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MINISTRIES

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The Lord’s Day

Part 1: Sabbath and Sunday in Scripture

If you’ve grown up in Christianity, then you’ve likely heard of something called the “Lord’s Day.” This term is typically applied to Sunday, the day when most Christians gather for worship and fellowship.

In popular Christian tradition, it’s taught that Christians are to observe the Lord’s Day—that is, Sunday—instead of the seventh-day Sabbath, which is from Friday night to Saturday night. In his sermon, “Why Sunday is the Lord’s Day,” Pastor John MacArthur gives his perspective, which is representative of what many Christians believe:

Remember what I told you last time about the Sabbath day? It is gone, right? It is gone. So, whatever we’re talking about on Sunday, we’re not talking about the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the seventh day of the week [...] It is part of Judaism that has been replaced by the new covenant, and the new covenant has a completely different day.

-John MacArthur, *Why Sunday is the Lord’s Day*, www.gty.org

So, in Christianity, it’s widely believed that the Lord’s Day has *replaced* the Sabbath for God’s people. Jews keep the Sabbath; Christians keep Sunday. But many Christians might be surprised to learn that it wasn’t always that way.

The Practice of the Earliest Believers

The earliest followers of Yeshua—Jesus—fellowshipped together constantly. In the book of Acts, the meeting places most often referenced are:

- Homes (Acts 1:13; 2:46; 5:42; 12:12; 20:7)
- The Temple (Acts 2:46; 3:4; 5:12, 20, 25, 42)
- The Synagogue (Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14, 42; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19, 26; 19:8)

A survey of the book of Acts reveals that the earliest believers, while they did additionally meet privately in homes, at the same time, continued to be very connected to the religious calendar and practices of their Jewish counterparts. They still kept the Sabbath from Friday night to Saturday night and met together for fellowship in the synagogue, long after Yeshua's resurrection.

As Samuele Bacchiocchi writes:

The private gatherings of the primitive community, though designed to express more freely and fully the content of their faith in the risen Lord, are not presented as conflicting with the services of the temple and synagogue but rather as complementing them.

-Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome, Italy: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), p. 134

The apostle Paul regularly met and even taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath day.

In Acts 13:13-52, for example, we read about Paul traveling to Antioch and teaching in the synagogue *on the Sabbath*. Paul addresses both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles and teaches them about the promised Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures, who has been revealed as Yeshua. Paul and Barnabas returned *the following Sabbath* to teach more (13:42, 44).

In Acts 17, Paul travels to Thessalonica and, once again, attends the synagogue services *on the Sabbath*. This was his "custom," according to Acts 17:2.

In Acts 18, Paul travels to Corinth where we see him attending the synagogue services "every Sabbath," trying to persuade both Jews and Greeks concerning the promised Messiah.

Some Christians have tried to downplay these references to Paul attending the synagogue services on the Sabbath. Some suggest that this was merely Paul's missionary strategy to convert Jews to Christians, not his normal custom in observance of the commandment. But this suggestion is reading something into the Scriptures that isn't there. It assumes that Paul and the other apostles believed they started some new religion, separate from Judaism, instead of seeing their faith as being within the parameters of first-century Judaism.

The fact is that Judaism of the Second Temple era was multifaceted. Scholars say that it's actually more accurate to speak of Second Temple "Judaisms" because of the wide variety of different views and practices.

It's clear from the New Testament that the apostles saw their faith in Messiah Yeshua as an expression of their "Judaism." The earliest Christians were designated as the "sect of Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). The word "sect," *hairesis*, is also used to describe the Pharisees (Acts 15:5) and Sadducees (Acts 5:17), which are both regarded as part of the Jewish faith in the first century.

Thus, it really shouldn't surprise us that the earliest believers in Yeshua continued to meet in synagogues on the Sabbath. Why wouldn't they?

