

The fourth commandment in the church today

Paul Gibson
November 2016

Contents

1. Introduction and historical overview	3
2. The obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant	6
3. The moral law as creational	8
4. The moral law as summarised in the Decalogue and applied in the new covenant	12
5. The fourth commandment as creational	17
6. The fourth commandment in the Gospels	20
7. The fourth commandment applied in the new covenant	23
8. The move from the seventh day to the first day	28
9. The abrogation of the Jewish ceremonial sabbatical laws	30
10. The Lord's Day as law, blessing and gift	32
11. Implications for life	33
12. Bibliography	37

1. Introduction and historical overview

As we begin, it's good to ask, why would we want to take time to study what the Bible teaches on the fourth commandment? After all, there are Ten Commandments, each of which is just as important as the Fourth. Why focus on this commandment in particular?

The main reason for our doing so is that this commandment, and this commandment alone, is the subject of much controversy in the church today. And in our own church, there is most likely a range of different views on whether Christians should keep the fourth commandment today.

In recent decades there has been a marked shift in society's attitude towards Sundays. Not all that long ago the idea of Sunday as a rest day was well ingrained in society, even among those who had no interest in the gospel. But more recently we have seen the introduction and extension of Sunday trading. For most people, Sunday is just another Saturday, another day to do shopping, sports, homework, and whatever else we do on a Saturday. Increasingly employers expect their employees to work on Sundays.

Even in many Christian circles, the fourth commandment is viewed negatively. Even though (whatever you think about the application for today) the Bible is clear that God's laws are good laws (because God is a good God), what comes into people's minds when they think about the Sabbath? Often it makes us think of detailed lists of don'ts – you can't do this and you mustn't do that. Or we think Sabbath-keeping is about legalistic judgmentalism of the kind we see in the Pharisees. Didn't Jesus come to set people free from the outdated Sabbath law which the Pharisees were such sticklers for? We feel that Sabbath-keeping would be a burden rather than a delight, a rule that restricts us rather than a good law which God's given us for our blessing.

But it wasn't always so. When we consider our forefathers in the faith, we find that, in the main, Christians have historically regarded all Ten Commandments as normative. That is, Christians have historically believed that Christians should keep the Ten Commandments. There's a warning here for us. Of course the Bible is our sole ultimate authority, but to reject the mainstream historical position of Bible-believing Christians throughout history is not something we should do lightly. If we're going to take a different view to most

Christians in history, we ought at least to do so having thoroughly studied the Scriptures first.

In this paper we will look at a lot of Scriptures in a fair amount of detail. That might make you think, 'this is all a bit complicated. Surely if God thought it was important for us to keep the fourth commandment, he'd make it a bit simpler.' But actually he has made it very simple and plain.

There is a very simple case; a very simple answer to the question, 'do I need to keep the fourth commandment today?' The simple case is this: the fourth commandment is in the Ten Commandments. And of course God wants his people to keep the Ten Commandments. If that's enough to persuade you, that's great! For most Christians, that's plainly true, and we don't need any further debate.

So why am I now going to develop a much more detailed case for why Christians need to keep the fourth commandment? Because we need to respond to those who disagree with the plain, straightforward case. Some Christians claim that the fourth commandment belonged only to the old covenant; it was made obsolete when the old covenant became obsolete through Jesus' death and resurrection. These Christians may claim that only commands which are repeated in the New Testament are binding on Christians today: if a law appears in the Old Testament only, we don't have to keep it. Because some of us may be led by such reasoning to believe we can now safely set aside the fourth commandment, we need to investigate these assertions in much more depth to see if they are true.

A final word before we dive into the Bible's teaching. As we approach the Bible, we need to beware the prejudice in our hearts. We are not just brains which study the Bible and dispassionately weigh the evidence, like a jury is meant to do in a court case. We have hearts as well as brains, and we always come to the Bible with thoughts already in our hearts. Those thoughts may include a vested interest in finding that we don't have to keep the fourth commandment, because we don't want to have to change how we personally approach Sundays. It's important to acknowledge how deceitful our hearts can be (Jeremiah 17:9), and to pray that God will help us to sit under his word, with soft hearts and a willingness for the Spirit to change our thinking and our practice.

Robert Martin observes, “Many Christians (who walk by God’s word in other areas of their lives) become uncomfortable or even hostile when the question of observing the Sabbath is raised. Why is this? Many are poorly taught – and this accounts for much. When the problem is lack of information, sound instruction may solve the problem. It will do so, however, only if there is not a problem in the heart.”¹

¹ Robert Paul Martin, *The Christian Sabbath: Its Redemptive-Historical Foundation, Present Obligation, and Practical Observance* (Montville, NJ: Trinity Pulpit Press), 29.

2. The obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant

Let's turn to the Bible, and the first thing to see is the obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant. That is, the old covenant which was made with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai is now obsolete and no longer in force. The New Testament says this explicitly: "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete" (Hebrews 8:13).

If the Mosaic covenant has come to an end, it follows that the laws that form part of the covenant have also come to an end. Of course we can still glean principles from the law of Moses as to how to please God, but we are not bound to obey the law of Moses in the way the Israelites were. So Paul reminds the Christians in Rome that they are "no longer under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). We are no longer under the law of Moses; that law has perished along with the covenant it belonged to.

And yet elsewhere the New Testament makes abundantly clear that Christians are still required to keep God's law in some sense. For example, Paul is at pains to emphasise that he is "not ... outside the law of God but under the law of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:21). Why must Christians obey the God's laws? Not to be justified – the New Testament couldn't be clearer that we're justified by faith alone, not by our law-keeping (e.g. Galatians 5:4). Rather we obey out of love for Christ: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Why do Christians have no problem agreeing that we should keep the sixth commandment, 'You shall not murder'? After all, this commandment is part of the Mosaic Law. It is found in the (now obsolete) Mosaic covenant. Christians rightly insist that we should still keep this commandment because it is not found *only* in the Mosaic covenant; it is also taught in Genesis 9:6 (before the Mosaic covenant) and in the New Testament (e.g. Matthew 5:21-22).

The fourth commandment, like the sixth, is found in the law of Moses in the now obsolete Mosaic covenant. The question is, does the fourth commandment transcend the Mosaic covenant in the way the sixth commandment does?

Imagine a school teacher gives her class a set of rules they're to abide by in her class. Some of the rules are the school rules, other rules are her particular rules for her class.

But she gives them to her class all together on one list. When the children finish the year and move up to the next class, do they still have to keep the old class rules? No – now that they're in Year 2, the old Year 1 rule list is obsolete for them. But some of the rules on that sheet transcended Year 1. Some of the rules apply to the whole school. And the Year 2 children do still have to keep those rules.

