

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY – CHARLOTTE

The Practice of Sabbatarianism in the Synoptic Gospels

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BY
EVAN ZHUO
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Often arguments regarding Sabbatarianism direct most of their attention to the New Testament epistles. It is there that the most explicit statements about whether or not to keep the Sabbath are found. Indeed, Williamson admits that “the most plausible argument against the binding authority of the Fourth Commandment is that which seeks to show that Christ disregarded it.”¹ However, when arguments are built primarily on the New Testament epistles, the question of *whether* to keep the Sabbath may be answered, but the question of *how* we should keep the Sabbath is usually overlooked. Yet in the Gospels, the *how* question is more clearly dealt with. Both Christ’s teachings regarding the Sabbath and his actions on the Sabbath show that he not only had a *reason* to keep the Sabbath, but also had a certain *way* of keeping the Sabbath. In the Synoptic Gospels, Christ reveals the original intent of the Sabbath as a day of redemption, for works of mercy.

Synagogue teaching on the Sabbath

In the Synoptic Gospels, we constantly see Christ in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In Mark, one of the initial events of Christ’s public ministry happens in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Mark notes that Christ, when it was the Sabbath, ἐβήθη went to the synagogue (1:21). Although the particle ἐβήθη is regularly used as a temporal connective particle in Mark,² yet this does not mean that even Mark’s usage of ἐβήθη does not have its own theological import. As Daube notes, Mark’s regular use of ἐβήθη denotes “the inevitable, one-after-another succession of events, from the first temptation to the final delivering over to Pilate.”³ And therefore, Christ’s

¹ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 221.

² Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, WBC 34A (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 54; Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 84–85.

³ David Daube, *The Sudden in the Scriptures* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 60, <http://archive.org/details/suddeninscriptur0000daub>.

immediate entrance into the synagogue on the Sabbath in 1:21 plays a key part in that inevitable series of redemptive events in Christ's earthly ministry.

Christ's regular ministry clearly consisted of regular Sabbath synagogue attendance; Luke 4:16 notes that this was "his custom." Assumed in the background of the pericope of Christ's healing of the man with the withered hand in Mark 3:1ff. is also the fact that the Pharisees and the scribes knew that Jesus would go to the synagogue on the Sabbath.

What Christ was expected to do in the synagogue is made clear by Luke's expansion of Christ's Sabbath synagogue appearance in Nazareth. The pericope is programmatic, for it has been theologically transplanted by Luke to the very beginning of Christ's public ministry.⁴ Its placement shows that, however opposed Christ was to the Jewish elite, he still kept the Sabbath, read the Scriptures, and worshipped at the synagogue. At Nazareth, Christ notably reads a prophecy of the Spirit-anointed servant-king from Isaiah 61 and proclaims its fulfillment in him.⁵

That Christ speaks at the Nazareth synagogue shows that both he and others regarded him as a rabbi. Regularly, the ruler of the synagogue would be in charge of regulating temple worship

⁴ Contra to Lane, who argues that the two accounts are two different visits. It is possible, but the passages are best explained by the same account explained in a different way. Just because the two accounts do not share immediate parallels does not mean that they are two different events. William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 201n2. 4:26's offhand comment "What we have heard you did at Capernaum" shows that Luke is not trying to hide that he moved this pericope earlier into Christ's narrative. This was already noticed by Augustine, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. S. D. F. Salmon, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series 6 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, II.42.89-90, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1602.htm>.

⁵ In a regular synagogue service, there would be a reading from the Law, and then from the Prophets, so many think that Luke 4:18-19 is the reading of the Prophets (the *haftarah*). However, Monshouwer argues persuasively that Luke 4:18-19 is not actually the *haftarah* but is instead the start of the sermon that occurs after the reading of the *haftarah*. In this view, verse 16b-17 should be translated as "He stood up to read *the lesson*. And *after that* He was handed the scroll of Isaiah and opening the scroll, found the passage..." See D. Monshouwer, "The Reading of the Prophet in the Synagogue at Nazareth," *Biblica* 72.1 (1991): 92-94. This seems to be the simplest explanation for the perplexing omissions and additions into the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-3a. Charles A. Kimball, *Jesus' Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke's Gospel*, JSNTSup 94 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 108. For more on the omissions and additions and why it does not necessarily signal Christ's proclamation of a gracious ministry in contrast to a judgmental ministry, see discussion in Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 227.

and would likely invite a visiting rabbi to read and give an explanation of a text.⁶ Christ's "custom," then, seems not only to have been a worshipper in the synagogue on the Sabbath, but as a Spirit-ordained preacher of God's Word on the Sabbath. His regular appearance on the Sabbath shows his concern for worship of God on the Sabbath as well as his Messianic burden to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God especially on the Sabbath.

