

The Christian Sabbath or the Jewish Sabbath, which should I follow?

The Sabbath

The word 'Sabbath' does not mean Saturday, Sunday or any other day. In broad terms, it simply means 'rest'. The highly regarded *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says, "The root means to cease, desist..."¹

Sabbath can refer to any rest period, even a year. "For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a Sabbath of rest, a Sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards." (Leviticus 25:3-4).

If a minister of religion takes a break from his normal duties, it is sometimes stated that he is taking a sabbatical; simply meaning, he is taking a rest from his usual work, perhaps to engage in a period of study.

God worked for six days, on the seventh he rested. "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the 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." (Genesis 2:1-3).

He commanded his people to also work for six days and rest on the seventh. The Sabbath for man after six days of work points to God intending that a close relationship between himself and man be established.

The first reference to the word 'Sabbath' in the bible is in Exodus. "He said to them, 'This is what the LORD commanded: 'Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. 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.'" (Exodus 16:23-30).

Keeping the Sabbath is part of the ten commandments. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 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. Therefore the LORD blessed the

Sabbath day and made it holy." (Exodus 20:8-11).

Quite clearly, the law being laid down here is that man shall labour for six days and rest on the seventh. Those who failed to keep the Sabbath were to be put to death. "Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested." (Exodus 31:14-17).

The covenant

Please note, this is a binding covenant with the Israelites. If the Israelites want to be in a right relationship with God, they must keep this covenant, and they must keep every part of it, that includes the execution of any person who fails to keep the Sabbath.

Today, people who keep the Jewish Sabbath don't take up stones against those who decide to keep the Christian Sunday Sabbath, so they are not fully complying to Jewish Sabbath keeping obligations. The Bible does not give any encouragement to those who partly keep obligations. The Bible warns "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'" (Gal. 3:10). Note the word 'everything'.

Those who place their faith in our faithful covenant keeping Lord Jesus Christ, are free from the legal obligation of the covenant between God and the Jews.

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, "... was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us - to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ... And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him," (Luke 1:67-76).

The people of Israel had failed to keep their covenant obligations before God. In the passage above, we see that the Priest, Zechariah, is excited because God is going to 'remember his holy covenant'. At last, God is sending his Messiah into the world. He, the Messiah, will keep the holy covenant, not simply as a personal obligation, but on behalf of all those who trust in him. The faithful covenant keeper is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christians do not normally try to keep Jewish covenant obligations because they fully trust in the work of Christ. They will enter the heavenly rest because of the work of

another, not their own work. A Christian who decides to revert back to some of the Jewish covenant obligations is like a young child who walks up to a famous painting with a paint brush in hand. He does not appreciate just how perfect the painting is, so he proceeds to put his own painting on top of the masterpiece. In doing so, the beautiful work of the master is hidden.

That is how it is with those who try to impose their own religious works upon the work of Christ. That reason alone should be enough to give most Christians some concern about attempting, or giving the appearance of attempting, to keep the Jewish Sabbath in preference to rejoicing in the perfect completed work of Christ on the Christian Sunday Sabbath.

The Jewish Sabbath

In ancient times, the day did not end at midnight as we have it now, but rather, at the end of the daylight period, at sunset. So a day begins with night time. That is why we read in Genesis, "... And there was evening, and there was morning - the first day." (Gen. 1:5).

The Jews begin their Sabbath at sundown on Friday. The Seventh Day Adventists and some other small Christian sects follow the Jews with regard to the Sabbath and begin their Sabbath at the same time. Several years back, I preached a few messages for a Church which was renting a Seventh Day Adventist church building. I noticed a message on the wall which stated that the next Sabbath will begin at - a very precise figure was given, something like 6:28 pm. I thought to myself. "Do they really believe that God is a strict taskmaster who is going to be displeased with them if they are a few minutes early or late in beginning the Sabbath?" The Bible gives a warning against strict Sabbath keeping.

The Religious Leaders

Following the Sabbath, and various other rules and obligations, became a burden for the Jews in the time of Christ. Jesus at one point told the religious authorities, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them." (Luke 11:46).

Jesus rebukes the religious leaders for taking a hard legalistic stand on Sabbath keeping. The Bible says, "'At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, 'Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.' He answered, 'Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread - which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.'" (Matt. 12:1-8).

Jesus puts everything in the correct perspective. He is the Son of Man, and the Sabbath does not rule over the Son of

Man, but rather, the Son of Man rules over the Sabbath.