The Mosaic covenant is obsolete. So the question we have to ask is, which (if any) of the laws that appear in the Mosaic covenant transcend that covenant and so apply directly to us today?

3. The moral law as creational

One way of describing laws which always hold true and are not restricted to a particular covenant is 'moral law'. Moral law is law which is inherently wrong, always wrong, and therefore cannot change. For example, the command to love God with all our heart is moral law – there is no time in history when it is acceptable to break this law. If there is a moral law which is creational (i.e. it dates back to creation) then that moral law transcends the Mosaic covenant (even though it may appear in the Mosaic covenant) and remains binding today.

Romans 2:12-16

One passage which shows that such a moral law exists is Romans 2:12-16:

¹² For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Here Paul describes a group of people, "Gentiles", who do not possess the law, yet (in some sense) do what the law requires (v14). The law is written on their hearts, and they know it through their conscience (v15).

Who are these "Gentiles"? One view is that they are Gentile Christians. Because they are *Gentile* Christians, they don't have the law of Moses, but they nonetheless do the law and are justified by their law-keeping (v13). But this view is most problematic. When Paul says that "the doers of the law ... will be justified" (v13), he is not saying that there are actually people (apart from Jesus) who can succeed in doing the law and being justified by their obedience. Rather, this passage comes in the broader section of Romans 1:18 – 3:20, in which Paul is making the case that "by works of the law no human being will be justified in

his [God's] sight" (3:20). No-one can be justified by doing the law, because all are lawbreakers, and can be justified only in Christ (3:21-26). The point of 2:13 is not to say that we who are sinners can actually be justified by doing the law. The point is to establish the standard that *would be required* if we were to try to be justified that way (as many Jews were indeed trying to do): it is not enough to merely hear the law; you must do it also. The fact is there is no-one apart from Jesus who accomplishes this, which is why we must give up trying to be justified by our doing and trust in Christ alone.

So the "Gentiles" in verse 14 are not law-keeping Gentile Christians. Rather, these are unbelieving Gentiles throughout history who have never heard the law of Moses and yet know in their conscience that certain things are right and wrong. And Paul says that "the work of the law is written on their hearts". In other words, there is what we might call a 'moral law' which even those who have never come across the Bible know through the consciences God has given them. For example, this is how Cain knew he was sinning, even though he was not breaking a written law.

It is vital we see that, ever since Adam sinned, our consciences are fallen. We do still have consciences, but they don't work as they should. So, for example, it is always wrong to commit murder, and it is always wrong to misuse God's name. All people should know these things in their conscience. Many people would agree that murder is wrong, but might not agree that misusing God's name is wrong. This is because our sinful hearts have twisted the law which God wrote on our hearts (consciences) to a more man-centred and less God-centred perspective.

In summary, Romans 2 shows us that there is a moral law which is written on the hearts / consciences of all people.

The next question we need to ask is, what is the content of the 'law' which Paul refers to in these verses? In v14 the 'law' clearly refers to the law which the Jews possessed but the Gentiles didn't, that is, either the whole law of Moses or part of the law of Moses such as the Ten Commandments. Assuming Paul is keeping the same meaning of 'law' throughout, he then says that this same law is the law which Gentile pagans do by nature, because this same law is written on the hearts. In other words, the logic of Paul's argument demands that the law which only the Jews had in writing (the law of Moses, or more likely the Ten Commandments in particular) is *the same law* which is written on the

hearts of all people in our consciences, *including those who are outside of the Mosaic covenant*. It is eternal moral law for all people.

References to the Ten Commandments before the Mosaic covenant

When we then turn back to Genesis and Exodus, it is striking that there are references to several of the Ten Commandments before the inauguration of the Mosaic covenant at Sinai (Exodus 19-20). According to Genesis 26:5, Abraham “obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws” centuries before the Mosaic covenant when Moses wrote down the LORD’s “charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments” (Deuteronomy 11:1). Abraham was already observing the laws that would later be written down in the law of Moses. There are also references to specific commandments before Sinai. For example, Genesis 9:5-6 prohibits murder. Genesis 20 assumes that adultery is a sin, even for those like Abimelech who are outside the covenant community – the law is written on his heart. And in Exodus 16:21-30 (still before the Mosaic covenant) God speaks to Israel about Sabbath-keeping in a way that assumes they already know that the Sabbath is a day of rest. The people knew these laws because they were God’s moral law, not new laws invented at Sinai.

Not a new law

Some Christians have argued that God has different laws for different times; Christ replaced the old law with his own new law (described in the New Testament as ‘the law of Christ’), which can be summarised by the two great love commands (love for God and love for neighbour). This was the view, for example, of the 17th Century Puritan Richard Baxter, and is sometimes called ‘neonomianism’ (literally ‘new-law-ism’). However, this view is problematic.

In fact, Jesus’ two great love commands are themselves taken from the Old Testament Law and are written in the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). They are therefore not a new law. Rather, Jesus makes clear that these 2 commands summarise the Old Testament Law (Matthew 22:40; see also Galatians 5:14). In Matthew 5:17 Jesus says he has not come to abolish the law, and he then goes on to apply several of the Ten Commandments to life in the kingdom of heaven.

The idea that Christ replaced the old law with a new law is not only unbiblical but also has serious implications. It has implications for God's character – what kind of God has no settled standards of right and wrong but changes his standards over time? How could he be holy if, for example, he lowered the bar to make it easier to keep his law? And it has implications for the gospel. According to Romans 5:19, Christ's obedience to the law is imputed (credited) to us as our righteousness ("by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous"). But if God's law has changed, which law did Christ obey as our representative and substitute? According to Baxter, Christ obeyed the old law for us, but we now have to obey the new law and be justified by our own obedience to it. This is a rejection of the gospel truth of justification by faith alone.

In summary, then, we have seen that God has an eternal moral law, which dates back before Sinai to creation, and which is not replaced by a different law in the New Testament. Next we turn to consider whether this moral law can be identified with the Ten Commandments.

4. The moral law summarised in the Decalogue and applied in the new covenant

We have established that God has an eternal, unchanging moral law which applies throughout human history. We will now see that the Ten Commandments are to be identified in this category of moral law.

The uniqueness of the Decalogue

The first piece of evidence for this is the uniqueness of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) within the law of Moses. These ten laws have a special importance not granted to the mass of other laws. The Ten Commandments are spoken directly by God, unlike all the other laws which are mediated through Moses (Exodus 20:1). They are given a distinct name: the 'Ten Words' or 'Ten Commandments' (Deuteronomy 4:13; 10:4). After the Ten Words God 'added nothing more' (Deuteronomy 5:22). The Ten Commandments (unlike any of the other laws) were written by the finger of God on tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18). And the Ten Commandments (unlike any of the other laws) were preserved in the ark of the covenant (1 Kings 8:9).