Christ's Sabbath healings

Since Christ customarily attended and taught at the synagogue on the Sabbath, it is no surprise that the setting of all but one of Christ's Sabbath healings are in the synagogue. Yet it was through Christ's Sabbath healings that he challenged the Jewish synagogue leadership. In many popular understandings of these pericopes, Christ effectively abolishes the observance of the Jewish Sabbath as "law" that has passed away to gospel. Yet a more careful reading of Christ's own teachings concerning his Sabbath healings show that Christ did not abolish the Sabbath but reestablish it in accordance with its original intent.

Synoptic Sabbath pericopes

Casting out an unclean spirit – Mk. 1:21–28; Lk. 4:31–37

Picking of grain – Mk. 2:23–28; Mt. 12:1–8; Lk. 6:1–5

Healing of the man with a withered hand – Mk. 3:1–6; Mt. 12:9–14; Lk. 6:6–11

Jesus at Nazareth synagogue – Mk. 6:1–6; Mt. 13:54–58; Lk. 4:16–30

Healing of a woman with a bent back – Luke 13:10–17

Healing of a man with dropsy – Luke 14:1–6

Saving life on the Sabbath. In the background of Christ's disagreements with the Jewish authorities lies a web of Jewish traditional assumptions and interpretations of the law. According to preserved Jewish tradition, one of the key exceptions to keeping the Sabbath was for the preservation of life. The *Mechilta* preserves multiple rabbinical arguments for this position.

⁶ John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, WBC 35A (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 419. Cf. Luke 13:10ff.

Rabbi Akiva said, “If the saving of a life overrides the sacrificial service, which overrides the Sabbath, how much more so does the saving of a life override the Sabbath!”⁷ *Yoma* 84b:7 similarly states, “One engages in saving a life on Shabbat, and one who is vigilant to do so is praiseworthy. And one need not take permission from a court but hurries to act on his own.”⁸ And most notably *Yoma* 84b:3 states: “one with pain in his throat should be given medicine on Shabbat because it is a case of uncertainty concerning a life-threatening situation.”⁹

In the pericope of the man with the withered hand, Christ seems to be familiar with this rabbinical discussion, and initiates a kind of rabbinical debate when he asks: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” (Mk. 3:4). Yet none of the Pharisees were willing to debate with him upon this matter, because none of Christ’s Sabbath healings—withered hand, bent back, dropsy, blindness—posed a danger to life. According to the Mishnaic tradition, therefore, Christ should have waited until after the Sabbath to heal. The ruler of the synagogue said as much to the crowd after Christ healed the bent back woman in Luke 13.¹⁰

Yet Christ seems to have understood his own healings as “doing good” (ἀγαθὸν ποιῆσαι) and “saving life” (ψυχὴν σῶσαι). Notably, the term used here is σῶζω. The term is used in rabbinical debates to denote the actual saving of lives from physical death,¹¹ but in the Gospels, the term is also used in two other senses. It can be used generically to refer to physical healing, unrelated to death, as in Mark 5:28, “If I touch even his garments, I will be made well

⁷ Shrager Silverstein, trans., *Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael* (Sefaria, n.d.), Tractate Shabbata, Chapter 1, sefaria.org.

⁸ Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Koren Talmud Bavli*, Digital ed. (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2013), 9: Tractate Yoma:84b:7, sefaria.org.

⁹ Steinsaltz, *Talmud*, 9: Tractate Yoma:Yoma 84b:3.

¹⁰ Hendrik van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1965), 212–14, <http://archive.org/details/miraclesofjesus0000loos>.

¹¹ Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Midrash*, ed. Jacob N. Cerone, trans. Andrew Bowden and Joseph Longarino, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023), 1:704ff.

(σωθήσομαι).” It can also be used to refer to spiritual salvation, as in Mark 8:35: “For whoever would save (σῶσαι) his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save (σώσει) it.” It often takes upon one or two of these meanings, as in the oft repeated “your faith has made you well (σέσωκέν)” (Mk. 5:34; 10:52). Here, there seems to be a double, or even triple meaning. Christ’s restoration of the withered hand might not be saving the woman’s physical life, but it still is making her well. In this reading, Christ’s question implicitly becomes: “is it lawful on the Sabbath to heal life or to kill?”

