

Lord of the Sabbath

Program #24

First Christians were Sabbath Keepers

Kenny Kitzke

LawstSheep Ministries

Any serious Bible student knows that the weekly Sabbath Day of the LORD was the seventh day of the week or what we now call Saturday. It was a day for rest and worship. The seventh-day was sanctified by God at creation.

But, many followers of Jesus, the self-proclaimed Lord of the Sabbath, think the “Day of the LORD” for Christians is the first day of the week or what we now call Sunday. Is this true? How did this change come about? When did Sunday become the LORD’S day instead of Saturday? Who made this change? Who has the authority to change the commands of God, anyway?

Let’s start with a little honesty. There are a number of things that the Bible and Jesus clearly say changed after His first coming as the suffering Messiah of Israel. For example, the people of God would no longer need to be circumcised in the flesh. The people of God would no longer need to worship the Father in Jerusalem. The people of God would no longer need to make animal sacrifices to Him to atone for their sin. Scripture makes these changes, and the reasons for them, clear.

What DID NOT change was the Sabbath day of God; the one that Jesus remembered and kept as His custom as the Bible says. There is NO command in the entire New Testament for Christians under the New Covenant to change from keeping the seventh-day of the week holy to keeping the first day of the week holy. There is NO example of Jesus, or ANY of His Apostles, EVER saying that the Sabbath was changed to Sunday because of the first coming of Jesus as the Christ. There is NO example of Jesus, or His Apostles, EVER attending an assembly for worship on the first day of the week.

There is no example of Jesus or any Apostle ever ceasing their work to rest on the first day of the week, Sunday, as a new day of rest for Christians! And, we know from the Old Testament that the Sabbath day for rest and worship was the seventh day of the week which is clearly Saturday on our modern Gregorian calendar.

However, the change did come to Christianity. That is also a fact. It is a documented fact that the change came AFTER all the Apostles of Jesus had died. It came as new leaders of the church of God took control over the “body of Christ.” Sunday worship was instituted by man and NOT by God. It took place long AFTER the last book of the Bible was written. Therefore, to understand how, when and why this change was made, we need to consult historical documents instead of our Bible. The Bible teaches, and never deviates from teaching, that the seventh-day of each week is the “Day of the LORD.”

Before we turn to historical evidence about how the seventh-day Sabbath changed to the first-day, Sunday, let’s get oriented to the times when the church of God began. This

period IS described in our Bible. During the three-year ministry of Jesus, multitudes of people would come to see Him and hear Him speak. But, when Jesus was crucified and died, most of His disciples, even His hand-picked apostles, abandoned Him.

Believe it or not, there is NOT unanimous agreement on exactly what Gregorian calendar year Jesus died! Most scholars see it as being within the period of 29-33 AD. For my current purpose, the correct year is not important.

After Jesus was resurrected, in the next 40 days, He appeared to His Apostles and other disciples. The number of believers numbered about 120 according to Acts 1: 15. Jesus told them, before He ascended into heaven, to wait in Jerusalem for the Promise of the Father. Not many days after His ascension, on the Day of Pentecost, they were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. It was on that Day of Pentecost where a multitude of devout Jewish men from many nations of the world heard the disciples speaking in their own tongues. And, about three-thousand men, having heard Peter speak, believed him, repented, were baptized in the name of Jesus, and received the Holy Spirit of God.

This was the beginning of the church of Jesus Christ, the ecclesia, the called out body of believers in Jesus as the Messiah, their promised Savior and the new Lord of their life. Now, we are told some rather amazing things about what these new members of the church of God did AFTER being baptized. We read about it in Acts 2: 42:

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Notice a couple of things about these New Covenant believers. They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine. Note, the word "apostles'" is a plural possessive. Any idea that Peter was now the sole head of the "church" would be inconsistent with this statement. Doctrine is the formal teachings of these apostles of Jesus. The baptized disciples continued in daily fellowship with the apostles at the temple, praising God, eating together from house to house and praying together.

As we see in Acts 2: 5, the men dwelling in Jerusalem were devout, religious Jews. They were keeping the LORD'S commanded Feast of Weeks. They continued to pray at the appointed times at the temple of God. Is there any doubt in your mind that the apostles still taught that the Fourth Commandment of God was to remember and keep holy the seventh-day of the week? It is incomprehensible to me that because of Jesus' resurrection the seventh-day Sabbath, established at creation and given as one of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, was changed to the first-day of the week AND yet, this key change was not mentioned as a new rest and worship day for New Covenant believers.