The law written on tablets of stone / on the heart

A second compelling piece of evidence is the way the biblical authors speak about the writing of the law on the heart in contrast to the writing of the law on tablets of stone.

In Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant, the LORD says, "this is the covenant that I will make ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33). In other words, new covenant Christians have "the law" written "on their hearts". How should we understand the word 'law' here? To answer that question we need to ask why God says he will "write it on our hearts". This is a clear contrast with the old covenant, in which God wrote the law on tablets of stone. In the new covenant, God says, the law will not be written on tablets of stone but on the hearts of God's people. Which law did God write on tablets of stone in the old covenant? The Ten Commandments. So in Jeremiah God says that this same law (the Ten Commandments) will be written on the hearts of God's people.

If there was any doubt that Jeremiah intended a parallel between God writing the law on tablets of stone and God writing the law on the hearts of his new covenant people, that doubt is taken away by Hebrews 3, another passage contrasting the old and new covenants. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3).

But what does Jeremiah 31:33 mean when it says that God will ‘write on our hearts’ his law? Could it mean that, in the new covenant, we no longer need to keep these laws? Surely this is inconceivable. If God didn’t want us to keep his laws, what could it possibly mean for him to write them on our hearts? Surely the point is that, whereas in the old covenant there was no power to keep God’s laws, because they were merely external (on tablets of stone), now in the new covenant God internalises these same laws in our hearts, so we have the desire and power to keep them. This understanding is confirmed by the parallel promise of the new covenant in Ezekiel: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezekiel 36:26-27). Again there is a contrast between stone (old covenant) and flesh (new covenant), again there is a promise of power (the Holy Spirit), and the purpose of this is to “cause you ... to obey my rules.” The Bible clearly teaches, then, that the Ten Commandments are written by God on the hearts of the new covenant Christian, so that we may obey them.

The Decalogue in the New Testament

This conclusion, that the Ten Commandments as God’s moral law continue in the new covenant, is confirmed throughout the New Testament itself. One example of this is in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus is teaching his disciples about life in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 4:17; 5:1-2). Jesus states clearly that he has not come to “abolish” the law and the prophets but to “fulfil” them. What does it mean for Jesus to ‘fulfil’ the law (and the prophets)? It cannot mean that Jesus is abolishing the law because he has just said he is not abolishing it. The meaning of ‘fulfil’ is complex and it may be that Jesus fulfils the Old Testament in different ways. For example, he fulfils the laws by perfectly keeping them as our representative. He fulfils the law by taking the curse of the law on himself on the cross. He fulfils the ceremonial laws about sacrifices by being *the*

sacrifice towards which the Old Testament sacrifices were pointing. He fulfils the prophets as the coming Messiah whom the prophets promised.

But the context in Matthew suggests another further meaning: Jesus came to 'fill out' the law. This is another meaning of the Greek word 'fulfil'. Jesus fills out the law, that is, he fills out its full meaning. Why did Jesus need to do this? Because the scribes and Pharisees were 'relaxing' the commandments (v19), that is, they were watering down the standard of God's laws. How were they doing that? In the case of murder, they were claiming that they'd kept this law so long as they hadn't physically killed anyone. Jesus responds by 'filling out' what the sixth commandment is really about by explaining that even to get angry with one's brother is to break the sixth commandment (v21-22). He does the same with the seventh (v27-32), ninth (v33-37), and eighth (v38-42) commandments, and with the summary love commandment (v43-47).

Throughout this section Jesus draws a repeated contrast: "You have heard that it was said ... But I say to you..." It is important to see that Jesus is not contrasting the Old Testament law with his own new law. Rather, he is critiquing the Pharisees' *false interpretation* of God's law – their 'relaxed' interpretation which makes the law merely about outward conformity rather than heart-level neighbour-love. Jesus is like the builder of a house who has watched over the decades as the house falls into disrepair, and who now returns to restore the house to its original beauty. He is the author of the law, and has seen people watering it down and twisting it to make it easier. He now returns to fulfil / fill out the law, restoring its original meaning and beauty. As the author of the law, he is able (unlike the Pharisees) to teach its authoritative meaning (Matthew 7:28-29).

Matthew 5 is not the only New Testament passage that affirms the ongoing importance of the Ten Commandments. Another example is Mark 10:17-22:

¹⁷ And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰ And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." ²¹ And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack

one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”²² Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Here Jesus makes explicit reference to the ‘second table’ of the law (that is, the commandments relating to love for neighbour: commandments 5-10). We may wonder why Jesus does not explicitly mention the first four commandments. Jesus’ purpose in this passage is to convict the man of his lawbreaking. The man thinks he can ‘do’ something to inherit eternal life (v17). Jesus wants him to see that he can ‘do’ nothing to deserve life because he is a law-breaker. When Jesus points him to commandments 5-9, however, the man misses Jesus’ point and claims he has kept them. So, to help the man see he really is a lawbreaker, he effectively takes him to the first commandment, ‘you shall have no other gods before me’. He wants the man to see that money is his idol, his God-substitute; he is a law-breaker who needs to repent. In conclusion, Jesus here upholds not only the ‘love for neighbour’ commands but also implicitly the ‘love for God’ commands too.

Another relevant passage is Romans 7:14-25. Here Paul speaks about his struggle: being pulled one way and another; wanting to live God’s way but finding he falls short time and again. There has been debate about whether Paul is speaking about his experience as a Christian or looking back to his experience as an unconverted Jew. There are several clues that show Paul is almost certainly speaking about his Christian experience. Paul says he has the ‘desire’ to live God’s way (v18), which is true only in the experience of a believer. He claims to ‘delight in the law of God’ (v22) which is also the experience of a believer. And he speaks throughout the passage of the battle he experiences, being pulled one way and then another, which again is the experience of a Christian (compare Galatians 5:16-18).

Paul says that, as a Christian, he regards the law as ‘good’ (v11) and he desires to keep it (v18). But what law is this that he wants to keep? In the same chapter Paul has been talking about the ‘law’ which includes the command ‘Do not covet’ (v7-12), that is, the Ten Commandments. This is the same ‘law’ which he desires to keep as a Christian believer.

Other passages include Romans 13:8-10, in which Paul says that love for others is the ‘fulfilment’ of the sixth, seventh, eighth and tenth commandments, “and any other commandment.” The point is not that we’re now free to commit murder, adultery, theft and

covetousness so long as we love our neighbour. Rather, loving our neighbour and keeping these commandments go hand in hand.

