
Christian Holidays: The Sabbath Identifies God

by: Ronald L. Dart

Would it shock you to learn that during the time that the New Testament was being written, during the whole first century, all the way up to around 80 or 90 A.D., that the entire Christian Church throughout the entire known world, observed the Sabbath Day? No, I do not mean Sunday, but what most people would call the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday. I mean, the fourth commandment. Would it surprise you to learn that for over 400 years, the great majority of Christian Churches still observed the Sabbath Day and that 1000 years later, the Roman Church was still trying to inhibit Sabbath Day observance among a substantial number of Christians of that century.

Actually, as late as the 80s and 90s of the first century, when the last of the epistles of the New Testament were being written, the New Testament Church universally observed the seventh day Sabbath. This part is beyond dispute. This is not a matter of a few proof texts and some technical arguments. It is something that is woven into the very fabric of the New Testament. To explain what I mean by this, I will have to start with some common ground, with something that everyone will agree on.

It Was Jesus' Custom to Keep the Sabbath

There is an event recorded by Luke that opens the door on this question. It is found in the fourth chapter in verse 16 where "Jesus came to Nazareth, where he been brought up and as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath Day and stood up to read". Now apart from the discussion that this was Jesus' custom, a part of His 'ethos' (Greek work for custom), the way He lived His life.

I want, at this moment, to look at the question of the Jews who were sitting there who heard Jesus when He stood up to read. I don't know of anyone who would 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 use the Greek word for it, to attend Synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath, and that Sabbath, week by week, is the day we call Saturday.

How Did the Jews View the Sabbath?

Here is my first question. How did the Jews in the Synagogue on that day, view the Sabbath? What was the status of the Sabbath Day in their faith and their practice? What place did it hold in their life?

The first aspect was of course the fourth commandment which you find in Exodus chapter 20 and verse eight. It is simple enough. It says to: "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy." The word 'holy' means 'to separate and set apart'. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, {10} 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. {11} 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."

But for the Jew in the Synagogue on the day when Jesus taught there, the Sabbath was rather more than just one of the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath Day was the very core of their identity as a people.

The Sabbath is a Sign that Identifies God

There is a passage back in Exodus 31 that illustrates this, and I think it is sometimes overlooked. Remember what we're trying to grasp at the moment is the attitude of the Jews in the synagogue on the day Jesus walked in there for the first time.

Toward the Sabbath Day, how did the Jews feel about it? Exodus 31 verse 12: "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am Jehovah that sanctifies you.'"

(Editorial Note: The Hebrew word for Jehovah is YHVH [i.e. Yehovah or Yahveh], the proper name of the God of Israel.)

Now think about that. This is not merely a sign of the Jews, this was a sign that identified who their God was by name. For a Jew to change the Sabbath was to change his God. Do you get that? It was a sign, He says between Me and you throughout all of your generations, that you may know something. It is that I am Jehovah that does sanctify you.

Verse 14: "You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people." That is an important statement. Understand this, you're cut off from the people of God by not keeping the Sabbath Day. It is the identifying sign, it is who we are and who God is.

Verse 15: "Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever does any work in the Sabbath Day, he shall surely be put to death. {16}

Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant."

The Sabbath is not going away for these people. It is a sign, God said "between Me and the children of Israel forever."

Verse 17: "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."

So, we would fully expect any Jew, in Jesus' day, who came to the synagogue on the Sabbath Day has no thought that sometime in the future, the Sabbath Day would go away, right? For him it is a perpetual covenant. For him it is something that is going to last forever. The thought of the Sabbath passing is like some kind of doctrinal change and would've been anathema to them. The Sabbath was the sign for the Jews that identified who His God was, and it carried the penalty of death for a presumptuous violation of it.

Babylonian Exile

For the Jews to whom Jesus spoke, on this occasion, the Sabbath could not have been taken lightly, because the Jews knew from Ezekiel's prophecies that the failure to keep the Sabbath as a sign was a direct reason why they had gone into exile in Babylon.

There is a fascinating prophecy and it is found in the 20th chapter of the book of Ezekiel. God begins to run down this statement with Israel, warning them about where they are and where they have come to.

