

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	67		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 14:5; Colossians 2:16-17		
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The Lord's Day (Part II)

38. Lord's Day

Question 103. What does God require in the fourth commandment?

Answer: First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained; (a) and that I, especially on the sabbath, that is, on the day of rest, diligently frequent the church of God, (b) to hear his word, (c) to use the sacraments, (d) publicly to call upon the Lord, (e) and contribute to the relief of the poor. (f) Secondly, that all the days of my life I cease from my evil works, and yield myself to the Lord, to work by his Holy Spirit in me: and thus begin in this life the eternal sabbath. (g)

(a) Tit. 1:5 For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: 2 Tim. 3:14 But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; 2 Tim. 3:15 And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 1 Tim. 5:17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. 1 Cor. 9:11 If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? 1 Cor. 9:13 Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? 1 Cor. 9:14 Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel. 2 Tim. 2:2 And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. (b) Ps. 40:10 I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation: I have not concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from the great congregation. Ps. 40:11 Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O LORD: let thy lovingkindness and thy truth continually preserve me. Ps. 68:27 There is little Benjamin with their ruler, the princes of Judah and their council, the princes of Zebulun, and the princes of Naphtali. Acts 2:42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. Acts 2:46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, (c) 1 Tim. 4:13 Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. 1 Cor. 14:19 Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. 1 Cor. 14:29 Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. 1 Cor. 14:31 For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. (d) 1 Cor. 11:33 Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another. (e) 1 Tim. 2:1 I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; 1 Tim. 2:2 For kings, and for all that are in authority;

that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. 1 Tim. 2:3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; 1 Tim. 2:8 I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. 1 Tim. 2:9 In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; 1 Tim. 2:10 But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. 1 Tim. 2:11 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. 1 Cor. 14:16 Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? (f) 1 Cor. 16:2 Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. (g) Isa. 66:23 And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD.

“Jesus’ observance of the Sabbath does not constitute strong evidence for its continuation in the new covenant. His observance of the Sabbath makes excellent sense, for he lived under the Old Testament law. He was ‘born under the law’ as Paul says (Gal. 4:4). On the other hand, a careful reading of the Gospel accounts intimates that the Sabbath will not continue to play a significant role. Jesus proclaims as the Son of Man that he is the ‘lord even of the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:28). The Sabbath does not rule over him, but he rules over the Sabbath. He is the new David, the Messiah, to whom the Sabbath and all the Old Testament Scriptures point (Matt. 12:3-4). Indeed, Jesus even claimed in John 5:17 that he, like his Father, works on the Sabbath. Working on the Sabbath, of course, is what the Old Testament prohibits, but Jesus claimed that he must work on the Sabbath since he is equal with God (John 5:18).

“It is interesting to consider here the standpoint of the ruler of the synagogue in Luke 13:10-17. He argued that Jesus should heal on the other six days of the week and not on the Sabbath. On one level this advice seems quite reasonable, especially if the strict views of the Sabbath that were common in Judaism were correct. What is striking is that Jesus deliberately healed on the Sabbath. Healing is what he ‘ought’ (*dei*) to do on the Sabbath day (Luke 13:16). It seems that he did so to demonstrate his superiority to the Sabbath and to hint that it is not in force forever. There may be a suggestion in Luke 4:16-21 that Jesus fulfills the Jubilee of the Old Testament (Lev. 25). The rest and joy anticipated in Jubilee is fulfilled in him, and hence the rest and feasting of the Sabbath find their climax in Jesus.

“We would expect the Sabbath to no longer be in force since it was the covenant sign of the Mosaic covenant, and, as I have argued elsewhere in this book, it is clear that believers are no longer under the Sinai covenant. Therefore, they are no longer bound by the sign of the covenant either. The Sabbath, as a covenant sign, celebrated Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, but the Exodus points forward, according to New Testament writers, to redemption in Christ. Believers in Christ were not freed from Egypt, and hence the covenant sign of Israel does not apply to them.”

I. THE APOSTLE PAUL ON THE SABBATH

“It is clear in Paul’s letters that the Sabbath is not binding upon believers. In Colossians Paul identifies the Sabbath as a shadow along with requirements regarding foods, festivals, and the new moon (Col. 2:16-17). The Sabbath, in other words, points to Christ and is fulfilled in him. The word for ‘shadow’ (*skia*) that Paul uses to describe the Sabbath is the same term the author of Hebrews used to describe Old Testament sacrifices. The law is only a ‘shadow (*skia*) of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities’ (Heb. 10:1). The argument is remarkably similar to what we see in Colossians: both contrast elements of the law as a shadow with the ‘substance’ (*sōma*, Col. 2:17) or the ‘form’ (*eikona*, Heb. 10:1) found in Christ. Paul does not denigrate the Sabbath. He salutes its place in salvation history, for, like the Old Testament sacrifices, though not in precisely the same way, it prepared the way for Christ. I know of no one who thinks Old Testament sacrifices should be instituted

today; and when we compare what Paul says about the Sabbath with such sacrifices, it seems right to conclude that he thinks the Sabbath is no longer binding.

