

ECCLESIOLOGY:  
The Doctrine of The Church:  
The Sabbath Verses Sunday  
Romans 14:1-12

INTRODUCTION: Last Sunday was Pentecost Sunday. We continued our study of the doctrine of the Church and were on the topic of the relationship of the Church to Israel. In this section I am taking time to do two messages on Sunday verses the Sabbath. Since I did not want to wait until next year to do this second message on this topic, we are finishing it today.

We began last Sunday by answering the question: What is the Sabbath. We said it is the seventh day of the week set out as a sign between God and Israel, in which Israel was to remember that God had given them rest from their bondage in Egypt. Sabbath keeping, as I understand it, was instituted in the time of Moses, when God first began to feed them Manna from heaven in the wilderness. And the Sabbath was to be kept holy, that is it was not to be defiled by doing any slightest bit of work. Those who even picked up sticks on the Sabbath, were stoned to death.

Then we asked who changed the Sabbath to Sunday, and it is my conclusion that the Sabbath was never changed to Sunday. The Sabbath is still Saturday. However, in the NT, the Sabbath is never commanded for the Church. Nor did the Catholic Church change the Sabbath to Sunday. We will see that in today's message. We also pointed out that Sunday keeping does not make one guilty of worshipping the sun God of the Teutonics.

That leaves us with numerous NT questions to answer and we will seek to do that in the next message.

C. In The Epistles

3. The Relation of the Church to Israel

Regarding the Sabbath NT Cont'd

What brought about Sunday keeping?

The first question we want to answer today is, what brought about Sunday keeping? Why did this matter ever become an issue? It is without

question that the central event that led to Sunday keeping is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead on the first day of the week, and which was also the Feast of First-fruits that year.

In the year Jesus was crucified, First-fruits fell three days and three nights after Passover. That does not happen often. On Good Friday of 2010, on the day we call Good Friday, I gave a message called, "It Wasn't Good, and It Wasn't Friday." You can ask for it or download it from Sermon Audio on internet.

I will not give any details about that here for the sake of time, other than to say here that I believe Jesus was buried just before the sun went down Wednesday evening. This means He was resurrected just before sundown Saturday evening or possibly even as the first day of the week began. His first day alive was Sunday, the first day of the week. He was not resurrected in the morning. In the morning when the ladies came very early to the tomb He was already risen! By the way, if you want to see all the events that took place on this one day, you might read Matthew 27, 66 verses; Mark 16, 20 verses; Luke 24, 53 verses, and John 20, 31 verses. Although John includes 2 Sundays in this chapter.

When the empty tomb was discovered, the day of First-fruits was already half gone. The very first day of the week was Christ's first day alive in His resurrected body. It is also true that Mary Magdalene met Him in the morning of the first day of the week and that the disciples came to see His empty tomb that same day. It is also true that His disciples met with Christ first after His resurrection on the first day of the week in the evening (read John 20:19).

Furthermore, we can also say that disciples were gathered together, not on the Sabbath, but on the first day of the week, on the day of Christ's resurrection, and Jesus came to meet

with them that day. Furthermore, Jesus met with them again on the first day of the week exactly one week later (John 20:26).

But that is not all. When we get to the book of Acts, we find the record of the birth of the Church in Acts 2. What is of note is that Pentecost always fell on Sunday, or the first day of the week. You may study Leviticus 23:15-16 for evidence for this. Pentecost took place the fiftieth day from First-fruits always fell on Sunday. So the Church was born on Sunday. The Holy Spirit was given on Sunday!

Well, as soon as the Church was born that Sunday, it began to spread out. As it spread out, it began to reach out to the Gentiles, and soon Gentiles were saved by great numbers as Christian missionaries carried the Gospel out into the world as instructed by Christ. And when you study the preaching of those early days, you will notice the importance placed on the resurrection! (See 1:22; 2:31; 4:2; 4:33; 17:3; 17:18; 17:32; 23:6; 23:8; 24:15; 24:21).

As the Church spread, we later find Paul meeting with the disciples on the first day of the week (read Acts 20:7). As we move into the epistles, Paul instructs the believers to lay by them in store as the Lord had prospered them and they were to do this on the first day of the week. He said, "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 Cor. 16:2). So very early in Church history, we have record that the Church began to meet on the first day of the week.

There is one reference in the NT to the 'Lord's Day'. It is in Revelation 1:10. If this is a reference to Sunday, it is the only time it is so used in the NT. It may, however, be a reference to what the OT calls the 'day of the Lord' which includes both the tribulation and the millennium. If it is a reference to

Sunday, it adds a significant weight to Sunday keeping.

When we add all of this together, who would not agree with me that it is a rather impressive emphasis on the first day of the week? We have the fulfillment of two major feasts of Israel; First-fruits and Pentecost on Sunday. Christ arose from the dead that day; the Holy Spirit was poured out, and the Church was born on Sunday!

-What did the Apostles say about Sabbath keeping in the Church age?

