

Why do Christians observe Sunday rather than the Jewish Sabbath?

By Graham Osborne

Some Christian denominations claim that Christians should still be worshipping God on the Jewish Sabbath [Saturday] rather than on Sunday, "the Lords Day". Some groups, especially Seventh-day Adventists, even go so far as to claim that Sunday worship breaks the third commandment, "Remember the sabbath day – keep it holy", and in fact is "the Mark of the beast" spoken of in Revelation 13:8. This relatively new Protestant splinter group [dating roughly back to the mid-1800s] argues that for almost 2000 years, Christians have all been worshipping on the wrong day, and often accuses the Catholic Church of having knowingly done this in an attempt to lead people astray – with satanic intentions! How is a Catholic to respond to this?

For starters, the Catholic Church would heartily agree with these groups that the Ten Commandments are unchangeable and must be kept in all situations. The Catechism is clear on this point: "Since they express man's fundamental duties towards God and towards his neighbor, the Ten Commandments reveal, in their primordial content, grave obligations. They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere. No one can dispense from them. The Ten Commandments are engraved by God on the human heart" (CCC 2072). The Church certainly still teaches that we should keep the Third Commandment commanding a sabbath or day of rest, and the book of Hebrews confirms that "there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God" [Hebrews 4:9]. And Jesus himself clearly says: He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me [John 14:21].

The disagreement is not about whether Christians should observe a sabbath rest, but *which* day Christians should keep as a "sabbath" [Hebrew for "rest"].

But some might reply that Jesus said he did not come to change the law in any way: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to *fulfill*. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, *until all things have taken place*. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" [Matthew 5:17-19].

What they are missing is that through his sacrifice and death on the cross, and his rising from the dead, Jesus *did keep and fulfill the Old Covenant and its laws perfectly*, including taking on the just punishments [death in serious cases] that were agreed to by the Israelites if they ever broke this covenant [which they did repeatedly over the centuries]. In fact immediately after this verse [1 verse later!], we see Jesus begin changing and repealing various Old Covenant laws: "You have heard that it was said... 'You shall not kill...' But I say to you..."

What Jesus is doing is instituting a new covenant, with a new priest [Himself], a new sacrifice [his death on the cross], a "new" law of Grace [actually a restoration of the natural law, the Ten Commandments, written on man's heart from the beginning], and a new day to celebrate all this in his memory – the "Lord's Day" – the day Jesus rose from the dead and completed this New Covenant.

The book of Hebrews captures the sense of this covenant change perfectly: "*When there is a change of priesthood* [from the Old Testament High Priesthood to Jesus], there is necessarily a change of law as well... a former commandment is annulled because of its weakness... a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God" [Heb 7:11-25].

Jesus begins repealing the Old Covenant Mosaic Law [which as I mentioned above, he had kept perfectly and fulfilled], because it had been added by God in Old Testament times to respond to the "hardness of heart" of his chosen people.

Now that the New Covenant is being instituted, Jesus begins the restoration of the moral natural law of love, written on the heart, that had been the ideal that God had intended right from the beginning. For example, in **Mat 19:6-9** “Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so... the two shall become one flesh... *what God has joined... no man must separate... I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery.*”

And similarly, in **Mat 5:38-45**, **Jesus says**, “You have heard, ‘an eye for an eye... ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you... love your enemies... pray for those who persecute you”. In dealing with all the dietary restrictions in the Mosaic Law [and some that were added to this law], Jesus repeals all of these as well [as does St Paul]: “Everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart... (Thus He declared all foods clean)” [Mark 7:15-21].

Jesus [and even the Apostles] often intentionally broke the Sabbath for various reasons, teaching that, “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the sabbath” [**Mark 2:23-28**]. Also noteworthy is that in the various passages that Jesus restates the Commandments, he repeats all of them but one: to keep holy the Sabbath. The point here is not that Jesus is rejecting the 3rd Commandment, but that he is hinting at a deeper understanding of it, and that the Pharisees had become legalistic and inflexible in observing it –observing the letter, but missing the heart, of the law.

