

About the Jewish Sabbath #2

by: Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about the Sabbath day?

Did the first Gentile Christians see this important issue differently from the Jewish Christians of that era? An unusual group of Christians developed quite early in a town called Antioch in Syria, north of Palestine, north of Jerusalem, near the coast. The church came into existence when some Jews from Cyprus fled there after the big persecution described in the eighth chapter of Acts. They spoke to the Greeks about the gospel and the result was one of the most forward looking churches of those early days. They were the missionary church, the Jerusalem gang were sort of stuck in the mud back there and not at all aggressive, like Antioch was.

Well. Barnabas found out about them, and he went down there, saw it, and got Saul (Paul) from Tarsus and brought him back there. Now by the time that Paul ends up in Antioch everything was beginning to change.

Peter's Vision

Peter, for example, had been given a vision on his house top one day and was sent down to the coast to baptize an uncircumcised Gentile named Cornelius. No one had baptized a Gentile before because the Jews kept themselves apart, even from God-fearers like Cornelius. Now a God-fearer is a description of a Gentile who has made a decision to go to synagogue, to study the Torah, to study the Law, to follow the God of the Jews, but he just has never been circumcised to become a Jew, and therefore the Jews wouldn't eat with him.

Paul Called

So meanwhile, Christ calls Saul of Tarsus into His service completely apart from the Jerusalem establishment. He didn't even consult them about it. His commission included, rather more than what most of the apostles had grasp up until now.

You may remember the story. Saul was struck blind on the road to Damascus. He laid three days up there fasting, not eating anything and praying, unable to see a thing. The Lord sent a disciple named Ananias to go to him. Now Ananias, knowing Paul's reputation, was hesitant but the Lord said "Get on down there, he is a chosen vessel unto me to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel." This is in Acts 9:15.

So the Gentiles were about to surge into the future of the church and soon would outnumber the Jews. Paul hits the evangelism trail along with Barnabas.

How Did the First Christians Respond to the Sabbath Day?

Now here is my question. We're wondering about how the first Christians responded to, looked at, believed concerning the Jewish Sabbath day? Was something about to change? Had something already taken place? What would the Sabbath mean to the new converts coming into the church, because this is one of the things that people look at when they look at the Bible and they say, "Well I know the Jews did that, but the Gentiles didn't have to."

Paul and Barnabas in Antioch in the Synagogue on the Sabbath

Paul and Barnabas sailed out of the Mediterranean and eventually arrived in Antioch in Asia minor. When they arrived, they did what they always did when arriving in a new city, they went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. This story is in Acts 13.

After the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue, said unto them, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, Say on."

Well, this is a custom, basically you have Jewish visitors come in from Jerusalem, or from Israel, or some other part of the world, and they wanted to know what the news was, what's happening. If you have something to say to us or what are people thinking somewhere else. Paul stood up and motioned with his hands and said "Men of Israel, you fear God." Now that is interesting. He's talking to the Jews, and he's also talking to the God fearing Gentiles who were present, it was a Sabbath day.

What follows is Paul's gospel to the Jews and you can read it for yourself and you will find not one word about any change of the Sabbath. If there had been such a change would Paul have noted it? Or would he have held it for later? Naturally, he didn't say that there was anything to say about it, but what would've been the response to such a suggestion in the synagogue? It is not hard to imagine, but when the Jews left that Sabbath day, something strange happened.

The story again, in Acts 13:42, "When the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas who was speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. The next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy and contradicting and blaspheming and they opposed the things spoken by Paul."

Now note this well. The uproar was not because of a change in the day of assembly and worship. This was the Sabbath day and there had been no change. There was no argument.

The uproar was sheer envy. Paul was accomplishing something that none of them had even come close to.

Paul, as His Custom Was

Now let's take an example from much later in time, a lot of water has gone under the bridge. The Jerusalem conference (Acts 15) has taken place. There were certain decrees established for the Gentiles. Paul crosses finally from Asia minor to Greece on his second missionary journey. He came to Thessalonica where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

This is in Acts 17:2 and this is how Luke tells us what happened. "Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and said "This Jesus whom I preached to you is the Christ." Did you notice at this late date, it was still Paul's manner, his ethos, to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath, He hadn't changed a thing. He kept right on observing the Sabbath, going to synagogue on the Sabbath, as he had always done. It was his custom.