Renowned Christian historian, Justo L. González, makes a great point:

There is no doubt that, for as long as they were allowed to do so, **early Christians continued attending Jewish religious services**. We are told that while in Jerusalem Peter and John went to the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon, a time set aside for prayers (Acts 3:1). Later, as Paul travels, it is his custom to attend worship at the synagogue on the Sabbath. **Later Christians have tended to see in this no more than a wise missionary strategy; but it is much more than that**. Paul's message is that in Jesus the promises made to Israel have been fulfilled [...] The most appropriate locus to announce such a message is the synagogue itself. Therefore Paul goes to worship at the synagogue, not with the intention of drawing people away from it and into the church, but rather to worship with other Jews and to invite them to rejoice with him for what God has done in Jesus.

-Justo L. González, *A Brief History of Sunday: From the New Testament to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017)

The apostles saw their faith in Messiah as an expression of their Judaism. This explanation makes much better sense of Paul's Sabbath custom than the idea that he simply wanted to infiltrate the synagogue to pull people out of it.

Not only did the apostles continue to regard the Sabbath as God's holy day, but they also seemed to expect even new Gentile followers of Messiah to meet on the Sabbath alongside the Jewish believers. In Acts 15, when the leaders in Jerusalem were trying to figure out what to do about the influx of Gentile believers in Yeshua, James, the presiding officer of the Jerusalem council, decreed that the Gentiles must follow four basic rules:

Acts 15:19-20

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

These four basic rules were not intended to be the full expression of Gentile obedience; they were the starting point for new Gentile believers to be received into the community and permitted to attend the synagogue meetings without offending the Jewish attendees. In fact, in the very next verse, James says something interesting:

Acts 15:21

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, **for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues**.

By this statement, James implies an expectation that the Gentiles would take part in the synagogue services *every Sabbath* to be instructed in Moses' teaching. The four basic rules given in the preceding verse served as a starting point for the new believers. They would learn the rest of what God expected of them over time as they faithfully attended the meetings every Sabbath. Since the local synagogue was the only place the Scriptures would even be accessible for the vast majority of people, this expectation makes complete sense in light of the Gentile believers' need to be disciplined in God's word.

Messianic scholar and theologian, J.K. McKee, offers an excellent summary of the Jerusalem council decree and the expectation that the Gentiles would attend Sabbath services at the synagogue:

The implication made by James is that once the new, non-Jewish Believers abstained from idols,

sexual immorality, strangled meats, and blood, they would really be able to go to the synagogues to hear the Torah of Moses taught. Many of them were already doing this, but the degree to which they were able to fellowship with Jewish Believers was being hampered, perhaps because no clear guidelines for table fellowship had been agreed upon. They needed to be welcomed into the assembly, and Jewish Believers needed to help and mentor them in their new walk of faith, guided by the grace of Messiah Yeshua which had saved them both. (Likewise, if the non-Jews started to follow some clear, beginner’s guidelines, any Jewish non-Believers might be able to recognize that these Believers in Israel’s Messiah were not quite so “pagan” after all.)

-J.K. McKee, *The New Testament Validates Torah* (Richardson, TX: Messianic Apologetics, 2012), p. 86

So, we’ve seen that the earliest Christians—both Jews and Gentiles—continued to keep the seventh-day Sabbath in the New Testament. The Sabbath, not Sunday, was the customary meeting day for believers in the New Testament.

These facts make perfect sense in light of Yeshua’s affirmation of the Sabbath as part of the Torah. He said the Sabbath has ongoing validity in the lives of his followers:

Matthew 5:17-20

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Let’s unpack this passage a bit because there’s a lot here. First, Yeshua said, “Do not think.” He didn’t want there to be the slightest misunderstanding regarding his position on the Law and the Prophets. He made himself very clear: he did *not* come to abolish any of the Torah.

Abolish, *kataluō*, means to destroy or tear down. It also carries the connotation of nullifying—that is, rendering something useless. So Yeshua tells us that we are *not even to think* that he came to destroy the Torah or render it useless. This would also apply to the Sabbath since it’s part of the Torah. Yeshua did not abolish the Sabbath.

Instead, Yeshua said he came to “fulfill,” *plēroō*, the Torah and Prophets. While this word does often relate to bringing something to completion, according to Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon, it can also mean:

to make complete in every particular; to render perfect.