The Catholic Church then points out that Jesus rose from the dead – and thereby completing the institution of the New Covenant – on a Sunday, the first day of the Jewish week. This then became the new “sabbath” of the New Covenant for Christians –the day Christians gathered together to worship God and to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection: “the Lord’s Day”!

We see this change clearly Scripture, as well as in the writings of the early Church – as early as 70A.D! There is simply no question that the Christian Church observed Sunday as the New Covenant sabbath. Even Martin Luther and all the Protestant reformers observed Sunday as the day of worship –as most Protestant denominations still do today.

For example, in Revelation 1:10, St John is “caught up in spirit” to be shown a glimpse of the worship of God going on in Heaven, it happens “*on the Lord’s day*”. In Acts 20:7, we read about St Paul and members of the Church in Troas gathering “On the first day of the week... to break bread” – a term that was used to signify the celebration of the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper. St Paul asks the churches at Corinth and Galatia to take up collections for the holy ones when they gathered “On the first day of the week” [**1 Cor 16:2**].

And significantly, Jesus’ Emmaus road appearance also takes place “on the first day of the week”, but his disciples don’t recognize him until *the breaking of the bread*: “he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that... they recognized him” [Luke 24:13-31].

And Jesus’ first appearance to the disciples [minus Thomas], where he gives them his authority, and the power to forgive sins, is also on the “first day of the week”: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you... He breathed on them and said... “Receive the holy Spirit.. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” [John 20:21-22]. A week later, he would appear to them again on a Sunday, but this time Thomas with Thomas present.

And the great day of Pentecost, complete with it’s powerful outpouring of the holy Spirit, St Peter’s great sermon, and 3000 converts baptized all in one day – all on a Sunday! And incidentally, Pentecost *always* falls on a Sunday [cf Leviticus 23:15-16].

And in Colossians 2:16-17, St Paul directly addresses the issue of the Sabbath not being binding on a Christian, calling it merely a “shadow” of things to come: “having canceled the bond which stood against us

with its legal demands... Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come... If with Christ you died... Why do you submit to regulations?"

Similarly, in Gal 2:9-10 he writes: "but now that you have come to know God... how can you turn back again to the weak and destitute elemental powers? Do you want to be slaves to them all over again? You are observing days, months, seasons, and years. I am afraid... I have labored for you in vain."

Now that's not to say that the Apostles and St Paul never went to the Temple or synagogues on the Sabbath. This was the best place to reach and evangelize large numbers of Jews. But it is clear that the first day of the week – the Lord's Day, Sunday – occupied the most prominent position of worship in the New Testament.

But perhaps the most compelling testimony comes from the writings of the early Church. What did Christians actually do in the first centuries of Christianity?

As early as 70A.D., we have written testimony from the Didache [Teaching of the Twelve], clearly calling for Sunday worship: "But every Lord's day . . . gather yourselves together and break bread, and give thanksgiving". Similarly, in 74A.D., the Epistle of Barnabas records that "we spend the 8th day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both arose from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended into heaven."

St Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and taught by St. John the Apostle himself, gives us further indisputable testimony to the practice of the Christian Church. Writing early on in 110A.D., shortly after St John's death, he writes: let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the Resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week]." He goes on to insist that, "Those who were brought up in the ancient order of things [i.e., Jews] have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's day, on which also our life has sprung up again by him and by his death."

What is also very striking is the unanimous testimony of the early Church, and their direct opposition to those who still tried to enforce worship on the Sabbath, circumcision and other Jewish practices that centered around the law of Moses.

For example, in 155 AD, St. Justin Martyr, an unmatched defender of the Christian Faith in his letter, "Dialogue with Trypho the Jew", insisted that, "We too would observe the fleshly circumcision, and the Sabbaths, and in short all the feasts, if we did not know for what reason they were enjoined [on] you—namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your heart." He then writes that, "Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead (First Apology 67 [A.D. 155]).

