

The New Testament Sabbath Day

By Ronald L. Dart

Would it surprise you to learn that during the time the New Testament was being written, the entire Christian church throughout the known world observed the Sabbath day? No, I don't mean Sunday. I mean what most people would call "the Jewish Sabbath," Saturday. As late as the 80s and 90s of the first century, when the last words of the New Testament were being written, the New Testament church *universally* observed the seventh day Sabbath. This is beyond dispute. It is not a matter of a few proof texts and technical arguments. It is something that is woven into the very fabric of the New Testament.

What may be the first subtle clue is found in Luke's account of one of Jesus' earliest sermons. It was not long after His baptism when Jesus, "came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, *as his custom* was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up for to read."¹

No one can doubt for a moment that the seventh day Sabbath was the universally recognized day of rest and worship among all Jews when Christ came on the scene. So it was Jesus' custom, His *ethos*, to attend synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath and that Sabbath was, week by week, the day we call Saturday. Jesus was a member of this synagogue and had been accepted there ever since He was a boy. This was surely not the first time He had stood to read in this synagogue.

Here is my question: How did the Jews in that synagogue think about the Sabbath? What was the *status and meaning* of the Sabbath day in their faith and practice? How important was it? Bear in mind also that all Jesus' disciples were Jews. They had all grown up attending synagogue and had learned to

read the Scriptures in synagogue schools. How did Jesus' disciples look at the Sabbath day? These are questions we can answer with clarity.

First and foremost, the Sabbath was the fourth of the Ten Commandments. It was heart and core of the Jews covenant with God.² But for the Jew of those days, the Sabbath was more than that. The Sabbath lay at the very heart of the *identity of their God*. They all knew well the significance of this passage from the book of Exodus: "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; *that ye may know that I am the LORD* that doth sanctify you."³

Due to a curious convention in most Bibles, there is something here that is easily overlooked. Whenever you see the small caps LORD in your Bible, it means that the Hebrew word there is YHWH (written Hebrew has no vowels). It is pronounced "Yahweh," or more familiarly, "Jehovah" (with the J pronounced as Y). It all depends on the vowels inserted.

The Sabbath, then, was not merely a sign of who the Jews were, but the sign that identified who their God was—*by name*. "Verily my Sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; *that ye may know that I am Jehovah*." For a Jew in that time and place, changing the Sabbath was unthinkable. It would be tantamount to changing his God. Now consider the rest of that passage in Exodus: "Ye shall keep the Sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a *perpetual* covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of

Israel *for ever*: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.”

For a Jew in the synagogue on that day, the Sabbath was the sign that identified his God. The Sabbath was not going away. It was a *perpetual* covenant to last *forever*. It even carried the penalty of death for a presumptuous violation. For a Jew of the first century, the Sabbath could not be taken lightly. They all knew from Ezekiel’s prophecies that failure to keep the sign of the Sabbath was a direct reason why they had spent 70 years in Babylonian exile.

Ezekiel and the Sabbath

Ezekiel was already a known prophet when the Jews found themselves in Babylon. Some of the elders went to him there to inquire of God, but God was having none of it. “Speak to these elders,” God said to Ezekiel, “and tell them this: Are ye come to inquire of me? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I will not be inquired of by you.”⁴

Strong words, and strongly put. “Will you judge them?” God asked Ezekiel, “Will you judge them, son of man? Then confront them with the detestable practices of their fathers.” What follows is a litany of sins that ultimately led to the Jews’ downfall as a nation. Included prominently in this is the Sabbath day: “And I gave them my statutes, and showed them my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them. Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them.”

Note well. God gave them the Sabbaths as a sign so they might know who their God was. They were just coming out of Egypt where there was one set of gods and they were headed for Canaan where there was yet another set of gods. The Sabbath was more than just another law. *It was the law that identified their God*. It told them whose laws and rites they were to practice.

“But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness: they walked not in my statutes, and they despised my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them; and *my sabbaths they greatly polluted*: then I said, I would pour out my fury upon them in the wilderness, to consume them. But I wrought for my name’s sake, that it should not be

polluted before the heathen, in whose sight I brought them out.”

It seems strange that the children of Israel were already corrupting the Sabbath while they were still in the wilderness. One would have thought it would have taken longer.

“But I said unto their children in the wilderness, Walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols: I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; And hallow my Sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that ye may know that I am Jehovah your God.”