Joseph Hebrew Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, pp. 517-518

In other words, rather than rendering the Torah over and done away with, Yeshua came to “perfect” it—to fully embody the Torah in his teachings and actions. He fulfilled the Torah by demonstrating how to properly live it out on the basis of love for God and love for one’s neighbor. This is how one’s righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. It’s clear that this was Matthew’s intended

meaning of “fulfill” in light of the rest of the passage.

For more information on this, we might recommend our teaching [Pleroo the Law](#).

So, again, Yeshua came to *fulfill* the Torah—to bring out its fullest and proper application and meaning. That’s what the Sermon on the Mount is all about!

And once again, Yeshua’s affirmation of the Torah here would include the Sabbath. The gospel accounts testify to the Messiah’s own faithful observance of the Sabbath in addition to his teachings regarding how his followers are to observe it.

Yeshua goes further to say that not one iota or dot—that is, the smallest part of the Law—will pass away until heaven and earth pass away and *all* is accomplished. Some have suggested that this occurred at Yeshua’s death and resurrection; thus, parts of the Torah can now be discarded. But according to Dr. Craig Keener, such an interpretation “violates the whole thrust of the passage”:

Matthew declares that nothing will pass from the law “until all is accomplished,” meaning until the consummation of the kingdom, when heaven and earth pass away. The idea that Jesus’ death and resurrection is the “goal of the world,” thus allowing the law to be set aside as fulfilled, violates the whole thrust of the passage.

-Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 178

Likewise, New Testament Scholar, Dr. J. Andrew Overman, doesn’t mince words in his criticism of such “hermeneutical gymnastics”. Here’s what he says:

A host of monographs have been devoted to these four verses attempting to show that Jesus did not mean that the law must be fulfilled when he seemed to have said the law must be fulfilled. For example, some interpreters have found an escape clause in 5:18b which concludes with the phrase “until all is accomplished” (*an panta genatai*). Some have claimed that Jesus “fulfilled all,” and therefore the law and the prophets were in force during Jesus’ lifetime, but not after his death since, at that point, “all was accomplished.” Such hermeneutical gymnastics seem excessive, if not tortured. Such contrived interpretations of 5:17-20 are also a result of isolating these verses from the rest of the Gospel. Indeed, throughout the Gospel Matthew demonstrates a sophisticated knowledge of the law, its interpretation, and the abiding validity of the law as he interprets it [...] Although this passage is the subject of lively controversy, it is unambiguous and does indeed command obedience to the whole Torah.

-J. Andrew Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International), p. 77-78

So what does Yeshua mean when he says nothing will pass away until all is accomplished? Many scholars have pointed out that Yeshua is making a reference to the *eschaton* here—that is, the end of the age and consummation of the eternal kingdom when heaven and earth pass away (Revelation 21-22). Clearly, this hasn’t happened yet. Unless you are a full preterist, you recognize that heaven and earth have not yet passed away and “all” has not yet been accomplished.

Thus, nothing from the Torah, including the Sabbath, has passed away.

Now, if he couldn't have made it any clearer, Yeshua goes one step further in Matthew 5:19—he directly admonishes his followers to be great in the kingdom of heaven by doing and teaching the commandments of the Torah! Again, this would include the Sabbath. And the evidence we have from the rest of the New Testament indicates that Yeshua's earliest followers continued to do just that. They continued to regard the Sabbath as God's holy day.

“But this message would apply only to Jews because that was Yeshua's original audience in Matthew 5!” Some might say.

However, Yeshua commissioned his disciples to make disciples of “[all nations](#)” and to teach them “[to observe all that I have commanded you](#)” (Matthew 28:19-20). According to Yeshua's Great Commission, *everyone* from the nations who chose to follow Yeshua would be discipled in his teachings. Yeshua's teachings include his Sermon on the Mount in which he affirms the ongoing validity of the Torah.

A survey of the New Testament reveals that the earliest Christians—both Jews and Gentiles—were still widely regarded as within the parameters of Second Temple Judaism. They remained firmly established on the Torah, and customarily also continued to meet on the Sabbath day.

Evidence of Sunday observance in the New Testament?

