

Sundays and the Sabbath

Written by K B Napier
Friday, 12 February 2010 15:36

This article, like many topics I cover, arises from concerns or questions asked by fellow Christians. We need to address two main questions: Is Sunday the seventh-day Sabbath? Should it be observed by Christians?

Forty years ago, when I lived in rural England, one of my Christian friends decided to train for the Anglican priesthood, against my advice. He attended Durham theological seminary, which was Romanist and ecumenical in outlook, and we gradually drifted apart as he adopted many beliefs that I could not concede to.

One of these was his refusal to observe the seventh-day Sabbath. He delighted in telling me how he deliberately mowed his lawn, took the children to theme parks, and did all kinds of recreational things on the Sunday (before he had his own parish).

Why did he do these things deliberately (rather than out of belief)? To show everyone around that he was not 'bound' by man-made rules and to what he thought was false theology. At the time I 'felt' he was wrong. Today, my 'feeling' is founded on scripture and on logical biblical thinking. You will see what this is as I progress in the article.

It is of interest that this man sadly continued to strip-away what he once believed, replacing many valid beliefs with Romanist/Anglican pseudo-theology. After many years he again replaced his remaining valid beliefs with a sudden jump into the charismatic fire. After that, I received a call, asking me if I would meet with him urgently, though we had not met for years.

It was so urgent he drove hundreds of miles to see me. At that meeting he was a broken man and admitted that he had attempted suicide. His life was in pieces, reflecting the way his theology and beliefs were ruined by heresy.

The Decalogue

When the topic of 'Sunday' arose again recently, the first thing that came to mind was the Decalogue, for these commandments of God are one of the keys to answering the questions posed about the seventh-day Sabbath. Why? Because either the Decalogue is for all people in

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all of time, or it was just for the Jews.

If the seventh-day Sabbath was only meant to be kept by the Jews, then keeping it is not mandatory but optional, if not defunct. However, there is a danger in ignoring all the facts and treating any part of scripture in cavalier fashion. There must always be a solid reason to reject a belief. If the Decalogue is for all people throughout time, then we have our answer – the Sabbath must be kept.

The issue goes back even farther than that, for in early Genesis we read that God made everything in six literal days and rested on the seventh day. But, is this relevant to the Decalogue, and is the Decalogue relevant to any New Testament texts on the topic? If there *is* a link to the New Testament, then it could be additional evidence, if not proof, that perhaps the Sabbath is for all time.

Seventh Day of Creation

“and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.

And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.” (Genesis 2:2,3)

‘Seventh’ is an ordinal number and it is emphasised by God. We know it is the last day before another round of six days begins, completing with a seventh. Thus, it has significance as a ‘marker’ day. The meaning is given entirely by God. No-one knows when the original seventh day was, and we do not know when Hebrews took what we call ‘Saturday’ as their day of rest. But, by the time of Christ, it was certainly a Saturday, the ‘seventh day sabbath’.

It was a blessing for working men, when God commanded it to be kept for the purpose of complete rest. It has a second meaning – to keep or observe. The word, shabath, has no connection with recreation or anything other than not working.

The seventh day was also significant because God blessed and sanctified it. The first meaning

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of 'blessing' is to bend the knee/kneel down. In context, to pay obeisance before the Creator. To sanctify is to make holy or separate; to set apart, with the added notion of being tabooed; to consecrate; to observe as holy; to treat as sacred.

We are left in no doubt that, in the Old Testament, God meant the seventh day shabath to be observed, kept holy, and a marker to end one week before starting another. The basic interpretation, then, is that the shabath was to be treated as holy and special, as a commemoration of being saved from Egypt.

The question still stands, though: does the command remain, or not? Why do I call it a 'command'? I do so because any statement by God is a command, or has the weight of one. That makes any command of God, His law, to be obeyed.

Now, when God blessed and sanctified the seventh day, He did so after He created everything. In those days mankind was simply mankind, because Adam, as representative of all who would follow, was the only human alive. He was given Eve as his companion. They had children, and so on. After God said He rested on the seventh day, and then, up to the Flood, there is no mention of men keeping a Sabbath for any reason.

