

Why Do Christians Meet On Sunday?

A Brief Explanation

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but **the substance is of Christ.**

(Col 2:16-17)

Introduction

It is a fair question from people who know their Bibles: why do Christians gather on the first day of the week when the most well known stipulation about worship in the Bible is to keep the seventh day as holy? Is Sabbath keeping not the fourth of the ten commandments after all (Ex 20:8)? Then again, where is the specific command from God to meet on Sunday?

There is good reason to keep the first day of the week as the Lord's Day but it requires a certain amount of Bible Study to understand it. Perhaps that is why the Lord left it as something to be searched out, to make people understand the massive change that occurred between the Old Covenant and the New. Folk accept certain changes without question. War is commanded in the Old Testament (OT) on a number of occasions, yet a Christian is to be a man of peace and even refuse to hate in his heart. Acceptance with God involves the slaughter of sheep, bulls and goats in the OT, but the New Testament (NT) throws these offerings out and explains that the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus alone makes a path to God for those who have faith. Similarly, the Sabbath was a time for physical rest and ceasing from work, but the rest for the believer in the NT is spiritual – a ceasing from works of self-righteousness and believing in God's grace. So how do we understand the OT?

Interpreting the Old Testament

Before we proceed we have to establish an important principle – what rules do we use to explain commands laid down about worship in the OT that are obsolete?

The forms of the law were shadows

It is vital that we understand that the OT worship system is called a '*shadow*' in the NT (Heb 8:5, 10:1). It was an illustration of truth that was only really present in Christ Jesus. He is the light, the Jewish worship system under the OT was a reflection of that – it all pointed to the future Christ. The specific legal forms of OT worship are not abiding, their relevance is how they point to the Lord.

For example: an Israelite came with the blood of bulls and goats to be forgiven of sins. What cleansed him was not the blood of an animal, but the faith he had in God's command that the blood of God's sacrifice was efficacious. The value of the act lay in the future sacrifice of God's own Son on the cross. It is his blood alone which deals with sin. The Israelite looked forward with faith that the blood of God's Son Jesus would cleanse from sin, just as we look back to the past that our sins were dealt with at the cross.

The forms of the law are fulfilled and completed in Christ

Furthermore, Christ is the fulfilment of all the OT law,¹ what the law points to is fulfilled and completed in Christ. In fact, Christ called himself the '*Lord of the Sabbath*' (Matt 12:8) and if he is its master, it is his prerogative to change the day of worship. Since Christ has fulfilled the law, the specific forms of the legal worship system are no longer celebrated, their value lies in that they highlight something in Christ and help us learn about him.

The forms of the law are explained by the NT

Then we must interpret the OT in the light of the NT. The apostles explain that the legal form is now dead² since Christ has brought grace to those who believe.³ The OT law was the provision of righteousness through faith in God based upon obedience and works. The New Covenant in Christ is righteousness as a gift of God's grace through faith in God's provided Saviour. This means that the legal system of statutes and commands has been cancelled, made obsolete.⁴

The whole argument of Hebrews is that Judaism is dead, we are not to keep the law as a means of approaching God; faith in the blood of Jesus is the basis of our approach to God. We experience the cleansing of his blood by the sheer grace of God, not as a result of something we do or some rule we keep. To emphasise the message of Hebrews, God ensured that the Temple was destroyed by the Roman Titus in 70 AD thus ending the ability of Judaism to continue its worship system.

First point: *the Sabbath, as part of the OT law, has been superseded by Christ. The OT regulation pointed to the rest of God, but that rest is now found in Jesus, not merely a cessation of work. The Sabbath was a shadow, Christ is the reality.*

*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.
(Rm 10:4)*

The Old Testament Sabbath

The basis of the Sabbath law is the cessation from labour. In honour of God resting after the six days of creation, the 7th day was to be a day of rest for the Israelite. Disobedience of this law resulted in death as it signalled rebellion against God - working outside God's plan. The law of the Sabbath was stringent, one man was killed for gathering sticks for his fire (Num 15:32ff). Since the Sabbath day was holy (that is: separated unto God) it featured heavily in the worship system and the Jewish feasts.

Any modern person who insists that the OT law of the Sabbath is to be obeyed today merely by meeting on Saturday fails to obey all that the Sabbath law stipulates: they must cease all activity and follow all the prohibitions, such as having no heat in your home that day. It is not good enough to merely state that worship occurs on that day. If the law remains, then bulls and goats need to be killed also, let alone finding a Jewish temple.

It is true that the Sabbath was instituted at the time of creation before the law was given, which indicates universality (like marriage or the family), the honouring of God on a special day every week is incumbent upon everyone. But the law of Moses amplifies God's

¹ Matt 5:17: *Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.* [That is – fully obeyed the law, completed it and thus did away with the legal forms which are now completed in him. See Paul's argument in Col 2:9ff.]

