

LIVING IN PERPETUAL ‘SABBATH’

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In the last three decades, increased interest in the nature and practice of spiritual disciplines among evangelical Christians has encouraged theologians of spirituality and spiritual mentors to devote more attention to Sabbath practices as a ‘spiritual discipline.’ Based upon the precedent of the Fourth Commandment in Exod 20, many Christian thought leaders urge believers to reserve some time in their busy weeks for a “sabbath.” In most cases, this has more to do with establishing a balanced rhythm between work time and leisure time in support of mental health than it does with reverencing the seventh day, as in Jewish practice.¹ Paul Stevens, for example, asserts² that “some form of weekly or regular Sabbath is not an optional extra for the New Testament Christian.” His understanding about sabbath practice is endorsed by many evangelical theologians. These advocate genuinely seeking to understand how Christians in the context of the New Covenant should interpret and apply the Fourth Commandment. However, their description of time taken for a spiritual ‘re-set’ on a weekly or intermittent basis as some kind of S/sabbath³ time has potential to create confusion among average Christians regarding the continued relevance of the Fourth Commandment in this New Covenant age.

Surprisingly, one of the most contentious issues in Christendom concerns the continuing relevance of the Fourth Commandment, namely “Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy”(Exod 20:8).⁴ Many scholars attempt to clarify for believers what this command now means after Pentecost.⁵ Interpretations range from the very literal (Saturday is a holy day in which no work must be done) to the symbolic (believers through their conversion enter ‘S/sabbath rest’ and as a result time for

¹ One example of this trend are the publications by Paul Stevens, including “Stress, Sabbath and Serenity” *Vocatio* 1.2 (July 1998) and re-published in *Playing Heaven. Rediscovering our Purpose as Participants in the Mission of God* (Vancouver, B.C., Regent College Publishing, 2006), 109-112. Stevens expresses similar ideas in “Being Kept By Sabbath” *Vocatio* 7.1(Winter 2003) and republished in *Playing Heaven*, 101-08. I reference his work only as an example of a much larger phenomenon. See also *Playing Heaven*, pages 60-5.

² Stevens, *Playing Heaven*, 106.

³ I use S/sabbath to refer both to formal Sabbath observance (‘the Sabbath’) and the use of sabbath as an adjective to describe periods of time that fulfill the intent of ‘the Sabbath.’

⁴ The Fourth Commandment is part of the first section of the Ten Words that Yahweh reveals to Moses on Mt. Sinai. These Ten Words form the essence of Yahweh’s covenant agreement with Israel. The rationale for sabbath practice, according to Exodus 20:8-11, is the rhythm between creative work and rest that Yahweh follows in Gen 1-2.

⁵ S. Westerholm and Craig Evans, “Sabbath” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Edited by Craig Evans and Stanley Porter (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000): 1031-35. Westerholm and Evans provide a succinct overview of the current state of discussion regarding sabbath practice as described in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The statement of Jesus in John 5:17 that “he works on the Sabbath” and in this way follows the practice of his Father is particularly important in grasping something of the transformation of sabbath practice within the New Covenant context.

believers is ‘sabbath time’), and many variations in between. A simple Google search will uncover diverse people or denominations promoting a vast array of interpretations.

This short article argues that Jesus brought the Fourth Commandment to full and complete expression when he inaugurated God’s rule under the New Covenant. In the New Covenant context, believers live a perpetual sabbath as they enjoy the salvation provided by Yahweh in Christ. The residency of the Spirit in their lives empowers them to devote to God all their time and activity within this new Jubilee period, whether work or leisure. As “Lord of the Sabbath”⁶ through his proclamation of the *euaggelion* (εὐαγγέλιον), Jesus brings to fulfillment God’s intent for the Sabbath and through it he blesses humans with his *shalom*.

If Christian leaders fail to explain to believers this dramatic development in God’s purposes for his people and continue to employ the term S/sabbath to describe Christian spiritual practices, they sow confusion and misunderstanding about the very essence of Christian life and how to steward their time appropriately. For example, Paul Stevens’ correctly observes that “sabbath” has to do “with the redemption of time,”⁷ but his strong encouragement for believers to carve out of their busy schedules time for ‘sabbath rest’ suggests, perhaps inadvertently, that the Fourth Commandment is still an obligation for Christians. For this reason, this article argues that it is better to avoid using the term ‘sabbath’ to describe contemplative periods in which Christians devote their time and energy to renewing their relationship with God. In this post-Pentecost age, a Christian’s time is perpetually ‘sabbath time.’ This is a critical perspective that helps Christians understand how the “sabbath principle” operates in the New Covenant context.