The Hebrews as a nation had yet to come, well after God ordained Abraham. The command to keep the seventh day only came when God delivered it to the Hebrews, through Moses, at the time He gave the Decalogue.

The Hebrews

"Six days ye shall gather it; but on the seventh day, (which is) the Sabbath, in it there shall be none." (Exodus 16:26)

"So the people rested on the seventh day." (Exodus 16:30)

"But the seventh day (is) the sabbath of the LORD thy God: (in it) thou shalt not do any work..." (Exodus 20:20)

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These instructions are repeated in many texts. However, their repetition means nothing today unless it is based on a command issued for all-time. Before we look at a relevant New Testament text, we should go back to Exodus 20:9,10:

“Six days shalt thou labour, 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...”

That text is very clear, but, if taken in isolation, it could be construed as only being given to the Hebrews. In reality, God is only repeating the same command He had made a number of times, beginning just after Creation. Then, the command was for all men. Now, it is repeated especially for the Hebrews, as a formal part of their coming national theocratic creed.

The text in Genesis 2:3 must be treated as significant, because it clearly tells us that God Himself regarded the seventh-day as blessed and holy; special. He would not have simply said that – it had to have some kind of application. It is possible that the seventh-day was kept holy by men, though we do not read about it until the time of Moses. This, of course, is conjecture.

We are reminded that when God makes something ‘holy’ it is not for His sake, but for those who are called to observe it as holy. This being so, it is reasonable to imply that God would not make something holy unless He expected it to be treated that way after His command has been made. Thus, though I have conjectured, I believe the conjecture to have reasonable grounds.

The reason for giving the Decalogue was so that the people should “sin not” (verse 20). Note that the commandments were not just for the Hebrews, but also for their foreign servants and travellers from other lands (Gentiles). And we know that the command was in perpetuity for the Hebrews. Was it in perpetuity for others, also, just as it applied to servants and foreigners in Jewish territory?

New Testament

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“For the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath day.” (Matt 12:8)

This text was leading up to “it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days.” (12:12). Note that Jesus referred to ‘days’ in the plural. This is because He could have been talking not just about the seventh day rest, but about any other sabbaths, of which the Jews had many. This reference to the many Sabbaths of the Jews is also found in Colossians 2:16, where the ‘sabbath’ refers to all of them (days, plural). Or, it just means all seventh day Sabbaths must be kept.

He was telling the Jews that as Lord of everything, He was above His own Creation, including the day of rest. Thus, he could “do well” without breaking His own command.

Jesus said that He did not come to destroy the law but to fulfil it. And, that not one law would pass away until He came again in the skies. This appears to tell us that the seventh-day Sabbath remains a command for all of time.

What Day?

In Mark 16:2 we read:

“And very early in the morning the first (day) of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.”

When was this ‘first day’? It was Sunday. This is confirmed in Matthew 28:1 that refers to the same incident:

“In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first (day) of the week...”

That is, at the end of the seventh-day of rest, Saturday, dawn came up on the next day, Sunday, the first day of the Hebrew calendar week. In Acts 20:7, etc., we find Christians meeting on this first-day, but as a matter of custom, not of law. It therefore duly came to replace

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the Jewish Sabbath, and became the Christian seventh-day of rest, though the original Jewish Sabbath remained. Remember that the actual meaning of the weekly Sabbath is 'seventh day rest' and nothing more, even though it is 'holy'. The name of the day itself is not of real consequence.

The names of the week are unfortunate, because they are pagan. Even so, such paganism holds no significance nowadays and the names are now meaningless. Christians soon started to rename the 'first day' 'The Lord's Day', because He arose on the first day. Roman Catholics refer to it as the 'eighth day'. Some countries still use numerals to name the days. We could easily do this today, but should consider the confusion it would cause, especially in countries whose calendars refer to Sunday as the last day of the week, and others that see it as the first!

In old Greek, the names we know (e.g. 'Sunday') are translated as 'one', 'two', etc., Sunday being Day One. In modern Greek, 'Sunday' literally means 'Lord's Day'. Several other languages do the same, but Slavonic languages begin the week with Day One as Monday, not Sunday.

