Matt. 22:40).

The covenant made with Israel at Sinai does not represent merely a treaty between a conquering king and his lowly subjects. It is deeply relational. The relationship between Yahweh and Israel was similar to a marriage, a key metaphor used to describe the relationship between God and his people throughout the Bible. The Decalogue was a foundational legal document for the nation of Israel, drafted by her King. Yet the Sinai covenant is also similar to a wedding contract. “A marriage may be legalized by a marriage license, but it is a true marriage only when

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24 Gentry and Wellum observe that in Genesis 1, “and he [=God] said” (wayyō’mēr) appears ten times. “In a very real way, the entire creation depends or hangs upon the word of God” (*Kingdom through Covenant*, 327). “It is also Ten Words that brings about the birth of the nation. Like the creation, Israel as a nation hangs upon the Ten Words for her very being” (Ibid., 328).
the legal terms of the contract are representative of a love leading to and maintaining the marital relationship.”

Israel was supposed to have such a love for Yahweh. It is not incidental that Yahweh says, in the second commandment, that he shows his “steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod. 20:6). The first four commandments could be considered “vertical,” since they directly address Israel’s relationship with God. The last six commandments are “horizontal,” concerning the relationships between individuals in Israel.

The Decalogue also reflects Yahweh’s holiness. In Leviticus, he says, “For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (11:44; see also 11:45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; 1 Pet. 1:16). Israel was to be a “holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). The Ten Commandments reflect Yahweh’s holiness, which Israel was to reflect to the nations.

Finally, it should be said that the Ten Commandments point forward to Israel’s need for the Messiah. The Israelites were not to make an image of God because Jesus is the true image of God (Col. 1:15). They were not to take Yahweh’s name in vain because Jesus has received the name of “Lord,” the name above all names (Phil. 2:9). Jesus truly honored his Father in heaven and, as we shall see, Jesus is the one who provides the true Sabbath rest for his people. Only Jesus could obey the Ten Commandments perfectly. He is the true Royal Priest who mediates blessings to the world.


26 Though there are different ways of numbering the Ten Commandments, the division found here represents the Reformed tradition, over against the divisions used by Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran interpreters. For more information on the numbering of the commandments, see Marshall, “Decalogue,” 172.

The Sabbath Commandment in the Old Testament

It was stated above that the first four commandments concern Israel’s relationship with God, while the latter six commandments concern relationships among the Israelites. However, according to Waltke, “The first three commandments pertain to Israel’s relation to God, their King; the last six pertain to Israel’s relationship to neighbors. The fourth, to keep the Sabbath, is transition: keep the Sabbath to remember the Creator for the benefit of his creation.”28 The Sabbath commandment is a unique one, in that it seems to have its origin in the creation of the world, is intended for the benefit of humanity, is ultimately fulfilled in the new creation, and yet is not repeated as a commandment in the New Testament.29

The fourth commandment is first delivered at Sinai:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exod. 20:8-11)

The Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week, was intended to be holy (qdš), which has the connotation of “distinct, withheld from ordinary use, treated with special care,” the opposite of “profane” or “common.”30 The Israelites were commanded to work for six days; on the seventh day, they were to cease from labor. The Hebrew noun translated as “Sabbath” (šabbāt) is


29 “The Sabbath law is the only law of the Ten Commandments that is not repeated in the New Testament” (Rooker, The Ten Commandments, 98).

related to the verb šābat, which means to cease or rest.\textsuperscript{31} Leviticus 23:3 indicates that the Sabbath was to be a “holy convocation,” a term used for the religious feasts described in that chapter. “A holy convocation was a time of corporate worship. Therefore, at least part of the purpose of the Sabbath rest was to observe the day by participating in public worship.”\textsuperscript{32} The Sabbath was the sign of the Sinai covenant (Exod. 31:12-17; Ezek. 20:12), just as the rainbow was the sign of the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:12-17), and circumcision was the sign of the covenant made with Abraham (Gen. 17:11). According to Ezekiel 20:12, the purpose of the Sabbath was that Israel “might know that I am the \textsc{LORD} who sanctifies them.” Clearly, the Sabbath was important for God, because not only is the Sabbath commandment part of the Decalogue, but the punishment for Sabbath breaking was death (Exod. 31:14-15). It was a “Sabbath to the \textsc{LORD},” a day that belonged to him (Exod. 16:23, 25; 20:10; 31:15).