⁶ In Mark 2:23-28 Jesus allows his followers to pluck grain on the Sabbath to satisfy their hunger. The Pharisees criticize Jesus and his disciples for doing “on the Sabbath what is not permitted,” at least according to their interpretation of the Fourth Commandment. Jesus cites David’s use of the Bread of the Presence to feed his followers as a precedent, something that it was unlawful to eat, except for the priests (v. 26). He concludes his defense with this statement: “The Sabbath happened (ἐγένετο) for the sake of humans and humans did not happen for the sake of the Sabbath.” With this declaration Jesus explains the intent of the fourth commandment and that as “Lord of the Sabbath” he has the authority to bring it to fulfillment. He does so by enabling humans through his death and resurrection “to enter into rest,” i.e., enjoy salvation. God made humans so that they might enjoy Sabbath perpetually.

⁷ Stevens, *Playing Heaven*, 104.

Brief Review of Sabbath Theology and Practice in the OT and NT⁸

This article does not offer detailed exegesis and interpretation of all the key passages in the Canon that pertain to S/sabbath understanding and practice.

However, it is important to establish some key principles and developments of S/sabbath practice in the Old and New Covenants.

Gen 2:2 states that after God finished his creation actions (reported in Gen 1), he “rested.” Much discussion occurs about how the deity ‘rests’. Gen 2:2 cannot mean cessation of his activity because he continues to sustain creation as he ‘rests.’ His work of creation is complete, finished, and so he ‘rests’, i.e., ceases, this activity, even as he continues other activities pertinent to his purposes. Creation ‘time’ is finished and the ‘time’ for new divine ventures has come. There was no more creation work to do in that context. It stands complete and it is good. Perhaps Jesus’s response to criticism about his Sabbath actions in John 5:17 (“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working”) indicates the reality of this deity’s continuous work. Also, Jesus’s cry in John 18:30 (“It is finished”) proclaimed from the cross, connotes the end of certain salvific activity, not the end of his work as Saviour. The Messiah’s initial salvation work is completed and so he moves into the next phase of his mission.

Even before Yahweh reveals his covenant to Israel at Sinai some kind of Sabbath principle was being practiced among the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 16:29-30). Within the Sinai Covenant (Exod 20:8-11), Yahweh uses his creation work rhythm (described in Gen 2:2) to ground the distinction that Israelites must make between six working days and the seventh, as “a Sabbath to the Lord your God,” reflects. Within the Old Covenant framework Yahweh requires Israel to devote the seventh day of the week (our Saturday) to the Lord. It is holy, i.e., consecrated, to him. After Israel’s spiritual debacle of the Golden Calf, Yahweh renews the Sinai Covenant and Moses reiterates this command (35:2-3). Those Israelites who violate this command and do in it the kind of work normally done during the other six days of the week are “to be put to death.” No more serious sanction regarding religious obligations can be pronounced. One example of such work is then noted, namely lighting a fire in a residence on the Sabbath day (35:3).

⁸ For extended treatments of sabbath theology and practice and the historical/theological shift regarding sabbath practice see: D. A. Carson (ed.), *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Eugene, ORE: Wipf and Stock, 1999 [originally published in 1982]) and also S. Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977). For the most part this article follows the interpretation offered in the book edited by Carson.

This prohibition of any normal work on a Sabbath gains greater elaboration in Deut 5:12-15. On this day of the week, anyone who is part of an Israelite household, whether human or beast, “shall not do any work,” but they have this day for ‘rest’. In this context, the command to rest on the Sabbath is sanctioned by reference to the Exodus experience of deliverance from slavery and the anticipation of rest in Canaan. In the prophetic literature the divine messengers criticize the Israelites for their failure to treat the Sabbath as holy (e.g., Isa 1:13 [cf. 58:13]; Jer 17:19-27), using this failure as an example of covenant violation. During the early Second Temple period it seems that Sabbath practices become more standardized (lists of guidelines occur in Jub 2:29-30; 50:6-13). For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls (CD 10:14-11:18) indicate that the community that possessed these documents was quite regimented in its Sabbath practices.