Yet when σωζω is paired with ψυχη, it usually denotes salvation. So if Christ had not saved her physical life, he may actually be claiming that he saved her life spiritually. So when Christ asks, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to save life or to kill?”, what he means is to say that he has saved the woman’s soul (ψυχη), not her physical life. This is exactly Jesus’s position in other non-Sabbath healings, when he heals people by forgiving their sins (Mk. 2:5ff.).

Doing good on the Sabbath. In Matthew’s account of the healing of the withered hand, Christ asks a different question to the Pharisees: “He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (12:11–12). Here, Christ in a sense answers the rhetorical question that was posed in Mark and Luke’s account; he says positively that “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” This is probably the most explicit positive statement of Christ on what is allowable on the Sabbath. Yet what exactly is denoted by “to do good” (καλῶς ποιεῖν)?

Within the context of the Old Testament, the corollary term טוֹב specifically denotes morally good things when speaking about actions.¹² In Matthew, the adjective καλος is used in a

¹² Georg Bertram, “Καλός,” *TDNT* 3:544.

variety of metaphors to speak about “good works,” especially in the pervasive metaphor of bearing “good fruit” (3:10; 7:17ff.; 12:33). In the Sermon on the Mount, good works (τὰ καλὰ ἔργα) are the light that the Christ-follower must shine before others and give glory to God. In 26:10, Christ defends his anointing by saying that the woman has done a ἔργον καλόν; this is especially important because the accusation was that the woman could have done morally good things with the expensive perfume—“For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.” Therefore, the passage seems to be suggesting that not only are works of mercy “good works,” but (extrapolating from “you will not always have me”) that the worship of Christ is also a good work, one that is even more important than works of mercy.

So what is lawful on the Sabbath? If taken in the broadest sense, it can mean just doing morally good things; thus, France argues that Christ’s comments are “so elastic that it will be hard to rule out any act which is not in itself unacceptable.”¹³ Yet the statement does not stand on its own; Christ says, *therefore* (ὥστε), “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Doing good, therefore, depends on the *a fortiori* argument in the previous verse.

***A fortiori* from animals to humans.** The *a fortiori* argument in Matthew 12 is one of three separate times that Christ defends his Sabbath healings using an *a fortiori* argument about animals:

“Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?” (Mt. 12:11)

“Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” (Lk. 13:15-16)

“Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?” (Lk. 14:5)

¹³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 150.

These arguments have important background in the Old Testament as well as Jewish rabbinical tradition. The original fourth commandment in Exodus commands the observance of the Sabbath even “by your livestock”; this is explained later in Exodus as “so that your ox and your donkey may have rest,” and included into Deuteronomy’s fourth commandment: “your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock” (Ex. 20:10; 23:12; Dt. 5:14). Christ’s arguments also keep in mind the Deuteronomic law that “You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again” (Dt. 22:4). There are rabbinical traditions that allow for the rescue of livestock from a pit on the Sabbath, loosening of temporary knots on the Sabbath, and watering animals on the Sabbath.¹⁴ In these three instances, Christ argues rhetorically, assuming that these Jewish traditions exist and are readily accepted by his interlocutors, yet also assuming they know the Scriptural precedent for Sabbath-keeping—by no means is Christ ignoring Scriptural testimony on the Sabbath.

The fundamental movement in all three arguments is that *if you would even save an animal on the Sabbath, how much more humans?* In this view, the common idea is deeds of mercy. If you would rescue an animal, then the act of rescuing is lawful on the Sabbath for people too. Luke 13’s argument is even more specific: if you can physically loosen (λυω) an animal from the manger, why can’t you spiritually loosen (λυω) a woman from the Devil? Here, the keyword λυω is tied conceptually to that programmatic statement in Luke 4 where Christ announces in the Nazareth synagogue that he came to set free the oppressed. Christ’s argument in Luke 14 is similarly metaphorical: if you would rescue your drowning animal, why won’t you rescue a drowning person?¹⁵

¹⁴ *Str-B*, 1:711–12; 2:232–33.

¹⁵ Edema/dropsy was well-known and diagnosable (as Luke the physician would know), and is concerned with the swelling up of water internally, like an internal drowning. Cf. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 544.

