

8th Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics
The Sabbath, Israel and the Church¹

Dispensationalism is defined, at least in part, by its literal hermeneutic. Indeed, Ryrie treats literal (or, better, “normal”) interpretation as central to the dispensational system, part of its *sine qua non*.² Literal interpretation involves no voodoo, no complicated machinations. One simply interprets Scripture as any other written text, taking it at face value within its context.³ Approaching Sabbath passages this way leads inevitably to the conclusion that the Old Testament commandment to keep the Sabbath does not apply to the New Testament church. Though some covenant theologians have come to share this view,⁴ the abrogation of the commandment has at least three implications that are consistent only with dispensationalism.

The New Testament clearly teaches that the legal requirement to keep Sabbath has been abolished. While it permits individual Christians to keep Sabbath as a matter of personal conviction,

¹In many ways, this paper is an amplification of the argument I first presented in one of the McCarrell Lectures at Calvary Bible College in 2002 and subsequently published under the title “The Sabbath and Dispensationalism” in *The Journal of Dispensational Theology* 11 (2007): 76-103.

²Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 39.

³There are actually two sorts of contexts: textual and situational. The textual context (sometimes called the “cotext”) is the information and perspective that the author supplies in the surrounding text. The situational context is the world view behind the text as a whole, the set of facts and attitudes that the original reader shared with the author. Classic protestant scholarship recognizes both in the concept of “grammatical-historical” interpretation. Both seek the most natural sense of the text. Grammatical (i.e., linguistic) interpretation tries to discover the sense most compatible with the diction, grammar, and syntax in the textual context; historical interpretation approaches seeks the sense most compatible with the historical and cultural circumstances in which the text was written (i.e., the situational context).

⁴Recently, a consortium of seven scholars came to the same conclusion (D. A. Carson, “Introduction,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 16).

the practice is never imposed on the church as a whole. Two major Pauline passages establish this. The first is Galatians 4:10-11: “You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.”⁵ In Galatians, Paul addresses a specific type of legalism called “Judaizing,” the incorporation of certain Jewish practices into the gospel. It is, therefore, logical to assume that the terms here refer to celebrations on the Jewish calendar, and that by “days,” Paul means Sabbaths. Nevertheless, some scholars contend that the text does not deal with Sabbaths, but with non-Jewish festivals⁶ or a syncretistic mixture of Jewish and pagan celebrations.⁷ After weighing the merits of these explanations, however, De Lacey (a non-dispensationalist) concludes that “Paul viewed any attempt to impose Sabbath keeping (or indeed the keeping of any of the regular festivals of the Jewish or astrological calendars) upon Gentiles as wrong, and any tendency on the part of converts to submit to this coercion as a retrograde step.”⁸ Even Hendriksen, who elsewhere defends Sunday as the continuation of the fourth commandment,⁹ believes that Paul is here referring “definitely to *the sabbath-days*.”¹⁰

⁵Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this paper are taken from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

⁶For example, J. Bligh, *Galatians: A Discussion of St. Paul's Epistle* (London: St. Paul Publications, 1970), 373.

⁷R. Jewett, “The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation,” *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970-71): 198-212.

⁸D. R. De Lacey, “The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus,” in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, 181.

⁹William Hendriksen, *Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980, 1981), 458: “The New Testament does indeed ascribe very special significance to the first day of the week.”

¹⁰William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968; combined volume, 1979), 165. So also, J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians*, Classic Commentary Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d. [1865]), 171 and Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical*

The second passage, Romans 14:5, seems to treat the keeping of Sabbath as a matter of personal conscience, not as a legal requirement¹¹: “One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day *alike*. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.” Most commentators take the text at face value and understand the “day” to be the Sabbath—or at least to include it along with other Jewish festivals.¹² If they are right, Romans 14:5 marks a significant difference between the Testaments. In the Old Testament, keeping the Sabbath was mandatory, a matter of law. Failure to keep it brought the death penalty (Exodus 31:14-15; 35:2). In the New Testament, however, Sabbath keeping is a matter of personal conviction; believers are free to keep it or neglect it as they choose. This difference seems to lead to only one conclusion: in the New Testament, the Sabbath is no longer considered law.¹³

Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, n.d. [1920]), 233.