The apostle James also quotes from the Decalogue, applying it to new covenant Christians: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty” (James 2:10-12).

A final and fascinating example is 1 Timothy 1:8-11, which we will look at in chapter 7.

In summary, there is abundant evidence that the Ten Commandments are moral law and apply not just in the old covenant but the new also.

5. The fourth commandment as creational

Having established that the Ten Commandments as a whole are moral law which apply from creation to new creation, we turn now to the fourth commandment specifically. In this section we ask the question, is the keeping of a day of rest a creation principle, like work or marriage? If it is, then it pre-dates and transcends the Mosaic covenant and therefore is not made obsolete when that covenant is made obsolete.

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

We begin in the creation narrative in Genesis 1:1 – 2:3. We are told that “on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation” (Genesis 2:2-3).

Someone might ask, if God instituted the Sabbath at creation, why is there no direct command in these verses for humanity to keep the Sabbath day holy? We need to remember who wrote Genesis, when, and to whom. Genesis-Deuteronomy is really one work in five parts (the Pentateuch), with Moses as the author. It is a covenant book for God’s covenant people. How would the first hearers (the Israelites) have interpreted Gen 2:2-3? Their natural reaction would have been, “There is the origin of our Sabbath.” There was no need for Moses to explicitly record the Sabbath command in Genesis 2, because his readers were already familiar with the Sabbath command. What Moses does write in Genesis 2 tells his first hearers where the Sabbath originated: not at Sinai but at creation.

Another important question for understanding these verses is, why does God tell us that he ‘rested’? After all, Jesus tells us that, in the ultimate sense, God is always working (John 5:17). Of course, Genesis 2:2-3 is telling the truth: there is a sense in which God rested. He rested from his work of creating but not his work of providence. He entered his royal rest upon completion of his creating task. Yet strikingly Exodus 31:17 tells us “God rested *and was refreshed*”. Clearly God did not literally need refreshment; he was not tired. The language is not to be taken in a wooden literalistic sense (God needed a breather so he had a snooze). So then, why does God tell us that he rested? What is the point of Moses recording this? The most likely answer is, God is giving a model for his image-bearers to follow. God rests, so we who are made in his image rest too.

The next question to ask is, why seven days? After all, God could have created instantaneously. That would have been just as easy for him. Why did he not do that? Why did he take a whole week? The most persuasive explanation is that God created in a week to give us, his image-bearers, a pattern to follow: six days of work, one day of rest. In fact, the whole of Genesis 1:1 -2:3 is moving towards its culmination in 2:2-3 and the principle of one day in seven for rest.

A further question is, what does it mean that God ‘made it [the seventh day] holy’? The word ‘make holy’ means to sanctify, to set apart for a purpose. John Owen explains that to sanctify things means “to separate and dedicate them unto holy use ... things [are] made sacred, by an authoritative separation from profane or common uses, unto a peculiar, sacred, or holy use in the worship of God.”² So when God sanctified the seventh day, he was dedicating it for a holy use. What was that holy use if not a holy day for God’s people?

Finally, notice that God spoke his blessing on three things in Genesis 1:1 – 2:3: the fish and birds (1:22), humanity (1:28) and the seventh day (2:3). Clearly, then, the seventh day is of immense significance to God.

In summary, in Genesis 1:1 – 2:3, the one-day-in-seven principle is woven into the fabric of creation: the Sabbath as a holy day for God’s people is a creation ordinance that dates back far before Sinai to the beginning of human history.

Exodus 16:21-30

This passage gives further proof that the Sabbath pre-dates (and therefore transcends) the law of Moses. In the wilderness, before Sinai, this passage makes clear the weekly Sabbath was being observed. In fact Exodus 16 assumes that the Israelites were already familiar with the weekly Sabbath prior to this chapter. Here the Sabbath is not being instituted but assumed (because it had already been instituted at creation).

² John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, with Preliminary Exercitations* (7 vols.; 1668-84; vols. 17-23 of *The Works of John Owen*; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 2:297.

Exodus 20:8-11

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. (Exodus 20:8-11)

When the law is finally formally stated at Sinai, it is explicitly grounded in creation: ‘the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy’ (v11). Which Sabbath day did God bless and make holy? In the context, this must be the same Sabbath day that is mentioned in verse 8 – the weekly Sabbath that God requires of his people. This weekly Sabbath for the people was blessed by God and made holy (v11). But when did God bless the Sabbath and make it holy? In Genesis 2:2-3: in creation, not at Sinai. John Frame explains, “When God ... rested on the seventh day (v11a), which he hallowed and blessed, he also hallowed and blessed a human Sabbath, a Sabbath for man (v11b)”.³ That is, at the beginning, Genesis 2 instituted not only a rest for God, but also a rest for man.

The framing of the fourth commandment in Exodus 20 also helps us see the dual purpose of the day: rest and worship. It is to be ‘kept holy’, which implies a day for worship. And it is a day to rest from daily work.

Mark 2:27

A final piece of evidence confirms what we have already seen, that the fourth commandment is a creation ordinance, not just a religious observance for the Jews in the Mosaic covenant. In Mark 2:27 Jesus tells us that the Sabbath was made “for man”. The Greek word used for ‘man’ (*anthropos*) means ‘mankind’ in general. In other words, Jesus says the Sabbath was made not just for the Jews, but for humanity in general. So it cannot be merely part of the (now obsolete) Mosaic covenant, but rather, as we have clearly seen, dates back to creation. As a creation ordinance, it remains binding on all people today.

³ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (A Theology of Lordship; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 532.

6. The fourth commandment in the Gospels

We now turn to the Gospels, and we ask the question, does Jesus uphold the Sabbath (as we would expect if it is a creation ordinance), or does he teach that the fourth commandment no longer applies to his new covenant people?

There are several passages where Jesus was embroiled in controversy with the Pharisees over the Sabbath, in which the Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the fourth commandment. Was the Pharisees' accusation true? The Pharisees must be wrong, because if Jesus himself was a law-breaker, then he did not perfectly keep the Law as our representative, and he would not have a perfect righteousness (perfect obedience to God's law) to impute to us (Romans 5:19). Rather, what we see time and again is Jesus clarifying the real intent of the fourth commandment over against the false interpretation of the Pharisees. This will become clear as we look at three key passages:

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your disability."
¹³ And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. ¹⁴ But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." ¹⁵ Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?"
¹⁷ As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

What is going on here? The Pharisees' problem is not that they want to keep the fourth commandment. Their mistake is that they think that to heal someone on the Sabbath is to break the fourth commandment. Against their misinterpretation, Jesus brings clarity. What

Jesus has done on the Sabbath is set the woman free (v12, 16). The people's response was to rejoice (v17). Jesus liberates the Sabbath from the burdensome hedges the Pharisees had put around it, the long list of 'don'ts' which are not in the Bible but which the Pharisees have added. Jesus liberates the Sabbath to be what it was always intended to be: a day of joy and renewal.