We do see, however, some pretty remarkable new practices mentioned among those called into the body of Christ, the church of God. One was that they sold their possessions and goods and divided them among everyone who had a need. There was gladness among them and simplicity in heart. They also gained the respect and favor of

all the people. So the Lord added to the church daily all who were being saved.

The apostles continued showing many wonders and signs to the people. One was the healing of a beggar at the temple who was lame from birth. This power of the apostles brought fear upon every soul. Can you imagine your reaction to what happened to Ananias and his wife Sapphira? They had sold a possession but secretly held back for themselves some of the proceeds from the apostles. This lie was not made just to men, but in their hearts it was a lie to God's Holy Spirit. And both were struck dead by God!

Would you have great fear of sinning like those who heard about these signs and wonders? Would you dare break the Fourth Commandment when simply holding back a part of the proceeds from God would lead to instant death? Does the account of the man who God also killed for picking up sticks on the Sabbath day come to mind? God takes His Commandments seriously for Christians in the New Covenant. Do we?

The popularity of the apostles and their preaching of Jesus as the resurrected Messiah leading to more and more believers greatly disturbed the temple priests and the Sadducees. They took Peter and John into custody by force and brought them before the high priest who forbade them from speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus. But, they had to let them go for fear of the people who had seen the miraculous wonders that the apostles had done since the Day of Pentecost.

I provide this review to establish how the high priest and religious rulers at the temple and the Sadducees continued to persecute the believers in Jesus. As we will see in a later program, this resentment for "Christians" would play a role in the subsequent reciprocal "Christian" disdain for Jews and anything Jewish.

But, let us continue to explore what happened after the Day of Pentecost according to our Bible. Remember what Jesus told His apostles they were to do just before He left them and rose to heaven to be with the Father? It is found in Acts 1: 8:

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

When we study the Book of Acts, this is precisely what we see reported. Up to Chapter 8, we read of the witness to Jerusalem, from Chapter 8-12 we see the witness in Judea and Samaria and in Chapter 13-28 we see the witness to the ends of the earth culminating with Paul's journey to Rome to appeal his arrest to Caesar.

One of the things we see happening in Jerusalem is the apostles boldly proclaiming the risen Jesus as the promised Messiah. We see them doing healing miracles that captivated the people and caused a multitude of them to believe and become disciples of Jesus. We see this is greatly resented by the high priest and their sect of followers: the Sadducees.

The idea of the apostles standing as witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus struck at the

heart of their false understanding of the scriptures. We see the high priests and Sadducees commanding them not to preach in the name of Jesus. Peter and John were taken captive and threatened by the high priest and the Sadducees. And, who stood up for a fair hearing and treatment for Peter and John in the Sanhedrin? It was none other than the highly respected Pharisee, Gamaliel, a teacher of the Apostle Paul and a member of the Council of Jewish elders, who pleaded to the Sadducees to let them alone.

At the end of the witness account in Jerusalem, we find Stephen giving such a strong witness to Jesus and the coming of God's Holy Spirit that the high priests and Sadducees stoned Stephen to death. Now, we see the emergence of Saul in scripture, the Pharisee who was made the Apostle Paul by Jesus Himself. Here is what is said in Acts 8: 1-3:

Now Saul was consenting to his (Stephen's) death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

I emphasize this to get a clear picture of the fury of the Jewish religious leaders toward this new throng of people who are now called the church; believers in Jesus as the Christ. This fury plays a role in the future resentment of the Jewish Sabbath. I also wish to point out that there is no mention of the apostles teaching that the seventh-day Sabbath for the disciples of Jesus had now been changed to a first-day of the week Sunday.

I recognize this is an argument from silence, but none-the-less, with all the criticism of the Jewish religious leaders against Jesus for breaking the Sabbath by healing on the Sabbath, or by His disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath, can you honestly imagine that they would have not blown their head gaskets if these witnesses of Jesus were also NOW suddenly teaching that the Lord's Day had become the first day of the week?

My assumption is that it was not mentioned because the church at Jerusalem knew that the resurrected Jesus, of whom they boldly witnessed, who had proclaimed Himself Lord of the Sabbath, had NEVER proclaimed Himself the Lord of Sunday! Jesus never expected His disciples to begin keeping Sunday as a day of rest for a holy convocation in remembrance of Him. If He did, none of those closest to Him, His hand-picked apostles whom He was with for forty days after His resurrection, ever seemed to get the message.

