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MINISTRIES

“The following is a direct script of a teaching that is intended to be presented via video, incorporating relevant text, slides, media, and graphics to assist in illustration, thus facilitating the presentation of the material. In some places, this may cause the written material to not flow or sound rather awkward in some places. In addition, there may be grammatical errors that are often not acceptable in literary work. We encourage the viewing of the video teachings to complement the written teaching you see below.”

119 Essentials: How Christianity Went from Sabbath to Sunday

Why don't most modern Christians keep the Sabbath on the seventh day, Saturday? One popular belief is that it's because God changed the Sabbath to Sunday in the New Testament.

For instance, the Westminster Confession states:

From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, [the Sabbath] **was the last day of the week**; and from the resurrection of Christ, **was changed into the first day of the week**.

—Westminster Confession XXI:VII

However, many Christians might be surprised to learn that the New Testament itself does not teach that the Sabbath had changed. The apostles continued to keep the Sabbath on the seventh day, long after the Messiah's resurrection. And as we'll see, Sunday was not widely considered a replacement of the Sabbath in Christianity until centuries after the time of the apostles.

Some might say that the New Testament speaks about the apostles meeting on the first day of the week, Sunday. There is one—maybe two—passages that mention early believers meeting on Sunday (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). However, there is no indication that these were weekly meetings, let alone that the earliest Christians had any intention of changing the Sabbath.

In fact, according to the book of Acts, the earliest Christians continued to observe the Sabbath on the seventh day (Acts 13:13-52; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). Luke records that it was Paul's "custom" to worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath, just like it was Jesus's custom (Acts 17:2; cf. Luke 4:16). According to New Testament scholar, Herold Weiss:

The New Testament shows that the Sabbath occupied a prominent position in the early Christian communities.

—Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 117

Since the Bible does not support replacing the seventh-day Sabbath with Sunday, how did we get to where we are today, with most Christians worshiping on Sunday instead?

We will explore that question soon. But first, while the transition from Sabbath to Sunday began early in Christian history, many might be surprised to learn that this change was not immediate, nor was it universal among Christians.

For instance, two fifth-century church historians—Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomen—testify that almost all Christians outside of Alexandria and Rome continued to observe the Sabbath *alongside* Sunday (Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.22; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.19).

As scholar Kenneth Strand observes, this evidence demonstrates that “even as late as the fifth century almost the entire Christian world observed both Saturday and Sunday for special religious services” (Kenneth A. Strand, “The Sabbath and Sunday From the Second Through Fifth Centuries,” *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing, 1982), 324).

So, the earliest Christians did not consider Sunday a replacement for the Sabbath. Again, outside of Alexandria and Rome, most Christians observed both days. So, what happened?

Well, during the first and second centuries A.D., there was growing conflict between Jews and the Roman empire. This conflict “made it necessary for Christians to develop a new identity in order to avoid the repressive and punitive measures (fiscal, military, political, and literary) aimed at the Jews” (Lawrence T. Geraty, “From Sabbath to Sunday: Why, How and When?” *Partings: How Judaism and Christianity Became Two* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2013), 266).

In Alexandria and Rome, where persecution of Jews was especially fierce (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.8.1; 19.5.2; *Jewish Wars*, 2.18.7), there was a strong motivation to disassociate Christianity from Judaism. This led to the Christian communities in those places abandoning Sabbath observance early on (See Skip MacCarty, “The Seventh-Day Sabbath,” *Perspectives on the Sabbath: 4 Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 42).

But once again, these motivations were not universal. As we saw earlier, most Christians living outside of Alexandria and Rome continued to observe the Sabbath in addition to Sunday as late as the fifth century AD.

In any case, the earliest Christians did not consider Sunday a replacement of the Sabbath. Sunday was its own religious day. In fact, originally, Sunday was not even a day of rest (Kenneth A. Strand, “The Sabbath and Sunday From the Second Through Fifth Centuries,” *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing, 1982), 330).

So, how did Sunday eventually become recognized as the “Christian Sabbath”? Well, on March 7, 321 AD, the emperor Constantine decreed that Sunday would be a day of rest (*Codex Justinianus* 3.12.3).

Christian historian, Justo González, summarizes the significance that this edict had for Christians:

Now that Sunday became a day of rest, civil laws had to determine what work was lawful on that day. This was soon followed by ecclesiastical laws, also determining which activities were allowed on Sunday, and which were forbidden. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that Sunday was now connected with Sabbath rest and with the commandment ordering it. This was the great change introduced by Constantine's decree. It brought about a connection between Sunday and Sabbath rest that was not present in earlier Christian thought and devotion. In the long run, this would lead to discussions as to whether Sunday abolished the Sabbath, whether Christian worship should be on the Sabbath, and so on.

—Justo L. González, *A Brief History of Sunday: From the New Testament to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), 45

Constantine's decree opened the door for later ecclesiastical authorities to discourage Sabbath observance and mandate Sunday observance exclusively. For instance, around sixty years after this decree, the Council of Laodicea's Canon 29 demanded:

Christians must not Judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honoring the Lord's Day [Sunday]; and, if they can, resting then as Christians.

— Council of Laodicea's Canon 29. Quoted in D. Thomas Lancaster, *From Sabbath to Sabbath: Returning the Holy Sabbath to the Disciples of Jesus* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2016), 269.

As time went on, church authorities increasingly disparaged Sabbath observance and promoted only Sunday observance.

As Strand remarks:

This process brought about a widespread conflict of Sunday with the seventh-day Sabbath, and eventually in medieval times this Sunday 'Sabbath' came to displace the original Saturday Sabbath generally throughout Europe.

—Kenneth A. Strand, "The Sabbath and Sunday From the Second Through Fifth Centuries," *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing, 1982), 330

After the Reformation, in English-speaking countries, Sunday not only replaced the Sabbath but also even came to be called the Sabbath. Protestant Christian confessions, sermons, and literature from this period all affirm the Sabbath commandment, yet Sunday is what is meant. So, the Sabbath was changed from Saturday to Sunday not by the Scriptures, but by political edicts and church councils, centuries after the time of the apostles.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with going to church on Sunday, or any other day for that matter. Historically, we know that Christians did hold religious services on Sunday. However, there is a problem when we break commandments for the sake of keeping traditions. We must not be like the Pharisees, whom Jesus rebuked by saying, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition" (Mark 7:9).

May we as Christians uphold the Scriptures as our final authority. The fourth commandment says to honor the Sabbath. The seventh day—not the first day, or any other day—is a holy day that God told us to keep. Let's obey the Scriptures like the apostles did and remember the Sabbath.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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