

The Christian Sabbath Examined, Proved, Applied, Chapter 1

The Sabbath Is Binding in the New Covenant Era

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Although the New Testament clearly teaches that the Sabbath is of perpetual obligation, there are certain things that must be discussed when setting out the biblical case for the Christian sabbath. The first is that in the new covenant dispensation the observance of the weekly sabbath has been changed by Jesus Christ to the first day of the week. Therefore, proving that there is biblical warrant for the change of the day from the seventh to the first day of the week is necessary and interrelated to proving the perpetuity of the weekly sabbath itself. Second, the argument for the change of the day from the seventh to the first day of the week is not based on a *direct* divine command but is deduced from biblical theology, analogy and historical example. Those who reject the Christian sabbath have used the fact that there is no *direct* command to deceive those who are untrained in theology.¹ Although there is no direct command or statement regarding the change of the day, that does not mean that there is not sufficient biblical warrant to observe the first day of the week; there is abundant evidence. Note that there are several crucial Christian doctrines that are based not on one direct statement but on a careful study of Scripture and deduction²: the trinity, the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ, infant baptism, etc. Therefore, a doctrine that is “deduced by good and necessary consequence” from Scripture is no less true or important than a direct statement from Scripture.³

1. The Day of Christ’s Resurrection Victory

The central reason that Christians observe the first day of the week is the historical fact that Christ rose from the dead on that day (Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:2, 9; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1). While it is true that we do not find a specific command given to the disciples to meet for public worship on that day, such a command is clearly implied in several ways. First, Christ chose to appear repeatedly to His disciples on the first day of the week (Mt. 28:9; Lk. 24:15-31, 36; Jn. 20:19, 26). This pattern of appearance is carefully noted in the Scriptures and is obviously not arbitrary. Jesus chose the first day of the week to strengthen the apostles’ faith, instruct them in doctrine, issue commands, engage in fellowship, and partake in the breaking of bread.

¹ For example, a Seventh-day Adventist tract entitled *Duped* says, “No biblical reference to the first day of the week ever talks about changing the Sabbath to Sunday. James Westbury, president of the Lord’s Day Alliance, an organization devoted to Sunday worship, is forced to admit: ‘There is no record of a statement on the part of Jesus authorizing such a change, nor is there recorded such a statement on the part of the apostles.’”

² The legitimacy of using logical inference from Scripture to formulate doctrine (formally known as deduction “by good and necessary consequence,” Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:6) can be seen in the following passages: Mt. 19:4-6, 22:31 ff.; Mk. 12:26; Lk. 20:37 ff.; 1 Cor. 11:8-10; etc.

³ “If this [first-day sabbath observance] be the mind and will of God, he hath not left the matter to human tradition; but hath so revealed his mind about it, in his word, that there is to be found good and substantial evidence that it is his mind: and doubtless, the revelation is plain enough for them that have ears to hear; that is, for them that will justly exercise their understandings about what God says to them. No Christian, therefore, should rest till he has satisfactorily discovered the mind of God in this matter. If the Christian sabbath be of divine institution, it is doubtless of great importance to religion that it be well kept; and therefore, that every Christian be well acquainted with the institution” (Edwards, 2:94).

2. The Universal Practice of the New Testament Church

Second, the universal practice of the apostolic church was to observe the first day of the week. The apostles met together on the first two Sundays after the resurrection (Jn. 20:19-26). The disciples also met together for public worship on Pentecost Sunday: “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place” (Ac. 2:1). “Just as the disciples had been ‘gathered together’ (probably in the upper room) on the first Resurrection Sunday, the next or second Sunday (John 20:26), and very probably every following Sunday as well, so too were they ‘with one accord in one place’—probably also in the same ‘place,’ the upper room—on the eighth Sunday of Pentecost...that eighth Sunday, the Lord’s day, when the Lord’s Spirit suddenly came to His temple (His church in the upper room) and burned like an oven with tongues of fire—that too was the new Day which God would create, the Day of the Lord, the Day of the Lord God the Holy Spirit.”⁴ It is clear that the apostles and the very first churches founded by them sanctified the first day of the week.