As we mentioned earlier, in addition to meeting in the synagogue on the Sabbath, the earliest Christians met in homes. These additional meetings could have taken place on any day, including Sunday. But is there anything in the New Testament suggesting that Sunday had become a regular meeting day for the early believers, eventually replacing the Sabbath?

A popular theory is that Christians began observing Sunday as a memorial of the resurrection since the gospels record that Messiah was raised from the dead on the “first day of the week” (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). While this became the common Christian practice a little later in history, which we'll explore later, let's first consider whether or not there is any *biblical* evidence for this practice.

Pastor John MacArthur cites three passages that he believes establish a pattern of Christians meeting on Sunday as a special day of worship. Those passages are Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2, and Revelation 1:10. We'll go through each of these passages and determine if they support regular Sunday observance.

Acts 20:7

[On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.](#)

Based on this verse, some will argue that a shift from Sabbath observance to Sunday observance had already occurred since it says the believers met “on the first day of the week.” According to Pastor John MacArthur:

And so, they met every day, but it didn't take long before **they landed on a special day** [...] “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread”—isn't that interesting? No law has been given to establish this. But here we are well into the ministry of the apostle Paul. Years have passed since the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it's not remarkable, it's matter of fact: “When we were gathered together to break bread on the first day of the week.”

That's what they did [...] This church at Troas is exemplary of **the pattern of Sunday worship** in the early church and ever since.

-John MacArthur, *Why Sunday is the Lord's Day*, www.gty.org

So, MacArthur thinks this verse indicates a "pattern" of Sunday observance. But why would we assume that this gathering mentioned in Acts 20:7 took place every week? To emphatically declare such to be the case seems to go beyond the evidence. As Dr. Craig Keener writes:

Because Paul had been back with the church in Troas only briefly and had to leave the next day, he needed to equip the church with much information and hence spoke throughout the night. Luke's note that the church was meeting on the first day could indicate a regular practice, **or it could point to a practice that was unusual**; in any case, Paul met with the believers at length then because he would leave soon afterward.

-Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014)

So the main question is this: why should we believe this event represents a weekly meeting instead of a special occasion due to Paul leaving the next day?

Again, it seems that the only way to conclude that Acts 20:7 reveals a regular pattern of Sunday observance is to approach the text already assuming such to be the case. A better explanation for this reference to the first day of the week is to simply go by what the text tells us: Paul was "intending to depart on the next day." Thus, the believers gathered to break bread and fellowship with Paul before he left.

But why did Luke, the author of Acts, seemingly go out of his way to make special reference to the day? Wouldn't this suggest that this was a regular, weekly gathering? Not at all.

As an eyewitness to Paul's journeys, Luke gives a chronological account of everything that happened when it happened. In chapters 20-21 alone, he gives thirteen time references (Acts 20:3, 6, 7, 15, 16; 21:1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 15, 18).

In Acts 20:7, Luke simply mentions the day as a chronological reference. And let's not forget that a significant event occurred at this meeting—namely, the miracle of Eutychus being brought back to life (Acts 20:8-12). Therefore, it seems reasonable that Luke would have wanted to make a special chronological note of this miraculous event.

Unlike the Sabbath day, which is clearly referenced as a regular meeting day, nothing in Acts 20 indicates that this Sunday meeting was a recurring, weekly event.

What about 1 Corinthians 16:2?

1 Corinthians 16:2

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

In this passage, Paul instructs the Corinthian believers to put aside funds on the first day of every week

to help the Jerusalem believers. It's often assumed that this passage references a regular Sunday meeting. But there are reasons we might doubt that interpretation.

First, if believers in Corinth customarily met on the first day every week, surely we would expect to see a reference to such a practice in the Book of Acts since there are accounts of Paul staying in Corinth. However, while Paul was in Corinth, the only reference to a customary meeting day is the Sabbath:

Acts 18:1, 4

After this Paul left Athens and went to **Corinth** [...] And he reasoned in the synagogue **every Sabbath**, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

Second, there is nothing in the text of 1 Corinthians 16 indicating that the Corinthian believers made this donation at a public gathering. The instruction is for "each of you"—that is, each individual believer—to privately set aside funds. Furthermore, the instruction to "store it up" could imply keeping the funds in one's own home so that it could be easily gathered when Paul came for it. Thus, it's not clear that any corporate gathering is in view at all.