Ezekiel proclaims the same formula we read in Exodus. The Sabbath identifies not the children of Israel, but their God. And God warned them of the consequence of corrupting the Sabbath right from the start.

“I lifted up mine hand unto them also in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the heathen, and disperse them through the countries; *Because they had not executed my judgments, but had despised my statutes, and had polluted my Sabbaths.*”⁵

In the end, the Jews went into captivity in Babylon for a broad variety of transgressions, but the number one reason that led to all the others was that they corrupted the Sabbath day.

So, by the time Jesus showed up in the synagogue to read the Scriptures that day, the Sabbath had been drilled into the conscience of every Jew assembled there. It was woven into the warp and woof of their faith. It was not a mere “doctrine” to be abandoned if it became inconvenient. Changing the Sabbath would have been tantamount to changing their religion. And there was no question among Jews about which day it was. They learned this when the Sabbath became the test commandment.

Which Day?

It happened when God gave them manna to eat. He said to Moses: “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no.”⁶ Thus, the Sabbath became the test commandment. If they

won't do this, God said, there is hardly any point in going further.

The test was a simple one. They would get manna every morning for six days. Each day, they were to gather just enough for one day. If they kept it over to the second day, it would become wormy and start to stink. On the sixth day, though, they were to gather twice as much and prepare it for the seventh day, the Sabbath. That way, they would not have to do the work of cooking on the Sabbath day. On the Sabbath day, it would not breed worms and stink.

And, so, everyone had to observe the Sabbath, and they all had to observe it on the same day. No one was allowed to choose a Sabbath for himself. After all, it was God's Sabbath and His identifying sign, *not theirs*.

So the Jews of the first century had no questions about the Sabbath or when it was. It was perhaps the most crucial of all their laws and customs. My point in all this is simple. *When Jesus walked onto the scene, the seventh day Sabbath was an established and honored tradition in every sect of Judaism.* There were Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and more. They may have been divided on many issues, but they were not divided on the importance of the Sabbath day. The observance of the Sabbath on the day appointed by God Himself, was the *identifying sign* that they were worshiping Jehovah and *not someone else*.

Jesus and the Sabbath

After His baptism, His 40-day fast and His temptation by the devil, Jesus was ready to begin His ministry. What was the first thing He did, where did He do it, and on what day did He do it? That brings me back to where I started.

“And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, *as his custom was*, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the

brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, *This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.*”⁷

And what day was that? The Sabbath day, of course. It was a part of Jesus' *ethos*, His customary practice, to attend synagogue on the Sabbath day. And it was on the Sabbath day that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled.

Okay, Jesus kept the Sabbath at this point. But was it His intent to later change the day of worship for His disciples? This kind of change could not have been an afterthought. If it were part of the plan, Jesus knew that from the beginning. He knew it when He read Isaiah in the synagogue on the Sabbath. So was it His intent to change the Fourth Commandment or even to abolish it? If so, how would that intent have finally been expressed or carried out? And what would have been the consequences of that change?

First, it would have been necessary at some point for Jesus to clearly and definitively announce the change, and to give the reason for it. Remember that to any Jew, changing the Sabbath would have been tantamount to changing gods. This was no mere doctrinal issue. All of Jesus' disciples were Jews. Like Jesus, they had been brought up in the synagogue and the Sabbath was a part of their *ethos*. They would never imagine that they had the authority to change the Sabbath without Jesus' *explicit* authorization.

Furthermore, if it had been Jesus' intent to change the Sabbath to Sunday, there would have been a point in time for the changeover. There would have been a recognition that the change had been made and why it had been made. This isn't the sort of thing you slip into gradually.

Bear in mind, that for some 20 years after the ascension of Christ, the church was composed entirely of Jews and proselytes. There was no wholesale conversion of Gentiles until Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey in Acts 13. You can search the four Gospels and through Acts 12 and you will not find a word about a controversy over the Sabbath. You will find no instructions for a change in

the day of worship, nor even any bread crumbs to follow to indicate that such a change might have been made.

This is important, because a change in the day of worship would not merely have implied a change in custom. For every Jew and every proselyte, it would have implied *a change of God*. And this change would have been dealt with in depth. Now, you tell me. Could such a change have been made without a ripple of it showing up in the Bible up to Acts 13?

I recognize that this is an argument from silence, but an argument from silence is decisive if it can be shown that the silence is significant. This silence is highly significant.