So, we want to seek to answer another question: What did the Apostles say about Sabbath keeping in the Church age? Well, let us come at once to what is probably the most crucial passage in the NT on this whole subject of the Sabbath verses Sunday. It is found in the book of Acts chapter 15. This event spoken of here brings to a close Paul's first missionary journey. In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit instructed the church leaders at Antioch to set out Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries for the Church. The Gospel, after meeting some Jewish opposition then began to spread out to the Gentiles. This was a very big step for this new entity which became known as the Church.

Well, Paul and Barnabas had no little success as Gentiles got saved and new churches started in Asia. But when the Church spread out to the Gentiles, it brought about tensions between Jews and the newly converted Gentiles. This is described for us in Acts 15:1-5 (read). So, the question is just how Jewish do Gentiles need to become after they get saved? Is circumcision a requirement?

So, in verses 6-21 we have a brief account of that meeting and the conclusion that was reached. I will not read that for the sake of time. So a letter was drafted and a delegation is sent with the letter to the Gentiles. In this letter we have the conclusion reached by

the apostles and we will read it (read 22-29). Well, when they got back to the Gentiles the letter was read (read 30-31).

What is very incredible to me is that nothing is mentioned about the Gentiles keeping the Sabbath. If the Church is to keep the Sabbath, if ever there was a place it should be mentioned, it should have been mentioned here. Yet nothing is mentioned of the Sabbath. And when we go on in Acts, not much later we read these words in Acts 20:7, "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread..."

And then, when we come to the epistles, which beyond all argument, are specifically addressed to the Church we find further information that is instructive for the Church. We go first to Colossians 2:16-17 (read). Of these verses LEM writes in his book, 'Crowded To Christ', "Turning again to Scripture, we note that there is explicit declaration to the effect that the Sabbath is not a binding obligation upon the Christian in this age.... Let not the Sabbatarian claim that Paul did not here refer to the Sabbath of the seventh day. Such would be dishonest dodging of Paul's use of the plain word 'Sabbath'" (348).

We note that the word 'sabbaths' is in the plural here, referring to the various sabbaths set out by God for Israel. For example the feast of Unleavened Bread and the feast of Tabernacles began with a special Sabbath and ended with one and these were not the regular weekly Sabbath. So when Paul refers to 'sabbaths' plural, he has them all in mind. If he had not included the seventh day Sabbath, it would have been necessary to point that out here, which same he does not do.

Further, in verse 17 we find that the 'sabbaths' were a shadow, not the substance. What is the substance? The substance is Christ, as verse 17 states. Now Israel was to remember that they were given rest from Egyptian bondage

and labor by keeping the Sabbath. In Colossians 2:16-17 we find that the Sabbaths were a shadow of things to come. Could it be that the Christians keep the first day of the week because of the rest they get from their sins through His death, burial and resurrection? So the Sabbath was not the real thing. It pictured the real thing. What is the real thing which it foreshadowed? You may wish to study this from Hebrews 3-4, where this fulfilled rest is spoken of about a dozen times. Let us here just briefly consider Hebrews 4:8-11 (read). Now this is the Sabbath of the soul given to the believer in Christ and realized in the doctrine of sanctification. This is when the believer learns to fully rest in the Lord, and ceases from his own works as God did from His. We do not have time to speak of that here.

Tertulian, who lived from 160-220 AD, long before Constantine, wrote: "We have nothing to do with the Sabbath or the Jewish festivals, much less those of the heathen." And again he writes, "Those who contend for the continued obligation of Sabbath keeping and circumcision must show that Adam and Abel and Noah and Melchizedek and Lot also observed these things." Then he writes, "The Sabbath was a figure of rest from sin and typical of man's final rest in God, yet with the other ceremonial observances was only intended to last until a new law giver would arise and introduce the reality of these things which were but shadows of things to come."

There is one more NT passage that is important to this study. For the sake of time, I will leave it for you to read. But the passage deals with both diets and days. What foods should Christians eat or not eat and what days should they keep? Those who insist on Sabbath keeping also fall into the tendency to require the dietary laws of the OT. In this chapter Paul deals with such questions (14:1-13). In no place here does Paul set out Sabbath keeping nor does he require Christians to keep the dietary laws of the OT. When we come to the

teachings for the Church with regard to diets, Paul writes in verse 14 that there is nothing unclean of itself (see 1 Tim. 4:1-4).

And so, from my studies, I have concluded that Sabbath keeping is not a requirement for the Church. It was a sign between God and Israel. And it was a shadow, not the substance.

-What did the true believers hold to after the Apostles had all passed away?

So let me come to another point. What did the true believers hold to regarding the Sabbath after the Apostles had all passed away? We asked earlier whether the Roman Catholic Church changed the Sabbath to Sunday or began the tradition of Sunday keeping with Constantine's edict. The answer, I said, was a resound, "No!" How so? Because Sunday keeping was already a practice among true believers long before Constantine came on the scene.

I want to give a number of quotes from Victor Buksbazen's, book, "The Gospel in the Feasts of Israel". These are quotes of writers who wrote long before Constantine instituted Sunday keeping. He writes of Barnabas, "Barnabas, one of the apostolic fathers of the first century A.D., wrote, 'We keep the Lord's Day with joyfulness, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead'" (92).