By no means was Sunday always observed as the first day of the week by early Christians. It was a matter of preference for some time. Sunday as the first day gained momentum by the first half of the second century, and has since become the usual day of rest and worship. Note that worship was a later, added, feature.

Constantine the First decreed that Sunday should be the Roman day of rest (CJ3.12.2). Some Christians use this to support their particular view, but the decree was in support of the Sun-God, not Christ!

A few Christian groups even make observance of Sunday as the day of rest a matter of orthodoxy, when scripture itself is silent. So, what is the truth?

Yes or No?

The earliest scriptural references do not give a name to the Sabbath, the day of rest. It only says we must keep a day of rest in honour of the Lord's day of rest. Hebrew texts do not name days, but use numerals. Thus, for Hebrews, the seventh-day rest or Sabbath, is our Saturday,

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and the first day of the week is our Sunday.

As you will see in the New Testament, the early apostles and followers continued to see Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, as the seventh-day rest. Perhaps this is a clue to whether or not we should also observe the seventh-day sabbath (not necessarily the same day). With time, Christians – especially as Gentile believers began to outnumber converted Jews – began to see Sunday as the Sabbath, because it differentiated Jewish religion and Christian beliefs. We also read of Paul preaching on a Sunday (Acts 20:7).

In this way the Christians wanted their faith to be seen as a 'new' religion rather than as a Jewish sect. The Council of Laodicea (about 354 AD) stated that Sunday must be the day for religious observances, so it became the new Sabbath. However, many rejected the command. The New Testament does not tell us that Sunday is the 'new' Sabbath, only that some Christians began to observe it as such.

In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul says no-one should be judged if they defer to a religious festival, etc., including a Sabbath. That is, it is up to the individual believer if he or she thinks a particular day should be kept as special. This is an interesting statement to be found in the New Testament, because it is a repeat of the same words in Ezekiel 45:17.

Romans 14:5 tells us that each must be convinced in his own mind about whether or not a particular day should be kept special. Though some maintain that this text refers to the Sabbath, it does not specifically mention it, but appears to talk about other days, too.

We do not read of Adam and Eve, or their offspring, observing a Sabbath, and no reference is found to such a command being made to men for many centuries after Creation, as recorded in Exodus 16:27. However, in strictest terms of research this is not proof that the earliest people did *not* observe a seventh-day. We can only say that such reference is not found in scripture. That is, it is 'non-scriptural' rather than 'unscriptural'. Even if the earliest men did observe a seventh-day Sabbath, we cannot tell which day it was.

The new day, the Feast of Firstfruits (Re Paul: 1 Corinthians 15:20), was a Monday, the day after the Sabbath, making it the 'eighth day', or first day of the week. Again, if we are strictly interpreting the command to keep the Sabbath, it was given for rest, not for worship. When the

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Jewish synagogues were first devised, in Babylon, it was to teach Jewish tradition and ways, not for 'worship'. However, many misuse the term 'worship', which can have many meanings (see BTM article).

In earliest Church days, many Christians attended Jewish synagogues on the Jewish Sabbath for teaching, and attended Christian gatherings the next day (Sunday) to worship, until the Jews became hostile and inserted wording in their services that would cause Christians to leave! Christians then went back to Sundays as their 'sabbath', though 'worship' can take place on any day of the week.

The Sabbath, at least from the time of the exodus, was on the seventh-day, Saturday. The move from Saturday to Sunday was arbitrary. Therefore, in one way, Sunday is not the Sabbath. On the other hand, the Sabbath after Creation was the 'seventh-day', not a specified day, and no authority, including Jewish, can truly confirm that the seventh-day has *always* been a Saturday – this they can trace only as far back as the exodus. Even then, the reason for the seventh-day Sabbath is given as a remembrance of being saved from Egypt – a Jewish memorial.

Romans 14:5,6 advises that whether we observe a Sabbath or not, it is up to us, and before God, either way. There is no proper reason to discard Sunday as special just to be a rebel or to prove a point. Nor is there proper reason to uphold Sunday as special unless you, as an individual, truly believe you should do so before God. In Galatians 4:9-10, we find this exemplified... observing days and months and years that belong to a past era of Judaistic rites and beliefs.