The son of man is Lord of the Sabbath

"... the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.' Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' He said to them, 'If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'" (Matt. 12:8-12).

The 'Lord's Day' Sabbath

Several passages of Scripture indicate that Christians chose to worship on the day that our Lord rose from the dead (Matt. 28:1). It was the first day of the week, and it came to be known as the 'Lord's Day'. No doctrinal error was committed in changing from the Jewish Sabbath to their own special Sabbath. Christians were still working for six days, then taking the seventh off. Initially, some Christians worshipped on both Saturday and Sunday.

The Christians at Troas worshipped (broke bread) on the first day of the week. "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight." (Acts 20:7).

We should note that even though the Christians at Troas had a special guest in the person of the apostle Paul, the focus of the service was to 'break bread', so clearly this was a worship service.

The Christians at Corinth met for worship on the first day of the week; Sunday. "On the first day of every week, each 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." (1 Cor. 16:2).

The apostle John received his revelation from the Lord on the Lord's Day. "On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet," (Rev. 1:10).

Some believe the Roman Catholic Church changed the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. However, they can not point to any pontiff who is alleged to have changed the day of worship. The day of worship was not changed. The day the Christians were worshipping on was simply honoured as the official Sabbath by the Roman authorities.

Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire in 313 under the leadership of the new emperor, Constantine. In 321, in support of Christians, he made Sunday a public holiday. He also gave generously toward the construction of church buildings.²

It does not make sense to claim that the Roman Catholics changed the day because Roman Catholicism with its special allegiance to the pope did not begin until the time of pope Gregory, several centuries after Constantine. Gregory reigned in the seventh century.

Sunday

Some sects have argued that we should not worship on a

Sunday because it is named after a Roman god. A problem with that idea is that the Roman days of the week were named after Roman gods. Even Saturday was named after a Roman god; the god Saturn. The Romans had a mid-winter festival in honour of Saturn, called the Saturnalia. It lasted seven days, and was a time of much merrymaking.

Our English days of the week are named after Saxon gods. For instance, Tuesday is named after the Saxon god Tiu. The one exception to the above is Saturday which is named after the Roman god Saturn as explained above.

Saturday holiday

It was not until May 1919 that around 20,000 shop workers in Melbourne Australia had their hours of work reduced so that they then had Saturday afternoons off from work. Sydney followed in reducing hours.³

For those following the Christian Sabbath (Lord's Day Sabbath) life would have been fairly straight forward with working six days - Monday to Saturday - then having a Sabbath (rest day) on the seventh day - Sunday. However, life would have been very different for those wishing to follow the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday Sabbath). Most occupations required their workers to toil on Saturdays.

The mark of the beast

Many in the Seventh Day Adventist denomination have been told that if they worship on Sunday, they will be following the 'mark of the beast' which is mentioned in Revelation chapter thirteen, however, a close look at this chapter reveals that it is not concerned with the day on which we worship. It is about a determined effort to get people to worship 'the beast'. People who refuse to receive a special 'mark' will not be able to buy or sell goods.

"He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666." (Rev. 13:16-18).

We do not know exactly what the mark on the right hand or forehead will be. Some have quite reasonably speculated that it is a microchip inserted under the skin which will identify the person and permit transactions. Many cats and dogs have microchips inserted under the skin for identification purposes. One thing is for certain, those who do not have 'the mark' will not be able to buy or sell goods (Rev. 13:17).

There are serious consequences for those who receive the 'mark'. The Bible warns, "The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image." (Rev. 16:2).

It does not make sense that God would turn his back on all of the great saints of the past in this manner simply because they worshipped him one day late. There are serious consequences with regard to our view of our salvation and other matters if we take up the view that the 'mark of the beast' refers to worshipping on the Lord's Day - Sunday.

The Bible informs us that punishment for those who

receive the mark of the beast on their right hand or forehead does not end with painful sores, the followers of the beast will be thrown into the lake of fire. An angel of God warns, "... 'If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.'" (Rev. 14:9-11).

I will list some major problems with the teaching that God is going to cast into the lake of fire those who worship him on the wrong day.

- This teaching denigrates the character of God. It turns him into a nit-picking deity who banishes people to hell simply because they worship him on the wrong day!
- It seriously diminishes what the devil is trying to achieve - the worship of himself (Matt. 4:9). This teaching would have us believe the devil is happy for us to worship God, so long as we do not do it on a Saturday.
- This teaching undermines the biblical assurance that "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." (1 John 5:12). The apostle assures believers, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13).