The New Testament Gospel narratives reflect Jewish Sabbath practices in the first century CE within the territories of Judea and Galilee. In Mark 1:32 people wait until the end of a Sabbath to bring the sick to Jesus for healing. Similar constraint informs the time when the women approach Jesus’ tomb to anoint his body (Mark 16:1). Numerous times the narratives report that Jesus attends local synagogues on sabbath days. According to Luke 4:16, Jesus customarily “on the day of Sabbath” went to a synagogue. Although the phrase “according to his practice/custom” does modify the verb phrase “entered on the sabbath day into the synagogue,” this phrase is immediately followed by the note that “he stood up to read.” It is not clear, then, whether he goes to the Nazareth synagogue on a sabbath day because it is his personal practice as a Jew, or because it is part of his missional strategy as Messiah, as the following narrative reveals. All of these references characterize early first century Jewish people in Galilee as respecting Sabbath in some fashion.

Pharisees in particular attend carefully to formal sabbath restrictions (e.g., Luke 18:12) and the writers of the Gospel narrative portray them as enforcers of such restrictions (e.g., John 5:8-10). The actions that Jesus chooses to do on sabbath days frequently bring him into conflict with the religious legal experts regarding what the purpose of the Sabbath is and how it properly should be honoured.

Probably the most controversial statement that Jesus makes about the Sabbath occurs in Mark 2:23-28 (parallels in Matt 12:1-8 and Luke 6:1-5). All three Synoptic Gospels report that Jesus claims that “the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 3:28; also Matt 12:8; Luke 6:5). Jesus assumes the authority to define what God intends Sabbath to mean and how humans should honour it. Mark’s Gospel, however, adds Jesus’s pronouncement that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” as justification for allowing his disciples to pluck grain on a Sabbath.

Whatever else Jesus intended to say in this declaration, he at least is challenging the highly regimented sabbath practices taught and promoted by the Pharisees (and the Essenes) as contrary to God's intentions for the Sabbath. According to Jesus the Sabbath is a time for doing good (Mark 3:4) which is equivalent to the will of God. People should enjoy and express God's *shalom* on the Sabbath. Jesus makes a similar argument in Luke 13:15-16. Jesus plainly has a different understanding of what covenant-obedient Jewish people should be doing on a Sabbath.

Although Jesus gathers with other Jews in synagogues on Sabbaths, presumably to pray, recite Psalms, and frequently to provide the teaching, he is never critical of Jews who may not do so. On those same Sabbaths he participates in many other activities that the Pharisees perceived as violations of its sacred character. Jesus's statement in John 5:17 justifies what he does on Sabbaths by analogy with Yahweh's work ("My Father is always at his work to this very day and I too am working"). This work expresses Jesus's interpretation of Gen 2:2 and indicates that God's 'rest' did not mean a cessation of his work. In Matt 11:28-30 Jesus claims that if Jewish people will accept his claims and obey his teaching, then he "will give them rest"⁹ and they "will find rest for their souls." Jesus may in this logion be advancing the idea that the kind of rest from normal work to support life, traditionally associated with the Sabbath, will define the entire lives of those who become his disciples. As Jesus inaugurates the New Covenant, he also introduces and models a new perspective about Sabbath that sets the paradigm for his followers after Pentecost.

The one text by an early Christian leader other than Jesus that expresses a "theology of Sabbath" occurs in Heb 4:1-11. This discussion builds upon the quotation of Ps 95:11-13 and its exegesis in Heb 3:7-11. It concludes with Yahweh's declaration: "So I declared an oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" The Psalmist urges his audience to worship and heed Yahweh's voice and ends with reminding them of the tragic results when Israel "hardened" their hearts at Meribah and Massah. Although it is unclear what these (metaphorical?) names refer to, the Psalmist links them with the rebellion at Kadesh, when the Israelites rejected the positive report of the two spies (Num 13-14). As a result, Yahweh refuses to let that generation "enter my rest [κατάπαυσις/katapausis],"¹⁰ i.e., to enter the land of Canaan and possess it as he had promised. The writer also argues that although Joshua enabled the Israelites to occupy the land (OG Jos 21:44[MT42]

⁹ The Greek term is ἀναπαύσις (somewhat synonymous with καταπαύσις). In OG Exod 16:23 it is used to define the sabbath day as a "rest holy to the Lord."