The Gentiles

But, the Gospel was going to the Gentiles. Paul hit the evangelism trail along with Barnabas. Did a change in the Sabbath take place at that time?

“But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, *and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and sat down*. And after the reading of the law and the prophets the rulers of the synagogue sent unto them, saying, Ye men and brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on. Then Paul stood up, and beckoning with his hand said, Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, give audience.”⁸

The Gospel had to go to the Jews first, and naturally on the Sabbath, right? Paul’s Gospel to the Jews followed. You can read it for yourself, and you will find not a word about a change of Sabbath. Naturally. What would have been the response to such a suggestion? That is not hard to anticipate, because we are told what happens when the Jews reject Paul’s message.

“And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to *them the next Sabbath*. Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. And *the next Sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God*. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul,

contradicting and blaspheming.”

Note well, this uproar was not because of a change in the day of assembly and worship. This was on the Sabbath day. *There had been no change*. The uproar was about sheer envy. There is more.

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, *as his manner was*, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.”⁹

Note that at this late date, it was still Paul’s “manner,” his *ethos*, to go to the synagogue *on the Sabbath*. The word is the same as the word used for Jesus’ custom. Yes, Paul went to the synagogue, because that was where the Jews were, so he could preach to them. But that is not why Luke says he went there. Luke says that going to synagogue on the Sabbath was still Paul’s *ethos*, his custom.

In the early years of the Christian faith, in all the years recorded in the pages of the New Testament, the Christian church looked, to the outside world, to be nothing more than another Jewish sect. They not only observed the same Sabbath as the Jews, they observed the same holidays. They planned their travel according to the Jewish calendar. Luke made a note on one occasion, “And we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and came unto them to Troas in five days; where we abode seven days.”¹⁰

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul made reference to the practices of the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread saying, “For even Christ our *Passover* is sacrificed for us: Therefore *let us keep the feast*, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”¹¹

I know this will be shocking to some people, but it is right there on the page. Paul was exhorting a Gentile church to observe the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But there is still more. Paul wrote to the Colossians: “Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the

substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking.”¹²

Parse this passage carefully, and what you see is a church that is observing the festivals and Sabbaths but is being condemned for feasting on food and drink by Gentile ascetics.

The Lord’s Day

But doesn’t John mention Sunday as the Lord’s day in Revelation? Actually, no, he doesn’t. Here is what he said: “I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet.”¹³

There is not a word here to suggest that the Lord’s day is Sunday. If John is indeed referring to a day of the week, and if we are to use the Bible as our best historical source, the Sabbath is the Lord’s day. Consider this instance from Jesus’ ministry.

“And it came to pass on the second Sabbath after the first, that he went through the corn fields; and his disciples plucked the ears of corn, and did eat, rubbing them in their hands.”¹⁴

This curious expression is interesting. There were seven Sabbaths between the Days of Unleavened Bread and Pentecost. This was the second Sabbath in the cycle.

“And certain of the Pharisees said unto them, Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days? And Jesus answering them said, Have ye not read so much as this, what David did, when himself was an hungered, and they which were with him; How he went into the house of God, and did take and eat the showbread, and gave also to them that were with him; which it is not lawful to eat but for the priests alone? And he said unto them, *That the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath.*”¹⁵

Why would one, then, assume that Sunday is the Lord’s day? I think it is clear enough that in the apostolic era of the church, there was one Sunday in the year that was observed—the day the firstfruits were offered, and the day Christ first appeared to His disciples and was presented to God as the first of the

firstfruits. It is that singular day in the year called “the first day of the Weeks.”

Try to put yourself for a moment in the mind of one of the original disciples of Jesus. How would you have been different from what you are today? In the first place, you would have been a Jew. Like Jesus, you would have been a regular in synagogue attendance, and you would have been a Sabbath keeper.

The Sabbath, you must remember, was more than just another commandment, more than a mere doctrine. It was a matter of religious *identity*. The Sabbath was the identifying sign that answered the question, “Who is your God.” To change the Sabbath to another day would not merely have been a change in doctrine. It would have been tantamount to *changing their God*.

So if you had been one of the original disciples of Jesus, the Sabbath would not merely have been another doctrine to believe or not. It would have been the irrevocable sign of the identity of your God.

Now, how and when did all that get changed? Why would you, at some later time, abandon the observance of the Sabbath in favor of Sunday? And what would have been the consequences of that change? Wouldn’t you expect that Jesus would have said something about it, to explain the change? For there would have had to have been a moment when the change came into effect, right? And, being good Jews, you or some of your close friends would have wondered at the change.

