
God's Sabbath in the Early Church

Part 1 by: Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about the Jewish Sabbath day? Now when I speak of the first Christians, I'm talking about those Christians who were alive and working while the New Testament was being written. I'm not including second century Christians as among the first Christians. I'm talking about Peter, James and John, Aquila and Priscilla, Paul, Apollos, and the entire leadership and membership of the Christian community while the New Testament was being written. What did those people think about the Sabbath day?

A Proposition

Now I'm going to state a proposition for you to consider, and then I am going to explain why I think it is so.

During the entire time when 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, maybe when the last words of New Testament were being written, the New Testament church universally observed the Sabbath. Now you may be sitting there saying "What?" But in reality, it is beyond dispute. It is not a matter of a proof text here or there, or a technical argument. It is something that is woven into the very fabric of the New Testament. What may be the first subtle clue to this is found in Luke's account of one of Jesus' earliest sermons. It was not long after His baptism. In fact, it may have been the first of his sermons.

As His Custom Was

Jesus came to Nazareth where He'd been brought up, and as His custom was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. Now, no one is going to 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, Jesus being a Jew, as was His custom, His 'ethos' was, to stand in the synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath day and that Sabbath was, week by week, on the day we call Saturday. Now you may want to argue about that. Feel free. Go ahead and do your research on it, though, because from that time till this no one has fooled with the day of the week.

Jesus was a member of this synagogue. He had been accepted there ever since he was a boy. This was surely not the first time He had stood to read in the synagogue.

How Did the Jews Think About the Sabbath?

So, here's my question. How did the Jews in that synagogue, think about the Sabbath? What was the status and the meaning of the Sabbath day in their faith and practice? How important was it?

Bear in mind also, all of Jesus's disciples were Jews. Jews in the broad sense. They lived in Judea, they practiced their religion, they were Jews. They had all grown up attending synagogue. They had learned to read the Scriptures in synagogue schools. How did Jesus' disciples look at the Sabbath day?

Now these are questions we can answer with authority from the New Testament even though most people don't notice it as they go through it.

The Sabbath Identifies God

First and foremost. The Sabbath was the fourth of the Ten Commandments. It was the heart and core of their covenant with God, but for the Jew of those days, the Sabbath was more than that, the Sabbath day was at the very heart of the identity of their God. They all knew well the significance of the passage in the book of Exodus. It's in Exodus 31, verse 12, "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, speak also to the children of Israel. 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 the Lord who sanctifies you."

Now due to a curious convention in most Bibles there is something here that is easily overlooked. Anytime you see, and as far as I know, virtually all of the accepted translations do this, wherever you see the small caps LORD in your Bible, that means that the Hebrew word there is the Hebrew letters, which in English is written YHWH. Written in Hebrew it has no vowels. It is generally accepted and pronounced as Yahweh, or more familiarity in English, Jehovah, although the 'J' would be pronounced as a 'Y' as in Yehovah. It's all depends on how the vowels are inserted among the Jews.

The Sabbath, then, was not merely a sign of who the Jews were, it was a sign that identified who their God was by name. Think about that! When you read through the Old Testament, you will begin to understand how important that is.

The Sabbath then, again, was a sign that identified their God by name. "Verily, my Sabbath, you shall keep; it as a sign between me and you throughout your generations that you 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.

The Sabbath is a Perpetual Covenant

Now consider the rest of that passage in Exodus, "You shall keep the Sabbath therefore, for it is holy to you; everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days. The seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the seventh day he shall surely be put to death. Therefore, the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant "

Ooh, did you hear that?

"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, for in six days, Jehovah made the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed."

For a Jew in the synagogue on that day when Jesus stood up to read, the Sabbath was the sign that identified who his God was. 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.

Babylonian Exile

For a Jew of the first century, the Sabbath could not be taken lightly. They all knew, all too well, from Ezekiel's prophecies that the failure to keep the sign of the Sabbath was the direct reason why their fathers had spent 70 years in Babylonian exile.

Ezekiel was already a well-recognized prophet when the Jews found themselves in Babylon, and some of the elders came to Ezekiel, and wanted to inquire of God. God was having none of it. "Speak to these elders," God said to Ezekiel, and tell them, "Thus saith the Lord God, have you come to inquire of me, as I live, says the Lord, I will not be inquired by you." This is Ezekiel 20.

Those are 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." Now what follows is a litany of all the sins that ultimately led to the Jews downfall as a nation, and included prominently in this list, is the Sabbath day.

The Sabbath is a Sign

God says, Ezekiel 20 verse 11, "I gave them my statutes. I showed them my judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them. Moreover, I also gave them my Sabbaths to be a sign between them and me, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them." Now notice this well, God gave them the Sabbath as a sign, so they would 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 another set of gods and the Sabbath was more than just another law, it was the law that identified their God. It told them whose laws and whose rights they were to practice.