Colossians 2:16-17 apparently agrees, but exegetical issues render the matter less certain. For a brief discussion of these issues along with supporting bibliography, see De Lacey, “Sabbath/Sunday Question,” 182-3. Nevertheless, many non-dispensational exegetes agree that Paul is referring to the Sabbath. For example, see T. K. Abbott, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 264 and William Hendriksen, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1964; combined volume, 1979), 124.

¹¹De Lacey, “Sunday/Sabbath Question,” 182.

¹²“It is impossible to say that this general language does not include the Sabbath” (James A. Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary Logical and Historical* [Chicago: Moody, 1960], 224). So also, C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 259; D. Stuart Briscoe, *Romans*, The Communicator’s Commentary, no. 6 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 245; and James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, no. 38 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 805.

¹³This conclusion is further supported by church practice in the second century. At that time, Jewish Christian congregations regularly met on Saturday; Gentile congregations, on Sunday. As Schreiner notes, “Their observance of both is instructive, for it shows that the Lord’s Day was not viewed as the fulfillment of the Sabbath but as a separate day.” He also notes that “most of the early church fathers did not practice or defend literal Sabbath observance (cf. *Diognetus* 4:1) but interpreted the Sabbath eschatologically and spiritually” (T. R. Schreiner, *40 Questions about*

Those that reject this conclusion argue that the fourth commandment is still in effect, but its observance has been changed from Saturday to Sunday. Thus, Hodge agrees that Paul is referring to Jewish festivals, including the Sabbath, but insists that “his language cannot properly be applied to the Christian Sabbath.”¹⁴ In support of this idea, Hendriksen offers New Testament evidence that Christians are still bound by the fourth commandment:

Since the New Testament does indeed ascribe very special significance to the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10), it is indeed very doubtful that the apostle would have expressed himself in such moderate terms if the “weak” members of Rome’s church had been indifferent about setting this day apart from all the others (as far as practical in those days) as a day of rest and worship.¹⁵

Even taken together, however, Hendriksen’s nine passages cannot support the weight of his conclusion. The first six (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19) only report that Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday, a day the Synoptic gospels explicitly distinguish from the Sabbath (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56). The rest probably do refer to Lord’s Day worship, but none identify it as a Christian Sabbath or treat it as divinely mandated.¹⁶ The texts show only that

Christians and Biblical Law [Grande Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010]. Exported from Logos Bible Software, July 7, 2015).

¹⁴Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1875), 418. Of course, not all nondispensationalists agree with Hodge. Speaking for a consortium of seven nondispensational scholars, D. A. Carson rejects his conclusion completely: “We are not persuaded that the New Testament unambiguously develops a ‘transfer theology,’ according to which the Sabbath moves from the seventh day to the first day of the week” (D. A. Carson, “Introduction,” 16).

¹⁵Hendriksen, *Romans*, 458.

¹⁶Commenting on 1 Corinthians 16:2, De Lacey concludes, “While we may reasonably see a link between the collection and the church’s regular worship, our text gives no support for the positing of any particular practice or belief relating to Sunday on the part of either Paul or the church” (De Lacey, “Sabbath/Sunday Question, 185).

first-century Christians met on Sunday, not that they believed that the fourth commandment required them to do so.

Of course, refuting Hendriksen's argument does not really resolve the matter since his evidence comes from the New Testament,¹⁷ and most defenders of a perpetual Sabbath base their case on the Old; specifically, on the connection between God's rest in Genesis 2 and the fourth commandment in Exodus 20. As they see it, the obligation to keep the Sabbath began at creation and is thus binding on all men and all times, including those in the modern church.¹⁸ After the resurrection of Christ, however, the Sabbath was changed from Saturday to Sunday. This position is formalized in the statement of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (21.7):

As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment *binding all men* in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, *from the beginning of the world* to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week.¹⁹

¹⁷Actually, the New Testament does not the term "sabbath" (sa,bbaton) with the church. Of the 68 times it appears, 67 refer to Jewish practice. Only one (Colossians 2:16) refers to a church, and there it is part of a warning against false teaching. This statistic was generated by a search for sa,bbaton in the BibleWorks Greek New Testament Morphology database (Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks, LLC, 1999-2001) using BibleWorks for Windows 8.0. Version 8.0.005s (2009).

