

Sabbath—7th or 1st Day?

Dave Brisbin, 11/4/04

Basically, there are two reasons that the day of rest (Sabbath) was changed from Saturday (7th day) to Sunday (1st day) or the week, and both were political or at least practical. The first was that the gentile church was trying to distance itself from all things Jewish. By the 2nd century, the gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians had undergone a split and were moving in different directions culturally and theologically. Further, Christians and Jews were split and moving further apart. Christians consciously distanced themselves from all things Jewish as much as possible from this point on. As the gentile church became stronger, it also distanced itself from the Jewish sects of Jesus followers as well. There are many writings by the early church followers denouncing these Jewish/Jesus-following sects. It's important to remember that the Catholic church as we know it didn't exist at this time. There were just churches located in the various cities around the empire. Big cities had big influential churches, such as Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Byzantium (Constantinople) who saw themselves as influential over the smaller churches, but this authority was not recognized until much later (6th-9th centuries) when the Bishop of Rome became known as "pope" and had real authority over other churches. All these churches had overseers (bishops) who were fully in charge of their individual churches. As fights broke out over doctrine, beliefs, and practices, the bishops convened in councils to try to hammer out agreements so that the universal (the definition of "catholic") church would be as unified as possible.

The second reason for changing the sabbath was that the gentile church was accommodating itself to Roman power and practice. By the 4th century, the emperor Constantine had become involved in the Christian church. Prior to that, Constantine had set up Sunday as the day of rest for the pagan Roman religion, celebrating it on the day dedicated to the Sun god—"Sunday." When he became a Christian, he set about settling the church's many disputes by calling major councils of bishops, beginning with the Council of Nicea in 324 CE. Throughout the rest of the century, Christianity became more and more aligned with the Roman empire until 380/381 CE when it was declared the official church of Rome, and 392 when paganism was prohibited. At that point, pagan temples became Christian churches, pagan priests became Christian, and pagan holidays were given Christian veneers--Christianized.

The change to Sunday worship occurred during this process as a result of a decision by the Council of Laodicea in 364 CE. The council decided that all religious observances would occur on the first day instead of the 7th day from then on. The church did not universally obey this decision, especially outside the centers of Roman power, but the change was followed certainly by the church of Rome which eventually became the Roman Catholic church we're familiar with, and which passed this tradition on to the European Protestant churches after the Reformation beginning in 1517 CE.

So the change occurred as gentile Christians moved away from their Jewish roots and assumed much of the practice and culture of Rome as it became more and more closely aligned with the empire. There are several passages in the NT, though, that deal with 1st day observances, and the church used those scriptures to justify their decisions. But the scriptures are really not definitive, and there are several Christian churches today, such as 7th Day Adventists, who still practice sabbath on the 7th day, believing the OT law to still be in effect.

Even though our calendar has been changed several times--from the lunar calendar of the ancient Jews and Romans, to the Julian calendar in 46 BCE, to the Gregorian calendar in 1582 CE, the days of the week haven't changed, so we are definitely out of sync with the OT practice/law. But that doesn't mean we're in violation of God's law for us (unless you're a 7th Day Adventist). In fulfilling the law, Jesus didn't abolish it, but he did make the old religious rituals and practices irrelevant from a Christian point of view. We don't follow the dietary regulations, the purification rites, and many of the other laws of the OT. There were actually many Sabbaths the Jews follow from OT law (Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread, The Feast of Weeks, The New Year, The Day of Atonement, The Feast of Booths, and the New Moon sacrifices), the 7th day is just one of them. We don't follow any of the others either. And Colossians 2:16-17 and Romans 14:5 seem to suggest, as Jesus did, that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. That is, the day itself does not matter, but simply a dedication of a day to the Lord—following the spirit rather than the letter of the Law, or that all things are fulfilled in Christ and not the law.

All these things taken together, we must realize that we most likely celebrate sabbath on a different day than Jesus did, that the church's decision to change the day was arbitrary and political, and that it just doesn't matter to God, as long as we continue to find ways to honor him and his creation. But as Paul says in Romans 14:5, each of us has to make up his own mind on this issue, and Christians continue to disagree on these issues and probably always will.

For more information, see <http://www.religioustolerance.org/sabbath.htm>