

Sabbath and Sunday – A Scriptural and Historical Defense of this Transition

The subject of *Sabbath and Sunday* has caused a controversy in recent years. This does not pass by the churches. One reason is that certain members have studied other religions, such as Judaism or Seventh Day Adventists. With this knowledge, their thoughts change about the day of rest. For them, it had always been the first day of the week, Sunday. Now, they seem to favor the seventh day of the week, Saturday. Their argument is then that the Ten Commandments clearly state that we should sanctify the seventh day and not the first day of the week as a day of rest. Therefore, the question arises, why did Christianity transition to the first day of the week? This article deals with the concept of the day of rest, the causes that it was ought to be sanctified, and the transition from the last to the first day of the week.

Concept of the Day of Rest

In the first place the concept of the day of rest. Immediately after creation it is said, “*And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made*” (Gen. 2:2).¹ In the original, for “rested” the word “sabbath” has been used. The meaning is to “rest, stop (working), or sanctify the day of rest.” The Lord explains what this day entails. It is a day that is blessed and sanctified, “*And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made*” (Gen. 2:3). The word *sanctify* in this verse has the meaning of “to set apart.” This happened, in like manner, with the tools used in the tabernacle. In a sense, these were ordinary tools, such as a fork or a table. However, they are set apart to use them only for the service of the Lord. The first question is, why did the Lord institute the day of rest? This cannot primarily be related to rest due to weariness. Though God did “work” in His creation, it did not make Him tired. The Scriptures say, “*Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?*” (Isa. 40:28). Why then did the Lord rest? The answer is that He wanted to delight in His creation. This is why the whole creation should glorify God. This is particularly the purpose of the day of rest. At the same time, the Lord has given this day for mankind to rest in body and mind from his daily labors. An important point of the day of rest is that it is one of the *signs of the Old Testament*. In Exodus the Lord says, “*Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you*” (Ex. 31:13). The word for sign is the same as used for circumcision (Gen. 17:7). Certain verses later make clear that the sign of the Sabbath is related to the covenant. It is namely “for a perpetual covenant” (Ex. 31:16). Note that the word covenant is at multiple occasions related to the word testament (Heb. 10). It is important to keep this concept of the testament and the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant in mind when it comes to the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament. After the concept of the day of rest is explained, the question arises, what is the foundation or reason to keep the day of rest?

¹ The different emphasis in this article in *italics* are added by the author.

Reasons to Keep the Day of Rest

In the second place, *the reasons* to keep the day of rest. The LORD Himself gives various reasons in Scripture. The first one is found in the *creation order*. From the very beginning, God has made clear that one day is set apart as a day of rest (Gen. 2:2). This was already the case before the law-giving at Sinai. For instance, when Lord gives the people of Israel manna, He says by Moses that the Sabbath is a day of rest. Moses tells Israel, “This is that which the LORD hath said, *To morrow is the rest of the holy sabbath unto the LORD: bake that which ye will bake to day, and seethe that ye will seethe; and that which remaineth over lay up for you to be kept until the morning*” (Ex. 16:23) In this context, “to morrow” refers to the Sabbath day. This oral commandment was later formalized by the law-giving at Sinai. There the Lord says, “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work...For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and *rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it*” (Ex. 20:8-11). This makes clear that the last day of the week has been set aside. Man ought to sanctify it. This means that he has to set it aside for the Lord and His service. The cause for the seventh day is because the Lord Himself rested on this day. It is grounded in the creation order. Therefore, the Sabbath in the Old Testament is on the seventh day. Those today who want to keep the seventh day as a day of rest, often refer to the fourth commandment. “Look,” they say, “God commanded the seventh day to be sanctified. Therefore, we must keep the seventh day. It is even after the creation order.” The question is, however, is this reasoning correct? If we compare this commandment with the rest of Scripture, it is clear that the Lord Himself changed the ground for keeping the day of rest.