Ezekiel's prophecy continues, "Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness, they did not walk in my statutes, they despised my judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them." Basically, what He means is, if a man follows My laws, he will have a good life, but they defiled My Sabbaths. "And I said I would pour out my fury on them in the wilderness to consume them, but I acted for my namesake, that it should not be profaned among the Gentiles."

Now it seems strange that the children of Israel were already corrupting the Sabbath while they were still in the wilderness. One would've thought it would have taken longer than that, but God isn't finished.

Since they had failed, God went on to warn their children not to make the same mistake. "But I said to their children in the wilderness, do not walk in the statutes of your fathers, do not observe their judgments, don't defile yourself with their idols. I am Jehovah your God. Walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them. Hallow my Sabbaths that it may be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am the Lord your God."

All Jewish Sects Had the Sabbath in Common

Now, this is extremely important in understanding the mindset of all the Jews in the first century, from one end of it to the other and from up-and-down and even in the diaspora. If there was one thing that all Jewish sects had in common, it was the Sabbath. It was woven into society.

The Jews of that generation, oh I know there were some Jews who are not religious at all, but I mean the Jews at that particular time who were religious, all of them knew that Ezekiel proclaimed the same formula that they had read in Exodus from Moses that the Sabbath identifies, not the children of Israel, it identifies their God by name and God warned them of the consequences of corrupting the Sabbath right from the start. It was a harbinger of a nation that would finally turn away from God completely.

Why Did the Jews Go Into Captivity?

In the end, the Jews went into captivity for a broad variety of transgressions, but the number one reason that led to all the others was, they corrupted the Sabbath day. And you know, not a one of them would have imagined that anyone would do the things that they ended up doing as they drifted away from God and followed the flesh, and quite literally followed the flesh, because the thing that killed them in those generations was the worshiping of idols that had to do with sex worship, Temple prostitutes and I won't go any further down that road right now.

So, by the time that Jesus showed up in the synagogue to read the Scriptures on this day, the Sabbath had been drilled into the conscience of every Jew who was in the room. It was woven into the wharf and whoop of their faith, and it was not only true of the Jews in the synagogue, but it was true of the man in the street who believed in God, because this was part of their faith. It was not a mere doctrine that could be abandoned when it became inconvenient.

Sabbath is the Test Commandment

Changing the Sabbath was tantamount to changing their religion. There was no question among the Jews about which day it was. They learned this, when the Sabbath became for them the test commandment.

Do you remember the story? When they came out of Egypt, they were muttering about not having anything to eat and God decided I will give them manna to eat. He told Moses, "Look, I will rain bread from heaven for you and the people will go out and gather a certain quota every day that I make test them whether they will walk in my law or not," so the Sabbath became the test commandment.

"If they won't do this," God says "There's hardly any point in going any further." They hadn't even gotten to Mount Sinai. They hadn't gotten to the Ten Commandments yet. God says, "We're going to settle this issue."

The test was a simple one, they would get manna every morning for six days. Each day they were to go out and gather just enough for one day, if they kept it over to the second day, it would become wormy and it was starting to stink. On the sixth day though, they were told to go out and gather twice as much and get ready for the Sabbath day. That way you will not have to do any work or cooking on the Sabbath. On the Sabbath day, it would not breed worms and stink if they kept it over. We have a first-class miracle here. And it is important, because it has to do with food.

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, His identifying sign, not theirs. Do you follow me on this?

God's Sabbath Day - Not Theirs

It was God Sabbath day, not theirs, and so frankly, I intentionally made the error myself when I called it the Jewish Sabbath day. I did that because that is the way most people look at it, but it isn't. It is God's Sabbath day.

So, the Jews of the first century, whether they were Essenes, Pharisees, Sadducees or whatever kind of Jews they were, they all knew they had to observe the Sabbath. They all knew they had to observe it on the same day. No one was allowed to choose a Sabbath for himself, any more than they could in the wilderness.

It was God's Sabbath. It was His identifying sign. The Jews had no questions about the Sabbath as to when it was. It was perhaps the most crucial of all their laws. I would have to agree with that, because the Sabbath is heart and core, and it is one of the reasons why they developed so many rules about it. I mean the rules they developed about the Sabbath day were legion in number and it is a testimony to how serious they took it.

Now, why am I telling you all this?

The reason is simple. When Jesus walked onto the scene, the seventh day Sabbath was an established and honored tradition of all the sects of Judaism, no matter where the Jews were. There were Pharisees, there were Sadducees, there were Essenes, there were more. They may have been divided on many things, but they were not divided on the importance of the Sabbath day. The observance of the Sabbath day was a day that was appointed by God himself and it was the identifying sign that they were worshipping Jehovah, and not someone else.

Jesus Begins His Ministry

Now, we insert Jesus into this picture. After His baptism and 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 this article.

