

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #67: IS SUNDAY THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH?

By John Temples

The custom of calling Sunday the “Christian Sabbath” is widespread, even among churches of Christ. Is it proper or correct to call the first day of the week “the Christian Sabbath”? That is the object of our study in this article.

The Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, was a day of rest mandated by God for the Jews in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:8-10). When Christianity began, the early church worshipped on a different day, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). But as has happened with many New Testament principles and practices, people began to mix in Old Testament concepts and to call the Christian day of worship “the Sabbath” or “the Christian Sabbath.”

THE MEANING OF THE TERM “SABBATH”

According to Vine’s Expository Dictionary, the term “sabbath” (Hebrew *shabbat*) meant “rest, refreshment, or cessation of activity.” This meaning is seen in several Scripture references:

- In Genesis 2:2-3 we find the first Biblical use of the term *sabbath* or rest--God “rested” (ceased from His work of creation).
- Later, when the nation of Israel was formed, God gave the Jews a day of rest, the seventh day of the week: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (Exodus 20:8-11).

Note that the term “sabbath” did not refer to a day of worship per se, but a day of rest. Notice also that God designated the Sabbath as “the seventh day of the week.”

SABBATH OBSERVANCE WAS A COMMAND ONLY TO THE JEWISH NATION

“You came down also on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments. You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, and commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, by the hand of Moses Your servant” (Nehemiah 9:13-14).

Deuteronomy 5:15 says, “And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” This passage clearly shows that the only people commanded to observe the Sabbath were those who had been slave in Egypt (and their descendants). No nation other than Israel was ever commanded to observe the sabbath or seventh day.

Exodus 31:16 makes it very clear: “Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever.” (The terms “throughout their generations,” “perpetual,” and “forever” indicate that Sabbath observance would continue as long as Israel remained as a nation in covenant relationship with God. That relationship ceased when the Jews rejected and crucified Christ.)

Sabbath observance was part of the old law, which was done away in its entirety with the establishment of the New Testament. Paul said that the veil (the Old Testament) “is taken away in Christ” (2 Corinthians 3:14). He further stated that Christ has “abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances....” (Ephesians 2:15).

SABBATH OBSERVANCE IS NOT, AND NEVER HAS BEEN, A PART OF CHRISTIANITY

God gave Christians a new day of worship, the first day of the week, as opposed to the seventh day. This day (the day of Christian worship) is referred to by three terms, two Biblical and one cultural:

- The first day of the week--Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2.
- The Lord's day--Revelation 1:10.
- Sunday--the name in our calendar for the first day of the week.

The Bible clearly distinguishes these two days:

- "But the *seventh day* is the Sabbath of the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:10).
- "Now on the *first day* of the week the disciples came together to break bread" (Acts 20:7).

So the first day cannot possibly be the seventh day, and the term "Christian Sabbath" is erroneous; in fact, it is an *oxymoron* (a contradiction in terms).

Keith Robinson, writing in *Alternative*, Volume 3, Number 1, said: "...it must be pointed out that it is semantically incorrect to speak of Sunday as the Christian Sabbath...as is the general practice today. Since Sunday is the first day of the week and the Sabbath (Saturday) is the seventh, *there is no possibility that one can be the other.*"

Christians are actually forbidden to observe the Sabbath. Colossians 2:16 says, "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon [all references to Jewish observances], *or Sabbaths*, which are a shadow of things to come; but the substance is of Christ." To speak of Sunday as "the Christian Sabbath" is to confuse Old Testament terms with New Testament terms and to misname the Christian day of worship. We should call Bible things by Bible names, and use "the first day of the week" or "the Lord's day" when speaking of the day of Christian worship.

OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

Jesus observed the Sabbath. Of course He did--He was a Jew, living under the Law of Moses; and like all other Jews He was obligated to keep the Sabbath. But when His will, the new covenant, went into effect, the day of worship was changed.

The apostles and the early Christians worshipped in the temple and synagogues on the Sabbath after the New Testament went into effect. The apostles did go into the temple and into synagogues on the Sabbath day, *but not to worship as Jews*--they went where the Jews would be gathered together to preach the gospel to them. A careful reading of pertinent passages shows this to be the case:

- “Immediately he [Paul] preached the Christ in the synagogues....” (Acts 8:20).
- “...they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed” (Acts 14:1).
- “And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4).
- “So he [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue.... For he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 18:26, 28).

If the apostles went to the synagogues to worship, why was Paul thrown out of one (Acts 18:5-7)? Note that verse 6 says the Jews “opposed him and blasphemed.” That would not have been the case if Paul had been observing the Mosaic law and advocating Sabbath observance.

Brother Wayne Jackson writes, “Try as one might, he will search in vain for New Testament evidence that the primitive church observed the Sabbath with apostolic approval. Yes, it certainly was the case that the apostles frequented the synagogues on the Sabbath for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel. That is where the greatest concentration of Jews would have been (cf. Acts 13:14; 17:1-2, etc.), and the message regarding Jesus was to be spoken first to them (Rom. 1:16). But where is the evidence that the early church, under divine guidance,

came together to worship God on the Sabbath day?”

(<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/314-should-christians-keep-the-sabbath>)

The days of the week can change or have different names in different calendars. Of course they can. Some EU nations have Monday as the first day of the week in their calendars. But the Bible allows for such changes by using numbers for the days, not names. Wherever Christians live and worship, there will always be a first day of the week, whatever it is called; and that is the day in which they will worship. And the difference between the Sabbath (the seventh or last day of the week) and the Lord's day (the first day of the week) will always exist, no matter what day the week starts with.

The Roman Emperor Constantine changed the Christian day of worship from Saturday to Sunday. Constantine was the first Roman emperor friendly to Christianity, and in AD 321 he decreed that Sunday would be a day of rest and cessation of business activity. But the Christians were already gathering together on Sundays long before Constantine. So, no, Constantine simply codified and legally recognized what was already a standard Christian practice.

You are saying that as Christians, we are not under the Ten Commandments. Correct! Jesus nailed the entire old law, including the Ten Commandments, to the cross (Colossians 2:14). So the Ten Commandments given on Mount Sinai are no longer in effect. (And remember, they were never for Gentile nations, but only for Jews.) However, every moral principle of the Ten Commandments is still binding on Christians, being repeated in the New Testament. It is still wrong to murder, covet, and steal, just as it was under the law of Moses. The command to keep the Sabbath, though, is conspicuously absent from the New Testament.

CONCLUSION

Keith Robinson said it well: “Even though Paul may have continued to observe some Jewish customs as a matter of cultural heritage, he refused to allow Judaizing teachers to impose these customs on Gentile Christians (Acts 16:1-2, Galatians 2:1-5).... The Sabbath rest was an integral part of God's law given by

Moses to the Jewish nation. It was a covenant between God and Israel, and never intended to be universal or eternal.” (Ibid.)

Without a doubt, Sunday or the first day of the week is the day on which Christians are to assemble for corporate worship (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2). So to speak of Sunday as “the Sabbath” or “the Christian Sabbath” is to confuse Old Testament and New Testament concepts and terms, and to misname the Christian day of worship. Let us be careful to call Bible things by Bible names. --John Temples