

Discover Bible Studies

#21: Can the Majority Be Wrong?

In Guide 16 we discovered that experiencing Sabbath rest is an important antidote to today's stressful living. Since God understands our every need, He established each seventh day for our physical rest and our spiritual refreshment. After creating our world in six days, He "rested" on the seventh day, "blessed" and "made it holy" (Genesis 2:1-3).

When God gave the Ten Commandments to His people, Israel, He placed the commandment to observe the seventh-day Sabbath at the heart of His law (Exodus 20:8-11). According to this commandment, the Sabbath is a memorial of God's creative power, a day to pause and think about the beauties and wonders of His created works, a day to relax and come close to our Creator, a day to explore in greater depth our relationship with Him.

During Jesus' human life on earth, He too kept the Sabbath (Luke 4:16) and endorsed it as a day that benefits Christians (Mark 2:27, 28). Several texts in the book of Acts make it clear that Christ's disciples worshiped on the Sabbath after His resurrection (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2; 18:1-4, 11).

1. A PUZZLING QUESTION

This brings us to a subject that many find perplexing. The Christian world has for some time observed two different days. On one hand, most Christians sincerely observe Sunday, the first day of the week, which they believe to be a memorial of Christ's resurrection. On the other hand, a large group of Christians, equally sincere, believe that the Bible honours only the seventh-day as the Sabbath and nowhere affirms the sanctity of Sunday.

Does it really make any difference which day we observe as the Sabbath? As sincere and earnest people who want to know the truth, we must always ask ourselves: "What matters to Jesus? What does Jesus desire me to do?"

In coming to a decision about this, several important facts need to be made clear: Who changed the Sabbath from Saturday, the seventh day of the week, to Sunday, the first day of the week? Does the Bible authorize such a shift? If so, did God, Christ, or perhaps the apostles make the change?

We'll proceed by looking at all the possibilities.

2. DID GOD CHANGE THE DAY?

Is there any pronouncement from God that changes the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week?

Most Christians accept the Ten Commandments as a valid guide to live by. They are the only message God has ever personally written out for the human race. They are so important, He wrote them on stone with His own finger (Exodus 31:18).

In the fourth commandment God instructs us:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but THE SEVENTH DAY IS THE SABBATH TO THE LORD YOUR GOD. On it you shall not do any work. . . . For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he RESTED on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD BLESSED the Sabbath day and MADE IT HOLY." -Exodus 20:8-11. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural texts in the DISCOVER guides are from the New International Version of the Bible [NIV].)

When God gave the Ten Commandments to His people, He also made it clear that no human being should revise or edit the instruction from His holy lips.

"DO NOT ADD to what I command you and DO NOT SUBTRACT from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you." -Deuteronomy 4:2.

God Himself pledges not to alter His commands:

"I WILL NOT violate my covenant or ALTER WHAT MY LIPS HAVE UTTERED." -Psalm 89:34.

The Bible is clear that God did not change the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week.

3. DID JESUS CHANGE THE SABBATH?

According to Jesus, the Ten Commandments are not subject to change:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." Matthew 5:17-18.

In Guide 16 we discovered that it was Jesus' custom to worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). We also discovered that Jesus wanted His disciples to continue experiencing the joys of true Sabbath-keeping (Matthew 24:20).

It is clear from Jesus' teaching and example that we still need the Sabbath for rest, relaxation, and spending time with God.

4. DID THE APOSTLES CHANGE THE SABBATH?

James, the first leader of the early Christian church, wrote concerning the Ten Commandments:

"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker." -James 2:10, 11.

Luke, a physician and evangelist in the early church, reports:

"On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there." -Acts 16:13.

The New Testament book of Acts mentions 84 times when the Sabbath was observed by Christ's followers, all of them more than 14 years after the resurrection of Jesus: 2 Sabbaths at Antioch (Acts 13:14, 42, 44); 1 at Philippi (Acts 16:13); 3 at Thessalonica (Acts 17:2, 3); 78 Sabbaths at Corinth (Acts 18:4, 11).

John, the last of the twelve apostles to die, kept the Sabbath. He wrote:

"On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit." -Revelation 1:10.

According to Jesus, the Lord's Day is the Sabbath:

"The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." -Matthew 12:8.

A search of the scriptural evidence reveals that the apostles made no attempt to change God's day of rest from the seventh to the first day of the week. The New Testament mentions the first day of the week only eight times. In none of these instances is the first day of the week spoken of as a holy day, nor is it even hinted that we should set it aside as a day of worship. A critical examination of the eight texts referring to the first day of the week points out these Sunday events:

- (1) The women came to the tomb on the first day of the week (Matthew 28:1).
- (2) "When the Sabbath was over" the women resumed their secular activities on the first day of the week (Mark 16:1, 2).
- (3) Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene early the first day of the week (Mark 16:9).
- (4) Jesus' followers resumed their secular activities on the first day of the week (Luke 24:1).
- (5) Mary went to the grave of Jesus and found the tomb empty on the first day of the week (John 20:1).

- (6) The disciples gathered together "for fear of the Jews" (not for worship) on the first day of the week (John 20:19).
- (7) Paul asked church members to take account of their funds on the first day of the week, and "set aside a sum of money" for the poor at Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2). The passage does not mention any religious meeting.
- (8) In Acts 20:7 Luke speaks of Paul's preaching on the first day of the week at an incidental farewell meeting. Of course Paul preached every day, and the apostles broke bread daily (Acts 2:46).

None of these scriptures suggest that the apostles intended to stop observing the seventh-day Sabbath. The apostles mentioned no change of the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week. There is clearly no New Testament evidence for a change of the Sabbath from Saturday, the seventh day of the week, to Sunday, the first day of the week. The change came after the days of Jesus and the apostles, so we must turn to history to see when and how the change came about.