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵ And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: ²⁶ how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" ²⁷ And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

³ Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. ² And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." ⁴ And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Jesus says he is the Lord of the Sabbath (2:28). What does that mean? It means the Sabbath belongs to him, and therefore he alone has the right to define its proper interpretation (which makes perfect sense as Jesus is the one who created the Sabbath, along with all things, in the first place). Jesus is again setting the Sabbath free from the Pharisees' restrictive, legalistic interpretation. Notice the question Jesus asks: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do harm?" (3:4). In other words, Jesus is not disputing whether people need to keep the law; rather, he is disputing what the law allows and what it does not allow. Jesus makes it clear that we are free to do acts of necessity (such as

finding food to eat, 2:23-26) and acts of mercy (such as healing someone, 3:1-5) on the Sabbath. Why? Because the Sabbath was always meant to be a good gift, for our benefit, joy, refreshing and blessing, not a burden: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (2:27). And as observed in the previous chapter, it is for ‘man’ (*anthropos* = mankind), not just for old covenant Jews.

John 5:1-18

In John 5:1-17 Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath. Then in verse 18 John tells us, “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.” As we have seen, Jesus cannot have actually been breaking God’s law; the Pharisees must be wrong about this, or Jesus would not have a perfect law-keeping obedience to impute to us. Jesus says to the Pharisees, “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (verse 17). In other words, there are some types of work that are legitimate even on the day of rest, just as God ‘rested’ from the work of creation and yet in another sense continued to work. So Jesus is keeping the fourth commandment, while also continuing to do a type of work which is legitimate on the Sabbath: an act of mercy.

Our investigation into these passages from the Gospels, then, confirms what we have seen in the Old Testament: the fourth commandment does not end with the coming of Jesus. Rather, Jesus restores its true intent from the misinterpretation of the Pharisees.

7. The fourth commandment applied in the new covenant

The passages examined so far are more than ample to prove that the fourth commandment, along with the other nine commandments, is God's moral law, dating back to creation, pre-dating and transcending the Mosaic covenant, and therefore applying not only in the old covenant but also in the new. The fourth commandment does not need to be explicitly re-stated in the New Testament for us to reach this conclusion.

Nonetheless, it is striking, and perhaps surprising, that there are in fact two passages in the epistles which most likely *do* mention the fourth commandment as a law which still abides in the new covenant.

1 Timothy 1:8-11

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

Paul begins this section by affirming that the law is intrinsically 'good'; after all, the law represents God-defined moral behaviour. Which 'law' is this which is good and to be used lawfully in the new covenant? This 'law' is clearly closely related to the Ten Commandments. As John Stott explains, "it is particularly noteworthy that sins that contravene the law (as breaches of the Ten Commandments) are also contrary to the sound doctrine of the gospel. So the moral standards of the gospel do not differ from the moral standards of the law. We must not therefore imagine that, because we have embraced the gospel, we may now repudiate the law!"⁴ It is clear that living in the ways Paul describes in these verses would be sin for the Christian.

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (BST; Downers Grove, IL: IVP), 49.

Now it is very obvious that the later items in Paul's list of sins are taking us through Commandments 5 to 9 in order (those who strike their fathers and mothers = 5th commandment; murderers = 6th commandment; the sexually immoral and men who practise homosexuality = 7th commandment; enslavers = 8th commandment; liars and perjurers = 9th commandment). But what about the sins earlier in the list (the lawless and disobedient, the ungodly and sinners, the unholy and profane)? A close investigation reveals that Paul is referring here to the first four commandments.

Working backwards, the next group of people before the breakers of the 5th commandment is 'the profane' (NIV 'irreligious'). This word means to desecrate or profane something that is holy. The word appears just three times in the New Testament, one of which (Matthew 12:5) is in the context of profaning the Sabbath. The word also appears frequently in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the translation Paul would have been familiar with) to speak of profaning the Sabbath. This is most probably what Paul is referring to here when he uses the word 'profane', meaning that the New Testament does explicitly re-affirm the ongoing importance of the fourth commandment.

This is confirmed as we continue to work backwards through Paul's list. The next item back is the 'unholy'. This is the same word root as 'hallowed' in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9). The unholy person is the person who does not hallow the Lord's name: the third commandment.

The next item back is 'sinners'. This word is sometimes used in the New Testament with specific reference to Gentiles, those who break the law by their idolatry (e.g. Galatians 2:15), an implicit reference to the second commandment.

Next in the list is 'the ungodly'. The Greek word is the opposite of the word translated 'God-fearing' which is used in Acts to speak of Gentiles who weren't Christians but who accepted the monotheism of the Old Testament and were so (at least outwardly) kept the first commandment.

If we are right to see a progression through the Ten Commandments in this way, then the opening phrase, 'the lawless and disobedient' (NIV 'lawbreakers and rebels') is a summary of the list which follows after it.

Richard Barcellos concludes: “It now becomes obvious that at 1 Tim 1:8-11 , Paul refers to the heart of the law of the Old and New Covenants (cf. Jer. 31:33). He refers to the basic, fundamental law of the Bible. He refers to the law common to believer and unbeliever alike. He refers to the law whose work is written on the hearts of all men by creation (Rom. 2:14-15). He refers to the Decalogue in its function of revealing God-defined, ethical norms for all men (i.e., the Moral Law).”⁵ And that moral law, which continues in the new covenant, includes the fourth commandment as well as all the others.

Hebrews 4:9-10

The other passage in the epistles which probably teaches the ongoing nature of the fourth commandment is Hebrews 4:9-10. The context is as follows:

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, “As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’” although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” ⁵ And again in this passage he said, “They shall not enter my rest.” ⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” ⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

It is clear that, for the most part, Hebrews 3:7 – 4:13 focuses on the eternal rest to come (in the new heavens and new earth). It is possible that 4:9 refers *only* to this eternal rest, in

⁵ Richard C. Barcellos, “First Timothy 1:8-11 and the Utility of the Decalogue,” RBTR 1:1 (2004), 22-23.

which case the passage would neither prove nor disprove the ongoing validity of the fourth commandment in the new covenant. However, there is a convincing case that 4:9 refers not only to the eternal rest but also the weekly day of rest for believers in the new covenant.

