
God's Sabbath in the Early Church

Part 3 by: Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about the Jewish Sabbath? What was their practice during those early years? Did they really switch from Sabbath to Sunday? Or did they continue observing the Sabbath as most of them had done for all their lives?

You know it isn't generally realized, that even the non-Jews among the first Christians, were already God-fearers and Sabbath keepers before their conversion to Christ. They had come to understand the God of the Bible, to believe in the God of the Bible, to believe in His Law and while they hadn't gone as far as circumcision, in most cases, nevertheless they attended synagogue, listened to the Scriptures being read and tried to order their lives along those lines.

What Would it have Taken to Change the Day of Worship from Saturday to Sunday?

Now what would it have taken to cause all those people, Jews and non-Jews, to change the day of the Sabbath, from Saturday to Sunday? Now the one significant change they did make, regarding circumcising Gentiles, required a major conference to settle that issue. They couldn't just slide by that, it became huge. This major conference was the Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15. And then, when they did make the change, there had to be an explanation of why the change was being made! It had to be discussed and debated, and the essentials of the discussion recorded.

Now where do you find that explanation regarding the change of the Sabbath? People assume that the first Christians, from the morning after Christ's resurrection, met routinely on the first day of the week. I don't think most people realize how terribly thin the evidence for that is. Even fewer realize that the expression in Greek is the 'first of the weeks' and it is an idiom for the 'first day of the seven weeks of harvest leading up to Pentecost.'

First Day of the Weeks

Now Hebrew thought would have called 'Sunday', not the 'first day of the week', but the 'Morrow after the Sabbath'. You'll find that expression in the Old Testament fairly common and that's the way they designated it.

Everything in Jewish thought, circulated around the Sabbath.

Now the expression, 'the first day of the week' is found only eight times in the New Testament and none in the Old Testament. Six of those refer to the events of the same day. Now did you get that? Eight times, the expression 'the first day of the week' is found in New Testament, Six of those refer to the same day, that is, the day following the resurrection of Jesus. The first time He appeared to His disciples, the first meetings He had with them, all of those six references are to that particular occasion, not to a meeting day of the church.

Now that only leaves two other incidents with which to establish a new custom. One of the two is Acts 20 and verse 7, "Now on the first day of the weeks," it's the same idiom and it is plural, "On the first day of the weeks, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight." Now you crank into your awareness here, that for Jewish people and for Gentiles who follow Jewish customs, the day began and ended at sundown. So, if it were the first day of the week, if it were Sunday that you were talking about, it actually began Saturday night and so Paul was actually speaking on Saturday night. Now this is the only passage in the New Testament that suggests that the church met on the first day of the week. One time! And how easy would it be to make the case that the only reason they did this time was because Paul was there. Even here though, it is Saturday night, not Sunday morning per se.

Flimsy Circumstantial Evidence

Now here is our problem. We have the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence that the church ever met on the 'first day of the week.' What we do 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, but it was the 'ethos,' the custom, of both Jesus and Paul to attend synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16, Acts 17:2).

To deny that the first Christians observed the Sabbath for years afterward, we have to explain how the earliest Jewish Christians abandoned the observance of the Sabbath and substituted Sunday. We have to explain when they did it? We should be able to explain why they did it? And we should be able to find these explanations in the Bible. And also, we need to define how they dealt with a certain fact that the Sabbath Day was the identifying sign of their God. We have to find all this in the New Testament. Sad to say, none of it is there!

Sunday Resurrection of Jesus Prompted the Change

The idea is that it was the Sunday resurrection of Jesus that prompted the change, but we even have a bigger 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, no one saw it. The first time they see Jesus, He's already alive, out of the tomb when He meets them. They all bear witness to the first time Jesus appeared, but no one can tell us what time it happened.

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.

Now I have discussed elsewhere, why I think Jesus left the tomb at sunset Saturday evening, but we have no witnesses, so we cannot be certain.