The goal of the Sabbath was to refrain from typical work. Of course, “some unavoidable work would nevertheless have to be done by those who served food to people or took care of flocks and herds.”\textsuperscript{33} Certainly, parents of young children do not have the option of ceasing from their work of taking care of them. Still, the goal of the Sabbath seems to have been a pause from everyday activities. “As a holy day, the Sabbath is removed from the mundane sphere of secular time and reflects the divine dimension. In this way the Sabbath could be seen as a suspension of


\textsuperscript{33} Stuart, \textit{Exodus}, 459. See also Rooker, \textit{The Ten Commandments}, 85.
time as it prohibits all work on that day.”

Perhaps one of the reasons that Yahweh gave the Israelites the Sabbath was to teach them to trust in his provision. When the Sabbath is first mentioned explicitly in the Bible, it is done so in the context of Yahweh’s provision of manna for his people. After crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites started to grumble because of hunger (Exod. 16:1-3). Yahweh then told them he would send them “bread from heaven,” and the manner in which they collected the bread would test their obedience (v. 4). The Israelites would need to collect twice as much manna on the sixth day so that they would not have to work on the seventh (v. 5). They were told that the seventh day was “a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD” (v. 23). The Israelites had to trust in Yahweh’s provision and obey the command to cease from work on the seventh day.

The basis for the Sabbath commandment, as presented in Exodus 20, is the pattern Yahweh established in creation. As he created for six days and rested on the seventh, so should the Israelites work six days and rest on the seventh. Yahweh blessed the first Sabbath day, the seventh day of the creation week, and made it holy (Exod. 20:11). Many theologians believe that when God rested on the seventh day of the creation week, he mandated Sabbath rest. G. K. Beale makes a very persuasive case for such a creation mandate. According to Beale, part of Adam’s job in imaging God (Gen. 1:28) was to subdue and rule creation, just as God “subdued and ruled over the chaos at the inception of creation,” and to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, “just as God created and filled the earth.”

Therefore, it seems logical that Adam was supposed to

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34 Rooker, The Ten Commandments, 80.

imitate Yahweh in resting on each seventh day. Though Scripture does not say that God expected humans to rest on the Sabbath prior to the giving of the Decalogue at Sinai, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Sabbath was God’s original and eternal intention for mankind. Israel was supposed to observe the Sabbath “throughout their generations, as a covenant forever” (Exod. 31:16).

The Sabbath commandment is also given in Deuteronomy 5:12-15. In this context, Moses presents the Law once again to Israel, this time forty years later, prior to their entry into the Promised Land. Interestingly, Moses says, “Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here today” (Deut. 5:3). Peter Craigie comments, “In a literal sense, the covenant was made with the fathers of most of those standing there on the plains of Moab. The essence of the covenant, however, was its present reality, so that Moses drives home very forcefully the direct identification of the principally new and young generation with those involved in the making of the Horeb covenant.”36 This statement shows that the Decalogue has eternal significance for Israel.

The Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 differs slightly from the one presented in Exodus. The key difference is verse 15: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” In Exodus, the reason for keeping the Sabbath was the pattern God established at creation. Here, the reason for keeping the Sabbath is that Yahweh delivered the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Perhaps there is a connection between the creation of the earth and the creation of Israel. “The Exodus, too, was a type of *creation* and thus forms an analogy to the creation account in Genesis.

The Exodus from Egypt marks in effect the creation of God’s people as a nation.37 When the Israelites remembered creation and their redemption, they were to realize that they were dependent upon Yahweh for life and freedom. They would learn this dependence from observing the Sabbath, ceasing from work in order to trust in his provision.

The rest of the Old Testaments depicts the importance of the Sabbath commandment. In Numbers 15:32-26, we read of a man who broke the Sabbath by gathering sticks and who was subsequently stoned to death, according to commandment found in Exodus 31:14-15. Breaking of the Sabbath was associated with idolatry (Lev. 19:3-4; Ezek. 20:16-24). It seems that breaking the Sabbath was one of the reasons why Israel went into exile (2 Chron. 36:21; Jer. 17:19-27; 25:11-12; Ezek. 20:12-24). After the exile, the Sabbath was one of the concerns of Nehemiah. He recalls the giving of the Sabbath in his prayer of confession (Neh. 9:14) and he states that no buying or selling should be done on the Sabbath (10:31). When he discovers that the Sabbath commandment was being broken, he confronted the leaders of the people and then made sure the gates of the city were shut on that holy day, so that no buying or selling of goods could be done (13:15-22). He likely did not want the people to be exiled again for their lack of observing this important commandment.

By the time of Jesus’ first coming, Sabbath observation was one of three badges of Jewish national identity, along with circumcision and dietary laws.38 Keeping the Sabbath had

37 Ibid., 157.

38 Craig L. Blomberg, Jesus and the Gospels, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 49.
become synonymous with Judaism. On the Sabbath day, Jews met in synagogues for prayer and Scripture readings. The Mishnah forbade thirty-nine activities on the Sabbath day.  

