



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

# The Origin and Change of the Sabbath





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The Sabbath is the seventh day of the week known as Saturday. It is the only day of the week identified in the Bible as a day of rest and worship. Most Christian churches assemble for worship on Sunday, the first day of the week. Many call Sunday the "Lord's Day"; some call it the "Christian Sabbath."

Do you know how the change in the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday came about? Do you know when this change occurred?

This booklet demonstrates that the Sabbath heritage originated at Creation, that the seventh-day Sabbath can be identified throughout various periods of human history, and that the Sabbath has never lost its identity or purpose as a day of rest and worship. The booklet shows from New Testament writings that the apostolic church of the first century observed the seventh-day Sabbath. It presents historical evidence that the change from observance of Sabbath to Sunday began in the Christian church during the second and third centuries.

## **The Sabbath of the Bible**

The seventh-day Sabbath has a rich heritage throughout the entire period of human history covered by the Bible. The Sabbath originated at Creation. Genesis 1 chronicles the creative acts of God for the first six days. They began with the organization of the universe and ended with the creation of man. Then God rested. Genesis 2:1-3 says:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the

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seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

God established the seventh-day Sabbath at the end of six days of Creation. In this manner, He established the seven-day week. The first six days are intended for labor and the pursuits of human interests; the seventh day is intended for humanity as a day of physical rest, spiritual renewal, and worship of God. From the time of Creation, the seven-day week has never changed. Time has been measured by days, seven-day weeks, months, and years.

When God rested on the seventh day of Creation week, He did three things that made the seventh day the weekly Sabbath of the Bible.

1. God rested from His work of creating. The Sabbath is a day of rest because God rested on it. Exodus 20:11 speaks of this: "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day."
2. God blessed the seventh day. On the six days of Creation, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31), but He did not pronounce a special blessing on any of those days. However, Genesis 2:2, 3 says: "On the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day." In blessing the seventh day, God made it an

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object of His special favor. According to Jesus, God did this for our benefit: “The Sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:27).

3. God made the seventh day holy. In other words, He set it apart from the other days of the week. The sacred nature and purpose for the Sabbath are described in Leviticus 23:3: “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. . . . It is a Sabbath to the LORD.”

The seventh-day Sabbath clearly has its roots in Creation. Just as the universe came into being in an orderly, thoughtful manner as a part of God’s creative genius, so God established the Sabbath by His own example of rest and by the authority of His Word.

## **A Perpetual Memorial to Creation**

Each weekly Sabbath memorializes Creation, reminding us of the origin of our vast universe. Like those pauses by which radio and TV stations identify themselves, the weekly Sabbaths are special pauses in our busy lives, giving us opportunity to identify ourselves as believers in Christ and to acknowledge God as our Creator. It is a truism that the God of the Bible would be universally recognized as Creator of all things had the seventh-day Sabbath been widely remembered and faithfully observed throughout time.

The Sabbath commandment clearly makes the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath a memorial to Creation: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. . . .

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For in six days the LORD made the heavens and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:8, 11). God and Creation are remembered and honored every seven days when the Sabbath is observed as a day of rest and worship.

## **Israel Kept the Sabbath**

As the people of Israel were led out of Egypt and delivered from an extended period of slavery, God instructed them when and how to observe the Sabbath. This instruction was given in connection with God’s promise to give them manna to eat during their desert journey toward the Promised Land. Exodus 16:4, 5, 21-30 specifically discuss God’s special arrangement to provide manna for the Sabbath:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days. . . .”

Each morning everyone gathered as much as he needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away. On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much — two omers for each person — and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. He said to them, “This is what the LORD commanded: ‘Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD.

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So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.”

So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. “Eat it today,” Moses said, “because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. You will not find any of it on the ground today. Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.”

Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. Then the LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out.” So the people rested on the seventh day.

Subsequent to this early instruction and experience of learning how the Sabbath was to be observed, God gave Israel further instructions about the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20:8-11 reminded Israel that God rested after six days of creative activity. According to Deuteronomy 5:12-15, the Sabbath rest also was given for humanitarian reasons: “so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do” (v. 14). This instruction was given to Israel in the context of making the Sabbath a reminder of their slavery and of the rest God had given them from servitude in Egypt.