So, do we keep the Sabbath or not? It is up to the individual. Do not become rooted in the actual word, 'sabbath', because it only means a day of rest. We are told that God had a day of rest, but nothing more is heard about it until after the Flood, or, more accurately, after the exodus from Egypt. Then, God commanded the Hebrews to observe a seventh-day rest or Sabbath, as part of their religious duties towards God. This was a testament of law. When Christ came, He disbanded Judaistic observances and gave us a new testament of grace, under which we worship God daily, not just once a week out of duty.

What To Do?

Sadly, many rites and traditions are commanded in modern churches because of human

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devices. Apart from the Sabbath, they include the completely non-biblical festivals of Christmas and Easter, the Jewish Harvest festival, etc.

The Sabbath is Saturday for Judaism. The early Christians saw Sunday as the 'new day' or 'first day', because it was the day on which Christ arose. They did *not*, then, make Sunday the new Sabbath. Indeed, many Christians continued to treat Saturday as the Sabbath for a few hundred years.

The adoption of Sunday as the new 'sabbath' finds no warrant in scripture, because it arose out of human preferences and not out of God's word. A variety of texts show us we are free in Christ, and this includes the days we wish to observe. There is no compulsion... unless you see the Decalogue as binding on all people throughout all time! If you *do* see it as binding, you will keep the Sabbath – whichever day you deem this to be, though keeping the same day everywhere makes logistical sense.

If you do *not* see the Decalogue as binding, you must do what you see fit. If you wish to call it a 'sabbath' there is no problem, because a seventh-day 'sabbath' is a day of rest. It is my preference to observe Sunday as a seventh-day rest, because it is the day most people do not work and are available for communal study (one meaning of 'worship'). I also prefer to maintain a seventh-day rest day because it is wholesome and good for the body and mind, and it gives a framework for our daily lives.

More than that, I believe the Decalogue remains active and applicable to all people for all time. Ask yourself if any one of the ten commandments do NOT apply today? I believe every one of them still applies, and can be found in the New Testament, so will never be revoked until the end of time.

The choice is yours, but make very sure you make the right choice in conscience and as far as Bible evidence allows.

So that you have sufficient information to make a decision (if led to make one), let us see if there is any evidence that links the Decalogue to the New Testament commands, and therefore, by association, to us today. Also see BTM article on 'Law and Grace'.

The Decalogue

The text can be summed up in English as:

I am the Lord your God.

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of your God.

Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy/to observe it (Deut).

Honour your father and mother.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal/kidnap (some Jewish teachers).

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

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You shall not covet your neighbour's house.

You shall not covet your neighbour's wife.

Below are New Testament texts that repeat the same commands, in quotes or in principle. Each number denotes the number of each Commandment in the Old Testament. The fact that many of these texts do not repeat the exact Commandment but phrase it independently, shows that the Decalogue is indeed current in all ages.

Romans 12:1; 1 Cor. 6:20; Hebrews 9:14; 1 Peter 3:15

Acts 15:20; Romans 2:22; 1 Cor. 10:28; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 John 5:21

Romans 2:24; 1 Titus 6:1; Rev. 16:9

Luke 23:56; Acts 13:14, 44; Acts 16:13; Acts 17:2

Matthew 15:4, 6; Matthew 19:19; Mark 7:10; Mark 10:19

Matthew 19:18; Romans 1:29

Matthew 5:27, 28, 32; Matthew 19:9, 18; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:19

Matthew 19:18; Romans 13:9; Ephesians 4:28

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Matthew 15:19; Matthew 26:59; Mark 10:19; Romans 13:9

Romans 7:7; Romans 13:9

“If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.” (Matthew 19:17)

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

“And a second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:34-40)

Taken by Jesus from OT – Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18. The Jews themselves saw the Decalogue as underpinning all other commandments.

The evidence is overwhelming – all the Decalogue is to be applied to our lives today. Therefore, we should keep the Sabbath (defined as a day of rest) each seventh day.

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