

Did Paul Change the Sabbath Command?

What was Paul's practice? And what did he expect of those he taught?

Some who argue against keeping the Fourth Commandment acknowledge that Jesus kept the seventh-day Sabbath but contend that He did so because He was a Jew and that He later authorized Paul to abandon this command when teaching gentiles (non-Jews). Even though some of Paul's writings are "hard to understand" and are therefore misinterpreted (2 Peter 3:15-16), his personal example regarding the Sabbath is quite clear.

Paul's custom

As the son of a Pharisee and as one who zealously lived as a Pharisee prior to his conversion to Christianity (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Philippians 3:5), Paul's practice was to observe the seventh-day Sabbath every week. After his conversion, this part of his life remained the same.

When he traveled to Thessalonica and learned there was a synagogue there, "Paul, as his *custom* was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ"" (Acts 17:2-3, emphasis added throughout). Note that Paul had the same "custom" as Jesus when it came to keeping the Sabbath (compare with Luke 4:16).

When Paul came to Corinth, Luke records that Paul "reasoned in the synagogue *every* Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4). Again, we see that Paul's habit was to observe the Sabbath by going to the synagogue "every" Sabbath.

Paul's teaching and instruction

He told the Corinthians to imitate or follow his actions, including keeping the Sabbath, just as he imitated or followed Christ's (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul did not have a different form of Christianity than the one taught and practiced by Christ.

When gentiles in Antioch wanted to hear God's Word preached to them, Paul had them come the next Sabbath (Acts 13:42-44). Had Sabbath-keeping no longer been God's expectation of gentiles, Paul could have simply told them that he would preach to them the next day.

In writing to the church at Thessalonica, Paul praised the members of this largely gentile congregation (1 Thessalonians 1:9) for being "examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything" (verses 7-8).

So did this largely gentile congregation in Thessalonica that set the example for all the other congregations that were being established abandon the Sabbath, or did it follow the example of the Sabbath-keeping congregations comprised primarily of Jews in Judea? Paul answers this question saying, "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 2:14).

The churches—whether made up of Jews or gentiles—that were established by Paul's teaching observed the Sabbath. The scriptural record shows that Paul personally kept the seventh-day Sabbath and that he taught the gentiles to do the same.

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Did Christ Break the Sabbath?

Jesus was criticized sharply over the way He observed the Sabbath. But was He disobeying God's Sabbath law or only the man-made rules that had been attached to it?

During His ministry as a human here on earth, Jesus was accused of breaking the Sabbath (Matthew 12:2, 10; Mark 2:24; 3:2; Luke 6:2, 7; 13:14; John 5:16, 18; 9:16).

Based upon these accusations, some have mistakenly concluded that it is okay for them today to "also" break the Sabbath. Before making such a judgment, consider whether the accusations were correct. Did Jesus Christ really break God's Sabbath law?

Jesus' custom

Jesus' custom was to go to the synagogue to worship God on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). God designated the Sabbath as a "holy convocation" (Leviticus 23:2, 4)—meaning that it was a time to assemble with others to worship God.

The accusations of Sabbath breaking against Christ were not because He neglected to assemble with others on this day to hear God's law read and to listen to exhortations to serve God. The accusations arose over the additional rules the Jews had established about how they thought the Sabbath was to be observed.

The Mishnah—a written record of Jewish oral traditions completed in the second century after Christ—

lists 39 forbidden types of work on the Sabbath. In general, the rabbis believed that all work that was creative and exercised control or dominion over the environment was forbidden (<http://www.jewfaq.org/shabbat.htm>).

Noting that God had ceased from His creative work after preparing the earth for mankind in six days (Genesis 2:1-3), the rabbis reasoned that similar types of work prohibited on the Sabbath would include agricultural activity such as plowing, sowing and harvesting.

Two of the major Jewish accusations of Sabbath breaking are recorded in Matthew 12:1-13. One of these occurred when Jesus' disciples picked a few heads of grain and ate them as they walked through a grain field on the Sabbath. The accusers considered this harvesting. The other arose over Jesus healing a man's withered hand on the Sabbath. The accusers considered this miracle to be work.

The Lord of the Sabbath

Instead of arguing with their definitions, Jesus supplied scriptural references and logical examples showing that what He and His disciples had done did not break the Sabbath. Then Jesus added that He is the "Lord" of the Sabbath—the One who can properly explain how the Sabbath is to be observed (Matthew 12:8).

Jesus' actions had not broken the Sabbath. His activities were teaching opportunities for those who wished to understand how the Sabbath was to be observed. Sadly, instead of accepting this teaching, the Pharisees then "plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him" (verse 14).

The truth is that Jesus lived a perfect, sin-free life. As Paul explained: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus did not break the Sabbath. Instead, He showed how it is to be observed. Those of us who wish to serve God are to "walk just as He [Jesus] walked" (1 John 2:6). We, too, need to keep the Sabbath.

Did the Early Christians Worship on Sunday?

Should we follow the clear instruction of the Bible, Jesus Christ and the apostles—or the practice of early Christians in later centuries?

A common but mistaken teaching is that the first-century apostles and Christians changed the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday in honor of Christ's resurrection. The change did not originate with the apostles and is not taught by the New Testament.

Later, however, Sunday worship did spread to many churches. Around A.D. 150 Justin Martyr wrote: "On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read. ... Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead" (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 67; ANF 1:186).

Other church historians document the fact that by the middle of the second century Sunday had become the predominant day of worship. Based upon these secular writings, some have mistakenly concluded that the New Testament must include accounts of worship on Sunday.

Who do we follow?

So what about the historical records that many began worshipping on Sunday by the middle of the

second century? Does this support the validity of the change?

We need to understand two important facts. First, Sunday does not really honor Christ's resurrection because Jesus did not rise from the grave on Sunday. When Mary came to the tomb before sunrise on Sunday morning, she found that He had already risen (Matthew 28:1-6). The Bible indicates that He rose from the grave just before sunset on Saturday.

Second, we need to understand that secular records do not override the authority of the Bible. Just because a large number of people abandoned the Sabbath in favor of Sunday does not mean that this was acceptable to God. When ancient Israel abandoned the Sabbath, God was not pleased and punished the nation severely for its sins. God has not changed His mind about sin. It is still wrong. It still leads to death (Romans 6:23).

Warnings of apostasy

Furthermore, the Bible indicates that toward the end of the first century, many departed from the faith. As Jude wrote: "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (verses 3-4).

Peter likewise warned the Church: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed" (2 Peter 2:1-2).

Based upon these warnings from faithful ministers at the end of the first century, we should expect the historical record to document deviations from the teaching and practices of Jesus and the apostles.