



*A Ministry of the  
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

# The First Day of the Week in the New Testament





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Most of Christianity attaches special significance to the first day of the week and has done so for over sixteen centuries. On this day, Christians from all over the world gather for worship.

The validity of recognizing Sunday as a special day for worship is almost never questioned by churchgoers. They just assume that Sunday has always been the day Christians go to church. And they may have heard verses like Psalm 118:24 (“This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it”) and Hebrews 10:25 (“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some . . .”) cited to back up their beliefs. Why, then, should there be any question about it?

Yet the assumption must be challenged. Several factors bring it into doubt.

## **Beginning the investigation**

According to the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, Christian belief and practice should be based solely on the Bible. If Sunday is to be the day of Christian worship, we should expect confirmation from God’s Word.

For centuries the majority of Christendom has held that Christ’s resurrection marked the inauguration of Sunday as a new day of worship, replacing the so-called “Jewish Sabbath.” Many believe that the apostles began to use Sunday as a day of assembly and worship soon after Christ’s resurrection. Contrary to this common belief, the apostolic church continued to

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observe the seventh-day Sabbath after the death and resurrection of Christ.

The book of Acts records a total of 84 Sabbath gatherings at which the apostle Paul preached to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2-4; 18:4, 11). In contrast, the first day of the week is referred to in only eight New Testament verses, and only one of these reports a worship service. Yet many feel that these eight references provide proof, either explicit or implicit, that Sunday has replaced the Sabbath as the God-ordained day of rest and worship.

## **“First Day” references**

The eight passages in the New Testament that refer to the first day of the week are examined here to determine their relevance to this subject.

1. The first day after the Sabbath when the two Marys came to Jesus’ tomb:

Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb (Matthew 28:1).

No sanctity or religious significance is attached to Sunday in this verse. It simply gives the day and time of day when the two Marys visited the tomb. Scholars date the writing of Matthew’s Gospel anywhere from A.D. 50 to A.D. 70 — somewhere between 20 and 40 years after the crucifixion of Christ. Yet after all that time, Matthew said nothing whatever about Sunday as a day of worship, either when relating the accusations

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against Jesus for breaking the Pharisees' Sabbath traditions or when narrating the events of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. If Sunday were intended to have any religious significance, or if the early Christian community had attached religious significance to the day, it is peculiar that Matthew made no comment about it.

2. The day when Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus:

Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen (Mark 16:2).

This account also refers to the day and time when women went to the tomb. They arrived on Sunday morning to anoint Jesus' body but found He was not there; He had already risen and departed the tomb. The statement of women visiting the tomb early Sunday morning and finding it empty should not be assigned doctrinal significance relating to a day of worship. The Bible makes no hint of such an application.

Mark is thought to have written his Gospel between A.D. 50 and 65, some 20 to 35 years after the Crucifixion. He was closely associated with both Peter and Paul, from whom he learned the facts recorded in his Gospel narrative, and became thoroughly acquainted with the doctrines they taught. Yet Mark's entire Gospel is silent as to any significance being attached to the first day of the week.

3. The day on which Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene after His resurrection:

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Now when He rose early the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons (Mark 16:9).

The two oldest Greek codices (A and B), with many other manuscript and patristic witnesses, do not contain Mark 16:9-20. Several translations say the most reliable early manuscripts omit Mark 16:9-20. For example: "The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20" (footnote in the *New International Version*).

Whether verses 9-20 are a valid portion of the original and inspired Scriptures or not, they provide no evidence for terminating Sabbath in favor of Sunday observance.

#### 4. The day on which an unspecified number of Galilean women visited Jesus' tomb:

Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared (Luke 24:1).

The primary intent of this passage, as with all other Resurrection accounts, is not to determine either the day or the hour of Jesus' resurrection, but rather to document the Resurrection as evidenced by the empty tomb and the witness of the angels. The women came early on Sunday morning only to find Jesus had already risen. Luke's Gospel, like Matthew's and Mark's, gives no religious significance to the first day of the week.

Luke is thought to have written the book

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of Acts about A.D. 63 and his Gospel prior to that. Both books were written between 20 and 35 years after the Crucifixion. Neither book gives any significance to the first day of the week other than stating it as the time when certain events occurred.

The absence of any mention by Luke of Sabbathkeeping being suspended or Sunday being observed is significant, especially after his years of association with Paul. As a careful historian, Luke would certainly have documented the debate caused by such a change, just as he did the debate surrounding circumcision.

5. The day on which Mary Magdalene visited the tomb:

On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb (John 20:1).

The first day of the week is mentioned here in the same manner as in Luke 24:1 — as part of a narrative identifying the time of Mary's visit to the tomb. John's Gospel does not attach any religious significance to the day.