So much for the witness for Christ in Jerusalem. Jesus next sent His witnesses to Judea and Samaria. And, we see the Apostle Philip preaching Christ in the city of Samaria and performing miracles. In Acts 8: 6-8, we read about the results and fruit of Philip and the creation of great joy in the city:

And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.

So astonishing was the conversion and water baptism of the Samaritans, generally despised as pagans by the Jewish religious leaders, that the apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria to pray for and actually see the Samaritans receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

Philip is also sent by an angel of the Lord to witness in Judea. Philip goes south and west from Jerusalem toward Gaza and then up the coast of the Mediterranean Sea back up to Caesarea. There Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. This is even more amazing as eunuchs were not allowed to participate in the assemblies of the Jews according to Deut. 23: 1.

I mention this incident because it might be easy to conclude that the apostles would continue keeping the Sabbath when in Jerusalem with God-fearing Jews. But now, with a non-Jew, and a eunuch besides, you might think that when the eunuch asks Philip to guide him in understanding the scriptures, Philip might have told this Ethiopian of great authority that as a baptized Gentile disciple of Jesus, he would be keeping Sunday holy and not Saturday as the Jews of the Old Covenant. Of course, nothing to that effect is recorded in scripture.

It is also a fact that in all the times the witnesses tell the good news of the resurrection of Jesus, they never mention that it happened on the first day of the week; on Sunday. If you have heard our earlier programs dealing with the day that Jesus died and the day He was resurrected, you would realize that it was NOT on Sunday when Jesus rose. Of course, the apostles knew this better than we do. We should, therefore, not be surprised by their failure to mention the importance of Sunday as a new "Lord's Day" to the non-Jewish believers in Christ.

Also fascinating is the conversion of Saul who was persecuting the church in Jerusalem and in the surrounding areas such as Damascus in Syria. Saul is identified as one who consented to the murder of Stephen. Saul gets the high priest to write letters to the leaders of the synagogues in Damascus so they would turn over to him any people "of the Way," an early term used for those in the church of Jesus the Christ. Saul would take the disciples of Jesus back to be imprisoned in Jerusalem.

Jesus Himself eventually speaks to Saul on the road to Damascus and blinds him. Jesus also speaks to His disciple Ananias and in the end, Saul's sight is restored. Saul believes in Jesus and he is baptized by Ananias. Saul is also filled with God's Holy Spirit. Scripture later calls him Paul and says he was chosen to bear His (the Savior's) name before the Gentiles, before kings and the children of Israel. But, as with all the other apostles, when Saul testified about Jesus as the Messiah, the very Son of God, the non-believing Jews in Damascus plotted against Saul, even to kill him. To help Saul escape, the disciples lower him over the city wall at night in a large basket. I guess this was a rather desperate situation, but I can't help getting some humor and a smile in picturing this escape in a basket.

When Saul returns to Jerusalem and has an encounter with at least some of the apostles,

Saul now gets into disputes with the non-believing Hellenist Jews who were from Greece. They too try to kill Saul! It was Saul's brethren who brought him safely to Caesarea and then sent him to Tarsus in Cilicia where he had been born of Jewish parents. This is the start of the witness of Jesus going to the ends of the earth and directly to the Gentiles.

Despite the persecution by the Jews, the church of Jesus had been greatly multiplied and spread. We see this in Acts 9: 31:

Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

Now, we also find Peter traveling in Judea, doing miracles and turning entire cities to the Lord. Peter also raises a woman from the dead in Joppa where many came to believe in Jesus. Another conversion by Peter of special note is that of Cornelius, a Roman centurion living in Caesarea. Here, Peter, and other Jews of the circumcision, witness the Holy Spirit of God being poured out on Gentiles who believed in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. They were astonished at this! And Peter commanded the Gentiles to be baptized in the name of the Lord. As with the other apostles who had been persecuted for preaching in the name of Jesus, now Peter, having returned to Jerusalem was also persecuted for going to and eating with the Gentiles.

The Gospel about Jesus was spread abroad by those disciples who had fled Jerusalem because of the persecution from the chief priests and Sadducees who had murdered Stephen. The disciples would always go to the Jews in a town first and meet at the synagogue. Of course, they were meeting them there on the seventh-day, the Sabbath Day of the Lord. Soon, there were a great number of believers in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch for the hand of the Lord of the Sabbath was with them.