It is very hard to imagine that one week the entire body of the disciples of Jesus (who were all Jews at the time) would have kept the Sabbath and, the next week, observed Sunday instead, with no explanation, no comment, not a ripple. So what did happen?

The conventional wisdom is that the crucifixion and resurrection changed everything. However, we must face the fact that there is *nothing* in the New Testament that says so. You would expect a change of this magnitude would be explained somewhere; that there would be a passage that tells us, not merely the change, but the reason for the change. The Sabbath had a theology that went with it. It identified who your God was—you were a worshiper of Jehovah, not Baal, and the Sabbath established that identity.

So, there should have been a statement as strong as the original statements about the Sabbath to

explain who their new god was. No such passage exists. Of course, there was no change in their God. And no change in their Sabbath.

There is a general presumption among Christians who do not keep the Sabbath that the church began meeting on Sunday immediately after the resurrection of Jesus, and they did it because Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday morning. This is based in its entirety on eight New Testament texts that appear to mention the first day of the week. The superficial impression is that the Church was meeting regularly on Sunday, the first day of the week. But this is entirely misleading. Six of these Scriptures refer to the same events on the same day—the day Jesus first appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. That only leaves two other passages that might lead one to this conclusion.

There is something else you should know about these passages. There is no Greek word for “week” in any of them. In fact, there is no Greek word for “week” in the New Testament *at all*. In every case where the word “week” is found, the word in Greek is *Sabbaton*, a transliteration of the Hebrew word, Sabbath. Take this instance for example, it is in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican: “Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast *twice in the week*, I give tithes of all that I possess.”¹⁶

Literally, the Pharisee said, “I fast twice of a Sabbath.” It is genitive *singular* and an idiom that refers to the period between the Sabbaths, for no Pharisee would fast on any Sabbath apart from the Day of Atonement. The very idea of “week,” to a Jew, was based on the Sabbath.

Now, about the eight instances where the expression, “the first day of the week” is found, first you should know that Hebrews (and all Jesus disciples at this time were Hebrews) did not identify days of the week in that manner. The Hebrew manner of designating Sunday would have been to call it “the morrow after the Sabbath.” Second, you should know that in every case, the word for “week” is “Sabbaths” in the *plural*, and the word “day” is missing altogether—in *every one of these eight instances*.

So here is how the first instance reads: “Now

after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.”¹⁷ And here is how it reads *literally*: “Now after the Sabbath, as the first of the Sabbaths [plural] began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.” That is an odd expression since we know it was not a Sabbath dawning, but a Sunday morning. What does it mean?

It is probably correct to insert the word “day” as virtually all translations do in this passage. And if we understand the *plural* of the word “Sabbath” as used here to refer to “weeks” (not the singular “week”), then what we are looking at is “the first day of the weeks.”

How does that help? Well, there are seven weeks, seven Sabbaths between this day and the Feast of Firstfruits, Pentecost.¹⁸ The day being referenced here is the first day of the 50-day countdown to Pentecost. It was the day when the first of the firstfruits were offered to God.¹⁹ It was also the day of Jesus’ presentation to the Father as the first of the firstfruits from the dead.²⁰ So this was not merely a day of the week. It was a special day of the year—the day that began the spring harvest.

But I said there are eight of these references to the first day of the week. Maybe one of the others will clarify matters. Here are the next five, each of them using exactly the same idiom for the first day of the weeks leading up to Pentecost:

- “And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the weeks, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.”²¹
- “Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the weeks, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.”²²
- “Now upon the first day of the weeks, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them.”²³
- “The first day of the weeks cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.”²⁴
- “Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the weeks, when the doors were shut where the

disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.”²⁵

As to the last of these being a meeting, there is nothing here to suggest that anything new was going on. They were frightened and confused and did the natural thing. They huddled together, trying to make sense out of what had happened.

So we have found nothing about a new custom of meeting on Sunday vs. Sabbath, have we? If I was one of the disciples of Jesus, I would have found nothing here to change anything concerning the Sabbath day. Would you?