Verse 4 quotes Genesis 2:2-3 to indicate that God has entered his (eternal) rest; he entered it when he finished the work of creating. But for us, “the promise of entering his [eternal] rest still stands” (verse 1). We are not there yet: “it remains for some to enter it” (verse 6). Who will enter the (eternal) rest? The answer is in 3:14: those who “hold our original confidence firm to the end” and therefore “have come to share [or ‘partake] in Christ.”

Throughout the passage, the author has been using the word *katapausis* (translated as ‘rest’), to speak about the eternal rest which God has already entered and which remains for us to enter. But then in verse 9 he uses a different word, *sabbatismos*. Why the sudden switch to a new word? This is the only place this noun appears in the Bible. The only other known use of the word in ancient literature is in Plutarch, who uses it to describe a religious observance. The verb form is used frequently in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the translation the apostles used), always relating to the keeping of the weekly Sabbath (e.g. Exodus 16:29-30; Leviticus 23:32). So, why the change of word? Probably to communicate that not only does there remain an eternal rest for God’s people (v1,6) but also, because we don’t yet have the eternal rest but still wait for it, in the meantime there also remains a (weekly) Sabbath-rest for God’s people (verse 9) in anticipation of the eternal rest to come.

How, then, does this connect with verse 10? John Owen is helpful here. Owen explains that ‘rest’ in the Bible involves ceasing to work and being satisfied in the work accomplished. Owen cites Isaiah 53:11 from the song of the suffering servant: “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied” (KJV). Where does Jesus rest and find satisfaction after his toil (travail)? At his resurrection. “On this day [Easter Sunday] he rested from his works, in and by his resurrection.”⁶

Hebrews 4:10 literally reads “For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His.” (NASB). Owen argues that the shift from the plural in

⁶ Owen, *Hebrews*, 2:409.

the preceding verses (speaking of God's people) to the singular in verse 10 indicates this is speaking about Jesus entering his rest through his resurrection [which we who are in Christ then get to share (Hebrews 3:14)].⁷ It is because of this (Christ entering his rest through his resurrection, v10) that there remains a Sabbath-rest for us (v9). That is, through his resurrection Christ has entered his rest, as our forerunner (the idea of Jesus as our forerunner who goes before us and carries us along behind him is a key concept in Hebrews, see e.g. 6:20).

So the logic is: there remains a Sabbath-rest for us who share in Christ (v9), both in eternity and weekly, because Jesus our forerunner has entered his rest through his resurrection on the first day of the week. As such, we who in Christ rest on Christ's day of rest, Sunday. As such on the Lord's Day (4:9) we enjoy a foretaste of the eternal rest to come through our union with (sharing in) Christ.

The writer then concludes in verse 11, "Let us [we who share in / are united to Christ] therefore strive to enter that [eternal, *katapausis*] rest", unlike the wilderness generation, who hardened their hearts and did not enter the rest (of Canaan, 3:11).

We have seen that 2 passages in the epistles probably teach the ongoing requirement to keep the fourth commandment in the new covenant. Even if these passages are interpreted differently, the previous chapters have already proved the ongoing nature of the moral law (Ten Commandments) in the new covenant, including the fourth. But if we are right that either or both of 1 Timothy 1 and Hebrews 4 do speak of the weekly day of rest, this merely serves to drive yet a further nail in the coffin of the alternative position.

⁷ Owen, *Hebrews*, 2:417.

8. The move from the seventh day to the first day

We turn next to the question of why there has been a change of day from the Jewish (Saturday) Sabbath to the Christian (Sunday) Lord's Day. First we need to explain why it is even possible for the day to change. One might think that, if the Ten Commandments are eternal moral law, then no aspect of them (such as which day of the week) can change. The answer to this is that the form in which the commandments appear in Exodus 20 contains a mix of moral law (which is eternal) and ceremonial law (specific to the old covenant). We can see this clearly in the case of the fifth commandment: "Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." The command itself (honour your father and mother) is eternal moral law, and is explicitly re-stated in the New Testament. But the motivation given clearly relates specifically to the old covenant nation of Israel in the land of Canaan and does not directly apply in the new covenant). Likewise for the fourth commandment, the principle of six days of work and one day holy to the LORD for rest and worship is eternal moral law, but the specific day (the last day of the week) is specific to that covenant and may be changed in the new covenant.

The New Testament makes clear that the day God's people met to worship together changed in the new covenant to Sunday. For example, Acts 20:7 tells us that the believers "gathered together to break bread" "on the first day of the week" (Acts 20:7). Literally they gathered "on the first of the Sabbaths", an idiom which reflects continuity with the earlier Jewish Sabbath. The first day of the week was their Sabbath. Likewise 1 Corinthians 16:2 tells us the Corinthian church met on the first day of the week (literally "the first of the Sabbaths").

Another relevant verse is Revelation 1:10. Introducing the vision Jesus gave him, John says "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day". The phrase 'the Lord's Day' indicates a day distinct from the other six. It indicates a day belonging uniquely to the Lord (Jesus); the phrase is very similar to 'the Lord's Supper' (1 Corinthians 11:20), which speaks of the supper belonging to the Lord. Other writings from the very early church after the close of the New Testament confirm that 'the Lord's Day' was the first day of the week, Sunday. John himself does not feel the need to clarify what day 'the Lord's Day' is; he clearly assumes his readers in the seven churches are already familiar with this term. It is striking that the Old Testament spoke about the weekly Sabbath in the same language as a day

belonging to the Lord: “A Sabbath to the LORD your God” (Exodus 20:10); “My holy day ... the holy day of the LORD” (Isaiah 58:13). So John’s phrase ‘the Lord’s Day’ implies the continuity with the Old Testament holy day of the LORD (Sabbath).

So the New Testament indicates that believers came together to worship God on the first day of the week. This is confirmed by the earliest post-biblical sources, from the second century, from which it is clear that Christians across the board worshipped together on the first day of the week.⁸

Why the change of day? The Bible is not explicit about this, but there is enough evidence to infer that the change of the day in the new covenant was brought about by Jesus’ resurrection on the first day of the week. In the previous chapter we have already considered John Owen’s exposition of Hebrews 4:9-10. The day Jesus was raised is the day he entered his rest (4:9), and we who partake / share in Christ share in his rest (3:14; 4:8) so we share Christ’s day of rest, Sunday.

Even in the old covenant the Sabbath was to be a day for remembering God’s great acts of redemption (Deuteronomy 5:15), so in light of God’s greatest act of redemption (in Jesus’ resurrection), it makes sense for the day to commemorate that in the new covenant.

We can also point to Jesus’ resurrection appearances to the disciples. Those which are dated in the Gospels happened when the disciples were gathered on the first day of the week (John 20:1,19,26), thus further tying together Jesus’ resurrection, the church’s gatherings, and the first day of the week. As such the change of day was not something the first Christians made up as their own idea, but was authorized by Jesus himself (it is his day, the Lord’s Day).