As the leaders of the church at Jerusalem heard about this news, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to confirm the reports. What Barnabas saw in Antioch made him glad. Barnabas then set out to Tarsus to find Saul. Having found him, Barnabas and Paul returned to Antioch for a whole year and assembled with the church and taught a great many people. It was in Antioch where these disciples of Jesus were first called "Christians." While it is not said directly, it seems apparent that these early Gentile Christians were assembling for teaching on the Sabbath day of the Lord, on what we call Saturday; not on Sunday.

Prophets came to Antioch from Jerusalem predicting a great famine in the land of Judea. The disciples of Jesus, hearing this prophecy, determined to send relief from each according to his ability. This relief was delivered to Jerusalem by Saul and Barnabas.

While the Sabbath-keeping church of Jesus the Christ was growing and spreading to the ends of the known world, new trouble beyond a famine began brewing back in Jerusalem. King Herod began harassing the church in Judea. He killed James the brother of John with a sword. Since it pleased the Jews, Herod also seized Peter during the Feast of

Unleavened Bread. But Herod decided to wait until the Passover was over before bringing Peter before the people. Now, note this. Here we have the church at Jerusalem praying for Peter. There is no mention of the church praying while celebrating Easter Sunday at the same time the Jews celebrated the Passover Feast of Unleavened Bread. Why? The early church of Jesus was still keeping the Feasts of the Lord. Even the concept of an Easter Sunday would not come along for the church until centuries later.

Before Herod decides to bring Peter out of prison, an angel of the Lord comes to miraculously help Peter escape. When Peter arrived at a gathering in a house of believers, they were astonished to see him. Peter told them to tell James, the brother of Jesus, and the leader of the Jerusalem church, the miracle that God had performed for him.

Herod was furious that Peter had escaped despite having assigned four squads of soldiers to keep him in prison! Herod commanded that the guards be put to death. Herod returned to Caesarea. His travel and life were about to end by heavenly decree. While addressing a group of people from Tyre and Sidon, sitting on his throne in royal robes, the people shouted, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" The Lord did not agree and we find in Acts 12: 23-24 that his patience with King Herod had come to an end:

Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him (King Herod) because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. But, the word of God grew and multiplied.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Herod died this awful death in the year 44 AD, the fourth year of Emperor Claudius Caesar.

We find that Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch after delivering their draught relief to the church at Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit spoke to the prophets and teachers of the law in Antioch telling them it was time to separate Barnabas and Saul to the Lord for the work the Lord had called them to conduct with the Gentiles. They took with them John Mark, the eventual writer of the Gospel of Mark.

Most of the rest of the Book of Acts deals with the ministry of Paul to the Gentiles as he extends the church into Asia Minor and Europe. He travels through the cities of Greece and finally ends up in Rome where Paul is beheaded. Scripture does not give the exact circumstances but it is believed from writings of early church fathers that it was under the great persecution of the church under Emperor Nero about the year 67 or 68 AD.

This section of Acts contains many fascinating accounts in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul. It would take a couple of more programs to review them. However, my main focus was on whether the early Christians and churches kept the seventh-day Sabbath or did they change to keeping the first day Sunday as a rest and holy day?

The most telling verses in this regard are found in Chapter 13 of Acts. Here we find Paul with his party of workers returning to Antioch in Pisidia of Galatia (that is to distinguish

it from Antioch in Syria). They went into the synagogue there on the Sabbath day and the rulers asked if they had a word of exhortation for the people. I urge you to read what Paul spoke as it is a great summary of how God worked through Israel and His prophets leading to preaching the Good News to the Gentiles. It is found in Acts 13: 16-41.

But, for now, I want you to concentrate on Acts 13: 42-44:

So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. Now, when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.

Notice that the Gentiles beg Paul to preach to them on the NEXT SABBATH. Now, had the Sabbath been changed to Sunday for Gentile Christians, you would think that Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, would say something like “I will preach to the Jews on the Sabbath and to you on the next day since Sunday is the “Day of the Lord for Christians.”

In fact, we find much of the city coming together to hear the word of God preached by Paul on the next Sabbath. It is clear that no matter where Paul preaches, and to either non-believing Jews or non-believing Gentiles, that Paul preached the name of Jesus to them on the Sabbath Day of the Lord. The church headed by Jesus, which He began, was a Sabbath and Holy Day keeping group of Christian disciples.

Next Sabbath, we will begin to explore the secular history of the church after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and the death of the last apostle and how the winds of change led men to establish new feasts and days for the “Christian” church. Don’t miss it!