

QUESTIONS ON THE SABBATH

By Dr. Norman Geisler
(from his book *When Cultists Ask*, Baker Books, 1997)

EXODUS 20:8-11—Why do Christians worship on Sunday when the commandment sets apart Saturday as the day of worship?

MISINTERPRETATION: This commandment states that the seventh day of the week, Saturday, is the day the Lord selected for rest and worship. However, in the New Testament the Christian church began to worship and rest on the first day of the week, Sunday. Are Christians violating the Sabbath commandment by worshiping on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day? Some sabbatarian groups, such as Seventh-Day Adventists, think so.

CORRECTING THE MISINTERPRETATION: The basis for the command to observe the Sabbath, as stated in Exodus 20:11, is that God rested on the seventh day after six days of work, and that God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it. The Sabbath day was instituted as a day of rest and worship. The people of God were to follow God's example in his pattern of work and rest. However, as Jesus said in correcting the distorted view of the Pharisees, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The point Jesus made is that the Sabbath was not instituted to enslave people, but to benefit them. The spirit of Sabbath observance is continued in the New Testament observance of rest and worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2).

It must be remembered that, according to Colossians 2:17, the Sabbath was "a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (NKJV). The Sabbath observance was associated with redemption in Deuteronomy 5:15 where Moses stated, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." The Sabbath was a shadow of the redemption that would be provided in Christ. It symbolized the rest from our works and an entrance into the rest of God provided by his finished work.

Although the moral principles expressed in the commandments are reaffirmed in the New Testament, the command to set Saturday apart as a day of rest and worship is the only commandment not repeated. There are very good reasons for this. New Testament believers are not under the Old Testament law (Rom. 6:14; 2 Cor. 3:7, 11, 13; Gal. 3:24-25; Heb. 7:12). By his resurrection on the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1), his continued appearances on succeeding Sundays (John 20:26), and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Sunday (Acts 2:1), the early church was given the pattern of Sunday worship. This they did regularly. Sunday worship was further hallowed by our Lord, who appeared to John in that last great vision on "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10). It is for these reasons that Christians worship on Sunday, rather than on the Jewish Sabbath.

ACTS 17:1-3—Does Paul's Sabbath preaching in the synagogue support the Adventist view that the Sabbath is still binding?

MISINTERPRETATION: Seventh-Day Adventists argue that Paul sanctioned the practice of the Sabbath for Christians by his custom of going into the Jewish synagogue on Saturday and preaching.

CORRECTING THE MISINTERPRETATION: Paul's practice of speaking to assembled Jews was merely part of his missionary strategy to reach the Jews where they were assembled and from their Scriptures, which they came to read. It no more sanctioned the Sabbath for Christian use than Paul's meeting with pagan philosophers sanctioned their meeting time (Acts 17:22-34). On the contrary, Paul told the Colossians that the Sabbath was only a "shadow" that had passed away when the "substance" came with Christ (Col. 2:16-17). Paul affirmed that the entire table of the Mosaic Law "written and engraved on stone" (which included the Sabbath law) "was passing away" (2 Cor. 3:7, 10) and found its "end" (v.13) in Christ. The New Testament repeatedly mentions that the Old Testament Jewish Law has been fulfilled by Christ (Rom. 10:4). Because of this fulfillment, "there is a change in the law" (Heb. 7:12).

The Sabbath command is the only one of the Ten Commandments that is not restated in the context of grace in the New Testament. This is a significant omission if it is supposed to be practiced by Christians today. Rather, the New Testament sanctions the first day of the week for Christian worship—a day which Paul himself practiced. The reasons for this are obvious. It is the day Christ arose, thus initiating the first day of the week for Christian celebration. Jesus' first post-resurrection appearances were on Sundays, thus establishing a pattern of expecting his presence on the first day of the week (cf. Mark 16:2; John 20:19, 26). Sunday is also the day the Holy Spirit baptized the disciples into the body of Christ (Acts 2:1-4; cf. 1 Cor. 12:13)—providing the birthday of the Christian church.

Thus, it became the practice of the apostolic church to meet on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). In the last book of the New Testament, John the apostle was meditating on Sunday, the "Lord's Day," when he received a vision of Christ (Rev. 1:10), showing that the practice continued for many decades after the time of Christ. Indeed, the Christian church has continued this practice from the first century to the present.

REVELATION 14:9-12—Does this passage indicate the restoration of the Sabbath?

MISINTERPRETATION: Some Seventh-day Adventist scholars believe John predicts here the restoration of the Sabbath. "We believe that the restoration of the Sabbath is indicated in the Bible prophecy of Revelation 14:9-12. Sincerely believing this, we regard the observance of the Sabbath as a test of our loyalty to Christ as Creator and Redeemer" (*Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, 1957, 153; cited in Martin, 430). For "in the last days the Sabbath test will be made plain. When this time comes anyone who does not keep the Sabbath will receive the mark of the beast and will be kept from heaven" (White, 1911, 449).

CORRECTING THE MISINTERPRETATION: There is no indication of the Sabbath in this or any other text in the New Testament. (See comments on Acts 17:1-3.) The word *Sabbath* does not even occur in the Book of Revelation.

The reference to Jews fleeing on the Sabbath in Matthew 24:20 is descriptive, not prescriptive. It simply refers to the fact that Jews will observe the Sabbath during the future Tribulation period, not that Christians ought to do so.

The day of worship for Christians mentioned in the Book of Revelation is "the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10) which in John's day was the "first day of the week" (1 Cor. 16:2) when Christians regularly gathered together (Acts 20:7). According to Paul, the Sabbath passed away with the rest of the Law of Moses as a "shadow" fulfilled in the "substance" of Christ (Col. 2:16-17; cf. Heb. 7:12).

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