A second reason to keep the Sabbath is the exodus out of Egypt. In other words, *deliverance from slavery*. Also this is found in the Ten Commandments, but in Deuteronomy. It says, “Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it...Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work...And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day” (Deut. 5:12-15). In other words, at the end of the wilderness journey, the main reason for keeping the Sabbath is grounded in the Lord’s *redemption*. Israel had served for years as slaves in Egypt, but God had delivered them from this bondage. Now this is the main reason for keeping the day of rest. It shows that the LORD Himself changed the ground for the day of rest from creation to redemption. It is important to keep this in mind for the transition from Saturday to Sunday. Before turning to this, it is good to consider the difference between the Old Testament and New Testament.

Difference between the Old Testament and New Testament

There is a difference between the two testaments in Scripture. This has everything to do with the transition of place of the rest-day in the week. As previously said, the Old Testament Sabbath day is a sign of the Old Testament (or covenant). The question is, what is the purpose of the Old Testament? Simply said, it was a *looking forward* to the coming of the Messiah. All ceremonial (temple) laws under the Old Testament pointed to Christ. The numerous sacrifices demonstrated that the sinner needed a substitute. It was a picture of the coming Messiah who would fulfill all these sacrifices (Heb. 10:1).

Such laws were a schoolmaster to Christ (Gal. 3:24). With the coming of Jesus Christ, all these ceremonial laws have been fulfilled (Heb. 10:14-18, Gal. 3:19). What then is the purpose of the New Testament? What does the New Testament Church do? This question has a simple answer. As the Old Testament looked forward to the Messiah, in like manner the New Testament church *looks back* to the finished work of the Savior. The sacrifices in the temple and ceremonial laws are, therefore, no longer necessary. Daniel, the prophet, foretold already that with the coming of the Messiah the offerings would cease (Dan. 9:26-27). In summary, we can say this: The Old Testament looked forward to the coming of the Christ. The New Testament looks back to the fulfillment in the Messiah. The question, however, is what has that to do with the Sabbath? Why did it transition from the seventh to the first day of the week?

Transition of Day of Rest from the Seventh to the First Day of the Week

Why is it that the New Testament church keeps the first day of the week as a day of rest instead of the seventh day, as commanded in the Ten Commandments? There are few things to mention.

First of all, the *concept of the rest day remains*. The intention is to set aside one day a week to glorify God and to give man rest. Old Testament texts make clear that the observance of a day of rest is still applicable for today.

Secondly, the fourth commandment consists of a *universal* and a *ceremonial element*. Universal means that it applies to every person, every place, and at all times. Ceremonial is to day that it has been fulfilled in Christ and no longer applies to the New Testament church. How is the fourth commandment then divided? The universal part is that there is a day of rest. One day per week has to be set aside for the Lord and His service. However, the phrase about *the seventh day* is part of the ceremonial law. How do we know this? This is shown by the reasons why the Sabbath has to be kept. The first reason was the order of creation. This demonstrated that it had to be the seventh day. Later, the Lord gives the redemption out of Egypt as foundation reason. However, if we draw the line to the New Testament, it can be said that the reason for Sabbath-keeping is the *redemptive work of Christ*. The difference with Egypt is that they had a rest after slavish labor. However, the true church works out of a resting in Christ. In other words, it is no longer work upon which a rest follows, but a rest in Christ out of which good works follow. This is only possible by Christ's resurrection power. Paul writes that a true Christian has not only been crucified with Christ but has also risen with Him to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4). Since He rose on the first day of the week, this is a reasonable ground for keeping the day of rest on the first day of the week.

Third, it can be said that even as the Old Testament church *looked forward*, so the New Testament church *looks back*. Though this is primarily focused on the coming of the Christ and His fulfillment of the law, it also includes the day of rest. The Old Testament church looked forward to the day of rest. After six days of work, a day of rest follows. The New Testament church looks back to the day of rest. Out of the day of rest follows a week of work. This is related to the Testaments or Covenants themselves. In the Old Testament, the day of rest was a sign of the covenant. Everything in the Old Testament looked to the future, including the view on the day of rest. This has been fulfilled with the coming of the New Testament. As a result, the rest day is now placed at the beginning (of the week). The question however is, does Scripture itself give any foundation for this change?