6. A time after Jesus' resurrection when He appeared to His disciples:

Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19).



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This text tells us for certain why the disciples were assembled that Sunday evening: “for fear of the Jews.” It is not at all certain that they were gathered for worship. Such is not indicated. Neither is it indicated that they sang, prayed, or read the Scriptures, nor what their topics of discussion were.

The Resurrection is not mentioned in this text. Nothing is said here of terminating Sabbath observance, nor of celebrating the Resurrection, nor about future gatherings on any day or date. This occasion for meeting was used by the Lord to strengthen the disciples’ faith and to set their hearts at peace. Neither the text nor the context suggests a change of days for regular weekly worship.

John’s Gospel is thought to have been written about A.D. 90, more than 50 years after the Crucifixion. John does not allude to a change from Sabbath to Sunday, nor to any significance being attached to the first day of the week. If such a change had occurred, it is strange that he gives no hint of it.

#### 7. A day on which the disciples came together to break bread:

Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight (Acts 20:7).

If Paul’s meeting with disciples at Troas began at the start of the first day of the week (after sunset on Saturday), then it must have continued through that night until Sunday morning. The worship portion

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was late Saturday night, and Sunday became a travel day for Paul (v. 13). This text lacks support for the idea of regular worship services on Sunday or any other day. Nothing is said of that first day of the week being sacred time. No suggestion is made of repeating the meeting on any subsequent first day of the week.

There is another possibility here. This first-day meeting with Paul in Troas could have been a Sunday afternoon and evening service, extending past sunset and past midnight into Monday morning, the second day of the week. In this case, much of the evening service and the breaking of bread (v. 11) was not on Sunday at all.

The purpose of this gathering to break bread is understood by some to mean that Paul held a Sunday communion service with the church. However, this text does not reveal that the disciples' breaking bread in Troas had anything to do with communion or the Lord's Supper. "Breaking bread" was an expression often used for a fellowship meal, as in Acts 2:46 (see also 27:35).

The Bible does not tell us that any particular day of the week became linked with observing communion in the early church. It could have been said of any day of the week that the disciples came together to break bread, and no such account would establish a substitute day of worship!

8. The day on which each individual member of the Corinthian church was to set aside gifts or save money for the poor saints in Jerusalem:

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On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come (1 Corinthians 16:2).

This verse does not instruct or command that a religious service be held. No meeting is suggested; rather, “let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper.” No prayer, no singing, no preaching are mentioned, and nothing is said about the people’s fulfilling Paul’s instructions in a meeting or worship service. Paul’s stipulation “that there be no collections when I come” certainly does not suggest a pattern of activity being established for customary meeting times.

Paul’s admonition is to individuals (“each one of you,” or literally in Greek, “each of you by himself”). He requested that they “lay something aside” as a contribution for the destitute saints in Jerusalem. This would have been accomplished most naturally by individuals in their own homes.

The natural interpretation of Paul’s instructions is as follows: Paul was coming; the collections were to be made individually before he came; and the instructions would be completely fulfilled when the believers’ gifts were carried to Jerusalem.

To conclude that this proves Sunday was a regularly recognized day of religious worship — complete with passing a collection plate — is to assume much more than the text says.

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## The Lord's Day

The expression *the Lord's Day* is found only once in the Bible, in Revelation 1:10. In this instance, it is used without signifying a relationship to any day of the week. John wrote, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." It is commonly assumed that this term designates a specific day pertaining to the Lord. But what "day"?

For centuries, Sunday has been popularly called the Lord's Day. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

. . . the first writer who mentions the name of Sunday as applicable to the Lord's Day is Justin Martyr; this designation of the first day of the week, which is of heathen origin (see Sabbath, vol. xxi, p. 126), had come into general use in the Roman world shortly before Justin wrote.<sup>1</sup>

Justin Martyr wrote about A.D. 150. Since his day, it has remained a foregone conclusion with many Christians that Sunday is the Lord's Day. This introduction of the concept that *Lord's Day* meant the first day of the week is without scriptural support.

It should not be assumed that because certain men, writing 100 to 300 years after John, used *Lord's Day* as a synonym for Sunday, that John himself must have intended the same thing. Since John did not define *the Lord's Day* in his own writings, and since he incidentally used the term without amplification, it should not be cited as a proof text for making holy a day that it does not identify.

If John truly had a day of the week in mind when he wrote "on the Lord's Day," it

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would be more logical to assume that the seventh-day Sabbath was intended, since the Bible does not identify any other day in that manner. The Lord said through Isaiah, "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day . . ." (58:13), and Jesus himself said, "Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28).