¹⁰ The translator of Genesis employs the cognate verb καταπαύω in Gen 2:2-3 to describe God's 'resting' after his creation activity. In Exodus 34:21 this term refers to the Sabbath.

[καταπαύω]; 23:1) and God gave them rest from their enemies (Heb 4:8), nonetheless this did not represent the complete fulfillment of God's promise of 'rest' to Israel. It is the writer of Hebrews who links the concept of rest=possession of the land with the deity's rest at the conclusion of creation and thus with the sabbath concept, as well as with the reference to 'rest' in Psa 94(95):7-11. He argues that finally God has acted to enable people to "enter his rest" through the inauguration of the gospel.

The writer of Hebrews adopts this verb phrase "to enter into my rest" and employs it seven times (3:18-4:11). He also connects it with OG Gen 2:2 in Heb 4:4 where he employs the cognate verb καταπαύω (katapauō) (also in Heb 4:8, 10). He also connects the 'rest' that Yahweh enjoys after his creation activity with the 'rest' that the Israelites experience in Canaan under Joshua (Ἰησοῦς). The writer links this concept of rest with the offer of salvation that is available to Jews and non-Jews in his day, as a result of Jesus's (Ἰησοῦς) sacrifice. "Entering into God's rest" for all people, Jew and non-Jew, now requires obedience to the gospel proclamation (Heb 3:14; 4:9-10).

The writer of Hebrews addresses believers who already possess "rest from their works" because by accepting the gospel they "ceased/rested from their works" (Heb 4:10). The translation of the verb tenses in this verse is important. The writer employs an articulated aorist active participle as the subject (ὁ...εἰσελθὼν εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσιν αὐτοῦ / "the one who has entered into his rest"). The main verb also is an aorist active tense form (κατέπαυσεν ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ / "has ceased/rested from his works"). The action of the aorist participle chronologically and logically precedes the action of the main verb ("the one who has entered into his [God's?] rest has rested/ceased from his [the believer] works"). And the writer indicates by the aorist tense of the main verb that believers in his time "have rested/ceased from their works." This is not something that they experience spiritually only in the future. However, if they abandon their confidence in Christ for whatever reason, there remains no other means by which "to enter this rest" in this age. This concept of "rest" reflects the eschatological 'now-not yet' reality of the gospel. Believers possess eternal life, but do not yet enjoy all its benefits. They are made holy in Christ, but do not yet experience complete holiness in their lives because they exist in a fallen world system. Similarly, as believers they have entered the rest that God provides through the gospel, but they still anticipate the full reality of this rest that they will enjoy at the return of Christ.

In New Covenant time, the sabbath concept as expressed in the Old Covenant is fulfilled and expressed in radical new ways because it is now "gospel time," an

eschatological period inaugurated at Pentecost when believers are “immersed” in the Holy Spirit in one body (1 Cor 12:13). The implication of this teaching about ‘rest’ in this gospel age is that for believers every part of human life occurs in ‘sabbath time.’ Resourced by the Holy Spirit they have the capacity “to redeem” or to liberate all their time to serve God, rather than themselves and Satan. They enjoy perpetual Jubilee.¹¹ Jesus transforms the concept of Sabbath into an eschatological reality when he proclaims that “the year of the Lord’s favour” has arrived with him.

‘Sabbath rest’ for believers, as expounded in Heb 3-4, defines life enjoyed in the sphere of God’s redemptive rule. Eschatologically they already are blessed with the benefits of the age to come, even if that age has not yet fully arrived. They rest from the need to work for their own salvation. In submission to the Lord Jesus all their work is now holy work, not the egotistical and idolatrous efforts of deluded, autonomous beings to somehow engineer their own spiritual reality. The Trinity has finished all the work necessary for the new creation. The responsibility of believers now is to embrace it and live it – a continual ‘sabbath rest’ in Christ where they enjoy God’s blessing and provision for salvation now and in the future, sealed by the gift of his Holy Spirit.