And the great St. Cyril of Jerusalem warns: "Fall not away either into the sect of the Samaritans or into Judaism, for Jesus Christ has henceforth ransomed you. Stand aloof from all observance of Sabbaths and from calling any indifferent meats common or unclean".

St Paul referred to these Old Covenant practices as "works of the law", and he was adamant that these "works" were not only unnecessary for salvation, but potentially opposed to the new law of grace [Romans 6:14-15: you are not under the law but under grace], and actually could endanger a person's eternal salvation [see places like Romans 3:28, and Gal 2:16: a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ... because by works of the law shall no one be justified.]"

But despite all the Scriptural and historical evidence, some still challenge this constant practice of Christianity, demanding, by what authority could the Christian Church change the day of worship? The

short answer is by the authority of Jesus Christ! Jesus himself would found a church and leave his authority to it.

What many fail to realize is that Jesus didn't first write the Bible. He wrote nothing at all that we know of, aside from some writing in the sand [though he certainly wanted the Bible written, and inspired its human authors to write what he wanted]. What Jesus first came to do was build his Church! And he built it on rock, so that it would never fall [Mat 7:24-25], and the gates of hell would never prevail against it [Mat 16:16-19]. To this Church, built on the foundation of Peter and the Apostles [Ephesians 2:19-22] – unarguably and historically the Catholic Church, with every priest, bishop, deacon and pope able to trace their ordination back in an unbroken line to one of the Apostles – he gave the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever it binds on earth will be bound in Heaven, what ever it looses will be loosed [Mat 16:19, Mat 18:17-18], promising, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” [John 20:21-23]. To this Church, he gave authority and power to baptize [Mat 28:18-20], forgive sins [John 20:21-22], to heal and cast out demons [Mark 6:7,13]. He made it “the household of God... the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth [1 Tim 3:15]. And finally, to this Church, he sent the Holy Spirit, to guide it, guard it and protect it from error, promising he would be with it forever: “the Holy Spirit... will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you... the Spirit of truth will guide you into all the truth... and he will declare to you the things that are to come [John 14:16,26, 16:13].

It is by the authority that Jesus gave his Church that all Christians can be assured that Sunday is the New Covenant day of worship. To follow some splinter Protestant group, that arose in the mid 1800's under some questionable circumstances, over the Church that Jesus founded would be, at best, imprudent!

And finally, what about this charge of Sunday worship being the “mark of the beast” of Revelation 13:18? And even a related charge that the Pope is the Antichrist?! These are wild, completely un-Scriptural, even demonic charges.

This will all be the subject of a future article, but briefly, the Pope could not possibly be the Antichrist, because in 2 John 1:7, it says: “those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh; such is the deceitful one and the antichrist.” No Pope has ever denied that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Period!

And regarding the mark of the beast being Sunday worship, this is so far removed from the literal sense of the text, it's hard to figure how someone could come up with such an interpretation. The actual Scripture reads: “It forced all the people, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to be given a stamped image on their right hands or their foreheads... the beast's name or the number that stood for its name. *Wisdom is needed here*; one who understands can calculate the number of the beast, for it is *a number that stands for a person*. His number is six hundred and sixty-six” [Rev 13:16-18].

For starters, no mention of Sunday worship is even remotely hinted at in these verses, or their context. To infer anything different is just extraordinarily poor Biblical exegesis at best, or downright deception and lies at worst. And this “mark of the beast” is either the beast's name, or a number that stands for his name. St John then goes on to tell us that this number “stands for a person”, not the day of Sabbath Worship, and that “*His number is 666*”.

The early Church Fathers all understood this beast to be Caesar Nero [whose name in Greek alphanumeric values totals up to exactly 666]. Nero and the pagan Roman empire fit the description of the beast well, as he was infamous for his radical persecution of the Catholic Church and murdering Christians for sport.

Ironically, people are still using this “beast” to persecute the Church today. But this should still never stop us from keeping Holy the Lord's day...