These are six of the eight occasions where the New Testament refers to “the first day of the week,” but these all refer to the events of the same day. That thins out considerably the argument that a new custom had started in the church. There are only two references left with which to establish a new day of worship on the first day of every week. Perhaps the most familiar of the two is the following: “Now 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 weeks, let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.”²⁶

There are a couple of important things to notice here. First, this is precisely the same idiom we saw in the previous six instances. It is a reference to the first day of the seven weeks of harvest and, therefore, the first opportunity they will have to store up grain for the “collection for the saints.” This was famine relief for the saints in Jerusalem. Notice the instruction that each of them was to “lay by him[self] in store” his offering of food so it would be ready to go when Paul got there. Further, that means that the first day of the weeks was not a day of worship—it was a *work day* to gather the harvested grain for shipment to Palestine. The use of this passage as an excuse for taking up an offering every Sunday is ludicrous to anyone who understands what was actually going on. And there is not a thing here about a church meeting.

That leaves us with only one instance of “the first day of the week” in the New Testament: “And upon the first day of the weeks, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his

speech until midnight.”²⁷

This is the only passage in the New Testament that suggests the possibility that the Church met on the first day of the week, and even here it is Saturday night, not Sunday, per se. It is also precisely the same idiom.²⁸ This is really thin gruel upon which to base a change in something as central to the faith as the Sabbath day, isn’t it?

The Problem

Here is our problem. We have the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence that the church met on the first day of the week at all. What we have is incidental, that is to say it is an isolated *incident*, not a custom of the church. At no point is it said to be the *ethos*, the custom of the church to meet on Sunday.

We have to explain how the earliest Jewish Christians abandoned the observance of the Sabbath and substituted Sunday, when they did it, why they did it, and how they dealt with the certain fact that the Sabbath day was the identifying sign of their God. And we have to find all this in the New Testament.

The idea is that it was *the Sunday resurrection of Jesus* that prompted the change. But we have an even greater problem with that. Are you ready for this? No one in the New Testament bears witness to the *time* of Jesus’ resurrection for the simple reason that no one witnessed it. We have an abundance of witnesses that He was alive from Sunday morning on, but no witnesses as to the actual time He opened His eyes and left the tomb.

For that, we have only circumstantial evidence for the time of the resurrection, but that circumstantial evidence is very persuasive. First is Jesus’ own testimony: “But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was *three days and three nights* in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”²⁹

There is simply no way to get three days and three nights between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning. If you accept what Jesus said, then you have to start with the time He was buried. They rushed to get Him in the tomb, so the count starts at the end of the day of his death.³⁰ This alone should tell us that

the resurrection should have been about sundown, not Sunday morning.

There is one way you can make this work. Jesus was placed in the tomb late Wednesday afternoon. He then lay there Wednesday night, Thursday, Thursday night, Friday, Friday night, and all day Saturday—three days and three nights.

Why then does tradition place the crucifixion on a Friday? Simply because the Scriptures say that Jesus was crucified on the preparation day, the day before the Sabbath: “There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews’ preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.”³¹ To most readers, that means Friday. But that isn’t necessarily so, as a Jewish reader would immediately tell you. John makes it clear that this was not the preparation for the weekly Sabbath, but the “Preparation of the Passover.”³²

The first day of Passover (the Days of Unleavened Bread) was a high day—a Sabbath—as well.³³ Jesus was crucified on the day before the Sabbath, but that Sabbath was a high day—the first day of Unleavened Bread. That Sabbath was not a Saturday, it was a Thursday: “When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost. The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (*for that sabbath day was an high day*.) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.”³⁴

The writers of the New Testament did not anticipate our problem. They never imagined anyone would use a Sunday resurrection as a reason to abandon the Sabbath, so they didn’t cover all the bases. But Luke and Mark left us a couple of bread crumbs to follow that open up a new way of looking at this.

“And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid. And *when the sabbath was past*, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, *bought sweet spices*, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.”³⁵

“And that day was the preparation, and the sabbath drew on. And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. And they

returned, and *prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day* according to the commandment.”³⁶

They bought spices *after* the Sabbath. They prepared those spices *before* a Sabbath. There had to have been two Sabbaths that week—Thursday and Saturday—with a day in between. So if Jesus was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, then Jesus left the tomb Saturday evening about sunset, not Sunday morning.

The early church had to know that. The reason that particular Sunday morning was important to them was because the wave sheaf of firstfruits was presented in the Temple on that morning, shortly after the time they first saw Jesus alive. It was the day of the year that was important, not the day of the week.