The word, is the same one where it says that "Jesus went into the synagogue as his custom, His ethos was" (Luke 4:16). So it's true to say, "Well, Paul went to the synagogue because that was where the Jews were and he needed to preach to them." But that's not why Luke says he went there. Luke said that going to the synagogue on the Sabbath was still Paul's ethos, his custom. Now I'll leave it to you to sit and work it out in your own mind.

If indeed the day of worship for Christian Jews had been changed by this time, how is it that we don't read anything about it?

I think the fact is, as I said in the previous article on this matter, that during this entire period, the entire Christian Church wherever Christ was named and wherever they gathered together, continued to keep the Sabbath as they had previously done up to this time.

What Did the Early Church Look Like?

In the early years of the Christian faith, and 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. Now we know that it wasn't, but the point is, to everybody else, it looked that way. They were not even separated from the Jews by the day they observed. They not only observed the same Sabbath as the Jews, they observed the same holidays. They planned their travel according to the Jewish calendar.

The Early Church Kept God's Holy Days

On one occasion, Luke makes this calendar notation quote "We sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and in five days, joined them in Troas where we stayed

seven days." This is in Acts 20 and in verse six. They were making these notations that they were going to be here for Unleavened Bread and they were going to be there for Pentecost.

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul makes reference to the practices of the Passover and the days of unleavened bread, saying, "For indeed, Christ our Passover, was sacrificed for us. 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" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

Now I know that this is shocking to some people, but it's right there on the pages of your Bible. Paul was exhorting a Gentile church in a Gentile city to observe the feast of Passover and the feast of unleavened bread. He draws a metaphor from it which would have been meaningful to them, because it was something they did.

Now there's more than this. Paul wrote this to the Colossians. In Colossians 2 and verse 16, "Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or observing festivals, new moons or Sabbaths. These are only a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 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 verse six very carefully, what you see is a church that is observing the Festivals and the Sabbaths and is being condemned for feasting on food and drink by Gentile ascetics, because asceticism was not Jewish, not in the least. It was Greeks that went down that road and they were criticizing the Jews and the Jewish Christians because they were really feasting on the festivals.

So far so good. There is not a word about a change in the day of worship for Jews or for Gentile believers, and if a change was contemplated, something should have been said by someone, somewhere by now, but nothing like that is found.

In the Spirit on the Lord's Day

Well, I know someone may be thinking, "Wait a minute, didn't John speak of Sunday as being the Lord's day in the book of Revelation. Well, no, he didn't!

Now I am going to read you what John actually wrote. Listen carefully, it is in Revelation 1 beginning at verse nine, "I John, your brother and companion in the tribulation in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ."

I gather that he had been exiled there because of his preaching of Christ. "I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet." Now, did you hear anything in there to tell you what day of the week the Lord's day was?

No, you don't. We have come to associate Sunday with the Lord's day that we can read that Scripture and think Oh John was worshiping on Sunday, but it doesn't say that.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

Now consider an innocent from Jesus' ministry. Jesus and His disciples were walking through a field of grain on the Sabbath day. Now this will put a wrinkle in your brain. His disciples plucked some ears of grain to eat and to the Jews that's harvesting. They rubbed them between their hands and in Jewish law that is threshing.

Now here is the exchange that grew out of this incident. It's in Luke chapter 6 beginning in verse 1, "Some of the Pharisees said to them, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath day." Now I will pause briefly to tell you that there's nothing in the law of Moses that says you can't do that. It was contrary to Jewish law, not Mosaic law. It is contrary to the oral law and the traditions of the elders not to the written law of the Old Testament. This is an important distinction.

Jesus answered and said, "Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and gave to those who were with him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat? Didn't you know that?" And then He said, "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." Now that is stunning! Why would one then assume Sunday is the Lord's day, when Jesus said flat out that He was Lord, not of Sunday, but of the Sabbath Day.