Every time Israel rested on the Sabbath



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and extended the privilege of physical rest to their men and women servants and animals of burden, they gratefully acknowledged their own deliverance from slavery. Thus, the Sabbath became an important institution of Israel's religious and social life. Devout Israelites have kept the Sabbath faithfully from the days of Moses until the present.

## **The Sabbath in New Testament Times**

Jesus set an example of New Testament Sabbath observance. Luke wrote, "On the Sabbath day he [Jesus] went into the synagogue, as was his custom" (4:16). Luke says again, "On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues" (13:10). Mark 3:1-6 cites an account of Jesus healing a man's hand on the Sabbath in the synagogue.

These incidents are only a few of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' Sabbath activities. His practice of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath is significant. In New Testament times, the synagogue was where Jews and God-fearing Gentiles assembled on Sabbath to worship. The synagogue service on Sabbath included reading Scripture, prayer, and preaching.

When Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath as a matter of custom, He was fulfilling the instruction in Leviticus 23:3: to make the Sabbath a day of "sacred assembly." This example of corporate worship in the synagogue is followed by Christian churches in conducting weekly services.

By continuing weekly Sabbath gatherings for worship, the apostolic church left

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a powerful precedent for Sabbath observance. Many people have the concept that the first century Christian church stopped worshipping on Sabbath and began to worship on the first day of the week in celebration of Jesus' resurrection, but that is not accurate! The book of Acts shows that many years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christian church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, was worshipping regularly on the seventh-day Sabbath.

Acts 13 refers to the Sabbath four times. Three of these references are in the context of worship in a synagogue with both Jews and Gentiles present. Paul and his companions went to a synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, where Paul preached the gospel of Christ to an audience he addressed as "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God" (vv. 14-16). In verse 27, Paul refers to "the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath," in the context of worship on the Sabbath. In verse 42, both Jews and Gentiles invited Paul and Barnabas to speak to them about Jesus again on the following Sabbath. Verse 44 reports that almost the whole city assembled on the next Sabbath to hear God's Word.

Acts 15:21 indicates the first five books of the Old Testament were read to both Jews and Gentiles in the synagogues every Sabbath.

Acts 16:13, 14 gives this account:

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listen-

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ing was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

It was Paul's regular habit to worship in the synagogue on Sabbath with both Jews and Gentiles:

As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, . . . "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women (17:2-4).

In Corinth Paul reasoned with a congregation of mixed nationalities every Sabbath for a year and a half:

Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, . . . Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. . . . and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized. . . . So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God (18:4, 6, 7, 8, 11).

This text suggests that Paul met with the church in Corinth for at least 78 Sabbaths during this stay.

These accounts illustrate that Paul and the first century church made the Sabbath the principal day to congregate for worship and for preaching the Word of God. While evangelism and Bible teaching occurred on

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other days of the week, the New Testament church honored the Sabbath day as its regular day to assemble before God. There is no biblical record of the church honoring any other day of the week for assembly and worship as they honored the seventh-day Sabbath. The New Testament is silent in terms of either example or instruction about any day other than the seventh-day Sabbath being devoted to rest and worship.

Thus, we conclude that the Sabbath, as established in Creation, has been observed faithfully and regularly by the people of God from the time of Moses through the centuries covered by the Bible narrative, including the first century Christian church.

## **The Process of Change**

By what process did it come about that most Christians now observe the first day of the week as a day of religious assembly and worship? By whose authority was the change made from Sabbath to Sunday?

In his book entitled *From Sabbath to Sunday*, Samuele Bacchiocchi observes that the change from Sabbath observance to Sunday observance did not occur with the Jerusalem or Palestine Christians; rather, its origin is found in the church at Rome. He writes:

In examining the possible origin of Sunday observance among primitive Jewish-Christians, we have just concluded that it is futile to seek among them for traces of its origin, because of their basic loyalty to Jewish religious customs such as Sabbath-keeping. We shall therefore

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direct our search for the origin of Sunday to Gentile Christian circles. We would presume that these, having no previous religious ties with Judaism and being now in conflict with the Jews, would more likely substitute for Jewish festivities such as the Sabbath and Passover new dates and meaning.

