

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Pt. 11)

The First Day of the Week

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My grandfather used to say that when he was a lad, nearly everybody went to church on Sundays. His job was to shine the family's shoes on a Saturday afternoon, so that no polishing would be done before church the next day. If he didn't shine them Saturday afternoon, they all went to church in dirty shoes (but that never happened)! His mother would prepare and cook all food on Saturday in readiness for "the Lord's day".

Such preparation for "the Lord's day" was common place in his community. Even those neighbours who did not attend worship, still kept Sunday as a day of rest and quietness. The 'unchurched' out of respect for the Christians, would themselves not do any work on a Sunday. All shops and businesses were closed.

When I myself was a young lad, some Christians were still very strict in their Sunday observance, to the point of not buying groceries and, certainly not the Sunday newspaper! If the paper was delivered, it was not opened nor read until Sunday evening, or even Monday. My wife's grandmother would ceremoniously wash her hands even after just picking the paper up! Sunday, you see, was a holy day for the things of God. And certainly, there was no such thing as sport being played on a Sunday. How things have completely changed in a few short years.

Given that most Christians around the world meet for fellowship, for communion, for the preaching and teaching of God's word on a Sunday, well might we ask: Did the Christian church simply swap the Jewish Sabbath for its own holy day? Did they swap one set of stipulations for other regulations?

Even more alarming, is that some objectors to Sunday worship allege the Church blasphemed the Almighty by swapping His day from the Sabbath to that of the pagan Roman Sun god. Is this so?

To answer these questions, let's do a little systematic search of all the relevant NT texts for clarity.

THE SEVEN RESURRECTION APPEARANCES OF THE LORD

The NT records seven resurrection appearances of Jesus to his followers. We are specifically told that five of those appearances happened on **the first day of the week**. No day is recorded on the other two occasions --- by the Sea of Tiberias in **John 21** and on the day when Jesus ascended into Heaven in **Acts 1: 6-10**.

Scripture is very clear that Jesus was resurrected by the Spirit of God on the first day of the week --- what we call Sunday. It was **late on the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1)**. It was **when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen (Mk. 16: 1-2)**. Again,

And on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, bringing spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb (Lk. 23:55-24: 2).

The NT witness is consistent on this point of timing; Jesus was resurrected the day after the Jewish Sabbath day, which the NT calls **the first day of the week**. Certainly, there is no suggestion that by raising His Son from the dead before the sun had arisen on **the first day of the week**, that the pagan Sun god was being honoured!

THE FIVE RESURRECTION APPEARANCES ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK ARE:-

1. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary ... departed from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to report it to his disciples and behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him ... (Matt. 28: 8-10).
2. Cleopas and another unnamed person met Jesus as they walked the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus; Jesus himself approached, and began traveling with them ... And he explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures ... and it came about that when he had reclined at table with them, he took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, he began giving it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight ... (Lk. 24: 15-31).
3. In the evening of that first resurrection day it was reported to a number of the disciples by the two who had walked to Emmaus that, **The Lord has appeared to Simon [Peter]** (Lk. 24: 34).
4. Jesus then appeared to the disciples on that evening of his resurrection; **When therefore it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, the doors having been shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, the risen Lord Jesus came and stood in their midst ...** (John 20: 19-23).
5. Exactly one week later, **his disciples were inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst ... and said to Thomas, 'Reach here your finger, and see my hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into my side; and be not unbelieving, but believing'** (John 20: 26-28).¹

Putting these five resurrection appearances on **the first day of the week** together, several points stand out: **First**, all the disciples were taken by surprise. They did not expect to see Jesus alive again. These "Sunday" meetings with Jesus were not pre-planned by them.

Second, on this first day of the week, the living Jesus was worshipped and admired by his followers. On this day Jesus encouraged the disciples as he **opened the Scriptures** and taught them, as he **broke bread** with them and drank with them (just days after telling them to **"Do this in remembrance of me"**), as he **breathed on them saying, "Receive the holy Spirit"**, as he commissioned them to preach the Gospel, as he authorised them to announce forgiveness of sins in his Name. All these significant events happened on **the first day of the week**.

Third, though these informal gatherings were not planned by the disciples, these appearances were planned in the Sovereign will and knowledge of God. Jesus had predicted he would rise again after being **three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40)**. God's plan was for Messiah to rise again, not on the Sabbath, but on our Sunday, or to stick with the Biblical language, on **the first day of the week**. It is therefore not illogical to ask whether the new covenant should have a new memorial day pointing to a new start?

Fourth, it is premature to speculate at this stage as to whether the early pattern of disciples meeting to worship their risen Lord on **the first day of the week** was to be followed. Luke tells us that Jesus **presented himself alive, after his suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God (Acts 1: 3)**.