As a result, believers live in ‘sabbath time’ *all the time*. Sabbath is no longer limited to one day of the week when people are supposed to cease their daily work and focus for a part of that day upon praising God. As Paul notes in Rom 14, believers can dedicate a day of the week to praising God, but this is not to be equated with “Sabbath” as defined in the Fourth Commandment. While it may have been Paul’s ‘custom’ to associate with Jews in local synagogues on the Sabbath (Acts 17:2), it is unclear whether this is part of his strategy of evangelism (sharing the good news first with Jewish people) or whether he does this for personal reasons.¹² Further, as the writer of Hebrews indicates,¹³ it is good for believers to gather for mutual encouragement. Paul affirms the same several times in Ephesians and

¹¹ The fulfillment of God’s intention for “the year of Jubilee” through the incarnation gets some attention in Luke’s Gospel. In Luke 4:19 Jesus states that his mission is κηρύξαι ἐν αὐτὸν κυρίου δεκτόν (“to proclaim the acceptable year of Yahweh”). As Marshall indicates (*Commentary on Luke NIGTC* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978]: 184), this is a reference to the year of Jubilee. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61:1-2 and the references to freeing prisoners and forgiving debts reflect Yahweh’s instructions to Israel regarding the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:10-13, 39-43, 54). It is the fiftieth year, the year that follows seven cycles of seven years (“seven sabbath years” Lev 25:8). This marks it as a sabbatical year. The author positions this quotation at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry to provide a frame of understanding for everything that follows, including the gift of the Holy Spirit.

¹² Luke’s Gospel and Acts is the only composition in the New Testament that uses the phrase κατὰ τὸ εἰωθός (“according to practice/custom”) to describe the actions of Jesus (Luke 4:16) and Paul (Acts 17:2) with respect to Sabbath. In both contexts it is linked closely with their respective missional strategies. It is not clear then, that the Lukan writer is making a statement about their personal sabbath practice or about their use of sabbath gatherings in synagogues as a primary vehicle for advancing their missions.

¹³ Heb 10:19-25.

Colossians.¹⁴ However, neither early church leader names a specific day of the week¹⁵ for such gatherings or names a day for a “Sabbath.” The writer of Revelation (1:1, 4) meditates upon the gospel on “the Lord’s Day,” the weekday that corresponds with Christ’s resurrection, namely Sunday. However, there is no indication in this text that he regards this day as a new “Sabbath” with consequent regimented activity. He is in exile, has little capacity to gather with other believers, and presumably is not working at a daily job.¹⁶ Believers often gather to sing, receive teaching, encourage one another, and celebrate communion. However, in none of the New Testament passages where early church leaders describe such gatherings are there any instructions about cessation of labour during the day of such gatherings. The term ‘Sabbath’ never gets applied to such days or gatherings.¹⁷ With respect to post-Pentecost Christian practice, Laansma¹⁸ concludes that “there is no indication in the NT evidence that [the Lord’s Day] displaced or rivaled the sabbath, that it was a day of rest, that it had anything to do with the Fourth Commandment or that it involved any sort of transfer theology.”¹⁹

Implications of this Exegetical Trajectory for Contemporary Believers

If this exegetical trajectory correctly evaluates how early Christian leaders understood the transformation of the S/sabbath concept in the shift from the Old to the New Covenant marked by the life and death of Jesus, then it also indicates a radical re-visioning of how the Fourth Commandment should be obeyed. The conclusion is this: with the inauguration of God’s Kingdom through Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, all time for Jesus’s followers becomes ‘sabbath time’. As Paul urges, they “redeem this time,” i.e., liberate it for God’s use. Christians live sabbath time by the presence and power of God’s Holy Spirit. Every day, as they offer “their bodies as living sacrifices to God,” in every thought, decision, and deed they devote

¹⁴ Possibly Eph 5:15-20; Col 3:15-17. However, these passages may also instruct believers to live in this fashion every day.

¹⁵ Some might regard Paul’s instruction in 1 Cor 16:2 as requiring such assembling “on the first day of the week.” However, the text does not say anything about “assembling” and only indicates that each Sunday believers should set aside some amount for the collection of funds Paul is making to assist believers in Jerusalem.

