

## Is Sunday the Sabbath?

Today is Sunday, but is it the Sabbath? Whatever answer we give, what are its implications? Some Christians believe that Sunday is the Christian equivalent of the Jewish Sabbath and should be strictly observed. Others say that it is part of the Jewish ceremonial law rather than the moral law and so does not apply today. There are many shades of opinion between these views. So how do we decide?

The Sabbath was instituted in the law given to Moses, notably in the Ten Commandments (*Exod 20:8-11*), but previous to that the Israelites in the wilderness were told to rest on the Sabbath and not collect manna. The fourth commandment, 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy' is the longest of the ten, with the most detailed explanation. Most of it is an injunction not to work or to make others work. Isaiah expands on this, promising God's people that if they desist from pleasing themselves on God's holy day and delight in it they will be blessed in their relationship with God and in their lives (*Is 58:13-14*). Whilst there is severe punishment for the Sabbath breaker in the Old Testament, the day is seen as a positive one, to be given in a special way to God but also of benefit to his people. In fact the fourth commandment tells us that God blessed the day and that its origins go further back than the law because on the seventh day God himself rested from his work of creation.

Later, especially in the period between Old and New Testament times, changes came in, with detailed rules about what was and was not permissible on the Sabbath, and we see evidence of that in Jesus' time in the attitudes of the Pharisees. Jesus did keep the Sabbath, but criticised the Pharisees' strict and inhumane rules. He was in turn criticised for allowing his disciples to pluck ears of corn and for healing people on that day, and famously retorted that, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath', reiterating that the Sabbath was instituted for humanity's benefit, not as a burden.

In accounts of the early church in Acts we see the apostles observing the Sabbath by going to the synagogue, but also have references to Christians meeting on the first day of the week, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead and on which the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost. Paul also addresses in his letters the tension between Christians' new lives and their Jewish roots. In Romans he says, 'One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind' (*Rom 14:5*) and in Colossians, 'Do not let anyone judge you with regard to...a Sabbath day' (*Col 2:16*). The only Biblical reference to 'the Lord's Day', now sometimes used to designate Sunday, is in Revelation (*Rev 1:10*), indicating that by late in the first century this was an accepted title for the Christian day of worship.

Sunday was not then a holiday, so meetings were held early in the morning or late in the day. As Christianity became more distinct from Judaism, Sunday became established as the day of Christian worship, as evidenced in the writings of Christian leaders in the second to fourth centuries. It was in 321 that the emperor Constantine, not yet a Christian, declared Sunday a day of rest throughout the Roman Empire. This was in honour of the Roman sun god, but it made it easier for Christians to meet in large numbers. A few decades later the Council of Laodicea ordered that religious observances be conducted on Sunday, though some Christians continued to keep Saturday.

Throughout British church history, let alone that of other parts of the world, there have been pendulum swings regarding Sunday observance, with the Reformers and the Puritans reacting against laxity by insisting on a more Sabbatarian approach, disapproving of 'frivolous' activities on a Sunday. When I was a young Christian debates went on about whether it was OK to engage in various activities on a Sunday, assuming that there was time for any of them amid the plethora of church meetings! Now laws have changed, with shops open, major sports events taking place and many people required to work, although there are still legal limitations and many still have a day off.

So where does that leave us? I think the key is in the distinction between the ceremonial and moral law of the Old Testament. The ceremonial law has been abolished under the new covenant in Christ. On that basis Sunday is not the Sabbath and we are under no obligation to keep it in the Judaistic sense, with all the rules and regulations. However, the moral law remains, and the principle of a day off from our usual activities and on which we come together to worship and seek God in a special way is a good one. God did not make us as machines to operate constantly and we need time out. We are not under law but under grace and how we work that out will vary, but we do need to work it out for our own sakes and for the sake of others. I read recently this from a Jew: 'The Sabbath was a respite from the rest of our lives', and in the frenetic lives many of us lead we need a Sabbath rest, and ignore that at our peril. For some of us that cannot be on a Sunday: some have to work, including church leaders. Without lapsing into legalism, I suspect that some of us need to examine and adjust our lifestyles to make room for this and accept God's gift of a day of rest, or risk suffering serious consequences if we think we know better than our creator.