Jesus Was Jewish

One of the strangest things about the Christian faith is that somewhere in history, Christians seem to have forgotten that Jesus was a Jew!(Hebrews 7:14). Not only that, but that all of His original disciples were Jews. Moreover, during the entire time covered by the New Testament writings, the Christian Church looked very much like just another Jewish sect. The people who were there, observers, people on the outside, saw the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, whatever they were, and they saw the Christians and to them, the Christians were just another Jewish sect.

Elsewhere, especially in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, there would be Jewish Christians whose outward way of life would not be markedly different from that of the Jews. Not only that, they went to synagogue every Sabbath. Now you do know why they went to the synagogue, don't you? This is an established fact. They went there because that's where the Scriptures were. The Scriptures were read and that is how they heard God's word. Otherwise, they didn't have any way of hearing it.

The Gospel Was a Continuation of the Faith of Abraham

They took for granted that the gospel was a continuation of the faith of Abraham. For them, the Christian covenant that Jesus established at the Last Supper with His disciples, sealed with His death, did not mean that the covenant made between God and Israel was no longer in force or valid or anything of the sort.

They still observed the feast of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. They also, believe it or not, continued to circumcise their children, to keep the weekly Sabbath and the Mosaic regulations concerning what they could eat in their diet. According to some scholars, they must have been so strong that right up to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, these observant Jews were the dominant element in the Christian movement.

The Early Church Was Composed of Jews

Okay, how do you rotate that group into a completely new fundamental service and nobody comment on it anywhere in the Bible. 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.

The Early Church Continued to Attend Synagogues

For example, when Saul went hunting for Christians to arrest in Damascus, where did he look? Well, (Acts 9:1) "Saul, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord went up to the high priest and {2} Ask from him letters to the synagogues of Damascus, so if he found any

of 'the way,' men or women, he could bring them bound to Jerusalem." Do you realize what he just said? In order to find Christians in Damascus, he was going to the synagogues to find them.

It is probably very surprising to the modern reader to realize that Christians in Damascus didn't have a church of their own. Why were they still going to the synagogues? And if they were still attending synagogue, then they were still keeping the Sabbath.

Now when Paul was arrested, he made a revealing remark to his fellow Jews. This is in Acts 22, and he is hearkening back to all this, "He says, 'Now this happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the Temple. I was in a trance and He said to me, Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly because they're not going to receive your testimony concerning Me'. So, I said, "Lord, they know that in every synagogue, I imprisoned and beat those who do believe on You." Now there it is. Paul said, "I went to the synagogues."

Now my job is to report and let you decide, but I find it impossible to believe that in those early years the Church made any change in its day of worship. There's 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 of when the New Testament was being written, when did it happen and why?

Sabbath and Circumcision

There were two Jewish practices that particularly identified the Jews in first century. They were the Sabbath and circumcision. Circumcision became a major bone of contention early on while the Sabbath never did. 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 is entirely Jewish and none of these questions had been raised.

Paul's First Missionary Journey

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 every city and when the gospel message was rejected by most in the synagogues, they turned to the Gentiles. The Gentiles began to be baptized in droves.

Now bear in mind, these are Gentile God-fearers, they already knew about God. They were already observant of the laws of God by and large, not all of them, but they did honor them.

A Fly in the Ointment

Now with this great success in hand, Paul and Barnabas went back to Antioch. They told them all that had happened and how God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. But as word spread, there appeared a fly in the ointment, and certain men, we are told in Acts 15 and verse 1, "Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren and said, "Except you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved."

Now there was a fundamental difference in world view, 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, that particular group of people not being Sabbath keepers? It's inconceivable!

Why then was the Sabbath not an issue while circumcision was? I think the answer is simple. There was nothing in Paul's work with 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 and to serve God, you had to join the tribe by being circumcised.

Fundamental Difference Between Circumcision and the Sabbath

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 right down to this day. So how did the conflict play out? Well it is all in Acts 15. When {1} "Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and a few others, should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question." And that they did.

"And (verse 4) when Paul and the others had declared all that God had done with them. {5} There rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses."