¹⁶ While we may desire to infer that he is worshipping in this way “on the Lord’s Day” because this was a common practice in the early church towards the end of the first century CE, nothing in the context requires such an inference. The *Didache* (XIV.1), however, does instruct believers to come together “on the Lord’s Day of the Lord” (κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου συναχθέντες). This document is roughly contemporary with Revelation. It indicates that Sunday was the day when many believers would gather together for worship.

¹⁷ In the earliest days of the Jerusalem church, according to Acts 2:46, believers met together every day.

¹⁸ J.C. Laansma, “Lord’s Day” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Development*. Edited by Ralph P Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997): 679-86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 683.

their time to him. The imagery of their bodies as “temples of the Spirit” gives definition to this new reality. Within this ‘sabbath time’ of salvation, all work and other activities, as well as relationships, occur within the sphere of divine blessing as defined in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12).

Christians no longer work to demonstrate their place in the Kingdom, as the Protestant Work Ethic might imply. Nor is their work a form of atonement, as Catholic doctrine articulates. As God’s image is being restored in Christ within believers, Christians consecrate themselves to God in and through the totality of their living, including work, leisure, and specific good works. In this sense all their activity as believers “helps to make God’s world work.”²⁰ Their work and leisure become part of the way they demonstrate love for God, love for neighbour, love for his creation, and obedience to Jesus last command (Matt 28:19-20). Their work has surviving value in the new heaven and new earth because it contributes to the transformation of human relationships with God and with one another. “It is practical social love, even when the work does not involve us in direct relationships with the people we are serving....Work is a context in which we are loved by God and, in turn, we love God and neighbour.”²¹ In this way the work-life of believers involves them in the life of the Triune God and occurs in the Kingdom reality of sabbath rest.

If believers have already entered their ‘sabbath rest’ by virtue of their conversion and the gift of God’s Spirit, then what application does this transformation have in a twenty-first century believer’s life? Jesus’ teaching about Sabbath and the interpretation of its eschatological significance in the New Testament writings means that all time for believers is ‘sabbath time’ (Col 3:23-24 - whatever you do, do unto the Lord). All their energy focuses on bringing praise to God, who is at work in their lives all the time. It is a misnomer to categorize some of a believer’s time as ‘sabbath’ but not other time depending upon the kind of activities engaged in that period. A believer’s ‘working’ activities, as well as ‘contemplative’ activities occur within their ‘rest.’²² Doing good as a believer occurs in all periods of life.

Theologians of spirituality and spiritual mentors promote the idea of the “balanced life.” In Western societies people tend to work a five-day week and then

²⁰ *Playing Heaven*, 94-95.

²¹ *Playing Heaven*, 95.

²² In the Old Testament the priests who “worked” in the cult, butchering animals and offering them as sacrifices, violated the Fourth Commandment with impunity. Presumably in these activities they were still keeping Sabbath. Perhaps in the same way all our work as believers occurs during sabbath time. The identity of believers as a “kingdom of priests” supports this contention.

shift to different activities for the other two days.²³ Believers participate in this current cultural practice, and it leads to the perception that the work they do in the marketplace is not holy work, because they think that the marketplace is a spiritually barren environment. To sustain spiritual vitality in the context of this intensive, repetitive life-pattern, theologians of spirituality and spiritual mentors urge believers to set aside time for contemplation, often suggesting that they use Sunday for this purpose. This proposed rhythm of work and restful contemplation is supposed to enable believers to practice ‘the Sabbath principle’. The implication is that such spiritual rhythm will fulfill the Fourth Commandment and consequently they will enjoy spiritual, mental, and physical health.

Such a concept is reflected in the traditional, academic practice of ‘sabbaticals’, periods of time when the faculty person is released from normal teaching and administrative responsibilities and allowed opportunity to focus on research, writing, and re-tooling. However, the sabbatical period is as much work as the other. Only the kind of work changes. This is a beneficial practice, but has nothing to do with the Fourth Commandment. However, the terminology influences the use of the term ‘sabbath time’ as employed by Christian spiritual guides.