Here is another quote, "The Didache of the Apostles, one of the earliest Christian documents also of the first century, which contained the teachings of the apostles, states, 'On the Lord's own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks'" (92).

And again, "Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, in the year A.D. 110, said, 'Those who walked in the ancient practices attain unto newness of hope, no longer observing sabbaths, but fashioning their lives after the Lord's Day, on which our life also rose through Him, that we

may be found disciples of Jesus Christ, our only teacher'" (93).

Justin Martyr, in the year A.D. 135, said, "Sunday is the day on which we all hold 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 Savior on the same day rose from the dead. And on the day called Sunday all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits.'" "

In the book, "The Apostolic Fathers", by J.B. Lightfoot on page 5 he claims that Sunday was established as early as AD 65. Sunday keeping did not come from Catholicism, Catholicism got it from the earlier Christians.

So, long before Constantine gave his edict to Rome, Sunday keeping was already in practice. He simply made an edict of a practice already in existence. However, there is no doubt that this edict had a great impact on the practice of Sunday keeping.

-What has been the general practice of Evangelical believers throughout church history?

So, we ask one more question: What has been the general practice of Evangelical believers throughout church history? Throughout church history, the majority of Evangelicals have held to the teaching of the early church, with regard to keeping Sunday. Some, like the Waldenses were called 'insabbathi', that is Sabbath keepers. I have not found in my studies yet that this was ever an issue of any size including in our own Mennonite forefather's teachings. The Church before Constantine set a precedent and it has remained, by and large.

-Do we then keep only 9 of 10 commandments? Is that not an inconsistency?

Let me come to one last question: Since we are to keep the 10 commandments, why do we only keep 9? Well, let me ask you a question: Have you read in the NT that Christians are to keep the 10 commandments? Listen to Colossians 2:16-17 says, "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." A careful study of Romans 14 is very enlightening here.

I do not have time to deal here with the three classes of OT laws; the social, ceremonial, and moral laws. However, I view the moral law as that law that is revealed through the conscience. This is a very large study in itself, but let me say by way of summary here that the 10 commandments may be divided into two tables. The first is with regard to man's relationship to God. What is revealed through the conscience with regard to this table is the fact that there is a God. That His name is Jehovah, that man is not to raise up idols, and that the Sabbath is to be kept is not revealed through the conscience.

However, with regard to man's relationship to man, the last six commandments, these are revealed through the conscience. These are written on man's heart? With regard to the law written on the heart of the heathen L E Maxwell writes of the missionary Henry Frost like this: "A missionary in Africa tested the heathen conscience by questioning one who had never before seen a white man, had never read the Bible, and had never heard the Gospel, as follows: 'Is it wrong to lie?' 'Yes, it is wrong to lie.'" "Is it wrong to steal?" "Yes it is wrong to steal." "Is it wrong to commit adultery?" "Yes, it is very wrong to commit adultery." "Is it wrong to murder?" The ex-chieftain, at this, looked closely at the missionary and said, "Do you take me for a fool?"

Now if that missionary had asked this native who had never before seen a white man or heard of the Bible, "Do you believe Jehovah God is the only God there is", what do you think the answer would have been? It would likely have been, "Who is this Jehovah God?" If the missionary had asked, "Should we keep the Sabbath day?" What do you think he would have answered? You see, these things can only be learned from special revelation, the Bible. These things are not taught in creation or the conscience like the moral law is.

The moral law, not the 10 commandments, is the law written on man's heart. We cannot here speak of this subject.

CONCL: And so, though this is much too brief, we conclude this second message on the Sabbath verses Sunday. We asked: What brought about Sunday keeping? We found that the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week, fulfilling the Feast of First-fruits led to Sunday keeping. We saw that the Lord met the disciples first on the first day of the week. On the very next Sunday they met on Sunday again. And then we saw that Pentecost took place on Sunday and that the preaching of the resurrection, which took place on Sunday, took a primary place in the preaching of the apostles. By the end of the book of Acts we have evidence of Christian gatherings being held on Sunday.

Furthermore, in the epistles we found that the stress on diets and days found in the OT was no longer there. And we found further evidence that the Church gathered on Sunday, instead of on the Sabbath. After the Apostles had all passed away we find that the Church officially met on Sunday. It is this that ultimately led Constantine to set out Sunday as the official day of worship for Rome, since he had claimed to become a Christian. Later, in the Evangelical church, these true believers took exception with the Church of Rome on many things, but for the most part, Sunday keeping was not one of them. And even in Evangelicalism today, it is still remains the same.

And what of the commandment to keep the Sabbath? It was a sign between God and Israel. Furthermore, it was shadow of things to come. The substance of the shadow is Christ, and the believer is to find the Sabbath of the soul in Christ.

The Church is never instructed to keep the Sabbath in the NT. And believers, early after the resurrection of Christ rejoiced so much in the resurrection that they began, not of commandment, but of a love for the risen Lord to meet on the first day of the week. That is true for the majority of the Evangelical Church today and I suppose will be so until the rapture of the Church.