¹⁸Some dispensationalists, such as Unger, have taken this view: "God . . . revealed and imposed the sanctity of the Sabbath upon *unfallen* man" (Merrill F. Unger, "The Significance of the Sabbath," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123 [1966]: 54. Emphasis in the original.) See also Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (2002; paperback ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 397. Both men understand the Sabbath to be lost to fallen mankind until it is reinstated with redeemed Israel in Exodus 16.

¹⁹Emphasis added. The statement of the *Reformed Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* (22.7) is virtually identical. For a more contemporary defense of the creation origin of the Sabbath, see Richard C. Barcellos, "The Old Testament Theology of the Sabbath: Creation Old Covenant, and Old Testament Prophecy," *The Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 3 (2006): 27-50. Barcellos himself argues that the Sabbath was established at creation as an "ethical paradigm that transcends covenants and cultures" (27).

Not all proponents of a Sunday-Sabbath are willing to go so far. Karlberg, for example, acknowledges that certain aspects of the Westminster statement are “at variance with the teaching of Scripture.”²⁰ As he understands it, the responsibility to keep the Sabbath did begin at creation and will continue—on one day or another—until the end of time, but it is not required of all men, only of all believers:

Although the sabbath ordinance is a binding obligation upon the people of God in all ages, the manner of observance changes over the course of covenant history, most notably between the Mosaic and New Covenants. Contrary to the teaching of the Confession, the sabbath as sign of God’s covenant is not binding on nonbelievers, simply because they are not recipients of the covenant-sign.²¹

Either way, the conclusion (or presupposition) is that the Sabbath began at creation and is thus binding on New Testament Christians as well as Old Testament Jews.

Now, Exodus 20:8-11 clearly does refer to Genesis 2:2-3. In Genesis 2, God “sanctifies” the Sabbath; in Exodus 20, he commands Israel to do the same.²² Still, the nature of this reference does not justify the idea of a perpetual Sabbath since the two passages are not parallel. A narrative event is not the same as a commandment. God rested in Genesis 2, but he does not tell any man to do so until Exodus 16:23, where he warns the exodus generation not to gather manna on the seventh

²⁰Mark W. Karlberg, “Covenant and Common Grace,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 50 (1988): 336.

²¹Ibid.

²²Though normally translated “to keep it holy,” the Piel infinitive in verse 8 (AvD>q;l. l=q^D·D=·voÁ) has the sense “to make holy” just like its preterite counterpart in verse 11 (WhveD>q;y>w:w^·y=q^D·D=·v@Á·hW). The form occurs thirteen times in the Old Testament, but is translated “to keep holy” only with reference to the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12; Jeremiah 17:24 [NASB], 27 [NASB]). Everywhere else, it has the simple sense “to sanctify” (Exodus 28:3; 29:1, 33, 36; Leviticus 8:11, 12; 2 Chronicles 29:17; Ezekiel 46:20). It even has this sense when applied to the Sabbath in Nehemiah 13:22! The command was for Israel to set the Sabbath apart by doing no work just as God had done. There is no command to *maintain* any existing sanctity.

day because “it is a Sabbath rest [!AtB'v; v^B·B*·toōn], a holy Sabbath [vd<qo-tB;v; v^B·B^t-

q)·d#Åv] to the LORD.” Furthermore, in the fifty-five chapters that precede Exodus 16, there is no reference to anyone keeping the Sabbath—not Adam or Noah or any of the Hebrew patriarchs.²³ If God has always required the Sabbath of all men, one would expect him say so, but he never does. This is, of course, an argument from silence, but as Feinberg argues, this particular silence is deafening²⁴—especially when the rest of the Pentateuch,²⁵ indeed, the rest of Scripture consistently associates the Sabbath with the nation of Israel.²⁶

²³Intertestamental Jewish traditions claimed that the Sabbath was practiced even before the beginning of time. The Book of Jubilees 2:18, 30, for instance, asserts that the angels are keeping Sabbath in heaven even now and were doing so on earth even before the creation of man.

²⁴If the Sabbath did exist, then it is more than passing strange that, although we find accounts of the religious life and worship of the patriarchs, in which accounts mention is specifically made to the rite of circumcision, the sacrifices, the offering of the tithe, and the institution of marriage, we should find no mention of the great institution of the Sabbath (Charles Lee Feinberg, “The Sabbath and the Lord’s Day,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 95 [1938]: 181). It is especially notable that Moses says nothing at all about the Sabbath when spelling out man’s responsibilities in the Garden (Genesis 2:15-17).