So on the one hand, Christ is defending his actions of physical healing on the Sabbath; but on the other hand, although all sorts of rescuing are lawful on the Sabbath, Christ's main concern was to show that he was bringing spiritual liberation on the Sabbath. Christ not only redeemed the people that he healed physically, but spiritually.

This redemptive understanding of the Sabbath is explicitly found in the Pentateuch, and not invented by Christ. Not only does God's redemptive act stand behind all of the 10 commandments (Ex. 20:2; Dt. 5:6), God's redemption also specifically stands behind the Deuteronomic fifth commandment: "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Dt. 5:15). The Sabbath, therefore, is rightly understood by Jesus as a day of liberation.

It is here that we note Luke's inclusion of a note towards the end of his Gospel about the observance of Sabbath by Christ's female followers: "On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment" (23:56). Is too much to extrapolate from this that Christ too, on the Sabbath, rested in the grave? And so Christ accomplished his great and final work of redemption by keeping the Sabbath commandment, before he was raised again from the dead.

The picking of grain on the Sabbath

Perhaps the most difficult passage concerning the Sabbath are the Synoptic pericopes concerning the disciples' picking of grain on the Sabbath. The issues of this passage cannot be discussed at length, but they will be covered as it pertains to Christ's teaching on the Sabbath. The climax of the passage serves as the concluding statement in all three Synoptic accounts: "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." This broad, sweeping statement, like Matthew 12:12's

“it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath,” can be used to defend almost any Sabbatarian position out of context. Therefore, it is important that the statement is taken within the context of the rest of the pericope.

Doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath. Assuming Markan priority, the original Markan pericope is reproduced in shortened form in Luke, but Matthew adds additional teaching to Christ’s lips. The act of plucking heads of grain when hungry is lawful according to Dt. 23:26, but the Pharisees understand it to not be lawful on the Sabbath. All three accounts keep Jesus’s argument from David’s precedent in 1 Samuel 21. The basic argument is that David did what was not lawful “when he was in need and was hungry” (χρείαν ἔσχεν καὶ ἐπείνασεν), and so Jesus can too. Leviticus 24:9 only allows for the Aaronic priesthood to eat of the holy bread, yet David was free to break this regulation due to his need. In this sense, the law was “broken” for deeds of mercy.¹⁶

Messianic exemption or abolishment of the Sabbath? Yet does Christ’s words imply that any hungry Israelite was able to lawfully eat the bread of Presence? Beare disagrees, arguing that “the example to which appeal is made is the example of David the great king, and those who were in his train.”¹⁷ In this view, the followers of Christ, being the new David (Son of Man), are also able to have “freedom towards the ordinary provisions of the law on the part of those who follow in the train of David’s greater Son.”¹⁸ Yet could not any faithful Israelite say that they are in David’s train? The implication of Beare’s comprehensive view of Christ’s argument returns to the position he rejects. This comprehensive view that Christ is proclaiming freedom from the law

¹⁶ From 1 Samuel 21:5’s “how much more today,” Rabbi Simeon (c. 150AD) understood 1 Samuel 21 to have happened on the Sabbath. Cf. Str-B, 1:699. If this is also Christ’s (infallible) interpretation, then there is a further parallel between the desecration of the holy bread on the Sabbath and the desecration of the Sabbath by the disciples; yet this is neither required by the text, nor does it clarify the argument, for the common part of the analogy is the breaking of the law for deeds of mercy.

¹⁷ Francis Wright Beare, “Sabbath Was Made for Man?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79.2 (1960): 134.

¹⁸ Beare, “Sabbath Was Made for Man?,” 134.

is also supported by Lohse, who argues that “the Christian community ... has freed itself from the Jewish Sabbath,”¹⁹ and Carson, who argues that the assertion of the lordship of Christ and the parable of the new wineskins implies that Christ may be abrogating the Sabbath as a part of the ceremonial law.²⁰

However, this idea that the Christian community has freed itself from the Jewish Sabbath falls short in multiple respects. Firstly, the kingly nature of David is not emphasized in any of the synoptic accounts. There very well may be an underlying theme of Messianic kingship over the Sabbath,²¹ yet this does not imply that Christ is abrogating the Sabbath, for if the Sabbath was gotten rid of, then it is redundant for Christ to be Lord over it.