² Rm 7:4: *You also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ.*

³ Jn 1:17: *For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

⁴ Heb 8:13: *In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.* [It did vanish when the temple was destroyed in 70AD.]

purposes for the institution of the Sabbath (just as it did for marriage); this was God's express will for Sabbath-keeping from that point on. Either the Sabbath is to be abandoned as part of an obsolete system or the Sabbath must be obeyed as part of the Mosaic law.

Second point: *if you keep the Sabbath on the 7th day, you need to keep all the law about the Sabbath. If you follow the law for communion with God, you cannot follow Christ.*

You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. (Gal 5:4)

For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. (James 2:10)

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. (Rm 8:2)

The Cross

It is important to see that the cross of Christ is the dividing line of history. After the cross, everything (not just the law) was changed; in fact it was then the last days began (Heb 1:2; 1 Pt 1:20).⁵ In Christ, all is complete and the last period of history begins, the age of grace which will end with the coming of Jesus in glory. All the object lessons of the earlier days are finalised in Christ, find their true reality in Christ: temple worship, the tabernacle, sacrifices, feasts, sabbaths, the Jewish nation as God's son etc. After the cross, God's focus is all that is in Christ (a phrase mentioned dozens of times in the NT). Only what is in Christ will escape the doom prepared for this world. Objective religious systems that are not in Christ (sacrifices, the law) are now obsolete as far as God is concerned.

For example: the offerings of bulls and goats were a picture to Israelites that sin needs to be covered by a blood sacrifice – someone has to die for sins committed. The Israelite trusted in God's word, provided the bull and believed he was forgiven. His faith in God saved him. When Christ fulfilled his mission, he became the sacrifice of God. The OT sacrifice was a picture pointing to Christ as God's sacrifice. Atonement (forgiveness through the sacrifice of a substitute) is now in Christ. Thus killing bulls is no longer required. This process is true of all the OT forms.

Third point: *the command to keep the 7th day holy has been made obsolete, just like all the other commands about worship under the law of Moses. The law is fulfilled in Christ. The change from the Old to the New Covenant occurred at the cross.*

⁵ This is why our ancestors described history as before Christ BC and after Christ – the year of the Lord AD.

Sunday

Since all was new as a result of Christ's atonement,⁶ the day on which believers gathered together was changed early on, but we are not told when. Instead of honouring the 7th day which spoke of the Old Covenant, believers began to meet on the 1st day, the day of Christ's resurrection – which they called 'the Lord's day'.⁷ The first day had much significance:

- It was the day of the resurrection.
- It was the day he manifested himself to his brethren (Jn 20:19, 26).
- It was the day that the Spirit was outpoured.⁸

So, at some point, the Holy Spirit (who Christ promised would lead believers into all truth) prompted the church to change the day of meeting. However, Sunday is not a Christian Sabbath where God's people do certain things as a matter of law, the Sabbath is an OT institution and the Old Covenant has passed away.

Sunday is the Lord's Day. It is the key day when we meet with the Lord together as a body of believers. Every Sunday, Christians look forward to that great prophetic day of the Lord, that issues in the 'first day' of the new world – heaven on earth. Every Sunday should be a foretaste of that day when we will worship God face to face. The use of the Greek word *episunagoge* only twice in the NT, once to the rapture of believers to heaven in 2 Thess 2:1 and the other referring to the Sunday gathering in Heb 10:25, surely points to this.

Fourth point: *after the cross there was a change, the Spirit of God encouraged believers to meet on Sunday, the first day of the week, which was called – 'The Lord's Day'. It is the day to worship God and which anticipates the coming of the Lord.*

Practicalities

Under the sovereign hand of God, the circumstances of the world were ordered to make the spread of the church possible. Greek had been adopted as the *lingua franca* so copies of scriptures could be easily understood and widely circulated. Roman civilisation had led to good roads and safer travel so missionaries could spread the word. A notable feature of the church was the proliferation of slaves – very many early converts were bondservants. As the church grew in Gentile lands it would not have been possible for the Sabbath to be kept since slaves worked everyday (that is why many meetings were at night). If God meant the Sabbath to be kept on Saturday, it would have been impossible for slaves to obey.

Support in Scripture

We do not find a categorical statement commanding believers to meet on Sunday, but we do find that Paul states that we should not make too much of sabbaths (Col 2:16; Gal 4:10; Rm 14:5 referring to Jewish 'holy' days which were all sabbaths). The appearance of Christ has done away with sabbaths full stop! The real point is not the day but the purpose of meeting. [In some circumstances people might have to meet on another day.] However, the NT shows that believers met to break bread on the first day of the week and

⁶ New Covenant, new people of God (the church), new institutions (breaking bread, baptism), new priests (all believers) etc.

⁷ It is noteworthy that many OT feast days had the 8th day (i.e. 1st day) as the high point of the celebration (e.g. the great day of the Feast of Tabernacles) as if to point towards the future importance of Sunday.