There is yet another reason why we should look to a full three days and three nights. One of the most dramatic of all Jesus’ miracles was the raising of Lazarus from the dead.³⁷ What made it so dramatic was that Jesus was determined that everyone should be certain Lazarus was really dead. He waited so long that when Jesus told them to take away the stone covering the tomb, “Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead *four days*.”³⁸

Consider this item from the New International Version Study Bible: “Many Jews believed that the soul remained near the body for three days after death in the hope of returning to it. If this idea was in the minds of these people, they obviously thought all hope was gone—Lazarus was irrevocably dead.”

It was important that Jesus be in the grave three days and three nights lest someone claim He had merely revived and not really been dead.

Jesus Was a Jew

One of the strangest things about the Christian faith is that somewhere in history Christians forgot that Jesus was a Jew. Not only that, but all His original disciples were Jews. Moreover, during the entire time covered by the New Testament writings, the Christian church looked very much like another Jewish sect.

“Everywhere, especially in the East of the Roman Empire, there would be Jewish Christians whose outward way of life would not be markedly different from that of the Jews. They took for granted that the

gospel was continuous with Judaism; for them the new covenant, which Jesus had set up at the last supper with his disciples and sealed by his death, did not mean that the covenant made between God and Israel was no longer in force. They still observed the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles; they also continued to be circumcised, to keep the weekly Sabbath and the Mosaic regulations concerning food. According to some scholars, they must have been so strong that right up to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 they were the dominant element in the Christian movement.”³⁹

From the beginning of the New Testament all the way through the 12th chapter of Acts, the church was composed entirely of Jews and circumcised proselytes. There is not a word of any major change in practice during this entire time. For example, when Paul went hunting for Christians to arrest, where did he look?

“And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to *Damascus to the synagogues*, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.”⁴⁰

It is probably surprising to the modern reader to realize that the Christians in Damascus didn't have a church of their own. Why were they still in the synagogues? If they were still attending synagogue, they were still keeping the Sabbath. When Paul was himself arrested, he made a revealing remark to his fellow Jews: “And it came to pass, that, when I was come again to Jerusalem, even while I prayed in the temple, I was in a trance; And saw him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me. And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and *beat in every synagogue* them that believed on thee.”⁴¹

My job is to report and let you decide, but I find it impossible to believe that in these early years, the church had made any change in its days of worship. There is not a hint about Christmas or Easter and no suggestion that the Church had ceased observing the Seventh Day Sabbath. So if it didn't take place within the time frame when the New Testament was being written, when did it happen?

Circumcision

Before I talk about that, there was one major change made by the early Church and even that one is not very well understood. There were two Jewish practices that particularly identified the Jews in the first century: the Sabbath and circumcision. Circumcision became a major bone of contention while the Sabbath did not. This is what makes the silence regarding the Sabbath so significant. When a major change was contemplated, it made waves.

As I remarked earlier, up through Acts 12, the church was entirely Jewish and none of these questions had been raised. But God had no intention of being the sole property of the Jews and, in Acts 13, a momentous beginning is recorded. For the first time, a serious effort was made toward unbelieving Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas launched their first “Missionary Journey.”

Wherever they traveled, they went first to the synagogue in each city, and when the Gospel was rejected by most in the synagogues, they turned to the Gentiles. The Gentiles began to be baptized in droves. With this great success in hand, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. They rehearsed all that God had done with them and how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.⁴²

But as word spread, there appeared a fly in the ointment. “And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.”⁴³

There was a fundamental difference in worldview of those involved in this dispute. Those who were making this argument, we learn later, were Pharisees who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Now, can you imagine this group of people not being Sabbath keepers as well? It is inconceivable. Why, then, was the Sabbath not an issue while circumcision was? The answer is simple enough. There was nothing in Paul's work with the Gentiles to change anything regarding the Sabbath.

The Pharisees rightly saw circumcision as a matter of national identity. But they assumed that God was only the God of the nation of Israel. To serve God, you had to join the tribe by being circumcised.

But there was a fundamental difference between circumcision and Sabbath observance. Circumcision

identified the Jews. *The Sabbath identified God.* This is a major point of confusion among many people to this day.

So how did this conflict play out? “When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.” Thus was convened the great Jerusalem conference described in Acts 15.