²⁵Exodus 16:23 (two times), 25, 26, 29; 20:8, 10, 11; 31:13, 14, 15 (three times), 16 (two times); 35:2 (two times), 3; Leviticus 16:31 (two times); 19:3, 30; 23:3 (three times), 11, 15 (two times), 16, 24, 32 (three times), 38, 39; 24:8 (two times); 25:2, 4 (three times), 5, 6, 8 (two times); 26:2, 34 (two times), 35, 43; Numbers 15:32; 28:9, 10 (two times); Deuteronomy 5:12, 14, 15.

²⁶Hebrews 4:9 does not refute this claim by saying that “a Sabbath observance (sabbatismo.j) is left to the people of God” (original translation). Some evangelical commentators believe the text refers to the saint’s future experience of heaven; others, to his present experience of peace; and still others, to the coming Millennial kingdom. Virtually all, however, acknowledge that the reference is to something other than Israel’s weekly celebration. For further discussion of these positions, see Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Eschatological Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982):67-80; Randall C. Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (2000): 281-302; Rodney J. Decker, “The Warnings of Hebrews Three and Four,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 5 (2001): 5-27; and David A. DeSilva, “Entering God’s Rest: Eschatology and the Socio-Rhetorical Strategy of Hebrews,” *Trinity Journal* 21 (2000):25-43.

For the minority argument that the reference is to Sunday observance of the Sabbath, see Robert P. Martin, “A Sabbath Remains: The Place of Hebrews 4:9 in the New Testament’s Witness to the Lord’s Day,” *The Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 1 (2004):3-11.

Exodus 16 may be where Sabbath keeping is first mentioned, but the commandment is not formally issued until Exodus 20 (and then repeated in Deuteronomy 5). In both passages, the responsibility to keep Sabbath is assigned to Israel, and Israel alone. Apart from the analogy to God's seventh-day rest²⁷ in Exodus 20:11, neither gives material support to the idea of a universal Sabbath. The commandment is specifically addressed to those whom the LORD had brought "out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). In short, Israel. No reference is made to anyone else. Furthermore, when Moses restates the commandment in Deuteronomy, instead of associating it with creation, an event that affects all mankind including Israel, he associates it with the exodus, an event that affects no one but Israel (Deuteronomy 5:15).

Thus, logic suggests that the Sabbath is for Israel alone, but this conclusion is supported by more than logic. As a part of the Decalogue, the Sabbath commandment is at the core of the covenant that The LORD made with Israel at Sinai: "He declared unto you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and he wrote them on two tablets of stone" (Deuteronomy 4:13, cf. Ephesians 2:12). Though one of the ten, the Sabbath commandment is unique.²⁸ The other nine commandments represent principles that do govern all men at all times. All men are responsible to limit their worship to the one true God, to honor their parents, and to tell the truth.²⁹ Keeping the

²⁷"It is probably best to see creation as an *analogy* instead of as a ground" (T. R. Schreiner, *40 Questions*).

²⁸Ross notes that "the fourth commandment is unique in the Decalogue," unique in that it applies specifically to Israel while the other commandments are general, expressing "eternal and moral principles" (*Holiness to the LORD*, 398).

²⁹When the church was born at Pentecost, these moral principles remained unchanged, not because the law is still binding, but because the holy Judge has not changed. Thus, contrary to Kaiser, the Mosaic code as a whole may be abrogated without establishing a "double standard of morality." See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "God's Promise Plan and His Gracious Law," *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 33 (1990): 295-6.

Sabbath, however, is required only of Israel. Indeed, God himself designates it as the sign of his covenant with them: “Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I *am* the LORD who sanctifies you” (Exodus 31:13, cf. Ezekiel 20:12, 20). This explains why the law treats Sabbath breaking as a capital offense (Exodus 31:14-15; Numbers 15:32-35). Keeping it was an act of political loyalty; breaking it was a violation of his covenant, an act of high treason.³⁰

The proponents of a universal Sabbath counter by pointing out that the Sabbath commandment itself asserts jurisdiction over more than just the Jews. And they have a case. The fourth commandment does in fact require non-Jews to keep the Sabbath: “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” (Exodus 20:10 cf. Deuteronomy 5:14). The male and female servants here may well be Hebrews, but the “stranger” clearly is not. The Hebrew term **rGE** (G@r)

refers to a foreigner, a resident alien. He is not Jewish, but he must still keep the Sabbath.