Now here is something important to know, the Pharisees held what the New Testament writers called 'the tradition of the elders', what has come to be called the 'oral law' was a part of the Law of Moses, it was a part of what God handed down to Moses on Mount Sinai. They claimed that God gave the Law to Moses in two media, written and oral. We have the Written Law on the one hand, the Oral Law on the other, which was passed on in a tradition, a custom of receiving and transmitting so that the Oral Law was what God gave Moses as well.

Now, Jesus and His disciples did not teach that. Moses actually said that he wrote down everything that God told him on the mountain (Exodus 24:3-4) and so it seems to me that to argue that there was an Oral Law that Moses told Joshua and he told somebody else and he told somebody else, is really not supported.

God Had Been Giving His Holy Spirit to Uncircumcised Gentiles

Now the argument of these Pharisees was pretty hard for Paul to take, because God had been giving the Holy Spirit to uncircumcised Gentiles, right and left, everywhere he went. Even Peter stood to take exception with this idea because he had been the very first to take the gospel to a Gentile, Cornelius (Acts 10), and to see with his own eyes that God had done the very same thing Paul was describing. While he was preaching the Holy Spirit fell on them with outward signs and Peter threw up his hands and said, "How can we not baptize these people? God has given them the spirit even as he did to us."

Now Peter ask the question in Acts 15 and verse 10, "Why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"

Now that's odd, because the Jews had born circumcision easily enough for generations. Paul is implying that the Pharisees were raising the bar higher for Gentiles than they had for Jews.

We have to recall at this point, the Pharisees were demanding circumcision and obedience to the Law to be saved. Peter makes it clear enough, that this had never been the condition for salvation.

Well, they finally sorted all of this out, made a decision, and sent the word out as to what the Pharisees said, {24} "You must be circumcised and keep the law" and Peter responded, "To which we gave no such commandment."

An Absurdity

Now there is an absurdity beckoning in this passage. The temptation is to say, "See there, the Gentiles did not have to keep the law." The absurdity is, that this would suggest that the Gentiles were free to kill, lie, cheat, steal and commit adultery. The issue was not mere obedience to the law, but the law was an instrument of salvation.

The issue is stated in the first verse of Acts 15, "Certain men came down from Judea, taught the brethren, and said, 'unless you are circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" It was never a salvation issue in the Old Testament or New Testament.

Circumcision Was Not Abolished For the Jews

Now what's important to know about this particular section is, circumcision per se was not abolished, nothing was changed in fact. Circumcision was a matter of national identity, not spiritual identity, it always had been, and it continued to be. They didn't abolish circumcision for Jewish couples to circumcise their children.

What they did, was to decide, not to circumcise Gentiles because they're not a part of the inheritance of the Jews. There is not a hint here that the apostles stopped circumcision for Jewish Christians.

Should Gentiles Receive The Gospel?

Paul identifies the core issue, in his letter to the Galatians, when he addresses all these things in the second chapter of Galatians. The issue was not really circumcision and law keeping, it was a question of whether the Gentiles might receive the gospel or not?

According to the believers who were Pharisees, circumcision and full participation in the Jewish community was required for salvation. Otherwise salvation was not available to the Gentiles. Well, in any case, circumcision was not abolished for the Jews. In fact, later on in Acts 16, Paul

comes across Timothy whose mother was Jewish and he circumcises him because of the Jews that were in that region.

This is remarkable. The Jewish mother of Timothy made him a Jew. It was necessary for him to be circumcised.

Utter Silence About the Sabbath

Now why am I telling you all of this about circumcision? Because it all takes place in utter silence on the other major issue, the Sabbath Day. As I mentioned previously, 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 Day as the Jews and 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.

When Did The Day of Worship Change To Sunday?

So, if the change from the Saturday Sabbath to Sunday didn't take place in apostolic times, when the New Testament was being written, when did it happen and why?

There's an interesting little aside in Acts 18 which might suggest a clue. Verse 1, "Paul left Athens and came to Corinth, {2} He found a certain Jew named Aquila, he was born in Pontus, and had lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, (because Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and he came and stayed with them."

