

New Testament Sabbath Observance?

by Bob Pulliam

Jesus' observance of the Sabbath was obviously done while the law of Moses was still in effect. I know of no one who denies that Jesus kept the Sabbath. As we have seen in earlier articles (see Two Laws at Sinai?), Jesus conducted His ministry while the Law of Moses was still in effect. But what about passages where Paul went to the Synagogue on the Sabbath? Was he observing the Sabbath because the Sabbath is still binding under the Law of Christ? No doubt, Paul was in the Synagogue on the Sabbath:

"But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, 'Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.' " (Acts 13:14f)

"Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there." (Acts 17:17)

Now, when we understand what the law of God had to say about the Sabbath, we begin to realize that this argument makes no sense.

The Sabbath Ordinance...

Where in the Old Testament do you find synagogue attendance to be a requirement of the Sabbath? This argument would be like saying that Paul was worshiping idols because he was considering the objects of the Athenian's worship, and reading the inscriptions on their idols. We know that isn't true, because the immediate context tells us that he was simply "passing through" the city; and the remainder of his teaching tells us that he did not worship idols.

When we turn to the Old Testament, we find that the Sabbath did not require a gathering at the tabernacle, temple or synagogue. Only when the Sabbath day coincided with another event was such a gathering required. Note the following passages regarding Sabbath observance:

"Then he said to them, 'This is what the Lord has said: "Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord." Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.' So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. Then Moses said, 'Eat that today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, there will be none.' " (Ex 16:23-26)

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it." (Ex 20:8-11)

"You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed." (Ex 31:14-17)

"Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of rest to the Lord. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your dwellings on the Sabbath day." (Ex 35:2f)

Many other passages could be cited; but these clearly illustrate the fact that the Sabbath day was not an ordinance to assemble in any way. Only when other events coincided with the Sabbath was an assembly required.

So, what of Paul being in the synagogue on the Sabbath? Was he there for the purpose of observing the Sabbath? How could that be when the synagogue was not a requirement of the Sabbath? The synagogue was a place for Jews to gather for readings of the law and prayer. That some Jews may have come to associate the synagogue with the Sabbath has nothing to do with the requirements of the Sabbath in God's law. But, what else would a devout Jew do on the Sabbath? He couldn't do any work. And, he didn't have a copy of the Torah (the law), the Haftarah (the prophets), or the Psalms at home. The synagogue was a natural meeting place to discuss the law of Moses on a day when little else would be allowed.

Why was Paul there on the Sabbath and not on other days? First of all, we are not told that he did not go on other days. Secondly, where would you go to catch the greatest number of people? You want to reason with them, and you'd rather address many of them at once, rather than one by one over a great period of time. Where would you find such a gathering? And please notice the text of Acts 17 above. Paul also reasons in the marketplace. He's obviously not there to worship the food or wares being sold! He goes to the market for the same reason he goes to the synagogue. He targets locations where he can do the greatest good in the least amount of time.

Here, I need to place a note concerning the above text in Acts 13. Later in that chapter, we read this:

"So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul." (Acts 13:42-45)

Why did they not reconvene on the next day? Probably for the same reason we wouldn't in our day and age. People work. Many do so from sunup to sundown. The next Sabbath would be the next universally available day in most schedules. In addition, allow me to insert the following interesting observation:

"To Christians, who sometimes think of church as a once-a-week event, it may come as a new idea that the synagogue was an everyday event." (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol 4, pg 684)

The same source points out that "Mondays and Thursdays were market days, when people came into the towns, hence were called... 'synagogue days' " (*ibid.*, Vol 4, pg 682) The modern notion of Sabbatarians regarding the synagogue being analogous to their Saturday service is nothing less than absurd.

Conclusion...

References to the Sabbath in the New Testament have nothing to do with what is binding upon Christians for serving God. Such references tell of efforts to reach the Jews who were devout for the law of Moses. Just as Paul entered the marketplace at opportune time, so also he entered the synagogue to reason about the scriptures.