5. WHERE DID SUNDAY COME FROM?

The apostles clearly warn us that some Christians would drift away from the doctrines of New Testament Christianity: "So be on guard!" (Acts 20:29-31). And that is exactly what happened. Credible historians clearly record how Christians began to stray from apostolic purity. Traditions and doctrines which Paul, Peter, and the other founders of the Christian church had never endorsed gradually crept into the church.

The change from Sabbath observance to Sunday observance took place after the New Testament was completed and the apostles had all died. History records that Christians eventually shifted from worshiping and resting on the seventh day to the first day of the week. But of course believers didn't stop observing the seventh-day Sabbath on a given weekend and then suddenly begin keeping Sunday as the Lord's Day. The earliest authentic instance of Sunday observance by Christians occurred in Italy, in the middle of the second century after Christ. For a long time after that many Christians observed both days, while still others kept only the Sabbath.

On March 7, A.D. 321, Constantine the Great issued the first civil Sunday law, compelling all the people, except farmers, in the Roman Empire to rest on Sunday. This, with five other civil laws decreed by Constantine concerning Sunday, set the legal precedent for all civil Sunday legislation from that time to the present. In the fourth century the Council of Laodicea prohibited Christians from abstaining from work on the Sabbath, while urging them to honour Sunday by abstaining from work if at all possible.

History shows that Sunday worship and observance is a man-made custom. The Bible gives no authority for doing away with the seventh-day Sabbath of the fourth

commandment. The prophet Daniel predicted that during the Christian era a deceptive power would attempt to change God's law (Daniel 7:25).

6. WHO MADE THE CHANGE?

Who officially moved the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first day of the week? The Catholic Church claims to have done so. In an attempt to save the crumbling Roman Empire, well-meaning church leaders compromised and attempted to change the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday.

A catechism of the Roman Catholic Church reads:

"Q. Which is the Sabbath day?"

"A. Saturday is the Sabbath day."

"Q. Why do we observe Sunday instead of Saturday?"

"A. We observe Sunday instead of Saturday because the Catholic Church . . . transferred the solemnity from Saturday to Sunday." -Peter Geiermann, The Convert's Catechism of Catholic Doctrine (1957 edition), p. 50.

The Catholic Church proudly announces that human church leaders made the change.

"The holy day, the Sabbath, was changed from Saturday to Sunday . . . not from any directions noted in the Scriptures, but from the Church's sense of its own power. . . . People who think that the Scriptures should be the sole authority, should logically become 7th Day Adventists, and keep Saturday holy." -Cardinal Maida, Archbishop of Detroit, Saint Catherine Catholic Church Sentinel, Algonac, Michigan, May 21, 1995.

7. WHAT DO SOME PROTESTANT CHURCHES SAY?

Official documents outlining the beliefs of several Protestant denominations agree that the Bible provides no authority for Sunday observance.

Martin Luther, founder of the Lutheran Church, wrote in the Augsburg Confession, Article 28, paragraph 9:

"They [the Roman Catholics] allege the Sabbath changed into Sunday, the Lord's Day, contrary to the Decalogue [the Ten Commandments] . . . neither is there any example more boasted of than the changing of the Sabbath day. Great, say they, is the power and authority of the church, since it dispensed with one of the Ten Commandments."

Methodist theologians Amos Binney and Daniel Steele observed:

"It is true, there is no positive command for infant baptism . . . nor is there any for keeping holy the first day of the week."-Theological Compend (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1902), pp. 180, 181.

Dr. N. Summerbell, historian of the Disciples of Christ or Christian Church, wrote:

"The Roman Church had totally apostatized. . . . It reversed the Fourth Commandment by doing away with the Sabbath of God's Word, and instituting Sunday as a holy day." -A True History of the Christian and the Christian Church, pp. 417, 418.

8. WHAT IS THE REAL ISSUE?

This brings us face-to-face with the questions: Why do so many Christians observe Sunday without Bible authority? Even more important, Which day shall I keep? Shall I follow those who say, "I don't think it makes any difference which day I observe as long as I keep one day in seven"? Or, shall I count as important the day Jesus, our Creator, established when He created our world, and the day God pointed out in the Ten Commandments: "the seventh day is the Sabbath"?

Here we are dealing with more than just an outward observance, but which day happens to be biblically correct. The essential issue is that of obedience to Jesus. Our Creator set aside the Sabbath as a "holy" day, as a time for us and our families to come closer to Him for strength and refreshment. Whom shall I obey? Shall I obey Christ, the Son of God, or human tradition in the matter of the day I keep holy? The choice is clear: the teachings of men or the commands of God. The word of men or the Word of God. A human substitute or a divine command.

The prophet Daniel sounds a warning to those who would "try to change the set times and the laws" (Daniel 7:25, NIV) ["intend to change times and law" (Daniel 7:25, NKJV)]. God is calling His people back to obedience. He invites them to keep the Sabbath as a symbol of loyalty and love to Him.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). And He promises fullness of joy to those who love Him enough to obey His commands (John 15:9-11). We have a wonderful Saviour. He is eager for us to experience His love in all its fullness. A heart of willing obedience opens the door wide to that love.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Christ submitted completely to the Father's will-even though He faced the cross and the sins of the world were crushing out His life. As He cried out to God, "Take this cup from me," He remained surrendered in His pleading, and added, "Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36).

Christ longs for us to experience the fulfilment that a truly surrendered life brings. And He also wants us to experience the joy of Sabbath rest. He wants us to trust Him enough to obey Him in all the details of life. If you answer God's call and obey all of His

commandments, you will experience the promise of Jesus that His joy will "be in you" and "your joy" will "be complete" (John 15:11).

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