The Sabbath in the New Testament

In the Gospels, there are a number of episodes where Jesus teaches and/or heals on the Sabbath. Though an investigation of each episode would be fruitful, we will examine only one at this time. In Matthew 12:1-8, Jesus and his disciples, walking through a field on the Sabbath, pluck some heads of grain and eat them. The Pharisees, seeing what Jesus and his followers did, accuse them of breaking the Sabbath. Jesus reminds them that David and his men ate the “bread of the Presence” when they were fleeing Saul (1 Sam. 21:1-6). Though this bread was to be eaten only by priests, Jesus says David and his men were guiltless. Then he says, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here” (v. 6) and, “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (v. 8). Not only is Jesus claiming to be greater than the temple, he is also claiming to be Lord.

Jesus then enters a synagogue and provokes the Pharisees by asking if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. He asks them a question that puts them in a difficult position. “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (vv. 11-12). He then heals a man with a withered hand. The clear indication is that the Sabbath was intended for the good of humanity and creation, and it is better to do good than to allow one to suffer. Of

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course, the man with the withered hand was not in dire need of healing. Jesus could have waited until after the Sabbath to heal him, but in healing on the Sabbath, he was making a point. In the Gospels, healing is a physical symbol of the salvation that Jesus offers. The connection between salvation and the Sabbath is significant and should not be missed.

It is certainly no accident that, in Matthew’s telling, this incident follows these important words: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30). Jesus offers to give rest to the weary because he is the true Sabbath.

In order to understand how Jesus is the Sabbath, how he is our rest, we must first understand that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament Law (Matt. 5:17). He is the telos, the goal of the Law (Rom. 10:4) and all of the Old Testament is about Jesus (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39). We also know that Jesus is the Sabbath because Paul tells us as much in Colossians 2:16-17. After referring to “festival,” “new moon,” and “Sabbath” (the annual, monthly, and weekly times of worship for Israel) in verse 16, he writes, “These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (v. 17). As Beale affirms, “In one way or another, Paul understood that the various external expressions of the OT law pointed to the advent of the Messiah, who now has come, so that the purpose of the typological function of the various Israelite institutions is now finished. Christ has completely fulfilled these things.”

When reading the Old Testament in light of the New, we find that certain laws are transformed by Jesus. In order to understand any given law, we must run it “through the grid of fulfillment in Christ to see how, if at all, its application in the era of the new covenant has

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changed.”42 Though nine of the Ten Commandments are reaffirmed in the New Testament, the Sabbath is shown to point to, and be fulfilled by, Jesus. Just as Jesus is the true temple, the true High Priest, the true Passover lamb, and the true bread of life, he is also the true Sabbath.

Though Jesus has inaugurated the true Sabbath in the spiritual rest that he provides for his disciples, the final fulfillment of that Sabbath rest is still future. The author of Hebrews writes, “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (Heb. 4:9). Whoever has entered God’s rest, through faith in Christ, has already rested from his or her works, as God rested after his creative activity (v. 10). Yet in Revelation 14:13 it is said that those who die in the Lord rest from their labors (Rev. 14:13), indicating a future rest, which is achieved when God’s people are with him after death and, ultimately, in the new creation. “The author of Hebrews sees the Sabbath as foreshadowing the eschatological rest of the people of God (Heb. 4:1-10). A ‘Sabbath rest’ still awaits God’s people (v. 9), and it will be fulfilled on the final day when believers rest from earthly labors. The Sabbath, then points to the final rest of the people of God.”43

**New Covenant Rest**

In the new covenant, the one who rests in Christ through repentance and faith, the one who comes under his yoke, keeps the Sabbath. This makes sense of what has already been discussed. It seems that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance; as Alpha and Omega, Jesus is the beginning and the end—the goal—of creation. The Sabbath is for the benefit of humanity; Jesus came as Savior of the world. Those who broke the Sabbath commandment received the death

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penalty; all who die outside of Christ will be punished through the second death (Rev. 20:14). The Sabbath was instituted so God’s people who know that it is he who sanctifies them (Ezek. 20:12); Christians are sanctified in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11). The Sabbath commandment was based on creation and redemption; Jesus, the creator of the universe (John 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2), has provided true redemption and will one day make all things new (Rev. 21:5).

