

Has the Sabbath Been Changed?

“The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God.” This declaration of the fourth commandment was accepted by the Jews and their converts in Old Testament times. The seventh day is unchallenged as the Old Testament Sabbath. But many persons believe that they have New Testament warrant for observing the first day rather than the seventh. Others hold that the change from the seventh-day Sabbath to Sunday took place during the early church period without Biblical authority; but that since the change is widely accepted today, Sunday is the more appropriate day for worship. Roman Catholic claims vary somewhat, but the most generally accepted view of that church is that the change came early and on the authority Christ gave the Roman Church.

Our purpose in this chapter is to investigate any and all supposed New Testament authority for the change from Sabbath to Sunday observance, to note a prediction that a change would be attempted, and to review some high points in the history of the change.

I. Supposed New Testament Authority

Many persons who have believed firmly that there is substantial New Testament authorization for Sunday observance are surprised and dismayed when they discover that there is not a single divine command or permission given concerning Sunday worship. There are several references to the first day of the week, and these are sometimes used as evidences of Sunday sacredness although the passages say nothing of such distinction.

1. Gospel references to the resurrection day. Each of the Gospels mentions the first day as the resurrection day. °Locate the four passages and study them in their context. Note references to the preparation day and the Sabbath. Is there any indication of transfer of sacredness from the Sabbath to the first day? Are these passages of value in establishing seventh-day Sabbath sacredness? Explain.

2. A first-day meeting with Jesus. Some proponents of first-day sacredness stress the incident recorded in °John 20:19-23 as an indication that Christ will meet regularly with His disciples on the first day. Study the setting and note that this meeting was on the evening of the resurrection

day. This is doubtless the meeting referred to in Luke 24:36-40, after the return of the two disciples from Emmaus. As to the time of day, see Luke 24:29. The return to Jerusalem followed Jesus' visit with the two. What day of the week was that, according to Jewish reckoning? Why did John call it the first day? Does the account contain any instruction or example that warrants substituting the first day for the seventh day of God's specific command?¹

3. Paul's first-day meeting. °Acts 20:6 tells of seven days that Paul and his companions spent at Troas. The next verses speak of an evening meeting held on the first day of the week and of Paul's plan “to depart on the morrow.” We cannot say with certainty whether the meeting was held on the evening preceding or following the first day. If Luke was using Jewish time reckoning in his account, the meeting was on the evening preceding the first day—which would be Saturday night and on into early Sunday morning. If he was using Roman time, the meeting followed the first day and would have been on Sunday night running over into Monday morning. The weight of evidence is in favor of Sunday evening, but it is immaterial to our present question. The question is: °Did this meeting indicate that Sabbath sacredness had been or was being transferred to Sunday?²

°Study the account carefully. Is anything said about Sunday observance? Does a religious meeting on a certain day indicate that the day is holy? How many references do we have to meetings of Paul and his associates on the Sabbath? Does the fact that the disciples met to “break bread” make the occasion more significant? Compare Acts 2:46. Is there any indication of Paul's sermon topic? What seems to have been the reason this event was recorded? If we were to follow the example set in these verses, when would we meet for preaching, or to “break bread” in partaking of the Lord's Supper? Can you find anything in these verses that even remotely attaches sacredness to Sunday?

4. Preparation for a collection. Because 1 Corinthians 16:1 speaks of a “collection” and verse 2 mentions the first day of the week, some persons have concluded that the Corinthian church came together regularly on Sunday for worship and to contribute to a “collection.” But there is no hint of such a procedure in these verses.³ °Notice the following in the passage:

¹ See *The Desires of Ages*, pages 802:1 to 805:3.

² See *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 391:1-4.

³ “This matter of giving is not left to impulse. God has given us definite instruction in regard to it. He has specified tithes and offerings as the measure

(1) The purpose of the collection.

(2) What was to be done on the "first day"? In verse 2 "by him" means literally "by himself" and in this context is equivalent to the English "at home." On what basis was the setting aside to be done? Would the necessary accounting and calculations involved be proper for the holy Sabbath?

(3) Paul's purpose in calling for preparation to be made for the collection.

(4) Is there any indication that the collection referred to had a relationship to a religious meeting on any day of the week?

5. "The Lord's day." John's statement in Revelation 1:10, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day," is commonly held by Sunday observers to refer to Sunday. °Does the fact that Sunday was later called the Lord's day indicate this was its meaning when John received his revelation? There are two strong evidences to the contrary:

(1) The Bible specifically points to the Sabbath as the Lord's day. See:

*Exodus 20:11

*Isaiah 58:13

*Mark 2:28

(2) The first conclusive evidence that "Lord's day" was applied to Sunday is found in the apocryphal "Gospel According to Peter" written about seventy-five years after the time John wrote. There the resurrection day is called the Lord's day. To say that a second-century connotation of this expression should be counted as its meaning at the time it was written is unjustified, when the later connotation has no Scriptural precedent.