The adoption of new religious feast days and their enforcement on the rest of Christendom could presumably be accomplished in a Church where the severance from Judaism occurred early and through an ecclesiastical power which enjoyed wide recognition. The Church of the capitol of the empire, whose authority was already felt far and wide in the second century, appears to be the most likely birth-place of Sunday observance. To test the validity of this hypothesis, we shall now proceed briefly to survey those significant religious, social and political conditions which prevailed both in the city and in the Church of Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Bacchiocchi makes the following points to support the validity of his hypothesis:

First, he points out that the congregation at Rome was dominated by Gentile Christians who had come to Christianity primarily from paganism. This often caused conflicts between the Jewish Christians and their more numerous Gentile brothers over issues of law, the need for circumcision, salvation by obedience to the law and respect for holy days, and the dietary restrictions of the Jews. Disputes over matters such as these gave probable cause for an early break between the Gentile converts and Judaeo-Christians of the church in Rome.

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Second, the actions of the Roman Empire, first against Jews and later against Christians, led to an early antagonism between Jews and Christians. In A.D. 49 the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. Later, in A.D. 64, Nero persecuted the Christians and blamed them for the fire that destroyed Rome.

Meanwhile, Jewish influence seemed to have found new favor with the emperor. This fact adds strength to the argument that Gentile Christians were led to distance themselves from their religious practices that had grown directly out of Judaism.

Bacchiocchi observed that the Roman church made the Sabbath a day of fasting. This changed the very nature of Sabbath observance. It was not a practice of the Jews to fast on the weekly Sabbath. The Roman church's insistence on making the Sabbath a day of fasting accomplished two objectives: 1) It made Sabbath observance less appealing and 2) it made a vast difference between the way the Sabbath was observed in the West and how it was observed in the East among Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians.

Third, after the death of Nero, the Jews once again became objects of Roman anger. Under Vespasian (A.D. 69-79) the Sanhedrin and the office of the high priest were abolished. Worship at the temple site (the temple had been destroyed) was forbidden. Later, Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) outlawed the practice of the Jewish religion and observance of the Sabbath. Furthermore, the Jews of the empire were singled out and required to pay a tax others were exempt

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from paying. This discriminating practice led to anti-Semitic views that made anything associated with the Jews unpopular.

According to Bacchiocchi, all these actions by Roman rulers were accompanied by anti-Jewish literature that derided and misrepresented them, their origin, and their religious customs, especially the Sabbath.

Bacchiocchi concludes that all this discrimination led to a strong anti-Semitic view within the Christian church at Rome. This anti-Semitic view became the impetus for the Christian church to abandon observance of the Sabbath in favor of Sunday as a day of rest and worship, first in the West and later in the East.

Various references support our position that Sunday, as a day of rest and worship, began to be substituted for the Sabbath in the second and third centuries. This did not happen in recognition that Jesus' resurrection was supposedly on the first day of the week, as many are led to believe. Rather, it happened to distance the Christian church from its Judaeo roots and practices.

Second century Christian church fathers (specifically, Ignatius, Barnabas, and Justin Martyr) wrote against observing the Sabbath. The writings of these men cover the period from about A.D. 98 to A.D. 160. They put forth a variety of arguments against Sabbath observance, largely reflecting their strong anti-Semitic views. The very existence of these arguments give unintended but clear testimony to the continuing Sabbath observance in the Christian church into and through the second century.

Notice this reference:

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From the testimony of Josephus it is clear that the Jews, as a nation, continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath until their overthrow, when Jerusalem was captured by Titus, 70 A.D. As colonies, and individuals, scattered over the face of the earth, the Jews have preserved a knowledge of the original Sabbath, and the definite day, until the present time. They constitute a living testimony for the benefit of all who desire to know the truth of this matter.

According to church history, the seventh-day Sabbath was observed by the early church, and no other day was observed as a Sabbath during the first two or three centuries. . . . Gradually, however, the first day of the week came into prominence as an added day, but finally by civil and ecclesiastical authority as a required observance. The first legislation on this subject was the famous law of Constantine enacted 321 A.D. The acts of various councils during the fourth and fifth centuries established the observance of the first day of the week by ecclesiastical authority, and in the great apostasy which followed, the rival day obtained the ascendancy. During the centuries which followed, however, there were always witnesses for the true Sabbath, although under great persecution. And thus in various lands, the knowledge of the true Sabbath has been preserved.<sup>2</sup>

Constantine, emperor of Rome, accepted Christianity. In order to unite the people and strengthen his rule over them, he attempted to unite them in his newly adopted religion. He gave Christian significance to pagan days and festivals as a means of



