

- May have involved circumcision (2:11-13)
- Involved the worship of angels (2:18)
- Paul constantly refers to Jesus being greater than the 'principalities and powers' (1:16,10,15 this phrase usually refers to supernatural beings or angels). The false teachers seem to exalt these powers above/beside Christ.
- It involved asceticism or harsh treatment of the body (2:18, 23)
- It involved numerous regulations about what one could eat, touch and handle (2:20,21)
- The regulations appeared to be linked to following the principalities and powers, and worshiping the angels

This teaching is a syncretistic mixture of angel worship and rigorous religious rituals. It downgraded Christ and exalted angels, principalities and powers. This is why Paul counter-emphasises Jesus' victory on the cross, and the absolute divinity and sovereignty of Christ over all of creation (Colossians 1:1:9-23; 21-23). All principalities are under Jesus. Every religious practice is a shadow compared to Jesus who is the real body. Jesus is the real thing everything else is a faint shadow.

We can see this false teaching has nothing to do with the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments; it is all about *human* regulations. Paul is saying that no one can make all these human rules about Sabbath keeping or any other day mandatory. No one can place them as conditions of salvation or necessary features of following God, especially when they are linked with false teaching. The Colossians need not keep the sabbaths of the false teachers, but we are to keep God's Sabbath.

### **The Importance of Obedience**

Sincere Christians disagree on the issue of the Sabbath, and we should not judge people's salvation over it. But every Christian is called to obey the commands of God. In John 14:15 Jesus says if you love me keep my commandments. This is the only true motive for keeping God's Sabbath.

The Bible warns us not to follow the traditions of men when we can see they conflict with the commands of God (Mark 7:8; Acts 5:29). Sunday is but a human tradition. And though it comes at a cost, the Bible teaches that obeying God is not burdensome (1 John 5:3), for God commands us to do what will bless us. So it is with the Sabbath.

The New Testament presents Jesus as upholding the Sabbath, Paul as meeting for worship on the Sabbath, no evidence of any change away from Sabbath keeping, and no evidence or command to keep Sunday. Instituted at Creation, enshrined in the Ten Commandments, and reaffirmed by Jesus - the importance of the Sabbath must be reckoned with by any Christian.

*What are the most significant factors in deciding about the Sabbath? The majority? Our Friends and Family? Our Feelings? Jesus? The Bible?*

*How well do you understand the Biblical evidence for the Sabbath in the New Testament? Pray that God will guide you as you weigh up this important issue.*

# ***Controversy Over the Sabbath***

We have seen that the Bible teaches us to enjoy God's gift of the Sabbath. God gave Sabbath at creation (Genesis 2:1-3). Sabbath is part of God's Ten Commandments (Ex 20:8-11). It was kept by both the Jews and Gentiles in the Old Testament (Ish 56:1-8 where Sabbath is a practice God gives to *Gentiles*). Jesus kept, and risked his life, to restore the Sabbath. In the New Testament both Jewish and Gentile Christians kept the Sabbath. But nowadays most Christians keep Sunday and have either forgotten, neglected or rejected God's Sabbath. Why do people worship on Sunday?

The exact origins of Sunday worship are a bit of a mystery, because the New Testament nowhere tells anyone to keep Sunday, nor does it abolish the Sabbath. The Apostles would never abolish what Jesus restored. Sunday arose after the writing of the New Testament. So how did Sunday become popular and how did the Seventh-day Sabbath ever get so unpopular? The best historical research suggests the following:

## **The Sabbath and Sunday in History**

History suggests that Sunday worship evolved along the following lines:

- The horrendous wars between the Romans and the Jews (AD 66-70 and AD 132-135) created a climate of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in the Roman Empire. This led Gentile Christians, not wanting to be confused with the persecuted Jews, to distance themselves from Judaism and any things perceived as Jewish, including dropping the Sabbath. This trend was strongest in the city of Rome.
- In the 2nd Century AD and on, some Christian teachers absorb anti-Semitism and decide that the Sabbath was only for Jews and not for Christians. This anti-Sabbath sentiment is spurred on by Jewish hostility towards Christians.
- There was a decrease in the numbers and influence of Jewish Christians conscious of the Biblical Sabbath and increase in Gentile Christians unaware, indifferent or antagonistic to the Sabbath.
- Honouring Sunday appealed to pagan converts who had revered the 'day of the Sun'. Sunday was the most popular day of the week due to Mithraism (Sun God).
- The Church of Rome championed Sunday and discourages Sabbath (made it a fast day). But even as late as the Fifth Century AD, outside Rome and Alexandria, many Christians gathered on Sabbath and Sunday. Eventually in medieval times Sunday worship displaced Sabbath worship altogether until modern times.
- When the Roman Empire became Christian in the early AD 300's, the emperor Constantine instituted the first Sunday law and discouraged Sabbath keeping. A church council in AD 364 also discouraged Sabbath keeping. (Incidentally, this was because lots of Christians were still keeping Sabbath).