Now the story is told remarkably well in Samuele Bacchiocchi's landmark work, "From Sabbath to Sunday." He said this, "In the year 49, the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome since they've rioted constantly at the instigation of Chrestus, (a probable erroneous transcription of the name of Christ). The fact that on this occasion converted Jews like, Aquila and Priscilla were expelled from the city together with the Jews (Acts 18:2) proves as Pierre Batiffol observes, quote "That the Roman police had not yet come to distinguish the Christians from the Jews." Fourteen years later (This is from 49 forward) 14 years later Nero identified the Christians as being a separate entity, well distinguish from the Jews." (From Sabbath to Sunday - page 167-168).

Now 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.

Now this suggests the possibility to me, 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. Samuele Bacchiocchi calls it, an 'anti-Judaism of differentiation.'

In other words, we have to get ourselves separate from these people or we are going to be persecuted.

Now towards 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 were even showing a level of respect and even admiration for the religious principles of the Jews, but the Jewish wars, that began about A.D. 66, and of course finally included the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, all that changed everything.

Militarily, the statistics of bloodshed provided by contemporary historians, even allowing for exaggeration, is a most impressive evidence of the Roman's angry vengeance upon the Jews. Tacitus gives an estimate of 600,000 fatalities in the A.D.70 war and there's more.

Christians Developed A New Identity From the Jews

Such circumstances invited Christians to develop a new identity, not only characterized by a negative attitude toward the Jews, but also by the substitution of characteristic Jewish religious customs for new ones. This would serve to make the Roman authorities aware that the Christians who were liberated from any ties to Israel and the land of Palestine represented for the Empire irreproachable subjects. This internal need of the Christian community to develop this anti-Judaism differentiation found expression particularly in the development of unwarranted criteria of Scriptural explanation through which Jewish history and observances could be made void of meaning and function. In other words, they had to get away from them and so get away from them they did.

Now as you might expect, the change took place over a long period of time. Pope Innocent I, along about 417 A.D. wrote a letter to Decentius which later became Canon Law that the church should absolutely not observe the sacraments on Friday or Saturday. I presume they could do it on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday but not Friday or Saturday, which reveals of course, that up until this time a lot of people did.

Two contemporary historians, Sozomen about 440 A.D. and Socrates about 439 A.D. confirm it. So as late as the fifth century, those who did not keep the Sabbath, were in the minority of Christian churches. It is not saying too much to say that the Roman Church was determined to inhibit Sabbath observance. They ordered fasting on the Sabbath and this practice continued up until around 1000 A.D.

Early New Testament Church Kept the Sabbath

So, we can tie up all of the loose ends and say there is really no question that the entire New Testament Church, through the period in which the 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 to worship to Sunday after the last apostles were dead.

The question we have to answer then is, whether that change was somehow authorized or whether it was unjustified and unwarranted? The next question is: what modern man must do about the Sabbath once he realizes what it's all about?

I can make a suggestion, take your Bible in hand and read the fourth commandment in Exodus 20 and verse 8. Pray, 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, not that you can't benefit their work, just don't require it. 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 on 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.

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. If you have read Mr. Dart's Sabbath series so far, what are your thoughts about his points?
2. Is the Sabbath valuable to you?
3. How would you answer Mr. Dart's question: "What would it have taken to change the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday?"
4. What are your thoughts about the point that there are only eight references to the first day of the week in the Bible, six of which are talking about the same day?
5. Is part of the problem with Christian churches today in regards to the Sabbath because of years of tradition of worshipping on Sunday?
6. What scriptures do they use to validate Sunday worship?
7. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's point that there is a "fundamental difference between circumcision and Sabbath observance;" circumcision was a Jewish identification whereas the "Sabbath identified God"?
8. What are your thoughts about people's claim of an Oral Law of Moses?

9. What are your thoughts about the point that the abandonment of the Sabbath probably started in Rome in a way of separating Christians from Judaism?
10. Do you think God ever intended for His sanctified day of rest to be changed from the seventh day to the first day of the week?