⁸ R. J. Bauckham, “The Lord’s Day,” in D. A. Carson (ed.), *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 236.

9. The abrogation of the Jewish ceremonial sabbatical laws

We have now seen overwhelming evidence from across the Old and New Testaments to show that the obligation to keep the fourth commandment continues in the new covenant. At this point we move to consider the handful of verses in the epistles which appear, at first reading, to suggest a different conclusion. Just as those who hold to the ongoing validity of the fourth commandment need to wrestle with these verses, so too those who reject the fourth commandment to day need to explain the many Scripture passages we have already looked at that point in the opposite direction.

To understand the controversial passages in Colossians, Galatians and Romans we need to see them in the light of the obsolescence of the entire Law of Moses. The old covenant is now obsolete (Hebrews 8:13), and all its laws have been abrogated along with it – apart from laws which predate and so transcend that covenant (moral law). The busy Jewish religious calendar is discontinued / abrogated, as is the seventh day Saturday Sabbath.

Colossians 2:16-17

With this in mind, we turn to Colossians 2:16-17: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”

Now we need to approach this text with humility and an awareness of our limitations, because we are listening here to just one side of a conversation. We don't know the details of the problem in Colossae to which Paul is responding. So we have to work out what precisely Paul has in mind as best we can.

Paul says that “a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” are mere shadows of Christ which are no longer binding in the new covenant, now that Christ has come. To understand what these festivals are we need to look back to verses in the Old Testament which speak of the same or very similar things. What does Paul (with his depth of knowledge of the Old Testament) have in mind in this verse? Surely he has in mind verses like 2 Chronicles 31:3: “The contribution of the king from his own possessions was for the burnt offerings: the burnt offerings of morning and evening, and the burnt offerings for the Sabbaths, the new moons, and the appointed feasts, as it is written in the Law of the LORD.” Or

Nehemiah 10:32-33: “We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: ³³for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.” Paul plainly has in mind these passages which speak of old covenant ceremonial days which were bound up with sacrificial offerings. These things were exclusive to the Israelites, unlike the fourth commandment itself which was universal (it included the foreigner (Exodus 20:10). In the apostolic era it was common to describe the whole Jewish calendar of feasts & solemn assemblies as their ‘sabbaths’, as Paul does here. Indeed, some of the special celebrations (other than the weekly Sabbath) were explicitly called ‘sabbaths’ in the old covenant itself. For example, Leviticus 25:4-8 speaks of the seventh year as a ‘Sabbath’.

In conclusion, then, Paul has in mind here the ceremonial calendar of special days; he may also have in mind the Jewish Saturday Sabbath (as opposed to the Sunday Lord’s Day. These, Paul says, are a shadow now fulfilled in Christ. He is not speaking about the weekly day of rest, holy to the Lord, which dates back to creation and which Christians continued to observe in the New Testament on the first day of the week.

Galatians 4:10 and Romans 14:5

The same reasoning explains what Paul has in mind in Galatians 4:10 and Romans 14:5. In Galatia false teachers are insisting that the Christians must not only have faith in Jesus, but also keep certain Jewish laws, in order to be justified. “You observe days and months and seasons and years!” Like in Colossae, Paul has in mind the Jewish festival calendar, not the new covenant Lord’s Day. The same is true in 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.” Paul also uses the example of Jewish food laws. The passage is about the keeping of Jewish food laws and Jewish holy days. These old covenant institutions are now abrogated; Jewish Christians were free to keep these days and/or abstain from these foods if they wished, but were not to impose them on others.

In conclusion, these passages confirm that the Jewish ceremonial sabbatical laws are discontinued in the new covenant. But Paul is not speaking in these passages about the question of the fourth commandment being kept by Christians on the Lord’s Day.

10. The Lord's Day as law, blessing and gift

We have seen that the fourth commandment, along with the other nine, is moral law, dating back to before the Mosaic covenant and continuing in the new covenant, albeit with the change of day from Saturday to Sunday. But there is a danger of overemphasising the legal (law) nature of the Lord's Day. Yes, the fourth commandment is a law of God. But what kind of God? A good God, who loves his people and wants what's best for us. A wise God, far wiser than us, who knows far better than we do what's best for us.

If we seek to be justified by our obedience to the law, it becomes a burden that drags us down to hell. But when we have been justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, God's law comes to us as the words of our loving Father, showing us the good life, life as it was always meant to be, life under the rule of King Jesus. So yes, God's law is law, but it is also an abundantly good law, a great blessing, the best way to live.

God never intended the Sabbath to be a burden that restricts us and pulls us down. Rather, God wants his people to "call the Sabbath a delight" (Isaiah 58:13). Keeping the Sabbath day holy is not meant to be a drudge, but a delight. As Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

The command to rest is an immensely kind, compassionate, loving command. All the more so in our society in which we can so easily feel overwhelmed with stress, overwork and burnout. Truly God knows what's best for us – he knows we need proper rest – he's made us to work for six days but then to have a full day's rest.

Not only as a day of rest, but also as a day of worship, the Lord's Day is a blessing, a precious gift. Yes, we come together to do something – to worship God together (and what could be more of a blessing than that?). But even more fundamentally we come together to receive from God's gracious hand: to hear his gospel promises, to have our eyes fixed on Jesus, to sing precious gospel truths, to approach our loving Father in prayer, to receive Christ in his word and at his Table, to be encouraged by our Christian brothers and sisters, to be filled up after six days which have left us running on empty. We ought to ask ourselves, why would we NOT want this? If we see this as a burden, there are deeper spiritual issues in our hearts that we need to address. The fourth commandment is indeed law – it is God's good and generous law for our blessing, refreshment and delight.

11. Implications for life

It has been necessary to focus our attention on rightly understanding the Bible's teaching. But it is just as important that we finish with application: the implications for our lives. We will consider these under a number of headings:

What Christians may do

Jesus' example of healing on the Sabbath day show us the legitimacy of acts of mercy; these do not count as 'work' that should be avoided on the Sabbath. Likewise, Jesus and his disciples picking corn to eat shows the legitimacy of acts of necessity – things necessary for daily life.

This means, for us, that acts of kindness to others are a good thing to do on a Sunday (as on any other day!). For example, visiting someone who is hospitalized or housebound, or preparing a meal for a family who have recently had a baby, would be legitimate activities on a Sunday afternoon. Likewise, acts of necessity (such as cooking a Sunday lunch, or looking after one's children) are perfectly appropriate.