⁸ At Pentecost (the Greek word for fiftieth). The OT reference is Lev 23:15-16. The issues surrounding the dating of Pentecost are complex and debated.

history confirms that God has sovereignly overseen the establishment of Sunday as the principle day for gathering together:

- 1 Cor 16:2 *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. [i.e. when they met together they gave the money to the pastor for distribution for the poor.]*
- Acts 20:7 *Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread. [Sunday was the day the disciples celebrated the Lord's Supper.]*
- Rev 1:10 *I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day. [Thus by 95AD the first day of the week had become known commonly as 'the Lord' Day'.]*

Other sources of Information

The Didache (A very early letter to disciples.)

And on the Lord's day ... come together and break bread and give thanks. (14:1)

Justin Martyr (Famous Christian teacher, d. 163 AD.)

Sunday is the day on which we all hold our communion assembly, because it is the first day on which God ... made the world; and Jesus Christ our saviour on the same day rose from the dead ... and appeared to his apostles and disciples. (Apology 67:8)

Ignatius (Teacher and martyr, bishop of Antioch, d. 110.)

*Hold to the newness of the hope which you have attained, no longer sabbatising (that is reverting to the 7th day sabbath) but living for the Lord's day. (Quoted from, *The Sabbath and The Gospel*, John Wilmot, p10.)*

Let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week]. Looking forward to this, the prophet declared, "To the end, for the eighth day," (The Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians, p127)

Further, He says to them, "Your new moons and your Sabbath I cannot endure." Ye perceive how He [God] speaks: Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, [namely this,] when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. (Ibid p273)

Irenaeus (Famous church Father, bishop of Lyons.)

*The mystery of the Lord's resurrection ought to be kept only on the Lord's Day. (Quoted from, *The Sabbath Day*, H. Legerton, p3.)*

Eusebius (Church historian.)

*... the evidence of Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, who appeals to the observance of the Lord's Day as a custom in the churches. (Quoted from Gilfillan, *The Sabbath*, p384)*

Pliny (the Roman historian.)

The Christians ... were accustomed to assemble together on a fixed day ... to sing hymns to Christ as God. (Pliny, Letter to Emp. Trajan, Ep 10.97)

The Talmud⁹

*A Nazarine or Christian is he who follows the error of that man who commanded them to make the first day of the week a festival to him. (Quoted from, *The Sabbath and The Gospel*, John Wilmot, p10)*

Note: Voltaire: *If you want to kill Christianity, you must abolish Sunday.*

⁹ The Talmud is a collection of Jewish laws and 'wisdom' which is fiercely anti-Christian.

Conclusion

It is the obvious conclusion of history that the Christian church should meet on Sunday and not Saturday. Throughout history all shades of mainstream Christianity have done so; only a very few cults have chosen to meet on Saturday and most of these have vanished away.

Regarding the word 'Sabbath' being used today, the Christian church is divided on the issue. Some take the view that Sunday is a renewal of the original Sabbath as a creation ordinance. It is a day of rest which must be legally kept and thus can be called a 'Sabbath' day. Others feel that the concept of the Sabbath is part and parcel of the law which has been cancelled in Christ and all days are to be lived for the Lord equally.¹⁰ Sunday was the focal point for early church meetings which became the 'Lord's Day' rather than 'the first day', also (under God's providence) social circumstances have provided this time of freedom for Christian meetings on Sunday, which ought to be made full use of. The use of the word 'Sabbath' is thus unhelpful. There are good arguments on both sides, but the difference is mainly a matter of semantics.¹¹ What is not Christian is the idea of a Saturday Sabbath for worshipping God. This is Jewish legalism and, as such, is rejected by the apostles and the early church, including church leaders who were disciples of the last surviving apostle, John.

Believers should, therefore, thank God for the provision of Sunday, the Lord's day, as a day of worship and fellowship when we can break bread together and celebrate the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sunday Meetings - synopsis

- To celebrate Jesus' resurrection the apostles (acting under inspiration) changed the day of worship to Sunday, the day on which Christ was raised.
- It was necessary to make a break with the Jewish system which was passing away and finally was destroyed when Jerusalem and the temple was sacked in 70AD.
- The apostles speak of gathering on the first day of the week (1 Cor 16:1; Acts 20:7). This sets the precedent for all time.
- The apostles speak of Sunday now being called 'the Lord's day', the day when the church worshipped (Rev 1:10).
- Early church history shows that the disciples met on Sunday not Saturday.

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¹⁰ Rm 14:5: *One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.*

¹¹ One pivot is the interpretation of Heb 4:9 where 'rest' is literally 'sabbath-rest' (*sabbatismos*). The argument surrounds whether the writer has in mind a literal day here (thus supporting a Christian Sabbath) or is referring to a spiritual experience of rest in Christ and ceasing from human works. My view is the latter, the writer talks of a rest to be entered, a ceasing from works, and inner motivation of the heart.