Though Christ is the Sabbath, a debate concerning how Christians should observe the Sabbath continues. Some Christians, particularly in the Reformed tradition, believe that Sunday, the Lord’s Day, is the Christian Sabbath. This emphasis on Sunday as the Sabbath can be found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (21.7-8) and the writings of Puritan authors. Beale makes a strong case that while the Sabbath has been inaugurated in Christ, the fullness of the Sabbath rest is yet to come; therefore, the Sabbath is still to be observed one day a week. “If the eschatological reality of final Sabbath rest has not consummately come, then it is unlikely that the typological sign pointing to that ultimate rest has ceased.”

However, while in the New Testament there is clear evidence that believers worshiped on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10), there is no attempt to equate this day with the Sabbath. Attempts to identify Sunday as the Sabbath fail due to lack of evidence. Also, as Craig Blomberg notes, those who believe that Christians must continue to observe a

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one-day-a-week rest never argue that they are also obligated to work six days a week, even though the fourth commandment mandates both work and rest with the same imperatival force. It seems that Christians worshiped on the first day of the week because that was the day that Jesus rose from the grave (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19). According to Athanasius (c. 298-373), bishop of Alexandria, “The Sabbath was the end of the first creation, the Lord’s day was the beginning of the second, in which he renewed and restored the old in the same way as he prescribed that they should formerly observe the Sabbath as a memorial of the end of the first things, so we honor the Lord’s Day as being the memorial of the new creation.”

In light of Athanasius’s comment, I propose that Jesus’ passion week recalls the week of creation. Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the first day of the week. He died on sixth day of the week, hours before the beginning of the Sabbath. At the end of his labors, he cried, “It is finished” (John 19:30). His body rested in the tomb on the Sabbath day, and on the first day of the next week, he was resurrected. As the “firstfruits” of the dead (1 Cor. 15:20), his resurrection was the first stage of the new creation, the consummation of which we still await. Therefore, the Lord’s Day is not a remembrance of the Sabbath, but a foretaste of our eschatological worship and fellowship. Beale acknowledges as much when he writes, “The activities of the once-a-week gathering should be modeled after and point to the kingly rest of eschatologically gathered saints in worship of God and Christ through his word, songs of praise,

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49 Blomberg, Jesus and the Gospels, 366, 397.
prayer, and fellowship at the very end of the age.” Corporate worship should remind us to live in light of eternity. It should be a foretaste of the joy that we will experience then as we gather around God’s throne.

Though the Sabbath is fulfilled in Christ, and the complete fulfillment of the Sabbath awaits us, that does not obviate the need for rest. All human beings need physical rest. The Sabbath also teaches us that we rely on God’s provision—not only for our daily bread, but also for our salvation—instead of relying on our own works. Our identity is not found in our production, but in Christ. Resting in Christ is not simply inaction, just as God’s rest after creating the world was not inactive (John 5:17). Resting in Christ requires listening to his voice and following him (John 10:27). This means we should spend significant, focused time in Bible reading, prayer, meditation, and other spiritual disciplines. That requires us to turn off our digital devices and other distractions and to live in a countercultural way. As royal priests (1 Pet. 2:9), we should show the world how to find true rest. If we do not spend time in fellowship with Christ, we should wonder whom or what we are worshiping. Though I disagree with Bruce Waltke’s position on the Sabbath, I agree with the principle of his comment: “A person who feels inclined to work seven days a week should examine what god he or she worships.”

The new covenant gives Christians the freedom to express such devotion to Christ on a daily or weekly basis. Paul writes that Christians should not pass judgment on each other in these areas. “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5). The one who desires to take

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all of Sunday to rest from workday activities in devotion to Christ is free to do so. The one who works Sunday afternoon, yet spends time each workday in devotion to Christ is also free to do so. What is important is trusting in Jesus and recognizing that he is Lord over all our lives, including our time.

**Conclusion**

The Sabbath commandment is a vital one, as it serves a great purpose in the story of redemption, from Genesis to Revelation. As the sign of the Sinai covenant, it distinguished Israel from the other nations, teaching them to depend upon Yahweh not only for food, but also for sanctification. This commandment is also prophetic, foreshadowing the work of Jesus, who finished the work of salvation for us on the cross, and who, in his resurrection, inaugurated the new creation. Christians observe the Sabbath by finding their rest in Jesus. Though Sunday is not the Sabbath, corporate worship is a significant aspect of the Christian life. We worship on Sunday in remembrance of Jesus’ resurrection and in anticipation of the eschatological worship that will include the saints of every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev. 7:9). Christians are free to express outwardly their rest in Christ by spending focused time in devotion to him, according to the dictates of each person’s conscience.

The Sabbath is a reminder that each person is spiritually restless and that the only rest available to satisfy our souls is offered by Jesus, who beckons the weary to come to him. Augustine understood this reality when he prayed to the Lord, “You stir men to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

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Bibliography