What about employment? Some jobs are indeed necessary seven days a week. An obvious example would be the emergency services, or the care sector. Christians in these kinds of employment should not feel guilty about working on Sundays, although they will not want to miss the public means of grace any more often than they need to, and may for example seek an arrangement if possible which allows them to miss only one of the two Sunday services.

What Christians must not do

We want to avoid a long list of restrictions here; that was the attitude of the Pharisees. The main thing we are commanded not to do is work – that is, we are to have a whole day of rest from our normal employment, apart from where our employment constitutes an act of necessity or mercy.

What does that mean in practice for us in a secular society? What should we do if our work is not the kind of work that is intrinsically necessary on a Sunday, but our employer

expects us to work on Sundays? There are a number of questions we can ask. Can we negotiate to have Sundays off? Perhaps our employer will be willing to listen if we make clear to them how important this is to us. If that isn't possible, can we arrange our timetable so that we're able to attend at least one Sunday service each week? If even that isn't possible, can we pray about and proactively look for alternative employment? While we should seek, as far as it depends on us, an arrangement that enables us to have the whole of Sunday off, we should equally avoid rushing to a rash decision which leaves us unable to support our family (indeed, one might say that supporting our family is an act of necessity, if we have no other possible way to make ends meet).

As under-shepherds who care for God's sheep, we don't want you to miss out on the benefits and joys of rest and worship that God wants his people to enjoy on the Lord's Day. But in doing so, we don't want to burden you; we want to help you. Please speak to one of us if you're unsure how to keep the fourth commandment in your situation.

What Christians must do

The Lord's Day is to be a day holy to the Lord (a day of worship) and a day of rest. So we must do two things on Sundays: rest from our daily work, and come together as a church to worship God, edify one another, and receive from him. The fourth commandment is very clear that the whole day is holy to the Lord, not just part of the day. We should pray and consider how best to use the whole day for the purposes of rest and worship.

What about the second service? The Bible does not explicitly command Christians to attend two services on a Sunday. However, there are multiple reasons why we should do this. Firstly, because the whole day is holy to the Lord, not just two hours between 10.30 and 12.30. Secondly, because morning and evening worship does have some biblical precedent. For example, in Psalm 92, which is entitled "A song for the Sabbath", we read "It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; ² to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night." And on his resurrection day Jesus met with his disciples both in the morning (Matt 28:1-10) and in the evening (Luke 24:29). Thirdly, because God invites us to draw near (e.g. Hebrews 10:22); why would we not want to enjoy this privilege whenever we can (Hebrews 10:25). Fourthly, because when we gather God blesses us with his means of grace, he feeds us with Christ; why would we not want this? Of course there are times when circumstances

do not allow us to come twice on a Sunday (e.g. looking after small children, ill health, employment in necessary work such as in a hospital). But it should be our desire to join together as God's people on the Lord's Day at every opportunity, as circumstances allow.

What Christians get to do

Or better, what Christians get to receive. We have said that the Sabbath is meant to be a delight; a good gift of God for our refreshing and blessing. How marvellous it is that we *get* to rest for a whole day from our tiring daily work! How precious it is that we *get* to worship God together not once but twice – personally invited by the King of Kings himself, to enjoy being in his presence together with our family, to receive his means of grace – what a privilege; how much we're missing out on if we refuse his invitation! How good it is that we get to enjoy fellowship with our beloved brothers and sisters – and not only in the services themselves but over refreshments afterwards and perhaps during the afternoon in our homes, building gospel relationships and spurring one another on to keep living the Christian life!

What you could do

Instead of thinking of Sundays in terms of all the things we can't do, if we believe Sundays are a good gift from God then we're better to ask, what good things could we do on this day, in the parts of the day when there is no corporate gathering? Here are a few suggestions. We could invite someone from church to join us for lunch. Don't worry about cooking a great meal; just cook a bit more of what you're having anyway and invite someone to share it with you. The purpose is not to impress people with our cuisine or our perfectly tidy house, but to encourage and bless our brothers and sisters in Christ. Or we could talk together over lunch about what God has been teaching us that day in his word (remember, 'what did you think of the sermon' isn't a great question; far better is something like 'how did you fare under God's word?'). Or we could work through a catechism, either one for adults or one for children. Or a family could read the Bible and pray together. Or we could read the Bible, perhaps the passage that will be preached on that morning or evening. Or we could read a Christian book or biography. Or we could listen to Christian music.

What church services should do

It should be the desire of all involved in planning and leading corporate worship to 'make Sundays sing.' We don't want Sunday services to be a frustrating, exhausting or discouraging experience. Rather we want them to be well-planned, well thought through, full of Christ, full of grace and comfort, full of the gospel, full of refreshment in Christ. Yes, our services and sermons should include the law and confession of sin, but we should always go out at the end encouraged and strengthened in the gospel of God's grace in his Son.

Two ways to miss out on the joy God offers you

God has given us his delightful law for our blessing and joy. There are two ways we can miss out on this joy. The first is pharisaism. The Pharisee is a stickler for keeping the Sabbath, is very careful about what they do and don't do on Sundays, and is always on the lookout to criticise anyone else who takes a more relaxed approach than they do. The second way we miss out is antinomianism. That is the approach which thinks we can disregard God's law. And so we don't set aside Sundays for rest and worship.

In the end, both the Pharisee and the antinomian are making the same mistake. Both think of the fourth commandment as a burden, something meant to restrict us. The Pharisee tries to carry that burden and looks down on others who don't. The antinomian shakes off the burden and tries to find freedom in doing as they see fit, like the fish seeking freedom from water. Both miss out on the joy God wants them to receive, the delight of the precious day of rest and worship which our loving God lavishes upon us week by week.

12. Bibliography

Barcellos, Richard C. "First Timothy 1:8-11 and the Utility of the Decalogue." *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 1.1 (2004): 3-25.

Barcellos, Richard C. *Better than the Beginning: Creation in Biblical Perspective*. Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2013.

Campbell, Iain D. *On the First Day of the Week*. Leominster: Day One, 2005.

Carson, D. A. (ed). *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982.

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Christian Life. A Theology of Lordship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008.

Godfrey, W. Robert. *God's Pattern for Creation: A Covenantal Reading of Genesis 1*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003.

Martin, Robert Paul. *The Christian Sabbath: Its Redemptive-Historical Foundation, Present Obligation, and Practical Observance*. Montville, NJ: Trinity Pulpit Press, 2015.

Owen, John. *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, with Preliminary Exercitations*. 1668-84. 7 vols. Vols. 17-23 of *The Works of John Owen*. Repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991.

** Pipa, Joseph A. *The Lord's Day*. Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1997.

Stott, John R. W. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian Counter-Culture*. The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester: IVP, 1978.

Stott, John R. W. *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996.