At first, this argument may seem air tight, but a second look will reveal its fatal flaw. The only Gentiles over which the fourth commandment asserts jurisdiction are those residing within the nation of Israel. Israel was not a church, but a nation state, and as such, its laws were binding on everyone in that state, even the aliens that resided “within [their] gates.” This same principle applies ~~to nations today.~~ While living in the United States, a British citizen must drive on the right side of

³⁰In Exodus 16:1-10, when the LORD first provided manna, he also issued the first Sabbath restrictions. When these were ignored, however, he did not require executions. In Numbers 15:32-36, however, he did. As Ferris explains, the difference had to do with the inauguration of the Mosaic covenant: “Pre-covenant rebellion was not generally punished by death, whereas post-covenant violations were” (Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., “The Manna Narrative of Exodus 16:1-10,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* [1975]: 199).

the road—even though American traffic laws are not binding in Britain. In the same, a Gentile living in Israel must abide by Israel’s laws, including the commandment to keep the Sabbath.

Thus far, this study has shown that the Sabbath is not binding on the church, but is binding on Israel, and only on Israel. Taken together, these facts lead inevitably to the conclusion that Israel and the church are totally different entities. This is the first implication to be derived from the abrogation of the Sabbath, and it may be summarized in a simple syllogism:

Sabbath-keeping is a distinctive mark of Israel’s special relationship with God.
Sabbath-keeping is not a distinctive mark of the church.
Therefore, the church is not Israel.

This distinction of Israel and the church is, of course, fundamental to dispensationalism, the first element in Ryrie’s *sine qua non*, but note its source. It is not a presupposition imposed on Scripture by a theological system. It is just simple logic, logic whose conclusion the New Testament explicitly confirms. In keeping with the scope of this study, two only examples must suffice.³¹ The most notable is 1 Corinthians 10:32: “Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God.” According to this text, Israel and the church are as distinct as Israel and the Gentiles. The rest of the New Testament maintains the same distinction. When John addresses the churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 1—3, he refers to the church twenty times, but when shows the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies belonging to Israel (chapters 4-21), he never even mentions the church. Scriptural evidence such as this makes it difficult to reject the dispensational conclusion. Lightner puts it well: “Since both terms—Israel and the church—are employed freely in Scripture without

³¹For a thorough discussion of the distinction of Israel and the church, see John F. Walvoord, “Does the Church Fulfill Israel’s Program?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980): 17-31, 118-23, 212-21.

ever being used synonymously, the burden of proof is on the opponents of the dispensational emphasis.”³²

There is a second implication to consider at this point: if Sabbath law is nullified, does that not suggest that all the law is nullified? It is one of the Ten Commandments, and as such, Sabbath keeping is usually considered part of the moral law.³³ If the Sabbath—one of the Ten—is no longer binding, how can any part of the law still be in effect? As with the previous implication, this idea is more than a logical conclusion; it has clear and direct scriptural support. Consider Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians:

But if the ministry of death, written *and* engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which *glory* was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation *had* glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away *was* glorious, what remains *is* much more glorious (2 Corinthians 3:7-11).

In verses 7 and 11, the New King James Version translates *katargevw* as “passing away.” The Greek term itself refers to that which has been done away with or abolished. The New Revised Standard Version makes the sense even clearer by translating it “set aside.” Thus, the law has been set aside, specifically the portion “written and engraved on stones.” As Ryrie notes, this phrase matters:

³²Robert P. Lightner, “Theological Perspective on Theonomy—Part 3: A Dispensational Response to Theonomy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (1986): 236.

³³Certainly, that is how Warfield understands it: “I am to speak to you today, not of the usefulness or of the blessedness of the Sabbath, but of its obligation. And I am to speak to you of its obligation, not as that obligation naturally arises out of its usefulness or blessedness, but as it is immediately imposed by God in his Word” (B. B. Warfield, “The Foundations of the Sabbath in the Word of God,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter [Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970], p. 308).

