

Sunday or Sabbath?

Ekkehardt Mueller

Sometimes things are different from what they seem to be at first glance. There are, for example, optical illusions. A book of adventure stories reports that certain areas in a desert were marked by poles so that travelers and caravans would not get lost. However, there were also so-called pole men who displaced the poles. Travelers followed these false poles. When they were exhausted and perplexed they were attacked and robbed of their belongings by these people. Deception!

Christianity at large keeps Sunday, but the Bible calls the Sabbath God's day of rest.

Arguments in Favor of Keeping Sunday Holy

- (1) The Ten Commandments state: "Keep holy the Sabbath day."
- (2) For God all days are equal.
- (3) The Lord's day mentioned in Scripture is Sunday.
- (4) The calendar was changed. We do not know which day is Sabbath.
- (5) We celebrate Sunday because we remember Christ's resurrection.
- (6) The law and therefore also the commandment to keep the Sabbath are abolished.
- (7) The early church celebrated Sunday.
- (8) Sunday is part of the church's tradition.

Arguments Reviewed

(1) *The Ten Commandments state: "Keep holy the Sabbath day."*

This sentence is not found in Scripture. The Sabbath commandment is worded differently and specifies the seventh day as the Sabbath, not just any day (Exod 20:8-11). However, the sentence is found in catechisms.

(2) *For God all days are equal.*

If this were the case why did God give the fourth commandment? Jesus kept the Sabbath and urged the correct way to keep it holy (Luke 4:16; Mark 2:23-28)? Why did Jesus wish that Christians would observe that day if it does not matter (Matt 24:20)? America's Independence Day cannot be moved from July 4 to July 5 without losing its meaning, nor can the Sabbath simply be moved from the seventh day to the first day of the week.

(3) *The Lord's Day mentioned in Scripture is Sunday.*

The term is found in Revelation 1:10. A unique Greek term is used to describe the day as specifically belonging to the Lord (as also in Exod 20:10). A similar expression, translated "the Day of the Lord," describes God's day of judgment (2 Pet 3:10; Joel 2:1, 11), but only the Sabbath does God call "My holy day" (Isa 58:13). Jesus called Himself the Lord of this day (Mark 2:28). John calls Sunday "the first day of the week" (20:1, 19). Not until the second century in Rome did the term "the Lord's day" begin to be used by church fathers to refer to Sunday.

(4) *The calendar was changed. We do not know which day is Sabbath.*

James Robertson from the U. S. Naval Observatory wrote already in 1932: "... we have had occasion to investigate the results of the works of specialists in chronology and we have never found one of them that has ever had the slightest doubt about the continuity of the weekly cycle long before the Christian era.... There has been no change in our calendar in past centuries that affected in any way the cycle of the week." When Pope Gregory XIII made a change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar the order of days was not affected. In 1582, Thursday, October 4 was followed by Friday, October 15. In case the weekly cycle had changed before Christ, we can assume that Jesus would have told his contemporaries which day the Sabbath really was.

(5) *We celebrate Sunday because we remember Christ's resurrection.*

Neither before nor after His resurrection did Jesus command the keeping of Sunday in remembrance of His resurrection (see His last words before his ascension in Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; and John 20-21). Instead Jesus expects his disciples to keep the Sabbath also in the future (Matt 24:20). It is not the *day* that memorializes Christ's resurrection but baptism and the Lord's Supper (Rom 6:3-6 and Col 2:12; 1 Cor 11:23-26). Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28) is the Creator, and He has instituted the Sabbath (Col 1:15-16). He alone has the authority to change or abolish the Sabbath commandment. Nowhere has He done this.

(6) *The law and therefore also the commandment to keep the Sabbath are abolished.*

Christians more or less keep the Ten Commandments. The problem is that many take liberty with the fourth commandment or declare this among all the others as ceremonial in nature. However, the Sabbath commandment is not ceremonial but a reminder of creation and liberation. Jesus did not transgress the Sabbath commandment (John 8:46); otherwise he might have been stoned to death (Num 15:32-36). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pointed out the real intention of the law (Matt 5:17-20). While the Bible knows different laws, the Ten Commandments are still valid (Rom 7:7, 12; Jas 2:10-13). There is a new covenant in the New Testament, but this new covenant is based on the Old Testament covenants and includes the *internalization* not abrogation of God's law (Heb 8:10). On the other hand, Daniel predicted that a power would come and change times and the law (Dan 7:25).

(7) *The early church celebrated Sunday.*

Traces of Christians keeping Sunday can be found in the mid second century AD but not in the New Testament.

John 20:19, 26 The meetings of the disciples were not worship services. The disciples hid, because they were afraid of their enemies.

Acts 20:7-8, 11 This is a farewell meeting. According to Jewish reckoning the day begins and ends with sunset (Lev 23:32). If the Jewish reckoning is used here, it was Saturday night, and Paul set out on his journey on Sunday. According to Roman reckoning the day begins and ends at midnight. If this method is used here, it was Sunday night. The breaking of bread took place on Monday. Neither option supports the sanctification of Sunday. Furthermore, even today churches have meetings during the week without keeping the respective day holy. See also Acts 2:46.

1 Cor 16:2 The money should be laid aside at home. A worship service is not pictured here.

Col 2:16 The text has to be understood in its context which deals with different heresies (verses 8, 18, 20-23). It may be that the Sabbath mentioned in v. 16 was observed in the wrong way or Paul may have ceremonial Sabbaths in mind (see Lev 23:26-32) which foreshadowed the plan of salvation and were fulfilled in Christ.

(8) *Sunday is part of the church's tradition.*

The sun was worshiped already in ancient times. In the Roman Empire the unconquered sun god (*deus sol invictus*) was worshiped. In AD 321 Emperor Constantine issued the first official Sunday law. But already before that time a great number of Christians observed Sunday, sometimes in addition to Sabbath. Reasons for observing Sunday may have included the desire to differentiate themselves from Jews and to enable Gentiles to become Christians more easily. Only after 321 was keeping Sunday enforced by civil and, later, church laws.

However, Jesus rejected traditions when opposed to the will of God (Matt 15:3, 9, 14).

God's Sabbath and Me

In his love God has given us the Sabbath in order to bless us richly. Jesus observed this day. Peter calls us to follow Christ's footsteps (1 Pet 2:21). Jesus is our Savior. He is also an example for us. We decide to follow him and keep the day that he himself kept.