The abiding nature of the new covenant first-day observance is demonstrated by Acts 20:7: “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.” Note that several years after the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the practice of the New Testament church was still public worship on the first day of the week, the Lord’s day (Rev. 1:10). The disciples came together to hear the preaching of the Apostle Paul and to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, which in the early church was taken together with a meal. They broke bread as a memorial to Christ’s death on the cross, and they met on the first day of the week to study, celebrate and remember Christ’s work of redemption and His glorious resurrection victory. Francis Nigel Lee writes,

It should be observed that the disciples did not come together on the first day of the week simply so that Paul could preach to them before his departure, as some claim. If the sole purpose of the gathering was to hear the Apostle preach his farewell sermon to the congregation, this was something that could have been done at any time during his previous week’s sojourn there. From the Seventh-day Adventist point of view, one would expect such a sermon to have been preached to the congregation on the previous day, Saturday, and for the hastening Paul to have sailed from Troas at sunset on Saturday or dawn on Sunday. Yet there is no trace of this, nor indeed of any Saturday meeting whatsoever. Rather does the whole context teach that Paul simply and incidentally availed himself of the opportunity to preach to the congregation ‘upon the first day of the week when the disciples (as usual) came together to break bread’—and not specially to hear Paul.⁵

Another passage which proves that the apostolic church held public worship on the first day of the week is 1 Corinthians 16:1-2: “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: 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.” The first thing to note regarding this passage is that Paul, speaking by the Holy Spirit, insists that the charitable donations for the poor brethren in Jerusalem be collected on the *first*

⁴ Lee, p. 209.

⁵ Ibid, p. 221.

day and no other.⁶ The fact that the Holy Spirit chose the first day of the week and no other day presupposes that for the Christian church there was something unique—of abiding religious significance—regarding that day. Otherwise, why would the Holy Spirit insist upon only the first day and not the seventh, or third, or fourth, etc.? Second, note that this was not just the practice of the church at Corinth but of *all* the churches in Galatia: “as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also.” Collecting tithes for the poor on Sunday was the *universal* practice of the Christian church in the days of the apostles. “The only explanation for this ‘catholic’ [i.e., universal] injunction to all Christians everywhere to lay by for the poor saints in Jerusalem specifically on Sunday, is that all Christians everywhere were in the habit of laying by for their own local poor brethren too.”⁷

It is not an accident that Paul’s injunction to give to the poor brethren on the Lord’s day immediately follows chapter 15, which focuses on the significance of Christ’s resurrection. Giving is an aspect of Lord’s-day public worship. We give unto God because He first gave Himself for us. “Elsewhere Paul speaks of this collection in terms that are full of theological content: ‘fellowship,’ ‘service,’ ‘grace,’ ‘blessing,’ and ‘divine service.’ All this together suggests that the ‘collection’ was not some mere matter of money, but was for Paul an active response to the grace of God that not only ministered to the needs of God’s people but also became a kind of ministry to God Himself.”⁸ Thus, this passage not only proves that the apostolic churches conducted their public worship services on the first day of the week, but also shows that giving to God is part of Christian worship. This is to be expected, for it was also the universal practice in the Jewish synagogues to receive tithes and offerings during their public worship services on Saturday. The New Testament church was patterned to a large extent after the Jewish synagogue.

Seventh-day Adventist apologists have attempted to circumvent the obvious implication of this passage by arguing that collections were made on Sunday, rather than on Saturday, because it would have been a violation of the Saturday sabbath to do bookkeeping, etc., on that day. Such reasoning is fallacious for three reasons: First, as already noted, the Jews collected tithes on Saturday and engaged in “bookkeeping” procedures related to charity on the Sabbath for centuries without divine disapproval. Second, Jesus Christ clearly taught that works of mercy were permissible—yes, even required—on the Sabbath (Mt. 12:12; Mk. 3:4). Third, works of mercy on the Sabbath are permitted and commended in the Old Testament as well (1 Sam. 21:6; 2 Kgs. 4:23). “If, as Seventh-day Adventists maintain, the post-resurrectional Christian Church held its weekly meetings and its sabbath on Saturday, it is more than probable that the entire collection would have been handed over to Paul on such an occasion, rather than ‘on the first day of the week.’”⁹

⁶ “The first day of the week is Sunday, and *kata* is distributive so that we may translate: ‘Sunday by Sunday let each of you lay by,’ etc. It is a fair inference that Sunday was the day which was set aside for the public worship of the Corinthian congregation, and that this custom was also followed in Galatia and in the other churches that had been founded by Paul” (R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937], p. 759). “It was the fact that this day [Sunday] marked for them the specifically Christian day in their week that probably made it convenient for Paul to note it as the time for them to remember the poor among the brethren and sisters in Jerusalem” (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], p. 814).

⁷ Lee, p. 217.

⁸ Fee, p. 812.