The only part of the Mosaic law which was written in stones was the Ten Commandments — that category which some designate as the moral part of the law. Thus, this passage says that the Ten Commandments are a ministration of death; and furthermore, the same passage declares in no uncertain terms that they are done away (vs. 11). Language could not be clearer, and yet there are fewer truths of which it is harder to convince people.³⁴

Many scholars avoid this conclusion by dividing the Mosaic code into three parts: the ceremonial law, the civil (or social) law, and the moral law. The ceremonial law deals with ritual worship; the civil, with the administration of national justice; and the moral, with timeless ethical principles. According to this reckoning, the New Testament abrogates the ceremonial and civil portions of the law,³⁵ but retains the moral law, and specifically the ten commandments. Thus, Hodge argues that “the precepts of the decalogue bind the Church in all ages; while the specific details contained in the books of Moses, designed to point out the way in which the duty they enjoined was then to be performed, are no longer in force.”³⁶

This tripartite division is theologically useful to the nondispensationalist since it allows him to cancel certain aspects of the law in the New Testament while retaining others. Still, it has at least three drawbacks. First, it is something he brings to the text; the law itself never makes this

³⁴Charles C. Ryrie, “The End of the Law,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124 (1967):243-4.

³⁵While this represents the basic debate, the situation is actually more complex. For example, most covenant theologians agree that the “moral laws” continue, but do not agree which laws are moral. For a defense of this position, see Willem A. VanGemeren, “The Law Is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” in *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, ed. Wayne C. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 13-58. For others, only the Decalogue remains active. Fee and Stuart, however, argue that only commands repeated in the New Testament are binding on the church (Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 139). The Theonomists take all but the ceremonial law as permanently binding (G. L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* [Nutley: Craig, 1977], 207-16).

³⁶Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956): 3:337.

distinction. To the contrary, the same passage often mixes moral responsibilities in with those of the other kinds of law. Consider Leviticus 19:18-19, for example:

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I *am* the LORD. You shall keep My statutes. You shall not let your livestock breed with another kind. You shall not sow your seed with mixed seed. Nor shall a garment of mixed linen and wool come upon you.

Virtually everyone agrees that the passage involves a moral principle, loving one's neighbor,³⁷ followed immediately by a ritual one, keeping different kinds of things separate. The problem is that nothing in the text or the context suggests that Israel (or God, for that matter) treated them as qualitatively different. They were just two laws, and law is law.

Second, the law uses the same motivation for all three proposed categories. This is clearly shown in the requirements for personal holiness set forth in Leviticus. To be holy, the Jew had to limit his diet (Leviticus 11:41-45)—a ritual responsibility.³⁸ He also had to let the poor harvest the corners of his field (Leviticus 19:9-10)—a civil responsibility. Additionally, he had to revere his parents (Leviticus 19:2-3)—a moral responsibility. Though generally classified in different categories of law, all three responsibilities are justified by the same fact: “I *am* the LORD.” In other words, each is as much a demonstration of the Jew's devotion to the LORD as the rest.

³⁷If there were ever any doubt of its abiding value, Jesus himself removed it when he identified it as one of the two commandments upon which all the law and the prophets hang (Matt. 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31).

³⁸Approached with different presuppositions, this commandment could as easily be classified as civil or moral. Although not developed here, the arbitrariness of classification is a major problem with the division of the law. As Dorsey observes, “all the so called ‘ceremonial’ and ‘civic’ laws embody or flesh out eternal moral and ethical principles. Conversely a number of the laws popularly categorized as ‘moral’ contain time-bound and culture-bound elements” (David A. Dorsey, “The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 [1991]:330). For Dorsey, the Sabbath is a classic example of this latter type.

Third, the law prescribes the same penalties for violations in all three categories. The death penalty applies as much to Nadab and Abihu's ritual failure (Leviticus 10:1-7) as to sexual immorality (Leviticus 20:8-16)—or to the violation of the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14-15; Numbers 15:32-35). Once again, there is no perceptible difference among the categories. Law is law; sin is sin.