Ezekiel says in verse 5: "Thus says the Lord GOD; In the day when I chose Israel, I lifted up my hand to the seed of the house of Jacob and made myself known unto them in the land of Egypt". This lifting up of God's hand is a form of swearing. He continues: "I lifted up my hand to them, saying, I am Jehovah your God". In other words, I identified myself to them by name."

Verse 7: "Then I said to them, Cast away every man the abominations of his eyes, do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt: I am Jehovah your God. {8} But they rebelled against me and wouldn't listen to me and they didn't cast away their idols."

There is a repeated theme in this passage again and again. God was angry with Israel, but He decided to work with them, for His own reputation.

He says in verse 9: "But I worked for my name's sake, that my name would not be polluted before the heathen". In other words, God was mad at them. He was going to punish them but there were certain things God said that He would have to do so that His reputation would not suffer in the process.

God says in verse 10: "I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness." {11} "I gave them my statutes, and showed them my judgments, which if a man

does, he shall even live in them. {12} Moreover also I gave them my Sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am Jehovah that does sanctify them."

The Sabbath Identifies God

Once again, the purpose of the Sabbath is to identify who their God was, but He says in Ezekiel 20:13: "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." So, He said, "I'll just get rid of these people". They are out in the wilderness now.

Now this same theme comes back, in verse 14: "But I worked for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen."

Verse 18: "But I said to their children in the wilderness, don't walk in the statutes of your fathers, don't observe their judgments, don't defile yourselves with their idols: {19} I am Jehovah your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; {20} And hallow my Sabbaths; and they (my Sabbaths) shall be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am Jehovah your God." How clear does this have to be?

Later, God will say verse 23: "I lifted up my hand to them also in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the heathen, and disperse them through the countries". Why would I do that? {24} "Because they had not executed my judgments, had despised my statutes, had polluted my Sabbaths, and their eyes were after their fathers' idols."

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 polluted the Sabbath Day. So, by the time Jesus showed up in the synagogue to read the Scriptures on that day, the Sabbath had been drilled into the conscience of the Jews assembled there. It was woven into the warp and woof of their faith. It was not mere doctrine that can be abandoned if it became inconvenient. So, I think we can understand that at this point in history when Jesus walked into the synagogue, the Jews who sat there and heard Him read, to abandon the Sabbath Day, to contemplate a change in the Sabbath Day of any kind, would have been tantamount to abandoning their God.

Manna

The commitment of the Jews, when Jesus went into the synagogue and taught there, their commitment to the Sabbath Day was absolute and permanent. This is one thing that they had gotten clear in their history and they would never have contemplated a change or abandonment of the Sabbath Day. There was also no question in their mind about which day it was. All of this was nailed down for them right from the very start. Before they ever got to Mount Sinai, before they ever got the fourth commandment, they were taught the lesson with manna. You will find the whole story in Exodus chapter 16. I won't bother you with it here, but it is an occasion where God gave them manna from heaven for six days and they were allowed to go out and gather

manna each day what they needed to eat that day, and as a matter of discipline God did not allow them to collect more than a day's worth at a time.

If you tried to keep it over till the next day, it bred worms and stank, but they were commanded on the sixth day to gather twice as much manna and to keep it over, which they did, and it didn't breed worms and stink. They established in their mind, "Okay, I've got the picture now, the Sabbath is this day and not some other day". Some fools didn't bother collecting extra on Friday, they went out on the Sabbath to find it and there was none there. The lesson was driven home for every Israelite.

When Jesus walked on the scene, the seventh day Sabbath was an established and honored tradition in every sect of Judaism. Now this in itself is interesting. While the Jews may have been divided on many issues, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes, saw it differently on many things, but not on the question of the Sabbath Day, because the observance of the Sabbath, on the day appointed by God himself was the identifying sign that they were worshiping Jehovah and not somebody else.

What was Jesus' Attitude about the Sabbath?

Now that brings us to the important question then of Jesus' own attitude toward the Sabbath Day. It was, as He grew up, a part of His 'ethos'. It was His custom. He observed the seven-day Sabbath right along with these Jews. He attended synagogue as His custom was.

Now after Jesus' baptism, and His forty day fast, and his temptation of the devil, He was ready to begin His ministry. What was the first thing that He did? Where did He do it and on what day did, He do it?