So we know that Jesus met with and instructed his followers on other days besides **the first day of the week**, the Sunday. This proves that any day of the week is a good day for Christians to gather to be with their Lord! So we need further NT instruction to be sure as to whether there is a special significance for the early Christians for "Sunday worship".

PENTECOST

Some 'Sabbatarians' have pointed to the fact that Luke mentions the ascension of Jesus occurred with the disciples present at the Mount of Olives, **which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away (Acts 1: 12)**.

¹ The Greek literally reads, **"And after eight days they were again inside ..."** As the NASB margin correctly notes, "i.e., a week later ..."

They allege this verse intimates the Ascension took place on the Sabbath day, for after Jesus was taken up from them, they returned to the Upper Room for their prayer meeting waiting for the Day of Pentecost..

This is unwarranted speculation, a reading into the text what is not there, to be perfectly blunt! For the point Luke makes is a statement about *distance*, and not that the ascension occurred *on* the Sabbath. Luke's point is *how far the journey was* --- not that it was on the Sabbath day.

Speaking about Pentecost, Dale Ratzlaff writes,

While there is no mention of the first day of the week in the record of the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2, the fact that Pentecost fell that year on the first day of the week is well attested. ² John 19:31 states that the day Jesus was in the grave was a "high day". This term was used when the annual sabbath of the Passover and the weekly Sabbath came together. If we accept this, then fifty days later would bring us to the first day of the week. Again, very significant events on this day, but the fact that the first day of the week is *not* mentioned in connection with these events may mean little significance should be given to the fact that Pentecost fell on Sunday. In other words, the *event* of the outpouring of the holy Spirit is more important than the *day* upon which it was given. We would expect this under the new covenant, where reality takes precedence over form. ³

OTHER EARLY CHRISTIAN MEETINGS ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

Later in the book of Acts we read a gripping account of a Christian gathering at which the preacher's sermon went long into the night. And it wasn't the first time somebody fell asleep during the preacher's long sermon!

And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. And there were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. And there was a certain young man named Eutychus sitting on the windowsill, sinking into deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor, and was picked up dead.

But Paul went down and fell upon him and after embracing him, he said, "Do not be troubled, for his life is in him." And when he had gone back up, and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. And they took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted (Acts 20: 7-12).

Some Sabbatarians argue that this evening church meeting was a continuance of the Sabbath morning meeting, but this cannot be. We are definitely told the meeting started in the evening for **there were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together**. According to Jewish reckoning of time, the Sabbath had then already finished, for our author states these events occurred **on the first day of the week**. In Jewish time, the new day began at sunset!

The fact that **there were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together** also corroborates that this evening Christian gathering was not a holdover meeting from the Sabbath. The believers had brought their lamps and torches, something they would not do if they were going to the morning Sabbath observance! These believers came prepared for a night meeting of Christians, which is to say, **on the first day of the week**.

Not only so, Luke also states these Christians **were gathered together to break bread**. This description **to break bread** is a unique Christian expression. It is not to be confused with the Jewish term for a regular meal, "to eat bread". **"To break bread"** is the usual NT term for communion or the Lord's Supper.

Jesus is the one who first "broke bread" and his disciples followed his example in remembrance of him (Lk. 22:19; 24: 30-31, 35; Acts 2: 46). And in 1 Cor. 11:23-24 where the apostle Paul gives specific teaching on the Lord's Supper we read,

² F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1983), p.53.

³ Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ*, Life Assurance Ministries, Az. Usa, 2003, pp 319-320

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me'.

It is beyond doubt then. The first Christians **gathered together** for the express purpose of **breaking bread** so as to keep the ordinance of the Lord's Supper as Christ himself had instructed them. And they did it **on the first day of the week**. The esteemed Bible scholar F.F. Bruce concurs;

The statement that at Troas the travelers and their fellow Christians dwelling in that port met together for the breaking of the bread "upon the first day of the week" is the earliest unambiguous evidence we have for the Christian practice of gathering together on that day.⁴

In fact, not only did the early Christians gather on the Sunday for their communion service of worship, but we also know they took up their 'free-will offerings' for the Lord's work at those services, too;

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collection be made when I come (I Cor. 16:1-20).

The apostle's instruction was not just to the church in Corinth, but also what he had **directed the churches of Galatia** to do, too. Standard practice. This was money to be dedicated to a special relief-fund for the drought-affected Christians in Israel. Although nothing specific is here said about these believers putting this money into the church collection box, Ratzlaff suggests that,

Perhaps Paul was telling the believers to save *some* of their offering money at home *before* they went to church each Sunday. This would keep them from putting all their offering money into the local church expense. Therefore, when Paul came he would simply call for the money which the believers would by then have already saved up for the saints in Jerusalem.^{5 6}

HISTORICAL CONFIRMATION

These NT texts about Christians meeting for worship on the first day of the week to honour their Lord must be read against the politico-religious backdrop to the NT. Few realise it soon became downright dangerous for Christians to gather separately **on the first day of the week** --- our Sunday.