The New Testament also treats the law as a unified whole, not as a potpourri of different categories. Thus, Paul asserts that "every man who becomes circumcised . . . is a debtor to keep the whole law" (Galatians 5:3). Similarly, James insists that "whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). Kaiser, however, rejects this conclusion, arguing that Christ's distinction between "weightier" and "lighter" things of the law (Matthew 23:23) justifies the use of categories.³⁹ Kaiser's argument is appealing at first glance, but it fundamentally misunderstands what Christ meant. Dorsey, a non-dispensationalist, clarifies the matter:

Jesus, in agreement with the OT writers (cf. Deut 10:12; 1 Sam 15:22-23; Isa 1:11ff; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8; etc.), is simply arguing that the overarching principles and purposes of the corpus as a whole, as well as the underlying principles and purposes of each individual law (of whatever category), are more important ("weightier") than the minor verbal details in the wording of specific regulations and the accompanying minutiae of oral traditions.⁴⁰

In other words, the general principles expressed in the law are more important than the minor details associated with obeying it. Matthew 5:19 shows that whatever Jesus does mean by "weightier" and "lighter," he clearly does not mean that certain laws are more binding than others: "Whoever

³⁹Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Weightier and Lighter Matters of the Law: Moses, Jesus and Paul," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by His Former Students*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne, 176-92 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

⁴⁰Dorsey, "The Law of Moses and the Christian," 330.

therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” Thus, every violation is a major violation. In light of this and other evidence, there are scholars of all theological stripes that reject the tripartite division of the law.⁴¹ The law is one unit, and it is no longer binding on the church—as the abrogation of the Sabbath demonstrates.

There is still one loose end to confront, one last implication to be drawn from the abrogation of the law, and it comes from the references to the Sabbath that appear in prophecy. Isaiah 66:23 and Matthew 24:20 both mention future Sabbath keeping, but the most detailed references come from Ezekiel 36-46.⁴² As part of his description of the coming new order for Israel, Ezekiel specifically mentions the Sabbath six times. He tells the priests to sanctify the Sabbath (44:24) and the Davidic

⁴¹For example, D. G. Moo, “‘Law,’ ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983): 73-10; Elmer A. Martens, “How Is the Christian to Construe Old Testament Law?” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12 (2002): 199-216; Daniel J. Hays, “Applying the Old Testament Law Today,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001): 21-35; Dorsey, “The Law of Moses and the Christian,” 321-34.

⁴²In these chapters, the LORD promises the Babylonian exiles that he will ultimately bring in a new and permanent order for Israel. When he gathers Israel and Judah out of captivity, he will retrieve each and every person (36:24, cf. 39:28). He will reestablish them in their land (36:8-12, 33). He will reunify the two nations (37:21-22) under the authority of a Davidic king (37:24-25). Above all, he will change them spiritually, giving them a new heart (36:26) and placing His own Spirit in them (36:27; 37:11-14; 39:29). They will be his people, and he will be their God (36:28; 37:23, 27; 39:22, 28). As part of this deliverance, the LORD will destroy the army of Gog in a conflict so great that it will take seven months to bury the dead (39:12). A huge, new temple will be built (40-44), a temple far greater and glorious than that built by Zerubbabel (cf. Haggai 2:3) or Herod the Great. In this new temple, the LORD will dwell, and from it, he will reign forever among His people Israel (43:7). None of these things have yet occurred, so they must be future.

There are, of course, other proposed explanations. The basic non-evangelical answer is that Ezekiel simply guessed wrong in his predictions. Though they vary in the details, amillennial covenant theologians generally argue that it refers either to the present reign of Christ over in the church or to the temple and kingdom is the eternal state in heaven. In both cases, they treat the blood sacrifices and other non-heavenly activities recorded in Ezekiel as figures of speech. Mickelson is representative of this approach: “Whatever the outward forms of worship involve, they will have this in common with the ancient ritual—that of bringing an active response on the part of men as they enter into a vital, outward fellowship with God” (Berkeley Mickelson, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 298.

prince to offer sacrifices on that day (45:17). He notes that the eastern gate of the Temple's inner court is to be kept shut during the week, but opened on the Sabbath (46:1). Every Sabbath, the people are to worship (46:3), and the prince is to offer a special offering at the eastern gate (46:4). Furthermore, if he brings a voluntary offering on any day but the Sabbath, the prince is to prepare it just like those he offers on the Sabbath (46:12). In each of these verses, Ezekiel treats the Sabbath as a literal day of literal worship in a literal temple.⁴³

In Ezekiel, as in other prophets, the LORD promised Israel a new order, one that included the Sabbath. Over the 2500 years since Ezekiel wrote, however, God has not kept that promise. Since God does not break his word, there must be some other explanation. Logically, only three possibilities exist: (1) The promised new order is fulfilled spiritually in the church, which functions as the New Israel. (2) The promised new order has been forfeited by Israel, and so will never come. (3) The promised new order will yet be fulfilled in the future.