The story is in Luke 4 and verse 14: "Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about. {15} And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all. {16} 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 to read. {17} And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place (Isaiah 61:1-2) where it was written, {18} "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has 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, {19} To preach the acceptable year of the Lord." {20} 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. {21} And he began to say unto them, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.""

What day was that? It was a Sabbath Day (Saturday), of course. It was a part of Jesus' 'ethos', His way of living to attend synagogue on the Sabbath Day. It was on the Sabbath Day and He said that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled as He began His ministry. Let's pause and think about this for a moment.

Did Jesus Intend to Change the Day of Worship?

Was it Jesus' intent to change the day of worship for the people of God in years to come? If it was, He knew it right here. Was it His intent to change the fourth commandment, or to abolish the fourth commandment that we should remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy? Was it His intent to switch the day of rest from the seventh day to the first day?

Now if so, what would have been the consequences of that change? First, it would have been necessary to clearly and definitively announce the change and to give a reason for it at some point in time. Mind you, we're talking about Jews here. We're talking about people for whom the Sabbath Day was central, it was the heart and core of their religion or faith. It was what actually identified their faith. It was the identifying sign of their faith, it was the identifying sign of who their God was. If you are going to change that, somewhere along the line you ought to explain it, don't you think?

Remember that to any Jew changing the Sabbath was tantamount to changing gods. This is no mere doctrinal issue. It is not equivalent to a Catholic becoming a Protestant or vice versa. It is equivalent of the Christian becoming a Buddhist.

If it was Jesus' intent to change the seventh day Sabbath to Sunday, there would have to also be a point in time when the change would take place. So, somehow, there would need to be a recognition that the change had been made. Why it was made? When it was to be made so that people would not think that Jesus was starting an entirely new religion with a new god. This isn't the sort of thing that you sort of slide into gradually.

Now bear in mind that for 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 Barnabus went on their first missionary journey, and that's recorded in the 13th chapter of Acts.

No Controversies Over the Sabbath

Now you can search through the four Gospels and all the way up to Acts 12 and you will not find one word about a controversy over the Sabbath. You will find no announcement of a change. You will find no suggestion of a change. No explanation of a change, nor will you find the great turmoil that would have been generated by any suggestion of a change in the day of worship. The assumption is so clear it is unmistakable, that up to the thirteenth chapter of Acts, all Christians who were Jews continued to observe the Sabbath as they had all their lives. There is no way that change could have been made and not have created an uproar in the New Testament. You will find no instructions for a change in the day of worship, nor even any breadcrumbs to indicate that such a change was made. This is important, because a change in the day of worship would not have merely implied a change in custom for every Jew and every proselyte, it would have implied a change of God. This change would have to be dealt with in depth. Now you tell me, could such a change have been made up to Acts 13 without a ripple of it showing up in the Bible?

But now, the gospel is going to the Gentiles, did a change take place at that time? That brings us to the 13th chapter of Acts where this first major effort for the Gentiles was made.

How Did Paul Deal with the Sabbath?

So here we are in the 13th chapter of Acts where the gospel finally goes out to the Gentiles for the first time. How did Paul handle the issue or the question of the Sabbath Day? The question as far as we can tell in the New Testament had never been raised up until this point. In Acts 13 verse 14: "They departed from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath Day and sat down. {15} And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on." {16} Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen."

Okay, the gospel had to go to the Jews first (Acts 13:46), and naturally it went on the Sabbath, right? Then Paul gives the gospel to the Jews. You can read it for yourself right there in the thirteenth chapter of Acts. You will not find a word about a change in the Sabbath. Naturally, what would've been the effect of such a change? They would certainly have grabbed Paul by the scruff of the neck and thrown him out in the street, because that would have been tantamount to abandoning God completely in the eyes of the Jewish synagogue.

Now verse 42: "And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. {43} 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." The gospel of grace had been thoroughly established.

Verse 44: "The next Sabbath Day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. {45} But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spoke against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming." Nothing had bothered the Jews about Paul until he was successful. The fact is, when Paul was doing all of this preaching, he was still doing it on the Sabbath Day.

The Identity of God is Established with the Sabbath Day

You see the identity of God is established in connection with the seventh day Sabbath. It is a sign of who He is. They didn't change that. It wasn't a change in the day of worship and assembly that infuriated the Jews, because they were still meeting on the Sabbath Day. There was no change.