Secondly, although the Sabbath was modified in the early church, it was still kept both in apostolic and post-apostolic periods.²²

Thirdly, the inference that Christ draws from the Davidic example is that “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” And although this can be interpreted in a comprehensive way to abolish the Sabbath,²³ it seems to be mirroring rabbinical understanding

¹⁹ Eduard Lohse, “Σάββατον,” *TDNT* 22. Cf. also Schottroff and Steggemann, who say “When Mark says that the Son of man is lord of the Sabbath, his meaning is that Christians are not obliged to observe the Sabbath and that new wine should be put into new wineskins.” Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, “The Sabbath Was Made for Man: The Interpretation of Mark 2:23-28,” in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 122.

²⁰ Donald A. Carson, “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 68–69. A similar argument can be found in Yong-Eui Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew’s Gospel*, JSNTSup 139 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 176, 194; Donald Alfred Hagner, “Jesus and the Synoptic Sabbath Controversies,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19.2 (2009): 246ff. Both argue that Christ transcends and fulfills the Sabbath (not abolish), but they seem to end up at the same practical conclusion that it is therefore no longer in force as in the Old Covenant.

²¹ Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, ed. Raymond O. Zorn, trans. H. de Jongste (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1962), 304. He rightly says that “in this case, also, the issue is an infringement of a typical interpretation of the law concerning the Sabbath and not of the Mosaic precept itself.”

²² Lohse, “Σάββατον,” 31ff.; Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, Revised and Expanded Edition. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 26–27; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: The Duties of the Christian Life*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 226ff.

²³ Schottroff and Stegemann, “The Sabbath Was Made for Man,” 123, argues that “not man for the Sabbath” is not referring to a rejection of the Pharisaical viewpoint, since the Pharisees would never hold that man was made for the Sabbath. However, Christ’s point is exactly that although the Pharisees did not think that man was

of the Sabbath. The Mekhilta preserves rabbis saying, “Sabbath is given to you and you are not given to the Sabbath,” a gloss on Exodus 31:14’s “to you.”²⁴ In context, the rabbinical statement defends the importance of saving life on a Sabbath, which is also Christ’s concern as well in his Sabbath controversies. Christ indeed did expand this to cover other kinds of acts of mercy, in this case feeding the hungry,²⁵ but it does not seem that the statement is so comprehensive as to abolish the Sabbath commandment altogether for members of the New Covenant.²⁶

Fourthly, Micaiah Hill rightly points out that the verse “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” has the same construction as 1 Corinthians 11:9’s “Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” Surely, 1 Corinthians 11 does not imply the abolishment of women because they were made for men, neither does it imply that man can do whatever they want with women. Similarly, Mark 2 does not imply the abolishment of the Sabbath, or that man can do whatever they want on that day, simply because it was made for man.²⁷

Fifthly, Scripture should interpret Scripture, and it is clear that Matthew’s account of the pericope focuses on acts of mercy. Matthew’s account adds an additional argument, from the example of the temple priests: “Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?” (12:5). The reference is to Numbers 28:9-

made for the Sabbath, their imposition of Sabbatical laws is contrary to the mercy of God; therefore, the Pharisees are making man for the Sabbath.

²⁴ Silverstein, *Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael*, Tractate Shabbata 1:8.

²⁵ It is true that under rabbinical tradition, hunger is not necessarily a reason for breaking of the Sabbath; yet Christ is not arguing over interpretations of rabbinical tradition, but interpretation of the original intent of the Sabbath in the Torah. See Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), 36.

²⁶ Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 1:265. Even Turner, who does not see Christ observing the Sabbath in Luke, is forced to admit that this pericope does not speak of the abrogation of the Sabbath in Luke. Max Turner, “The Sabbath, Sunday, and the Law in Luke/Acts,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 104.

²⁷ Micaiah Hill, *The Sabbath Made for Man, or, The Origin, History, and Principles of the Lord’s Day* (London: John Farquhar Shaw, 1857), 108–9, <http://archive.org/details/sabbathmadeforma00hill>.

10, but also to the general knowledge that even on the Sabbath the priests are working. The key is that the priests are *guiltless*, even though they are profaning the Sabbath. He then says, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (12:6-7). Here, Christ quotes from Hosea 6:6, and shows that mercy is greater than sacrifice. Therefore, if one can be guiltless in sacrificing on the Sabbath, then how much more (*a fortiori*) will one be guiltless in showing mercy on the Sabbath?