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Christianizing pagan Rome, illustrated in the following:

Constantine is the founder, in part at least, of the civil observance of Sunday, by which alone the religious observance of it in the church could be made universal and could be properly secured.<sup>3</sup>

The wording of the first Sunday law made by Emperor Constantine in A.D. 321 follows:

On the venerable Day of the Sun let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed. In the country, however, persons engaged in agriculture may freely and lawfully continue their pursuits; because it often happens that another day is not so suitable for grain-sowing or for vine-planting; lest by neglecting the proper moment for such operations the bounty of heaven should be lost.<sup>4</sup>

Constantine's decree enforcing observance of the pagan Day of the Sun was the first in a long series of decrees enforcing the observance of Sunday, the first day of the week, in lieu of the Sabbath.

Sixty-six years later, 387 A.D., in another Roman decree, Sunday is called "The Lord's Day." This constitutes legal recognition of the Christian name for the day. . . . In 392 A.D., another Roman decree forbade on that day all exhibitions that might turn away attendance from the mysteries of the Christian religion. The Sunday legislation of the Roman empire never went backward. . . . In the time of Justinian, 685 A.D., the laws of the empire on the subject were gathered into the codes, which contained the law of the

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Roman empire, and from the year 800, when Charlemagne was crowned, this code was of force and effect all over the "Holy Roman Empire." . . . During the Middle Ages there were decrees and canons of popes and of councils concerning the observance of Sunday, which, though ecclesiastical, were of civil force because enforced by the civil power.<sup>5</sup>

The crowning of Charlemagne as emperor by the pope in A.D. 800 was the great act that united church and state. This created a great governing power in Europe with two heads: the pope and the emperor. The pope made the ecclesiastical laws and the emperor enforced them. The result was that anyone who defied the Roman church was pronounced a heretic and ostracized from the community and family — even suffering death. With the backing of the emperor, the decrees of the Church carried tremendous authority as noted in this quotation:

Not until the time of the Carolingians [the line of kings that began with Charlemagne] did the idea of substitution of Sunday for the Old-Testament Sabbath prevail in Christian Europe. Charlemagne's numerous strict Sunday regulations were explicitly based upon the Old-Testament command to keep the Sabbath day holy.<sup>6</sup>

This reference points out two important facts: The Christian church in Europe was forced to honor Sunday instead of the Sabbath, and the decrees of the Church attempted to make Sunday the "Lord's Day" or the "Christian Sabbath." But the first day

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of the week can never become the Sabbath of the Lord. God rested on the seventh day, blessed, and hallowed it and it alone (Genesis 2:2, 3). No other day of the week can ever become what God made of the seventh day of the week: the Sabbath!

## **Conclusion**

The Bible clearly declares which day of the week is the Sabbath. We have shared with you some of the Sabbath's rich heritage as God's gift to us for our delight and enjoyment. We have shown clearly that the seventh-day Sabbath is identifiable throughout the various periods of human history, and that it was observed faithfully by God's people throughout Bible times.

Finally, by various historical references, we have given evidence that the change from Sabbath to Sunday for a day of rest and worship began in the Christian church during the second and third centuries. The theory that Christ rose on a Sunday was not employed as an explanation for observing the first day of the week in lieu of the Sabbath until this change was in progress.

Honoring the time of the resurrection of Christ was not the earliest motivating reason for the change. Rather, the change had its origin in social and religious prejudices, and was furthered by political expediency. These largely grew out of the anti-Semitic attitude of that period of history.

The change of the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday had nothing to do with biblical instruction or example. Rather, it

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came about by the will of man in opposition to clear instructions in God's Word and His example of Sabbath rest.

The modern church world, continuing this substitution of Sunday for the Sabbath, has almost entirely abandoned the concept of Sabbath rest. In the last decades of the twentieth century, Sunday has become a day of recreation, shopping, and work. Usually on Sunday, Christians devote one or two hours to worship and study. They use the remainder of the day for recreation or work characteristic of the other six days of the week.

But God still invites us to partake in the glorious blessings of Sabbath rest: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8).

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- 1 Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, Rome, 1977), p. 165.
  - 2 *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. IV (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1939), p. 2633.
  - 3 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. III (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1953), p. 379.
  - 4 *Ibid*, p. 380
  - 5 *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. XI (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1949), p. 147.
  - 6 *Ibid.*, p. 145.



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