After Paul and the others had declared all that God had done with them, “there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”⁴⁴ This was pretty hard for Paul to take, since God had been giving the Holy Spirit to uncircumcised Gentiles right and left. Even Peter stood to take exception to this idea since he had been the very first to take the Gospel to a Gentile and to see with his own eyes that God had done the very same thing Paul was describing: “And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?”⁴⁵

This was an odd thing to say, for the Jews had borne circumcision easily enough for generations. Peter was implying that the believing Pharisees were raising the bar higher for Gentiles than they had for Jews. We have to recall at this point that the Pharisees were demanding circumcision and obedience to the law *to be saved*. Peter makes it clear enough that had never been the condition for salvation. The conference finally reached a conclusion: “The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no

such commandment.”⁴⁶

There is a dangerous absurdity beckoning in this passage. The temptation is to say, “see there, the Gentiles did not need to keep the law.” The absurdity is that this would suggest that the Gentiles were free to lie, cheat, steal, and commit adultery. The issue was not mere obedience to the law, but the law as an instrument of salvation. The issue is stated in the first verse of Acts 15: “And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, *ye cannot be saved.*”

What is important to know about this section is that circumcision was not abolished. Nothing was changed, in fact. Circumcision was a matter of national identity, not of spiritual identity. It always had been and *continued* to be. There is not a hint here that the Apostles stopped circumcision for *Jewish Christians*.

Paul identifies the core issue in his letter to the Galatians when he addresses the issue of this conference: “Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; *that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.*”⁴⁷

The issue was not merely circumcision and law keeping. It was a question of whether the Gentiles might receive the Gospel or not. According to the Pharisees, circumcision and full participation in the Jewish community was required for salvation. It wasn't available to Gentiles. And circumcision was not abolished for Jews in any case.

“Then came [Paul] to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: Which was well reported of by the brethren that were

at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek.”⁴⁸

This is truly remarkable. The Jewish mother of Timothy made him a Jew. And it was necessary for him to be circumcised. Why am I telling you this? Because it all takes place in utter silence on the other major issue—the Sabbath.

I recognize that this is another argument from silence. For an argument from silence to carry any weight, the silence must be shown to be significant. In this case, we have met that requirement. The silence speaks louder than words. The fact is that, all through this time, the entirety of the Christian church observed the Sabbath day—the same Sabbath as the Jews. Jewish and Gentile Christians all observed it and felt no need to comment on it. The Sabbath was taken for granted in the New Testament.

The Change

So if the change from Sabbath to Sunday didn't take place in Apostolic times, when did it take place, and why? There is an interesting little aside in Acts 18: “After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth; And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (*because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome*:) and came unto them.” The story is told remarkably well in Samuele Bacchiocchi's landmark work, *From Sabbath to Sunday*: “In the year A.D. 49 the Emperor Claudius . . . expelled the Jews from Rome since they rioted constantly at the instigation of Chrestus (a probable erroneous transcription of the name of Christ). The fact that, on this occasion, converted Jews such as Aquila and Priscilla were expelled from the city together with the Jews (Acts 18:2) proves, as Pierre Batiffol observes, ‘that the Roman police had not yet come to distinguish the Christians from the Jews. Fourteen years later, however, Nero identified the Christians as being a separate entity, well distinguished from the Jews.’”⁴⁹

By this time, Christianity in Rome was taking on a rather different cast from Christianity in the east, particularly in Palestine. The political structure of Rome gave both Jews and Gentiles good reason to

separate themselves from one another, something that had not happened elsewhere.

“This suggests the possibility that the abandonment of the Sabbath and adoption of Sunday as a new day of worship may have occurred first in Rome as a part of this process of differentiation from Judaism.”⁵⁰

Toward the end of the first century, relations between Jews and the Roman Empire had deteriorated drastically. The Romans had previously recognized Judaism as a legitimate religion and had even shown a level of respect and even admiration for the religious principles of the Jews. But the Jewish wars that began about A.D. 66 changed all that.

“Militarily, the statistic of bloodshed as provided by contemporary historians, even allowing for possible exaggerations, is a most impressive evidence of the Romans's angry vengeance upon the Jews. Tacitus (ca. A.D. 33-120), for instance, gives an estimate of 600,000 Jewish fatalities for the A.D. 70 war. . . Besides military measures, Rome at this time adopted new political and fiscal policies against the Jews. Under Vespasian (A.D. 69-79) both the Sanhedrin and the office of the High Priest were abolished and worship at the temple was forbidden. Hadrian (A.D. 117-138). . . outlawed the practice of the Jewish religion and particularly the observance of the Sabbath.”⁵¹