You see, in order to keep peace and quiet within the Empire, the Caesars had made it illegal--- indeed it was legislated as 'treasonous' and 'seditious' --- for conquered peoples to associate for regular meetings more than once a month.⁷ However, Caesar Augustus had made an exception for the Jews. They were allowed by special Roman decree to associate for the weekly Sabbath.

Included in their special status, Caesar Augustus also exempted the Jews from offering up sacrifice to the emperor (for his safety) as an expression of their loyalty to Rome. Instead, in the Temple in Jerusalem, sacrifice was made daily not to Caesar, but for Caesar. Ah, the power of diplomatic speech!

This explains why the very earliest Christians who were seen as a sect of Judaism, initially came under the protective wings of Diaspora Judaism, for all of them were Jews either by birth or had been proselytes or God-fearers who worshipped in the synagogues.

However, as increasing numbers of Gentile Christians began to change the social mix of the church, and as the Christians became more numerous and conspicuous, this situation came to the attention of the authorities. Meeting on the first day of the week became problematic. Indeed, it was increasingly dangerous in the 50's, 60's and early 70's as Jewish unrest had the Romans more and more nervous about large public gatherings.

⁴ *Ibid.*, as quoted in *Sabbath in Christ*, pp 322-323

⁵ Dale Ratzlaff, *Ibid.*, pp 323-324

⁶ The Greek construction supports Ratzlaff's contention. Each person was to **put aside and save by himself**.

⁷ E.G. In an early constitution, *Lex Coloniae Genetiae Juliae* (45 B.C.), Section CVI records, 'No colonist ... shall (get together) any assemblage or meeting or conspiracy'.

So, we can now understand why the author to the Hebrew Christians felt it necessary to warn them **not to forsake our own assembling together**, as some had already done (**Heb. 10: 25**). With this political context, we can understand the strong attraction for Hebrew Christians to go back to Sabbath attendance.

That motive was for self and family preservation. The temptation was subtle --- “Just go back to meeting on the Sabbath. No harm in a little compromise over which day you do it is there? Why not come under the imperial exemption given by law to Jews who meet on the Sabbath?” Thus, Sabbath worship was a neat side-stepping of the offence of the cross and of its Messiah!

This historical setting is a powerful argument for the fact that the early Christians met for worship on the Sunday, or better, on the first day of the week. Sunday gatherings very early on had become the norm for Christian worship. In an increasingly politically charged atmosphere in Judea, what a temptation to avoid official Roman persecution by going back to the old covenant ceremonial law, with its distinctive sign of Sabbath-keeping!

This is to say nothing of the other historical factors at play, for as we have already noted in an earlier article, Jewish sectarians were also hounding Christians for allegiance to the old covenant distinctives. By returning to Sabbath-observance, the Hebrew Christians would have avoided both the Roman State and their own Jewish brethren! ⁸

PASTORAL CONCERNS

Those of my readers with a good memory will recall that in my introduction to this series I made a statement that as we approached the Sabbath question, it would be good for us all to realise that,

“Sabbath-keeping is not a salvation issue. Perhaps we should all take a chill pill, and recall the apostle Paul’s observation;

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind (Rom. 14: 4). In this matter, I am convinced the most important test of our relationship with God the Father is how we treat each other while discussing and reasonably debating the issue.”

These introductory remarks drew fire from both sides of the fence! Sabbath-keepers launched into why they feel the apostle Paul in **Romans 14** is **not** referring to the Sabbath when he says that the strong believer considers all days alike. Non-Sabbatarians were aghast that I suggested, **Sabbath-keeping is not a salvation issue.**

As we conclude this series, I feel I must make my remarks clear for both sides. To help with this, let’s just make a few remarks from the passage I alluded to --- **Romans 14: 1- 4;**

Now accept the one who is weak in the faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls, and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Let’s stop here for a moment. It is noteworthy that Paul wrote this piece precisely because there were cracks of division and sharp disagreement in the church at Rome over questions of food and special days of worship. Some felt free to eat all things, others **vegetables only (v. 2)**. Some regarded certain foods **unclean**, and others were not bothered by what they ate (**v. 14,21**). Some felt they could drink wine, others did not (**v. 21**).

⁸ I highly recommend Dr Bruce Winter’s, *Divine Honours For the Caesars: The First Christians’ Responses*, Eerdmans, 2015 for a comprehensive study of this theme.

I have always found it extremely instructive that the ones whom Paul calls **weak in the faith** are the ones who have the scruples about diet and day! The corollary is that the mature Christian --- the one who understands the freedoms of the new covenant in Messiah --- is free of the old Law's rituals and is accepted before the Lord.