Scripture is clear that there was no change in the day of worship, by Jesus or the apostles, in New Testament times. History shows it may have happen soon after and became widespread. So what does the New Testament say about Sunday?

# Sunday in the New Testament

## First day of the week in the Gospels

Most texts merely mention Jesus rose from the dead on the “first day of the week.” (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2,9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1,19, 26). Did Jesus' resurrection on a Sunday mean that it should now become the day of worship? There is simply no explicit or implicit indication in the Gospels. The disciples were gathered together in fear, not worship, on the resurrection Sunday until they realised that Jesus was alive (John 20:19). Jesus' appearance to them ‘eight days later’ (probably a Sunday) is given no explicit significance (John 20:26). Writing years after the resurrection, all the disciples call Sunday by the normal and unreligious term “first day of the week.”

## First Day of the Week in Acts

Acts 20:7 mentions Sunday. “*Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.*” But one cannot use this as evidence for Sunday worship. The phrase ‘break bread’ does not mean they celebrated the Lord’s supper, rather it is a non-technical, non-religious term for eating a meal and it appears only Paul ate (see vs. 11).

Acts 20:7 is an unique, once-off and unusual meeting. The meeting continues all night and onto the next morning (20:7,11)! Why was this so? Paul was going to Jerusalem, and based on prophecies that had been received, the people knew they would possibly never see Paul again (20:22, 23)! This was their final farewell and is why they talked all night.

Some translations correctly say this meeting occurred on Saturday evening (the Bible reckons days as evening first then morning see Gen 1:5). The following day (which would be a Sunday) Paul walked from Troas to Assos, a distance of almost 20 kilometres. Paul certainly did not keep Sunday as a holy day!!

## First Day of the Week in 1 Corinthians

The final Sunday text in the Bible is 1 Cor 16:1,2. Here Paul simply tells the believers to set aside certain money every Sunday for a future offering. This is something they all do individually *at home*. It does not prove the day had any special significance for worship at all. It is a day suitable for arranging finances.

## Paul and Controversy over Days

We need to realise that the ancient world was completely and totally religious. Modern non-religious and secular people didn’t exist. Back then all groups of people had numerous religious days. Christians appeared to have had allowed a freedom amongst themselves to kept different days. Paul didn’t mind people personally keeping various days, except when people made these days or styles of keeping them an issue of salvation or forced the larger group to keep them.

These various days are *not* the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments, which is God’s own day, and as we have seen, was kept by Jesus and Paul. Paul had to face several controversies over the keeping of various days in his ministry.

### **Controversy One: Galatians 4**

Whenever a person claimed that keeping a law or a day was the means or condition of salvation Paul strongly opposed them. Paul taught very forcefully salvation was *by the grace of Christ* and not by works of any law (e.g. Gal 2:15-21; Rom 3:20-22). Therefore Paul opposed the extensive religious calendar of “days and month and seasons and years” (Gal 4:8-10) that was being forced upon the Galatians as a crucial means to their salvation. While Paul encourages us to obey God as a result of grace he opposes legalism.

### **Controversy Two: Romans 14**

In the book of Romans we find a slightly different controversy. Here people were not saying that one must keep a day to be saved. The issue is over should one eat certain food and esteem certain days. It seems there was a lot of judging and arguing over which days were more important. We do not know what these days were, some scholars believe they are fast days, others believe they are Jewish Feast days. Paul calls these days “doubtful things” or “disputable matters” (Rom 14:1). This is not talking about Sunday versus Sabbath! (That is a post apostolic and now modern controversy that you simply cannot find in the New Testament). These are matters that aren't clear or important and Paul counsels us not to judge or needlessly offend other believers who are convicted differently to us. The Sabbath, or any of the Ten Commandments, cannot be considered a “disputable matter” – consider Jesus attitude to them!

### **Controversy Three: Colossians 2**

This is the only place Paul mentions the word ‘Sabbath.’ Some have misread this verse and made it say what it doesn't. Colossians 2:16-17, “*So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.*” There are several points we need to note here.

Firstly, this passage does not say the Sabbath is abolished. The text says don't let anyone *judge or condemn you* in regard to the way you are eating and drinking and keeping different days. The Colossians were eating and drinking a certain way and certain teachers were condemning them for that. The issue is about *how* one keeps a day not *if* one keeps any day (a few translations mistranslate these verses and add things that are not in the Greek i.e. NLT). This verse actually implies the Colossians are keeping Sabbaths and other days, but not in the way that the false teachers want.

The second point notes that the false teaching has nothing to do with the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments and possibly little to do with the Old Testament feast days. Interestingly, the word ‘law’ (*nomos*) is not even mentioned in the letter. By studying the letter we can see something of the false teaching Paul was opposing.

- It was based in human philosophy (2:8)
- Traditions of men (2:8)
- Commandments and doctrines of men (2:22)