Such circumstances invited Christians to develop a new identity, characterized not only by a negative attitude toward the Jews, but also by the substitution of characteristic Jewish religious customs for new ones. These would serve to make the Roman authorities aware that the Christians, as Marcel Simon emphasizes, “liberated from any tie with the religion of Israel and the land of Palestine, represented for the empire irreproachable subjects.” This internal need for the Christian community to develop what may be called an “anti-Judaism of differentiation” found expression particularly in the development of unwarranted criteria of Scriptural hermeneutic through which Jewish history and observances could be made *void of meaning and function*.⁵²

As you might suspect, the change took place over a rather long period of time. Pope Innocent I, about A.D. 417, wrote a decretal which became canon law that the church should absolutely not observe the

sacraments on Friday or Saturday. This reveals, of course, that up until this time, many people did. Two contemporary historians, Sozomen (about A.D. 440) and Socrates (about A.D. 439), confirm this.

According to Socrates: “Although almost all churches throughout the world celebrated the sacred mysteries on the Sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this.”⁵³

So, as late as the fifth century, those who did *not* keep the Sabbath were in the minority of Christian churches. It is not too much to say that the Roman church was determined to inhibit Sabbath observance. They ordered fasting on the Sabbath and this practice continued among some until after A.D. 1000.⁵⁴

Conclusion

There is really no question that the entire New Testament church, throughout the period in which our New Testament was being written, observed the Sabbath on the day we call Saturday. And there is no question that most of the visible church changed their day of worship to Sunday after the last of the Apostles was dead. The question we must answer is whether that change was somehow authorized or whether it was unjustified and unwarranted.

The next question is, what must modern man do about the Sabbath once he realizes what it’s all about? I can make this suggestion. Take your Bible in hand and read the Fourth Commandment in Exodus 20:8-11. Pray and ask God to help you incorporate the Sabbath into your life. As much as possible, step aside from your ordinary work and *require* no one else to work on your behalf. In other words, give all the people for whom you are responsible the day off.

Use the Sabbath day for rest and recuperation. Sleep late Saturday morning. Spend some time in Bible study. Spend extra time with your family. Take some time to think about life and about what God might have in mind for you. Don’t allow yourself to feel restricted by the Sabbath. But do hold this day apart for God. After all, it is His day, *the day that reminds us who our God really is*.

For more information on observing the Sabbath, order our *FREE* Bible Study Notes titled *Keeping the Sabbath Holy*.

¹ Luke 4:16

² Exodus 20:8-11

³ Exodus 31:12-13

⁴ Ezekiel 20:3-4

⁵ Ezekiel 20:23-24

⁶ Exodus 16:4

⁷ Luke 4:14-21

⁸ Acts 13:14-16

⁹ Acts 17:1-3

¹⁰ Acts 10:6

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 5:7-8

¹² Colossians 2:16-18 (NRSV)

¹³ Revelation 1:9-10

¹⁴ Luke 6:1

¹⁵ Luke 6:2-5

¹⁶ Luke 18:10-12

¹⁷ Matthew 28:1 NKJV

¹⁸ Leviticus 23:15-16

¹⁹ Leviticus 23:10-11

²⁰ John 20:17

²¹ Mark 16:1-2

²² Mark 16:9

²³ Luke 24:1 KJV

²⁴ John 20:1

²⁵ John 20:19

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 16:2

²⁷ Acts 20:7

²⁸ It is worth noting that this occasion falls about a week after the Days of Unleavened Bread. This is at variance with the custom in Jerusalem where the “first day of the weeks” usually occurred within the festival. The reason is simple. The harvest had to begin from one to two weeks later in Asia Minor than in Jerusalem due to a more northerly latitude.

²⁹ Matthew 12:40

³⁰ John 19:40-42

³¹ John 19:42

³² John 19:14

³³ Leviticus 23:6-8

³⁴ John 19:30-31

³⁵ Mark 15:47-16:2

³⁶ Luke 23:54-56

³⁷ John 11:1 ff.

³⁸ John 11:39

³⁹ W.D. Davies, *Paul and Jewish Christianity*, 1972, p. 72.

⁴⁰ Acts 9:1-2

⁴¹ Acts 22:17-19

⁴² Acts 14:27

⁴³ Acts 15:1

⁴⁴ Acts 15:5

⁴⁵ Acts 15:7-10

⁴⁶ Acts 15:23-24

⁴⁷ Galatians 2:1-5

⁴⁸ Acts 16:1-3

⁴⁹ Samuelle Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp. 167 f.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 169

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 173

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 183

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 196

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 192