The apostle would not be able to give the above assurance if he thought God would turn his back on believers if they worshipped him on the wrong day. The real beneficiaries of the 'Sunday is the mark of the beast' teaching are the churches which follow the Jewish Sabbath. They gain a faithful following from those who are fearful of being thrown into the lake of fire if they stray from the 'correct day' of worship.

Not all Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Churches continue to teach the above false teaching. While I was staying with family in Kingaroy Queensland in the mid 1980s, a pamphlet was distributed in letter boxes which proclaimed the view that Sunday is the 'mark of the beast'. I responded to the pamphlet with a letter to the local newspaper. The SDA church responded to my article by placing a letter in the paper the following week advising that the pamphlet did not come officially from the church, furthermore, they did not endorse the Sunday is the 'mark of the beast' teaching.

In some circles, there is an additional error to the false 'mark of the beast' teaching. That is the view that in the last days, Christians will turn on those who worship on a Saturday and force them to worship on a Sunday. In view of what the Bible says about being overly particular about worshipping on a certain day (Colossians 2:16-17) I find that idea quite absurd. Let me respond to the above claim with a slight twist to a popular saying in reference to democracy. I do not agree that Saturday is the best day on which to worship, but I will defend to the death the right of people to worship on that day.

Having previously looked at what the Old Testament says

about the Sabbath, we will now investigate the teaching of the New Testament on this subject. This approach is important because the NT interprets and explains the OT. That means, the NT has the final say on the matter.

Sabbath keeping in the NT

The New Testament does not command Christians to continue Old Testament obligations and execute those who do not keep the Jewish Sabbath. Quite the contrary, we are told, "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 teaching here is quite clear, no person can judge another over the matter of the Sabbath day. He or she can keep the Sabbath on a Saturday, Sunday or any other day of the week. However, there is one constraint, we are not to forsake our gathering together. "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Heb. 10:25). That means, for practical purposes, it is best to worship on the Lord's Day (Sunday) because most Christians worship on that day.

The Lord's Day

Emperor Constantine declared Sunday to be a public holiday so that Christians could more easily worship God on that day. He declared, "Therefore all men shall have the right to emancipate and to manumit on this festive day, and the legal formalities are thereof are not forbidden."⁴

The *Didache*, an old document which gives teaching on such things as baptism and the Lord's supper says, "And on the Lord's day of the Lord (sic) [not on the Jewish Sabbath] come together and break bread and give thanks ..."⁵

The editor of *A New Eusebius*, after quoting Justin, a Christian apologist (c.100-165) on how Christians conducted their worship states, "Justin goes on to describe the weekly Eucharist held each Sunday".⁶

Keeping the Sabbath is not an end in itself, it actually points to something; the heavenly rest.

Heavenly rest

The Sabbath points to a rest which is far greater than the rest that any man can give to another. It points to that great rest provided by God; a heavenly rest. The Bible says of that rest, "Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith." (Hebrews 4:1-2).

Two things stand out in the above passage. There is a promise from God of a heavenly rest and it is entered through faith in the gospel message. The heavenly rest, which our earthly Sabbath points to, can not be entered through works, that is, trust in our own religious works, including, keeping the Jewish covenant regarding the Sabbath. Entering the heavenly rest is through faith, that is, through belief in the gospel.

The Bible declares, "'Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, 'So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest." It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;" (Hebrews 4:3-9).

Our focus

The message of the Bible points people in a certain direction with regard to the Sabbath. It points to the 'Sabbath-rest for the people of God' which is obtained through the Lord Jesus Christ, our faithful covenant keeper. Christians should not divert their attention to their own Sabbath keeping efforts, but rather, trust fully in the work of Jesus Christ.

Further reading

"*The Hindu, The Muslim and The Christian*," This paper shows that it is impossible to be saved outside of Christ. "*God's Covenant With Abraham*" Understanding this covenant will help to understand Jewish obligations regarding the Sabbath.

The papers listed above are free downloads from the main page of www.defenceofthefaith.org web site.

End Notes

1. Sabbath, W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 311.
2. Bruce L Shelley, *Church History In Plain Language*, Nelson, Nashville, 1995, p. 94.
3. *Chronicle of Australia*, Ed. John Ross, Viking, 2000, p. 492.
4. Constantine, *A New Eusebius*, SPCK, London, 1968, p. 344.
5. *Didache, A New Eusebius*, SPCK, London, 1968, p. 129. See also, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd Ed., Ed. M Homes, Baker, 1989, p. 157.
6. *A New Eusebius*, p. 67.

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