“Some argue, however, that ‘Sabbath’ in Colossians 2:16 does not refer to the weekly Sabbaths but only to sabbatical years. But this is a rather desperate expedient, for the most prominent day in the Jewish calendar was the weekly Sabbath. We know from secular sources that it was the observance of the weekly Sabbath that attracted the attention of Gentiles (Juvenal, *Satires* 14.96-106; Tacitus, *Histories* 5.4). Perhaps sabbatical years are included here, but the weekly Sabbath should not be excluded, for it would naturally come to the mind of both Jewish and Gentile readers. What Paul says here is remarkable, for he lumps the Sabbath together with food laws, festivals like Passover, and new moons. All of these constitute shadows that anticipate the coming of Christ. Very few Christians think we must observe food laws, Passover, and new moons. But if this is the case, then it is difficult to see why the Sabbath should be observed since it is placed together with these other matters.

“Another crucial text on the Sabbath is Romans 14:5: ‘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.’ In Romans 14:1-15:6 Paul mainly discusses food that some – almost certainly those influenced by Old Testament food laws – think is defiled. Paul clearly teaches, in contrast to Leviticus 11:1-44 and Deuteronomy 14:3-21, that all foods are clean (Rom. 14:14, 20) since a new era of redemptive history has dawned. In other words, Paul sides theologically with the strong in the argument, believing that all foods are clean. He is concerned, however, that the strong avoid injuring and damaging the weak. The strong must respect the opinions of the weak (Rom. 14:1) and avoid arguments with them. Apparently the weak were not insisting that food laws and the observance of days were necessary for salvation, for if that were the case they would be proclaiming another gospel (cf. Gal. 1:8-9; 2:3-5; 4:10; 5:2-6) and Paul would not tolerate their viewpoint. Probably the weak believed that one would be a stronger Christian if one kept food laws and observed days. The danger for the weak was that they would judge the strong (Rom. 14:3-4), and the danger for the strong was that they would despise the weak (Rom. 14:3, 10). In any case, the strong seem to have had the upper hand in the Roman congregations, for Paul was particularly concerned that they not damage the weak.

“Nevertheless, a crucial point must not be overlooked. Even though Paul watches out for the consciences of the weak, he holds the viewpoint of the strong on both food laws and days. John Barclay rightly argues that Paul subtly (or not so discreetly!) undermines the theological standpoint of the weak since he argues that what one eats and what days one observes are a matter of no concern. The Old Testament, on the other hand, is clear on the matter. The foods one eats and the days one observes are ordained by God. He has given clear commands on both of these issues. Hence, Paul’s argument is that such laws are no longer valid since believers are not under the Mosaic covenant. Indeed, the freedom to believe that all days are alike surely includes the Sabbath, for the Sabbath naturally would spring to the mind of Jewish readers since they kept the Sabbath weekly.

“Paul has no quarrel with those who desire to set aside the Sabbath as a special day, as long as they do not require it for salvation or insist that other believers agree with them. Those who esteem the Sabbath as a special day are to be honored for their point of view and should not be despised or ridiculed. Others, however, consider every day to be the same. They do not think that any day is more special than another. Those who think this way are not to be judged as unspiritual. Indeed, there is no doubt that Paul held this opinion, since he was strong in faith instead of being weak. It is crucial to notice what is being said here. If the notion that every day of the week is the same is acceptable, and if it is Paul’s opinion as well, then it follows that Sabbath regulations are no longer binding. The strong must not impose their convictions on the weak and should be charitable to those who hold a different opinion, but Paul clearly has undermined the authority of the Sabbath in principle, for he does not care whether someone observes one day as special. He leaves it entirely up to one’s personal opinion. But if the Sabbath of the Old Testament were still in force, Paul could never say this, for the Old Testament makes incredibly strong statements about

those who violate the Sabbath, and the death penalty is even required in some instances. Paul is living under a different dispensation, that is, a different covenant, for now he says it does not matter whether one observes one day out of seven as a Sabbath.”

CONCLUSION: “Believers are not obligated to observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant. The Mosaic covenant and the Sabbath as the covenant sign are no longer applicable now that the new covenant of Jesus Christ has come. Believers are called upon to honor and respect those who think the Sabbath is still mandatory for believers. But if one argues that the Sabbath is required for salvation, such a teaching is contrary to the gospel and should be resisted forcefully. In any case, Paul makes it clear in both Romans 14:5 and Colossians 2:16-17 that the Sabbath has passed away now that Christ has come. It is wise naturally for believers to rest, and hence one principle that could be derived from the Sabbath is that believers should regularly rest. But the New Testament does not specify when that rest should take place, not does it set forth a period of time when that rest should occur. We must remember that the early Christians were required to work on Sundays. They worshiped the Lord on the Lord’s Day, the day of Jesus’ resurrection, but the early Christians did not believe the Lord’s Day fulfilled or replaced the Sabbath. The Sabbath pointed toward eschatological rest in Christ, which believers enjoy in part now and will enjoy fully on the Last Day.”¹

¹ This set of notes is adapted from Thomas Schreiner, *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law* (Kregel, 2010), Question #37 “Is the Sabbath Still Required for Christians?”