The meaning of "Lord's day" in this instance can be more accurately determined by Biblical usage than by later literature. On this text see further *The S.D.A. Bible Commentary*, volume 7.

°After investigating these texts which are claimed as a basis for Sunday observance, what conclusions do you reach regarding the Bible and first-day sacredness?

of our obligation. And He desires us to give regularly and systematically. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, 'Concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him.' Let each regularly examine his income, which is all a blessing from God, and set apart the tithe as a separate fund, to be sacredly the Lord's. This fund should not in any case be devoted to any other use; it is to be devoted solely to support the ministry of the gospel. After the tithe is set apart, let gifts and offerings be apportioned, 'as God hath prospered' you."—*Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, pages 129, 130.

II. Prophecy and Sunday

There is, of course, no Bible prophecy that mentions specifically the first day of the week. However, an attempt to change God's law was predicted. The prophecy points to the power that would attempt to change the law, and this helps us identify the particular part of the law involved.

Daniel 7:25 speaks of a power that would "think to change times and laws." The prediction is in a four-part prophecy fulfilled in the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Grecian, and Roman empires. The latter includes not only pagan Rome, but also its successor, papal Rome. There is in the prophecy even a time prediction that enables us to identify the power definitely. The power that would "think to change times and laws" is identified as papal Rome. And papal Rome claims to have changed the law of God by transferring Sabbath sacredness to Sunday.⁴ See *The S.D.A. Bible Commentary*, on Daniel 7:25.

From one of the most important of all Roman Catholic councils, the Council of Trent, comes an authoritative catechism for priests, which declares: "The Church of God [the Roman Catholic Church] has thought it well to transfer the celebration and observance of the Sabbath to Sunday."—*Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*, translated by McHugh and Callan, 2d rev. ed., 1937, p. 402.

Obviously no individual or church can change a command of God. In "think to change," the word translated "think" means "to intend," "to strive," "to mean to." The implication is that there would be a deliberate attempt to make a change. But no matter how many individuals or churches adopt the intended change, God alone can alter His instruction and commands.

III. Origin of Sunday Observance

The *S.D.A. Bible Commentary* statement on Daniel 7:25 contains an excellent summary tracing the steps by which Sunday observance displaced Sabbath observance in the early church. Part of the comment is quoted below:

"Throughout NT times Christians observed the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath. . . . The transition from Sabbath to Sunday was a gradual process that began sometime before A.D. 150 and continued for some three centuries. The first historical references to the observance of Sunday by professed Christians occur in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (ch. 15) and in Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (ch. 67), both dating from about

⁴ See *The Great Controversy*, page 446:1, 2.

A.D. 150. Both denounce Sabbath observance and urge that of Sunday. The first authentic references to Sunday as the "Lord's day" come from the apocryphal "Gospel According to Peter" and from Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies*, v. 14), toward the close of the 2d century.

"Prior to the Jewish revolt under Bar Cocheba, A.D. 132-135, the Roman Empire recognized Judaism as a legal religion and Christianity as a Jewish sect. But as a result of this revolt Jews and Judaism were discredited. To avoid the persecution that followed, Christians henceforth sought by every means possible to make it clear that they were not Jews. Repeated references by Christian writers of the next three centuries to the observance of the Sabbath as "Judaizing," together with the fact that no historical references to the Christian observance of Sunday as a sacred day occur prior to the Jewish revolt, points to the period A.D. 135-150 as the time when Christians began to attach Sabbath sacredness to the first day of the week.

"The observance of Sunday did not, however, immediately replace that of the Sabbath, but accompanied and supplemented it. For several centuries Christians observed both days. Early in the 3d century, for instance, Tertullian observed that Christ did not rescind the Sabbath. A little later the apocryphal *Apostolic Constitutions* (ii. 36) admonished Christians to 'keep the Sabbath and the Lord's day festival.'

"By the early 4th century Sunday had achieved definite official preference over the Sabbath. In his *Commentary on Psalm 92* Eusebius, foremost church historian of the period, wrote, 'All things whatsoever it was duty to do on the Sabbath, these we have transferred to the Lord's day, as more appropriately belonging to it, because it has a precedence and is first in rank, and more honorable than the Jewish Sabbath.'