Examples in the New Testament of Transition

In the New Testament, we can find several examples that confirm the transition from the Saturday to the Sunday. In the first place, the disciples *come together at two different occasions* on the first day of the week (John 20:19, 26). At the second time, it is specifically said that they came together at the “eighth day” of the week. This is a Jewish way of thinking to speak of exactly one week later. Thus, both gatherings took place on the first day of the week. Even though some argue that they came together “for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19), this is not mentioned for the gathering at the eighth day. Besides, one can ask, if this has nothing to do with gatherings on Sunday, why did they not come together on the last day of the week? Was that not mentioned in the fourth commandment? But what happens? Exactly at these Sundays, the resurrected Christ appears to the disciples. It is not one day earlier nor one day later in the week. These appearances happen specifically at the first day of the week. This shows that Christ has given his approval and blessing to gather together on the first day of the week.

In the second place, Paul is present at a *gathering on Sunday*. In this history is particularly spoken about the “first day of the week,” the Sunday. It is true that the Scriptures show that Paul had also gone on Saturdays to Synagogues. A simple explanation is that Paul desired to proclaim the gospel to the Jews also. They came still together on Saturdays. In this history, however, the gathering happens on Sunday. During this gathering two things take place. First, those that come together keep the Lord’s Supper. This is also called the “breaking of bread.” Second, Paul preaches to his hearers. These are two elements of a church service. The Scripture says, “*And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together [1] to break bread, [2] Paul preached unto them...and continued his speech until midnight*” (Acts 20:7). This word “preached” is also used when Paul shares the gospel with the Jews in the Synagogue (See Acts 18:4). This is the reason why the King James Bible translates it with “preaching.”

In the third place, Paul writes about *collecting* on the first day of the week. He says to the Corinthians, “*Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him*” (1 Cor. 16:2). In the previous verse it is clear that it has to do with the “collection for the saints” (1 Cor. 16:1). It is surprising that the apostle specifically speaks about the first day of the week for collections. If this day was not separated, why would he mention this day to collect? This proves that the Sunday has special significance.

In the last place, the apostle John, during his exile at Patmos, receives *a blessing on the Day of the Lord*. He writes, “*I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last*” (Rev. 1:10-11). The surrounding verses show that it is the risen Lord Jesus Christ that speaking here. The Annotations on the Dutch Statenvertaling explain concerning the Day of the Lord, “*That is, on the first day of the week, thus called, because Christ arose on that day from the dead, and because the service of God was there already used among the Christians on that day instead of the Sabbath, as all the ancient teachers witness, and is also inferred from Acts 20:7 and 1 Cor. 16:2.*” Again, it is surprising to see that the Savior appears to His servant exactly at the first day of the week. John receives in this way a spiritual blessing. Remember that Christ could have appeared to him on any other day of the week. However, it speaks here specifically about the Day of the Lord. This demonstrates that this day is set apart for the

service of the Lord. Nonetheless, the question arises, are there any historical arguments for keeping the first day as day of rest? This is certainly the case.

Historical Arguments

In the history of the Christian church, there are a number of examples that show that Christians came together on Sunday rather than Saturday. One instance is what Ignatius, the bishop in the church of Antioch, writes. John had appointed him as bishop in this congregation. Ignatius writes in the letter to the Magnesians, “If then those who had walked in ancient practices attained unto newness of hope, no longer observing sabbaths but fashioning their lives after the Lord’s day, on which our life also arose through Him and through His death.”² This letter is written in AD 110, not too long after the death of all the apostles. However, he is not the only church father that writes about this matter. About 40 years later, in AD 150, Justin Martyr writes, “And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the overseer verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.”³ This shows that the Christian church came together on Sunday. One of the things that happened during these gatherings is that the Scriptures were explained. This is also what happens in the church during the services on the first day of the week.

Besides this, there are a number of other examples found in the Didache (AD 90), the Letter of Barnabas (AD 130), and other early Christian writings.⁴ This proves the gathering of Christians in the first century on the Sunday.

In summary, it can be said that not only from the Scriptures, but also from history, there is evidence of a transition of the day of rest from the last day of the week to the first day. In the deepest sense, it is about Christ and His resurrection. The true church may live according to the commandments of the Lord out of a resting in Him. This was already purpose of the day of rest in the creation, to the glory and honor of a triune God.

² Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians*, 9.

³ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 67

⁴ <http://www.sabbaths.org/meeting.html>