The first possibility can be dismissed out of hand. As previously shown, the present abrogation of Sabbath law shows that the church is not Israel. The second runs afoul of the specific

⁴³This passage is a problem for amillennialists, who try to explain the passage as a symbol of the new covenant relationship that has existed since the resurrection of Christ. Clowney's explanation of Ezekiel's temple is a good example. Though he denies that he is spiritualizing the text, he insists that Ezekiel's temple is not referring to an literal building, but to the incarnate Christ: "This is not spiritualization in our usual sense of the word, but the very opposite. In Christ is realization. It is not so much that Christ fulfills what the temple means; rather Christ is the meaning for which the temple existed. As the symbolic language of the temple cultus continues to be used for Christ and for the heavenly temple of his eternal ministry, we know that our understanding is being drawn from earthly things to heavenly, from the creature to the Creator" (Edmund P. Clowney, "The Final Temple," *Westminster Theological Journal* 35[1972]: 177).

If Ezekiel's temple refers figuratively to Christ, however, what is significance of all the details associated with it? Why does the text spend three chapters just measuring every part of this "imaginary" structure? And what about the rituals, including the Sabbath? How do they fit the "realization"? How much simpler and more natural it is to understand Ezekiel as describing an actual building and rituals that are actual rituals!

emphasis of the text. Throughout Ezekiel 36—46, the focus is on God, and not Israel. God does all the work.⁴⁴ And why does he do it? To glorify himself. In this portion of Ezekiel, the LORD never claims to act out of compassion for Israel, but only out of concern for his own holy name (36:22, cf. 36:21, 32; 39:25) so that all men may know who he is—Jews (36:11, 38; 37:13, 14; 39:22, 28) as well as Gentiles (36:23, 36; 37:28; 38:23; 39:6, 7). How can the text focus exclusively on God, if his promises are dependent on man? Thus, only the third explanation is viable. The promised world order, along with its renewed Sabbath requirement, must lie in the future. Since the Sabbath belongs exclusively to Israel, that future must also belong to Israel, and not the church.

The preceding analysis has dissected the Sabbath question biblically, examining the pertinent texts and interpreting them at face value. It has validated its findings with the teaching of other Scripture. By this means, it has uncovered three specific insights: (1) The church and Israel are distinct entities. (2) No part of the Mosaic Code is still binding as law. (3) Israel has a role to play in the future. Each is a distinctive aspect of the dispensational system.⁴⁵ Contrary to the

⁴⁴Throughout the passage, it is the LORD alone who acts, performing what he has spoken (36:36; 37:14). Israel, in contrast, is as dead and helpless as scattered dry bones. It is the LORD who raises them, restores them, and puts his Spirit within them (37:1-14). He even takes responsibility for making them righteous, promising to “put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*” (36:27). Two verses later, he adds, “I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses.” After such dogmatic assertions, it is hard to imagine an implied condition: “I will do all this—provided, of course that you do not stop me by rebelling.” Indeed, how can a condition be attached to a promise such as Ezekiel 39:29: “‘I will not hide My face from them anymore; for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel,’ says the Lord GOD”?

⁴⁵According to Heideman, two of these are among its four basic tenets: “The main distinctives of Dispensationalism are, first, the consistent use of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic; second, the distinction between Israel and the Church; and, third, the reign of Jesus Christ and His saints in the Millennial Kingdom. The latter is the goal toward which God providentially works in human history. The fourth distinctive is that the unifying thread from the beginning to the end of the biblical record is the manifestation of God’s attributes, namely, His love, justice, faithfulness, and sovereignty” (Phillip Heideman, “Dispensational Theology,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 4 [1998]: 31).

pronouncements of some, all three are ideas derived inductively from the biblical text, not imposed upon it as *a priori* presuppositions.⁴⁶ In the case of the Sabbath at least, dispensationalism stands vindicated.

⁴⁶Mark W. Karlberg, "Israel and the Eschaton," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 124.