I think it is clear enough, that in the apostolic era of the church, there were two Sundays in the year that were observed. One was the day when the first fruits were offered, the day Christ first appeared to His disciples, and was presented to God as the first of the first fruits. It is that singular day of the year called the first day of the weeks. I discussed this at length in the book that I wrote called "The Thread."

The other Sunday is Pentecost.

What if You were a Disciple of Jesus

Now 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? Well, in the first place, you would be a Jew. Like Jesus himself, you've been a regular in synagogue attendance. You would've been a Sabbath keeper. The Sabbath, you must remember, was more than just another commandment, it was 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 have been merely a change in doctrine, it would've been tantamount to changing their God. So if you had been one of the original disciples of Jesus, the Sabbath would have been not merely another doctrine to believe or not believe, it would've been an irrefutable sign of the identity of your God, and the remarkable thing about it is that across all the sects of Judaism, the one thing they agreed on was the Sabbath, when it was, and generally speaking what you are supposed to do on the Sabbath.

How Did the Sabbath Get Changed?

Now, here's the question that you and I have to struggle with.

How and when did the day of worship get changed? Why would you at some later time, abandon the observance of the Sabbath in favor of Sunday? If you were one of the first Christians, what would've been the consequences of that change? Wouldn't you have expected Jesus to say something about it? Wouldn't you have expected Him to explain the change? There would've had to been a moment when the change came into effect and being good Jews, you or some of your close friends, would have wondered at the change! It's very hard to imagine that one week the entire body of the disciples of Jesus, remember they were all Jews at that time, that one week the entire body of the disciples of Jesus kept the Sabbath and the next week they observed Sunday instead, with no explanation, no comment, no objection, not a ripple.

So what happened? Well, the conventional wisdom is that the crucifixion and resurrection changed everything. However, we have to explain and still face up to the fact that there is nothing in the New Testament that says so.

You would really expect that a change of this magnitude would be explained somewhere. That there would be a passage that gives us, not merely the change, but the reason for the change, the meaning of the change, the meaning of the new approach.

The Sabbath had a theology that went with it, it identified who your God was. You are a worshiper of Jehovah, and not Baal. And it was the Sabbath that established that identity. So there should be a statement just as strong as the original statements about the Sabbath to explain who your new God is! And there's no such passage that exists. And of course, there was no change in who their God was and no change in their Sabbath.

First Day of the Weeks

Now 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 (Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:2, Mark 16:9, Luke 24:1, John 20:1, John 20:19, Acts 20:7, and 1 Corinthians 16:2). I say appear to mention, and that's important. The superficial impression is that the church was meeting regularly on Sunday, the first of the week, but this is entirely misleading.

Six of these eight Scriptures refer to the same events on the same day, the day of Jesus' first appearance to His disciples after the resurrection. So that only leaves two other passages to use to somehow establish a conclusion where the church continually met on the first day of the week after this.

There is something else that you should know about these passages, there really is no Greek word for 'week' in any of these. In fact, there doesn't seem to be a Greek word for 'week' in the New Testament at all. In every case where the word 'week' is found, the word for it in Greek is 'Sabbaton.'

This is a transliteration of the Hebrew word 'Sabbath', sometimes plural, sometimes singular.

Take this instance, for example, it is the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. It is a good old standby Christian doctrine.

"Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed this to himself." This is in Luke 18:10. "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I possess." Literally the Pharisee says "I fast twice of a Sabbath." It is the genitive singular, an idiom that refers to the period between the Sabbaths, for no Pharisee would fast on any Sabbath day apart from the day of atonement, A Sabbath day was a day that they had good meals and they ate well. It is a feast. The very idea of 'week' to a Jew was based on the Sabbath.

Now, about the eight instances in the New Testament where the expression 'the first day of the week' is found, first, you should know that the Hebrews, and all of Jesus' disciples at this time were Hebrews did not identify the days of the week in that manner. The Hebrew manner of designating Sunday would have been to call it "the morrow after the Sabbath." You can look it up in your concordance and you'll find it.