⁹ Lee, p. 281. In 1 Cor. Paul answered many questions that had been put to him by the congregation (e.g., eating meat offered to idols, marriage and divorce, spiritual gifts). The final question that Paul deals with is what to do regarding the poor saints in Jerusalem. The way Paul answers this last question indicates that “Sunday collections

3. The Lord's Day

The sanctification of the Lord's day (or the first day of the week) is also implied in Revelation 1:10 where the Apostle John says, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." John speaks of a day which is distinct from all other days. "Some say, how do we know that this was the first day of the week? Every day is the Lord's day. But it is the design of John to tell us *when* he had those visions. And if by the Lord's day is meant any day, how doth that inform us *when* that event took place?"¹⁰ John uses an expression that Christians in his day would instantly recognize as the day of Christ's resurrection: the first day of the week. Seventh-day Adventists argue that this refers to the Saturday, Jewish sabbath. But this assertion is clearly unscriptural. "Nowhere in God's Word is the Saturday sabbath ever called the 'Lord's day.'... The adjective in the expression—'*kuriake* (-os, -on)' [i.e., the Lord's]—occurs in only one other verse of scripture: in 1 Cor. 11:20 in the expression 'the Lord's Supper' (*'kuriakon deipnon'*), which supper was usually held on the first day of the week. This very fact surely implies that the Lord's day (*'he kuriake hemera'*) was also then held on the first day of the week."¹¹ A passage of Scripture which clearly identifies the Lord's day as the day of Christ's resurrection is Psalm 118:22-24: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it."

The Apostle Peter, in addressing the Sanhedrin (Ac. 4:8-12), applies Psalm 118:22 directly to the exaltation of Jesus Christ, which began at His resurrection (cf. Mt. 28:18, Rom. 4:3-4).¹² Psalm 118 identifies the day of Christ's exaltation as a day of rejoicing and gladness. Were the disciples of Jesus rejoicing on the seventh day (Saturday)? Were they glad and happy on that day? No, absolutely not. On Saturday Jesus was dead and still laid up in a tomb. On Saturday the disciples were in mourning. Their leader had been put to death as a common criminal. They were living in fear, doubt, sorrow and apparent defeat; but on Sunday, the first day of the week, Christ rose from the dead; and their tears turned to joy, their sorrow to gladness, their doubt to hope, and their defeat to victory. "This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps. 118:24). This is the origin of the term "the Lord's day." It is the day on which the Christian church celebrates the victory of the Son of David. "We observe the Lord's day as henceforth our true Sabbath, a day made and ordained of God, for the perpetual remembrance of the achievements of our Redeemer.... Entering into the midst of the church of God, and beholding the Lord Jesus as all in all in the assemblies of his people, we are bound to overflow with joy. Is it not written, 'then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord'?"¹³

for the local poor saints [were] the well-known rule, and for that very reason Paul now enjoined that the contributions towards the collection for the Jerusalem saints [were] to be made on the same day as the local contributions, namely 'on the first day of the week'" (Ibid.).

¹⁰ Edwards, 2:99.

¹¹ Lee, pp. 237-38.

¹² The Bible views Christ's exaltation organically. It begins at His resurrection and concludes with His ascension and enthronement at the Father's right hand. Lange writes, "The ascension is essentially implied in the resurrection. Both events are combined in the one fact of Christ's exaltation. The resurrection is the root and the beginning of the ascension; the ascension is the blossom and crown of the resurrection.... The resurrection marks the entrance into the heavenly *state*; the ascension into the heavenly *sphere*" (John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*, ed. and trans. by Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980]), 15:556.

¹³ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1882]), 5:332.

The historical evidence presented thus far is sufficient to prove that Jesus Christ has changed the sabbath day from the seventh to the first day of the week. Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. He appeared to His disciples on the first day on more than one occasion. The disciples gathered together on resurrection Sunday, and then again at Pentecost, in order to meet with the risen Christ. The apostolic church engaged in public worship on the first day of the week.¹⁴ This involved preaching, the sacraments and tithing. The Apostle Paul indicated that first-day public worship was universal in the churches of Galatia. The Apostle John used the phrase “the Lord’s day” as a time reference that all the churches of Asia Minor would instantly recognize: the day of Christ’s resurrection (Ps. 118:22-24), the day of joy and worship. “Must we not conclude that these inspired men regarded the authority of God as now attaching to this Lord’s day?”¹⁵ Yes, we must. Yet the evidence thus far presented is only *half* the argument; God has provided theological proofs as well.

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¹⁴ Seventh-day Adventists make much of the fact that throughout the book of Acts the Apostle Paul is observed going into the Jewish synagogue on the Jewish sabbath (i.e., Saturday). But upon careful examination of these passages it is quite clear that Paul’s *sole* purpose for going to the synagogue on the Jewish sabbath was to preach the gospel to unbelieving Jews. There is not a shred of evidence in the New Testament that the post-resurrection church met for public worship on Saturday. In fact, all the evidence points to a first-day observance. The idea that Paul went in to the Jewish synagogues on Saturday to worship because he believed in a seventh-day sabbath is absurd. Why would Paul worship with non-Christians, with unbelievers? The truth is that Paul’s practice was to first preach to all the Jews (synagogues in Paul’s day were virgin territory), and then to the Gentiles. When Paul felt that preaching the gospel was no longer profitable, his practice was to take the believers and depart and set up a Christian assembly. “But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus” (Ac. 19:9).

¹⁵ Dabney, 1:531.