It is healthy for believers regularly to schedule periods of contemplation and worship in their lives. However, to categorize such contemplative periods as ‘sabbath time’ in contrast to other times in life leads people to assume that their work time is not ‘sabbath time.’ This perspective is the opposite of what the New Testament proposes. This language encourages Christians to regard such contemplative periods as more important or more ‘spiritually’ significant than time spent fulfilling work or family obligations. However, believers honour God in their work time as much as they honour God in contemplative periods. All their time is sacred time under the Lordship of Christ and resourced by the Holy Spirit. Believers should engage in regular periods of contemplation, but they should not confuse such a period as ‘sabbath time’ in contrast to periods of work. Whether such contemplative parts of worship should coincide with “the Lord’s Day” is a matter of convenience, and such an arrangement does not constitute “remembering the Sabbath [day]” or “keeping it holy” in the Christian context. There is no example of believers in the New Testament scheduling a contemplative period of time and describing it as ‘sabbath rest’.

²³ Work rhythms constantly shift and change as technology and other factors influence the way businesses operate and engage their employees. Many different weekly patterns now exist.

Why the Transformation of the Sabbath Concept in the New Covenant is Misunderstood

If the sabbath concept is transformed this way within the Kingdom reality of messianic assemblies and in the context of the New Covenant, why are there persisting claims that believers must still fulfill the Fourth Commandment literally, almost legally? What factors cause this fault line of understanding to slash through the Christian world? Why do theologians of spirituality and spiritual mentors keep using the 'S/sabbath' term in such confusing and misleading ways?

This legacy of misunderstanding persists primarily because of interpretational and dogmatic differences regarding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Some theologians and Christian traditions regard the relationship between the Old Covenant and New Covenant as basically 'flat.' In other words, although the Christ event does provide for salvation, many of the institutions and covenant requirements practiced during the Old Covenant retain their currency in some form within the New Covenant. For example, some Christian traditions frame leadership roles as a continuation of priestly functions defined in the Old Covenant, contending that such figures exercise similar authority within the church today. For this reason, these traditions restrict the leadership of certain rituals to 'priests' and give them authority to pronounce sins forgiven. Some Christian traditions believe that the Ten Words continue to have full authority in the lives of believers, even though Jesus regarded their legalistic applications as too limiting and not expressive of God's intended purpose (e.g., Matt 5). Jesus considers the two commands to love God and to love neighbour as the essence of God's will for human life (e.g., Mark 12:28-34). For this reason, in such Christian traditions the Fourth Commandment still carries weight and Christians regard Sunday as the equivalent to the Old Testament Sabbath, imposing similar restrictions upon human conduct.

Jesus, however, seems to teach his followers that the Ten Words were intended as a guideline for the conduct of God's people, but not a legislative framework. The Holy Spirit who is resident in the lives of believers in the New Covenant reality empowers them to love God and love their neighbour in more intensive and essential ways than any legal code might engender (as Paul teaches in Gal 5). Jesus' message and actions will enable believers to live according to God's will more fully (Gal 3-5). The Holy Spirit generates within believers the capacity to live these the principles of Galatians 5 (Gal 5:22-23) and in this way fulfill the law of love. Believers live this way not to earn salvation, but to demonstrate the reality of the new creation that the Messiah and the Spirit are generating within their lives. In several situations, Jesus iterates a number of the Ten Words, but he never includes

the Fourth Commandment in such lists.²⁴ Jesus often teaches in synagogues on Sabbaths, but he does not state that he is present on such occasions out of obedience to the Fourth Commandment.

In several events Jesus also seems to indicate that Jewish practices such as eating Kosher no longer were required by his followers in the New Covenant reality. Paul argues that not even circumcision is required within the framework of the New Covenant for individuals to become part of God's people. Jesus seems to regard the Jerusalem temple and its rituals as irrelevant, because he is the new temple, and his death is the ultimate and unrepeatable sacrifice that provides human salvation (as the book of Hebrews details). These are fundamental and essential changes that the shift from the Old Covenant period to the New Covenant period inaugurates by God's design. Included among Old Covenant requirements fulfilled in quite new ways in the New Covenant is the transformation of sabbath practice into the enjoyment of the perpetual, salvific sabbath experience, God's *shalom*, that extends into eternity.

Christian leaders have an important responsibility to interpret and teach Jesus's instruction about the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. Jesus fulfills what Yahweh had partially revealed and established in the Old Covenant, a temporary arrangement as Paul argues (Gal 3-4). Jesus completes fully the deity's plan for human salvation – so that the nations of the world might be blessed through the Messiah and his gift of the Spirit.