Sixthly, Carson argues that Matthew’s focus on the Temple and sacrifices are part of the ceremonial law, so the Sabbath seems to be portrayed as also part of the ceremonial law.²⁸ Yet, Bacchiocchi rightly notes that the Temple and sacrifices are acts of mercy, to atone for the sins of the people.²⁹ Therefore, Christ’s argument is from start to finish concerned with different acts of mercy on the day of redemption.

Lastly, this reading overlooks the fact that Christ and his interlocutors are still under the Mosaic law. It is Christ’s full obedience to the law, including the Mosaic ceremonial law, that gave us the righteousness that was imputed to us in justification.³⁰

Christ’s easy burden and rest. In Matthew 11:25-20, Christ proclaims his yoke is easy, his burden is light, and that he will give his followers *rest*. This “prepares the way” for the grain-picking pericope by implying a contrast between the light burden of Christ in comparison with the Pharisee’s burden (in their interpretation of the law).³¹ Christ’s proclamation that he will give them rest prepares the way for the Sabbath, in which followers of God are called to rest. Christ’s

²⁸ Carson, “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels,” 68–69.

²⁹ Samuele Bacchiocchi, “Matthew 11:28-30: Jesus’ Rest and the Sabbath,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 22.3 (1984): 304.

³⁰ See a slightly different redemptive-historical argument in Robert Lewis Dabney, *The Christian Sabbath: Its Nature, Design and Proper Observance* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1882), 32ff., <http://archive.org/details/christiansabbath00dabn>.

³¹ Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew’s Gospel*, 160–61.

recovery of the original intent of the Sabbath law reveals an easy and light burden, one that will give us true rest. Indeed, the original intent of the law is to be a yoke, but not a burdensome one, but one that is a delight (Ps. 1:1-2).³² Therefore, the yoke of Christ is not a new law that is less burdensome than the Mosaic law, but Christ himself, who is the fulfillment of the Mosaic law, and who upholds the original intent of the law.

Matthew 24:20. Lastly, Matthew 24:20 is instructive for Christ's understanding of the Sabbath. Speaking concerning the coming tribulation, Christ says to "Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath." This seems to indicate that Christ still understands that there is a moral obligation to uphold the Sabbath.³³

Principles of Sabbatarianism from the Synoptics Gospels

Our discussion of the relevant Sabbath pericopes in the Synoptic Gospels gives us many principles for the New Testament Christian's Sabbath.

(1) Firstly, there is still *a moral obligation to keep the Sabbath*. Christ nowhere abolishes the Sabbath day in the Gospels; instead, he reveals the right way to uphold the Sabbath.

(2) Through his healings, Christ recovers the original intent of *the Sabbath as a day of redemption*, a day of freedom. Yet this is not a freedom from the law, but a freedom from the ultimate powers of evil: sin, death, and the Devil.

³² Bacchiocchi, "Matthew 11:28-30," 302.

³³ John Owen, *Exercitations Concerning the Name, Original, Nature, Use, and Continuance of a Day of Sacred Rest Wherein the Original of the Sabbath from the Foundation of the World, the Morality of the Fourth Commandment with the Change of the Seventh Day Are Enquired into: Together with an Assertion of the Divine Institution of the Lord's Day, and Practical Directions for Its Due Observation* (London: R.W. for Nath. Ponder, 1671), 193, <http://name.umd.umich.edu/A53694.0001.001>.

(3) *The law itself is upheld, and shown to be a delight.* “The Sabbath was made for man.”

Christ’s burden is easy when understood correctly, and the Sabbath is a delight to those who recognize its original intent (Is. 58:13).

(4) When Christ says, “not man for the Sabbath,” he is not abolishing the Sabbath, but showing that *the law of mercy is more important than keeping the Sabbath*. As Bavinck says rightly, “Jesus does not abolish the Sabbath but subordinates it to love of God and neighbor, which is the content of the moral law.”³⁴

(5) When Christ says that he is “Lord of the Sabbath,” he shows that *he exercises lordship* over something that is important to him. Indeed, Christ “is Lord of it ... for the purpose of bringing to the fullest realization on behalf of men that beneficent design for which the Sabbath was instituted.”³⁵

(6) When Christ says that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath, he does not mean that anything that is not bad can be done on the Sabbath, but specifically *any general work of mercy* (or piety, in the case of the anointing) *is allowable on the Sabbath*.

(7) Christ’s customary pattern of appearing in the synagogues on the Sabbath and teaching is a model for our regular *congregating on the Sabbath to hear the Word* read and preached.

³⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 225.

³⁵ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: The Claims of Truth* (Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:208.

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