A preferable view suggests that John did not have a day of the week in mind at all. Rather, Revelation 1:10 refers to John's transportation in spiritual revelation into the final "day of the Lord." The term *Lord's Day* would therefore parallel the eschatological expression "day of the Lord" in such texts as 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; and 2 Thessalonians 2:2.

Although John does not use the usual New Testament Greek phrase for *day of the Lord*, this in itself does not rule out the possibility that *Lord's Day* is to be understood in an eschatological sense. In his *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, under the heading "Day," W. E. Vine states:

As the "day" throws light upon things that have been in darkness, the word [day] is often associated with the passing of judgment upon circumstances. In 1 Cor. 4:3, "man's day," KJV, "man's judgment," RV, denotes mere human judgment upon matters ("man's" translates the adjective *anthropinos*, "human"), a judgment exercised in the present period of human rebellion against "God"; probably therefore "the Lord's Day," Rev. 1:10, or "the Day of the Lord" (where an adjective, *kuriakos*, is similarly used), is the

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day of His manifested judgment on the world.<sup>2</sup>

In summary, care should be taken to attach no meaning to Revelation 1:10 other than was first clearly intended. John's incidental and undefined reference to "the Lord's Day" is not grounds for driving hard-and-fast theological teachings about Sunday.

## **Firstfruits fulfilled**

If any theological significance attaches to the "first day of the week" in Scripture, it would be as it fulfills an important date in the Hebrew festival calendar. The central gospel events of Jesus' death and resurrection providentially coincided with Israel's spring feasts: Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Wave Sheaf (firstfruits) offering (Leviticus 23:4-12).

The Gospels report Jesus' death and burial on the dates of Passover and Unleavened Bread (Mark 14:1). Similarly, His resurrection appearances on "the first day of the week" (Greek: *te mia ton sabbaton* — literally "the first [day] from Sabbath") correlated with the public waving of the first sheaf of barley harvest on "the day after the Sabbath" of festival week (Leviticus 23:10, 11). From this event the 50-day count to Pentecost began (23:15, 16; Acts 2:1).

As Jesus' followers were making their visits to the tomb at Sabbath's end and early the next morning (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1, 2), not far away the temple priests followed the ritual of the firstfruits sheaf. First, they reaped the sheaf at the end of the Sabbath

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and then brought it into the temple for the second step: its public waving to God on the “day after the Sabbath.”<sup>3</sup>

Apostle Paul drew on this wave sheaf imagery. Jesus died and rose again according to Scripture, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, and has “become the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep” (v. 20). This *firstfruits* from the dead anticipates the full resurrection harvest to come: “Christ the *firstfruits*, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming” (15:1-4, 20-23).

Thus “the first day of the week” has a role in the Gospel story. The phrase in Greek, *te mia ton sabbaton*, recalls the first day’s relation to the weekly Sabbath — the only day of the biblical week with a proper name. In view of Israel’s temple calendar, this first day after Passover-Crucifixion and Resurrection is when Jesus appeared to the disciples as risen Lord, so fulfilling the priestly ritual of waving the firstfruits of the harvest year to God. Important as this is in terms of Levitical typology, it says nothing about a supposed shift in the sanctity of the weekly Sabbath from the seventh to any other day.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, only three “Sundays” are mentioned in the New Testament. The six references to Sunday in the Gospels refer to the same day — the day the women found the empty tomb and Jesus appeared to His disciples. The second Sunday reports Paul’s farewell meeting with the disciples at Troas in Acts 20:7ff. The third reference to Sunday names the day Corinthian believers

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were told to set aside their contributions for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

After reviewing these texts, we see that none gives scriptural authority to the notion that Sunday has replaced the Sabbath as the Bible's day of rest and worship. Generally, the time references in all eight of the "first day" passages have no explicit theological significance other than indicating when certain events happened. The Gospel references, however, suggest the fulfillment of Israel's annual festival of the Wave Sheaf of Firstfruits, standing uniquely between Passover and Pentecost.

The process by which Sunday became the customary day for assembly and worship exposes a willingness to read into the Scriptures intentions and meanings not at all evident. This process attaches more importance to assumptions and traditions than to clear, biblical statements of God's will.

The crucial, underlying issue here is the basis of valid spiritual authority: Is the Bible to be our sole authority for faith and practice, or are we allowed to supplement and supplant the teachings of Scripture with extra-biblical tradition?

*Sola Scriptura* — the Bible alone — was accepted by Reformation Christians as the final rule for faith and practice. "The Bible alone" standard challenges us to return to the biblical seventh-day Sabbath, not substituting Sunday in place of the day of the week God blessed and made holy.

1 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. xxii, article "Sunday" (New York and Chicago: The Werner Company, 1898), 654.



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- 2 W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1985), 146.
  - 3 Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 203-205.

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