A second reason that believers misunderstand this transformation and fulfillment of the sabbath concept in the context of the New Covenant is that they fail to appreciate the implications of the Spirit's residency within them. As John the Baptist prophesied, the result of Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension would be "immersion in the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). This language refers to the new Kingdom age that Jesus would inaugurate. The hallmark of this new age is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who takes up residence in believers (Rom 8:9-11). It is the Spirit's presence that enables humans to once again be co-workers with God and live in perpetual devotion to the deity as his *diakonoi*. The Spirit's presence transforms their lives into sacred space – they become temples of the Spirit. As the guarantee that they have entered into God's Kingdom and participate in God's promises, the Spirit enables them to enjoy sabbath rest as a life condition, a perpetual Jubilee. The Spirit inaugurates their experience of *shalom*, peace with God that will continue into

²⁴ Mark 10:19; Matt 19:18-19; Luke 18:20.

the next age (Rom 5:1). As Jesus promises, when Christians come to him, he gives them “rest” (*anapausis* / ἀνάπαυσις).²⁵

Lastly, misunderstandings about the sabbath concept are perpetuated because Christians generally fail to appreciate the essential linkage between their work and their service to God. The Spirit is resident within believers, and they now live as holy people. In all their time and their activity, they offer themselves as sacrifices to God (Rom 12:1-2). Or, to use the analogy that Peter employs, in their living they form the new temple of God, they function as God’s royal priesthood, and they continually offer sacrifices of praise as they do good in the name of Jesus (1 Pet 2:4-5). All their work and leisure contribute to the majestic renown of God, because it reflects his holiness and his will. As Paul argues in Col 4:17, “whatever [believers] do in word or deed” they do it under the name of the Lord Jesus and in submission to him. Their responsibility is to ensure that such words and deeds are not “taking the name of Yahweh in vain,” that is, acting in disobedience to the Spirit’s leading.

For these and other reasons it is important for Christian leaders to use the term ‘S/sabbath’ correctly and explain more completely how Jesus’ teaching and actions bring God’s intent for ‘S/sabbath’ to fulfillment in the New Covenant. Here are five recommendations that may help to clarify the issue of ‘S/sabbath’ among Jesus’s disciples:

1. Believers should not equate Sunday with the Old Testament ‘Sabbath.’ The early church leaders on occasion use the phrase “the Lord’s Day” to describe Sunday as a day when Christians might assemble. The Lord’s Day is linked with the day of Jesus’ resurrection. However, while believers do assemble on this day (as in Acts 20:7), there is no sense that this is an obligation, that it happened regularly on this day, or that assemblies did not happen on other days.
2. Christian leaders should explain that believers now enjoy ‘sabbath rest’ by virtue of their salvation in Christ (as Heb 3-4 teaches). This is God’s intended fulfillment of the Fourth Commandment in the New Covenant context.
3. All a believer’s time is ‘sabbath time,’ time that is liberated from sin’s domination. In this new freedom believers use their time to do good and contribute to God’s majestic renown. This includes both periods of work—employment in the marketplace, fulfilling family responsibilities, participating in specific good work projects—and periods of leisure. Believers devote themselves to God in all that they do every day.

²⁵ It often is overlooked that in the Septuagint translation of Exodus, the translator employs the term ἀνάπαυσις to define what the Hebrew term נָחַשׁ (נָחַשׁ) means (Exod 16:23; 31:15; 35:2). He similarly employs the cognate verb ἀναπαύω (Exod 23:12).

4. An appropriate rhythm of work and rest in life contributes to mental and spiritual health. However, periods of rest do not constitute “Sabbath” in contrast with periods of work. That is a false distinction in the Kingdom.
5. It is important to help maturing disciples learn the relationship between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, what ends with the Old Covenant, what begins with the New Covenant, and what continues in a fulfilled and transformed way. Without clarity about this issue, disciples will misinterpret Scripture and misunderstand God’s intentions in the past, the present, and the future.

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Perkins, Larry J. “Living in Perpetual ‘Sabbath.’” Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca (November 14, 2025). Peer reviewed.