

# **The** *Bible & Life*

## **Bible Teaching Newsletter**

**BIBLICAL DOCTRINE & NEW TESTAMENT ASSEMBLY LIFE**

Vol. 30, No. 5

December 1, 2023

### **Should a Christian Keep the Sabbath Day?**

by David Dunlap

The question of whether a Christian should keep the sabbath is often controversial. The sabbath day is the seventh day of the week (Saturday). Many argue strongly that Christians must worship God on the sabbath. Groups such as the Seventh Day Adventists hold that God requires the church services to be held on Saturday. Yet original purpose of the Sabbath was that it was to be a day of rest. The Sabbath command was to cease from work on the Sabbath day (Ex. 20:8-12). In fact, the Hebrew word “Sabbath” means rest from work.<sup>1</sup> It is true the Jews in Old Testament, New Testament, and modern times used Saturday as the day of worship. Yet in the New Testament there is no command for Christians to worship on Saturday.

### **Why Do Seventh Day Adventists Worship on Saturday?**

The main reason Seventh-Day Adventists worship on the Sabbath is it’s mention in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the influence of Ellen G. White, a prophetess and founder of the Seventh-Day Adventists cannot be overstated. She raised the emphasis of the Sabbath to a new level. She often recounted a vision she had in 1846.

*“I was amazed as I saw the fourth commandment in the very center of the ten precepts, with a soft halo of light encircling it. Then said the angel, “It is the only one of the ten which defines the living God who created the heavens and the earth and all things that are therein.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **On What Day Did Early Christian Meet?**

When did the early Christians meet? Acts 2:46-47 gives us the answer, “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”

In the very beginning of the church Christians met together every day. However, if there was a single day that Christians met regularly, it was the first day of the week (our Sunday), not the Sabbath day (our Saturday) (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2). In honor of Christ’s resurrection on Sunday, the early Christians observed Sunday not as the “Christian Sabbath” but as a day to especially worship Jesus Christ and teaching of the Word of God.

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An examination of New Testament passages reveals three important points on why Christians gathered together on the first day of the week.

**1)** First of all, whenever Christ appears in His resurrected form and the day is mentioned, it is always the first day of the week.

**Matthew 28:1** “In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.”

**Mark 16:9** “When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.”

**Luke 24:1** “On the *first day of the week*, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.”

**John 20:1** “*The first day of the week* cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulcher, and sees the stone taken away from the sepulcher.

**2) Secondly**, the word “Sabbath” appears from Acts through Revelation is usually within a synagogue when Paul is evangelizing (Acts 13:42, 44 NKJV). “And the next Sabbath day...” In doing so Paul wrote, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews” (1 Corinthians 9:20). Paul did not go to the synagogue to fellowship with and edify the saints, but to preach the gospel and save the lost.

**3) Finally**, there is no reference or example of a New Testament church meeting on Saturday.

A close reading of the New Testament will reveal that there is no obligation for the believer to keep the Sabbath. The idea of a Sunday “Christian Sabbath” is also unscriptural. As mentioned, there is one time the Sabbath is mentioned in Paul’s epistles, “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ”(Colossians 2:16-17). The Jewish Sabbath was abolished at the cross where Christ “canceled the written code, with its regulations” (Colossians 2:14).

### **God Gave the Sabbath to Israel**

God rested on the seventh day, after the six days of creation (Gen. 2:2). He did not command man to “keep the Sabbath day” at that time as a special day of worship. However, He intended the principle of one day of rest in every seven to be followed.

The nation of Israel was commanded to keep the Sabbath when the Ten Commandments were given (Ex.20:8-11). The law of the Sabbath was different from the other nine commandments in that they had do with things that were intrinsically and morally wrong. The Sabbath was connected to the ceremonial worship of Israel.

The prohibition against work on the Sabbath was never intended to apply to the service of God in worship (Matt. 12:5), deeds of necessity; the every day activities of life (Matt, 12:3,4), or deeds of mercy (Matt. 12:11,12).

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It is noteworthy, that nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, not as the Mosaic law but moral instructions for Christians living under grace. The only commandment Christians are never told to keep is that of the Sabbath. Rather, Paul teaches that the Christian cannot be condemned for failing to keep it. He writes, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day (Col. 2:16). The Seventh-Day Adventists have often used history to argue that the Sabbath is the proper day for Christians to meet and not on Sunday the first day of the week.

### **The Did Emperor Constantine Change the Sabbath?**

They claim that a mandate by Emperor Constantine in AD 321 "changed" the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. The eminent historian Philip Schaff (1819-1893) is often quoted in support of this assertion.

*"In the year 321 A.D., Constantine decreed, "On the venerable day of Sunday let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed." 3*

It is a misinterpretation of this quotation by Philip Schaff to imply that Emperor Constantine changed the Sabbath from Saturday to Lord's Day. What Schaff was saying is that Emperor Constantine put into a decree for the Roman Empire that which the church had already practiced for hundreds of years. Scripture never mentions any Sabbath (Saturday) gatherings by believers for fellowship or worship. The Sabbath was a shadow, the substance is Christ (Col. 2:16,17). The resurrection of Christ marked a new beginning for believers, and the Lord's Day signifies that beginning.

However, there are passages in the New Testament that mention Christians gathered for worship on the first day of the week. For instance, Acts 20:7 states that "on the first day of the week we came together to break bread." In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul gives this instruction: "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income."

Since Paul designates this collection to be linked with the Sunday worship service of the Christian assembly. Historically, Sunday, not Saturday, was the normal meeting day for Christians in the church, and its practice dates back to the first century.

### **The Christian is Free from Sabbath Regulations**

The Sabbath was given to Israel, not the church. The Sabbath is still Saturday, not Sunday, and has never been changed. The Sabbath is part of the Old Testament Law, and Christians are free from the bondage of the law (Romans 6:14). Sabbath-keeping is not required of the Christian whether it be Saturday or Sunday. The first day of the week, Sunday, the Lord's Day celebrates the new creation, with Christ as our resurrected Savior (Revelation 1:10).

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3116 Gulfwind Dr., Land O' Lakes, FL 34639

## December 2023

### INFORMATION

Bible and Life is published periodically and sent out free of charge, supported entirely by the freewill offerings of the Lord's people. Checks should be made out to "Bible and Life Ministries, Inc."

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Our freedom from Sabbath-day regulations is repeated more than once in the New Testament: "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord" (Romans 14:5-6). "But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years" (Galatians 4:9-10). Our Savior, as the Lord of the Sabbath, freed it from the false rules and regulations with which it had become encrusted.

### Conclusion

The distinctive day of Christianity is the "first day of the week." The Lord Jesus rose from the dead on that day (John 20:1), a proof that the work of redemption had been completed and divinely approved. On the next two Lord's Days, He met with His disciples (John 20:19,26). The Holy Spirit was given on the first day of the week (Acts 2:1). The early disciples met on that day to break bread, showing forth the Lord's death (Acts 20:7). It is the day appointed by God on which Christians should set aside funds for the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 16:2).

Finally, Christians do not "keep" the Lord's Day as a means of earning salvation or achieving holiness, nor from fear of punishment. Rather, they set Sunday apart for worship and service because of loving devotion unto the One who gave Himself for them on the cross of Calvary.

### Endnotes

1. Walter Elwell (Ed) *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (vol. 2) (Grand Rapids, MI:Baker,1988), p. 1874
2. [https://www.ellenwhite.info/ellen\\_white\\_life\\_11a.htm](https://www.ellenwhite.info/ellen_white_life_11a.htm)
3. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 3, (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 380, note 1