Second, you should know that in every case, the word for 'week' is 'Sabbaths' in the plural, that is in all of these eight instances and the word 'day' is missing altogether, in everyone of these eight instances, it is a formulaic example.

Okay, here is how the first instance of the use "The first day of the week' occurs in the Bible. "Now, after the Sabbath after the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb." This is Matthew 28 and verse 1.

Here is how it reads literally in the Greek. "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."

Now, this is an odd expression because we know it was not a Sabbath that was dawning, it was a Sunday morning. What does this mean? First it is probably correct to insert the word 'day', as virtually all translations do in this passage, and if we understand the plural of other 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'. Now how does this help?

Pentecost

Well, there are seven weeks, seven Sabbaths between this day, 'the first day of the weeks', and the feast of first fruits, Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15-22, Acts 2). The day that is being referenced here, is the first day of the 50 day countdown leading to Pentecost. It was the day when the first fruits were offered to God (Leviticus 23:11-21). It was also the day of Jesus' presentation to the Father as the first of the first fruits from the dead (John 20:11-20, Matthew 28:9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

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, the first day of the weeks of harvest,

Eight References of the First Day of the Weeks

As I said, there are eight of these references to the first day of the week. Perhaps one of the others would clarify this.

Well, the next five all talk about exactly the same day and they use exactly the same phraseology, and they don't really tell us a thing in the world of the ongoing custom of the church. All they do is establish the fact that Jesus was alive and appeared first to his disciples on 'the first day of the weeks'.

No New Custom of Meeting on Sunday

Now if you look at these, none of them have anything to do with a meeting going on. The disciples were frightened. They were confused. They did the natural thing. They huddled together, trying to make sense of what happened, and bang, Jesus appeared to them.

So, we have found nothing here about a new custom of meeting on Sunday versus the Saturday Sabbath. Have we found it? If I were one of the disciples of Jesus, I would have found nothing here to change the Sabbath day, would you? Oh yes, I might do something special on the Sunday morning next week, but the following Sabbath, I would do what I had always done.

Now this really thins out the references, the arguments, that might make a custom that started in the church. There are really only two references left of which to establish a new day of worship on the first day of every week.

Collection for the Saints

Perhaps the most familiar of the two is the following. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you have spotted it on the offering envelopes at a lot of churches. Here's what it says, "Now concerning the collection for the saints that I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also. On 'the first day of the weeks' let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come."

There are a couple of important things to notice here. First, this is precisely the same idiom that we saw in the previous six instances. It is a reference to 'the first day' of the seven weeks of harvest, and therefore is the first opportunity they will have to store up grain for the collection for the saints. This is the first day that they'll have anything coming in. This was famine relief for the saints in Jerusalem. Paul discusses it again at length in his second letter, and it is evident that there is a major effort involving the churches in Macedonia and Galatia to put together grain for Paul and his men to take to Jerusalem. When do you put the grain together? When you harvest it. When does it start? The first day of the seven weeks of harvest.

Something similar is described in Acts where a prophet arrives in Antioch with the message of the impending famine. The church put together food, sent relief to the saints in Jerusalem by the hands of Barnabas and Paul. This happened earlier in Acts 11.

Now notice what the instruction was, each of them was to lay something aside for his offering of grain so that it would be ready to go when Paul got there. Moreover, that means that 'the first day of the weeks' was not a day of worship. It was a work day for gathering in 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. Not that there's anything wrong in taking an offering, that is certainly justified, but that has nothing to do with what these guys were doing on this occasion.

The N.I.V. renders this verse this way, "On the first day of every week, every one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up so that when I come no collections will have to be made." And there's not a thing in the world here about a church meeting. This in spite of the fact that there is no Greek word for 'money' in this passage. Moreover, money is of little use when there's no food to buy. They were sending grain, not shekels.

Well, that leaves us with only one more instance of 'the first day of the week' to talk about in the New Testament, but I am out of time. We will come back to that next time.

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