"The first official action of the Catholic Church expressing preference for Sunday was taken at the Council of Laodicea, in the 4th century. Canon 29 of this council stipulates that 'Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on Saturday [Sabbath], but shall work on that day; but the Lord's day they shall especially honor, and, as being Christians, shall, if possible, do no work on that day. If, however, they are found Judaizing, they shall be shut out from Christ.' This council made provision for Sabbath worship, but designated the day as a workday. It is worthy of note that this, the first ecclesiastical law enjoining the observance of Sunday, specifies Judaizing as the reason for avoiding the observance of the Sabbath. Sabbath observance is evidence that many were still 'Judaizing' on that day. Indeed, the writers of the 4th and 5th centuries repeatedly warn their fellow Christians against this practice. About the year 400, for instance, Chrysostom observes that many were still keeping the Sabbath in the Jewish manner, and thus Judaizing.

"Contemporary records also reveal the fact that the churches in Alexandria and Rome were chiefly responsible for promoting Sunday observance. About A.D. 440 the church historian Socrates wrote that 'although almost all churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the Sabbath every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this' (*Ecclesiastical History*, v. 22). About the same time Sozomen wrote that 'the people of Constantinople, and almost everywhere, assemble together on the Sabbath, as well as on the first day of the week, which custom is never observed at Rome or at Alexandria.'

"Three facts are thus clear: (1) The concept of Sunday sacredness among Christians originated, primarily, in their effort to avoid practices that would tend to identify them with Jews, and thus lead to persecution. (2) The church at Rome early developed a preference for Sunday; and the increasing importance attached to Sunday in the early church, at the expense of the Sabbath, closely parallels Rome's gradual rise to power. (3) Finally, Roman influence prevailed to make the observance of Sunday a matter of church law, as it did with many other practices such as the worship of Mary, the veneration of saints and angels, the use of images, and prayers for the dead. Sunday sacredness rests upon the same basis as these other nonscriptural practices introduced into the church by the bishop of Rome."—*The S.D.A. Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, pp. 832, 833.

TOPICS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Evidence indicates that the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) fell on the first day of the week in the year of Christ's crucifixion. Because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on that day and the fact that in a practical way the occasion launched the Christian church, some people believe that Sunday sacredness is shown. How would you respond to their claim?

2. Some persons make this claim as an objection to the Sabbath: "Paul, in Colossians 2:14-17, declares that the Sabbath is abolished." Show what Paul taught in these verses.

3. What validity is there to the argument made by some Sunday observers: "We keep Sunday because the resurrection is the greatest event in Christian history. We believe Christians should commemorate the resurrection"?

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

For further information on the origin and history of Sunday observance, see: Bollman, Calvin P. *Sunday: Origin of Its Observance in the Christian Church*.

Odom, Robert Leo. *How Did Sunday Get Its Name?*

Straw, Walter E. *Origin of Sunday Observance.*

Yost, F. H. *The Early Christian Sabbath.*

———. "How Sunday Observance Began," *Review and Herald*, May 22, 1952; "How Sunday Was Named," May 29; "Earliest Sources for Sunday Observance," June 5; "How Sunday Was Observed in the Early Christian Era," June 12; "Sabbathkeeping in the Early Christian Centuries," June 19.

The Sabbath a Sign

The admonition to keep the Sabbath holy recurs four times in the book of Exodus after the statement of the Sabbath command in the twentieth chapter. See Exodus 23:12; 31:13; 34:21; 35:2, 3. The restatement in Exodus 31:13 introduces an important thought not mentioned in the others. The Sabbath is said to be "a sign between Me and you; . . . that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you." Later Ezekiel also calls attention to the Sabbath as a sign. °See Ezekiel 20:12, 20.

That the Sabbath is a sign of God's sanctifying power in no way detracts from the Sabbath as a memorial of creation. As a memorial it focuses attention on God's creative power and acts. Ways in which the Sabbath points to God as the One who sanctifies His people are the subject of our present study.

I. A Sign

Forms of the word translated "sign" in Exodus 31:13 and Ezekiel 20:12, 20 are used elsewhere to refer to a flag or ensign, a token, a memorial. A "sign" serves as both a reminder and a symbol representing another person or object. In what way or ways is the Sabbath a sign of sanctification? You will recall that sanctification refers to a person or thing as being holy, that is, set apart, and that it is frequently synonymous with "holiness." As we noted in chapter 38, "Christian Growth," this holiness is not ultimate perfection, but it is the dedication to God and "wholeness" for Him that characterizes the growing Christian. °What is there about the Sabbath that shows a person to be set apart to live for God?

I. A sign of obedience. God tested Adam and Eve's obedience by forbidding them to eat of one tree in the Garden of Eden. This was not God's only instruction to the first pair, but it served to test their relationship to their Creator. When He sent Israel manna, God used the Sabbath to test His people to see if they would keep His "commandments and . . . laws." Exodus 16:27, 28. Disregarding the holy day indicated a spirit of