It's Luke chapter 4 "Jesus returned in the power of the spirit to Galilee. News of him went out throughout all the surrounding region, and He taught in their synagogues, and was honored by everyone. He came to Nazareth where he had been brought up."

Jesus Kept the Sabbath

And as His custom was, this was Jesus' ethos, that is the Greek word for 'custom'. It is what He did as an ordinary part of His life. He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. They handed him the book of the prophet Isaiah, when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." He read that, He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.

Bear in mind, it was the custom to sit to teach and stand to read. Jesus sat down and the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him and He said to them "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." And what day was that? It was a 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.

Was It Jesus' Intent to Change the Day of Worship?

Okay, so Jesus kept the Sabbath at this point, but this is a burning question, was it His intent to later change the day of worship for his disciples?

Now, I told you this just to underline for you, how big a deal the Sabbath was for the Jews at this time. For all of society, for all that went on, their own ethos, their own custom, their own identity of themselves. Here's Jesus, is it His intent to later change that day of worship for his disciples?

This kind of change, if it is going to be made, could not have been an afterthought. It could not have been happenstance. It could not have been something, well we just did it. No, if this is what He did, He intended to do it from the start. He knew it when He read Isaiah in the synagogue on that Sabbath day. So, was it His intent to change the fourth commandment, or as some people think to abolish it? If so, how would that intent finally have been expressed or carried out and what would've been the consequences of that change?

So here we sit, we are in the midst of a society for which the Sabbath is really the unifying principle. It is the one thing they all have in common. The Pharisees differed from Sadducees and Sadducees differed from the Essenes. The Jews were just about as sectarian as Christians are. Not as big a population at that time so maybe not as many as we Christians have, but they were divided all over the place.

The core of their belief was the Sabbath day, and their practice. So, if it was Jesus' intent on this day in the synagogue when He said "This day is fulfilled in your ears" to change the Sabbath day, it would've been necessary for Jesus at some point to clearly and definitively announce the change and give the reason for it. Remember to any Jew changing the Sabbath was tantamount to changing gods. This was no mere doctrinal issue.

All of Jesus's disciples were Jews like Jesus himself (Hebrews 7:14). 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. Now think that through! Changing the Sabbath day in this society, among these people is not something you drift into. It is not something that one day you wake up and know you're going to keep a different Sabbath day, or we are going to worship on a different day.

This is not the way this can work, Jesus had to say so. Furthermore, if it were Jesus' intent to change the Sabbath to Sunday, there would've been a point in time for the changeover. There would have needed to have been a recognition that the change had been made and why it had been made. This is not the sort of thing that you just slide into.

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 kind of want to underline Acts 13 in your mind because it is a crucial time in the history of the church.

What is a Proselyte?

Now bear in mind, what is a proselyte? A proselyte is a person who is not a Jew, but who has accepted Judaism at some level. Some of them went as far as to be circumcised and others of them like Cornelius, whom Peter went to preach to, were not, but nevertheless, they were God fearers. In other words, they believed in God. They believed in the God of the Jews. They observed the practices of the Jews, and there would've been no thought among any of the proselytes that there was going to be a different Sabbath day. It would have had to have been explained to them. The starting point would have had to been shown, and they would've had to have a new theology based on it.

An Argument From Silence

Well, 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 instructions for a change in the day of worship, nor even any breadcrumbs to follow that such a change might have been made. Now 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 had to be dealt with in depth. It would have had to be explained and argued. Now you tell me, could such a change have been made up to say Acts 13 without a ripple of it showing up in the Bible? Could this have been made after Acts 13 without Luke making some kind of remark about it during this period of time?

Now, I realize that what I'm making here is an argument from silence. It is axiomatic. An argument from silence is decisive if it can be shown that the silence is significant. This silence could not have been more significant.

What about all of the Gentiles, then who were converted after Acts 13? Well that's a story in and of itself. I can leave it to you to read the rest of the book of Acts and see if you can find some place where changing the Sabbath was discussed. It isn't there! If you're a Bible reader, you already know that it is not there, but there still is an issue to be answered on this question of the Gentiles.

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. Was the Sabbath only for the Jews or did God create it for all mankind? What scriptures can you use to back up your answer?
2. Have you ever studied when the day of worship got moved from Sabbath/Saturday to Sunday?
3. If you have what did you learn?
4. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's point that the "Sabbath identifies God"?
5. How important is the Sabbath to you?
6. How important do you think the Sabbath was to Jesus and His disciples?

7. Do you agree that the “Sabbath is the test commandment” for mankind?
8. Do you think that the importance of the Sabbath is lost because majority of people call it the “Jewish Sabbath” rather than God’s Sabbath?
9. Do you really think that it was Jesus idea to change His Sabbath Day?
10. If the Sabbath day was to change, wouldn’t there be at least one scripture that stated the change?