It has to be said, that Paul clearly sides with Jesus himself on the question of diet. Jesus declared all foods clean (Mk. 7:14-19). Paul agrees, **I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself** (i.e. there is now no restrictions in diet as laid down by Moses) (v. 14). But the one who considers anything unclean, to him it is unclean and he eats against his own conscience.

This really is radical teaching about the new covenant. For the old Law definitely called certain animals and foods off limits, because they were "unclean" under Judaism. In fact, **Leviticus 11** is in no doubt that to eat what is unclean is an **abomination**, or **detestable!** Thus, Paul following Jesus, **cancel**s out the old covenant distinctions between clean and unclean --- **All things indeed are [now] clean (v.20)**.

But what of the calendar? Let's read on in **verse 5 of Romans 14**;

One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord...

Sabbath-keepers argue --- and correctly here --- that the word Sabbath does not occur. So, what are the days that some wish to observe and others do not feel obligated to observe? We must not be dogmatic here, I think. It may or may not be referring to the weekly Sabbath. I am personally persuaded though, that the Sabbath is included. My rationale is that the conflict over foods and days in Rome sounds very much like the known conflict over diet and days between Jewish Christians and Gentile believers in other parts of the NT. It's significant that after this discussion, Paul identifies Jews and Gentiles (**Romans 15: 8-9!**)⁹

The fact that Paul does not come out as strongly against the old covenant regulations as he does say, in his letter to the Galatians, is because in those churches certain teachers were infiltrating and saying that, unless the Christian believer was circumcised and kept the Jewish holy days and feasts, they could not be members of the new covenant community, the Body of Christ. In the churches in Galatia and Ephesians Paul was adamant that to be circumcised, to keep Sabbath, to follow the old Mosaic regulations, was in fact to deny the Gospel of Christ ... it was to clasp at a mere shadow and not the substance which is Messiah.

In Rome, the circumstances are different. Here, believers were passing judgment on each others **opinions (v.1)**. They evidently were not by their judgments compromising the Gospel of Christ. But they were compromising brotherly unity and acceptance. The whole context is about passing judgment on fellow believers, and feeling superior or inferior depending on one's preference.

However, if we are prepared to accept that the "days" being argued over do include the weekly Sabbath, then the inevitable conclusion is that Church unity is more important than arguments over Sabbath-observance. This is the passage I quoted in the beginning about taking "a chill pill" because Sabbath-observance is not a matter of salvation ***in this context!***

This is to say (and this is my opinion before the Lord!), if a Christian still feels in their conscience before God that Saturday has special significance above other days, then it is not my place to pass judgment. As Paul says, **Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand ... He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord ... each one of us shall give account of himself to God (vs. 4,6,12)**.

⁹ I agree with James R. Edwards in his commentary on *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series: Romans*, Baker Books, 1992, p 318; **It appears that the weak refer to Jewish converts who continued to accept the yoke of the law, whereas the strong were largely Gentile Christians whose faith freed them from the law.** Although this has been challenged by some commentary, this Roman situation **bears a close resemblance to Jewish-Gentile tensions familiar in the NT as a whole (Acts 15:1-21; Gal. 4:10; 1 Cor. 8: 1-13; 10: 1-22; Col. 2:16-23)**.

The new covenant principle by which we now operate is the law of love. Against this law there is no condemnation. Each person's conscience before God is sacrosanct. Those of us who are strong in the faith must be patient and tolerant towards the weaker ones with their various scruples.

But do not misunderstand me. If anybody comes *teaching* that Sabbath observance is a matter of personal salvation, that God cannot accept us if we don't keep the weekly Sabbath, then those who so teach are definitely to be condemned and withstood! Those who teach that you can't be saved in Christ Jesus unless you keep this rule or that rule whether in diet or day are actually preaching **another gospel, which is not another**, and are *doubly accursed (Gal. 1: 8-9)*.

CONCLUSION

Whatever your own history and practice regarding the meeting and worship of God may be, the apostle's advice on this tricky and potentially divisive question is still very much relevant. Be convinced in your own mind before the Lord. Do not make your own conscience the rule for another, **for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the holy Spirit (Rom. 14: 17)**. This is the attitude that is **acceptable to God and approved by men (v. 18)**.

The NT evidence is that the first Christians recognized **the first day of the week** --- what we call Sunday --- as invested with high spiritual significance. It was the day their Lord Messiah had been vindicated by Heaven, raised from the dead in fulfillment of the prophetic oracle. It was the day the new covenant was inaugurated with power and heaven's imprimatur.

Let us each observe our days in all good conscience before the Living God as we serve Him in the newness of the spirit of the new covenant. Let us each fear lest we should fail to enter His promised rest in Messiah.