Later in Acts 17:1: "Now when they (Paul and Silas) had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. {2} Then Paul, as his 'ethos', his custom, his manner was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, {3} explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.""

It was Paul's way of life at this late date to keep the Sabbath, to go to the synagogue. It is the same word that Jesus used for His custom, when He said His 'ethos', His custom was to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath Day.

The Christian Church Looked Like a Jewish Sect

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. Do you know why? Because they continued to observe the Jewish Sabbath Day! It's as simple as that. They not only observed the same Sabbath as the Jews, they also observed the same 7 annual holidays.

The Early Church Observed God's Annual Sabbaths

In Acts 20 and verse 4, Paul takes off into Asia with several companions and it says in verse 5: they went ahead and waited for him at Troas: {6} "We sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and in five days joined them in Troas; where we abode seven days." It's just a throwaway line, but they were planning their travel according to the Jewish calendar. They wanted to stay in location until the holidays were finished and then move on.

In first Corinthians 5 verse six, Paul was writing to these people about a problem in the church. He said in verse seven: "Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. {8} Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

I know that this is shocking to some people, but it is right there on the pages of your Bible. Paul is exhorting a Gentile church to observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It was done commonly at this time.

Then there's another interesting letter of Paul's. In Colossians 2 verse 16, he told them: "Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or observing Festivals, new moons or Sabbaths. {17} Now these are only a shadow of what is to come but the substance belongs to Christ. {18} Don't let anyone disqualify you insisting on self-abasement and worship of Angels, dwelling on visions puffed up without cause by human way of thinking". Now if you parse this passage very carefully, what you see is a church that is observing the Festivals, new moons and Sabbaths, but is being condemned for feasting on food and drink by Gentile ascetics, that was common at that time.

It is truly ironic that this is a popular passage that is used against the observance of the Festivals, when in actual fact, it reveals plainly that the Church was observing the 7 annual Festivals (or holidays), new moons and Sabbath Days.

The Lord's Day

But doesn't John mention Sunday as the Lord's Day in the book of Revelation. Actually, no he doesn't!

Here is what John says: "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. {10} I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet." Do you realize there is not one word here to suggest that the 'Lord's day' is Sunday?

If indeed John is referring at all to a day of the week and if we are to use the Bible as our best historical source, you have Luke six beginning in verse one: "It came to pass on the second Sabbath after the first, that Jesus went through the corn fields; and his disciples plucked the ears of corn, and ate them, rubbing them in their hands." Now the Pharisees saw this, and they jumped on them about it and said: "Why do you do that which is not lawful to do on the Sabbath Days?"

Now there is nothing at all in the Bible, the Old Testament, to tell you that you can't do what Jesus and His disciples were doing.

Verse 3: "Jesus said to them, "Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: {4} "how he went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and also gave some to those with him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat?" {5} And He said to them, "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.""

Now here is my question: Why would anyone assume that Sunday is the Lord's day when Jesus had plainly said that He was Lord of the Sabbath? I think it is clear enough that in the apostolic era of the Church, there was one Sunday in the year that was observed and that was the day that Jesus first appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, the day when the first fruits were offered. Otherwise, the Church, being at first composed of good Jews and later of many Gentiles, continued to observe the Sabbath and the Festivals.

So how did the Sabbath and Festivals get lost? How and when did the change take place?

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Were you surprised to find out that the Sabbath day was observed for over 400 years in the early Christian Churches after the resurrection?

2. Do you think that Jesus only kept the Sabbath because He was of Jewish decent, or is it because God created it to be observed?
3. What are your thoughts about Exodus 31:12-13?
4. Why do you believe God create the Sabbath?
5. When was it created?
6. Why is it so hard for the majority of Christian churches to believe in the Sabbath?
7. What are your thoughts about the point that one of the main reasons the Jews went into captivity was because they had polluted the Sabbath Day?
8. Don't you think that if Jesus intended to change the day of worship that He would have said something during His ministry?
9. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's point that to change the Sabbath to a Jew would be like changing gods, like a "Christian becoming a Buddhist"?
10. How do you answer Mr. Dart's question: "Why would anyone assume that Sunday is the Lord's day when Jesus had plainly said that He was Lord of the Sabbath?"