In summary, Paul's instruction was for individual believers. He instructed the Corinthians to personally and privately set aside funds every week so that this special offering would be ready and available when he arrived. To read anything more than that into this verse would be stretching it.

What about Revelation 1:10?

Revelation 1:10

I was in the Spirit on the **Lord's day**, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.

Many Christians believe John's reference to the "Lord's Day" in Revelation is talking about Sunday. But this interpretation is not based on the context of the passage itself. Moreover, there is nowhere else in the Bible where Sunday is given such a title. Every time Sunday is mentioned in the New Testament, it's referred to as "the first day of the week" (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).

So if this idea doesn't come from the Bible, where does it come from? The interpretation that the term "Lord's Day" in Revelation 1:10 is Sunday is based primarily on *external* evidence, which is believed to give us insight into what John means by the term.

Again, Pastor John MacArthur's perspective is representative of what many others have argued. Here is what he says:

Now, when is John writing? Well, he's writing 30-40 years after Paul. He's writing in 96 A.D. at the end of the first century, and by that time this was no longer called Sunday, or whatever other forms that day had been called. It was for believers now the Lord's Day. It doesn't even need a further explanation. **There are all kinds of testimonies in the second century**—which would have been just a few years later since John's writing in 96—all kinds of testimonies to the fact that **in the second century this was the customary way to refer to the first day of the week**. The first day of the week was the Lord's Day; the day that we honor the Lord. **This title for Sunday is commonly found in many, many early Christian writings**, has continued through all church history, even down to the present.

-John MacArthur, *Why Sunday is the Lord's Day*, www.gty.org

In other words, since early Christian writings outside of the Bible refer to Sunday as the Lord's Day, then that must be what John means when he uses the term. Therefore, by the time Revelation was written, followers of Yeshua observed Sunday, the Lord's Day, instead of the Sabbath.

There is no doubt that, later in history, Christians used "Lord's Day" with reference to Sunday for various reasons. Most commonly, because Yeshua resurrected on Sunday, Christians historically have attached theological significance to this day. Thus, Sunday became the Lord's Day. However, the Christian writings that refer to Sunday as the Lord's Day are from the late second century—almost a century after Revelation was written. It seems unreasonable to interpret the Lord's Day as Sunday based on such late evidence.

For instance, that would be like using a modern tabloid magazine to interpret the words that Mark Twain used in his books over a hundred years earlier. When Twain wrote Huckleberry Finn's character saying, "I felt gay," we would completely miss the author's intent if we read modern meanings of the word "gay" into that story. Words can change over time, and what "Lord's Day" meant to a Christian in the late second century might not be the same as what John meant by the term. The question is, did the "Lord's Day" terminology commonly apply to Sunday when Revelation was written or did this occur later in history?

Our contention is that the term "Lord's Day" was not used with reference to Sunday in John's time, but that this happened much later. However, there are two Christian writings from the *early* second century that are often cited as evidence of an early usage of "Lord's Day" with reference to Sunday. These writings are the Didache and the letter from Ignatius to the Magnesians. These writings are much closer to the time Revelation was written. Let's explore both of these writings and see if they give us any insight regarding the meaning of "Lord's Day" in Revelation.

The Didache

First, let's look at the Didache, a set of ethical instructions to an early Christian community written by an anonymous author. This is an important text because it's *very* early. Many scholars even date it to the late first century! Thus, this document gives us some valuable insights into the practices of some early Christians not much later than New Testament times. Here's the relevant passage from the Didache:

On the Lord's own day, when you gather together, break bread and give thanks [Or: *celebrate the eucharist*] after you have confessed your unlawful deeds, that your sacrifice may be pure. Let no one quarreling with his neighbor join you until they are reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled.

-Didache 14:1-2 (Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 439)

Based on this translation of the passage, the author here clearly seems to expect that the early Christian community gathers together on "the Lord's own day." Is this evidence of early Christian Sunday observance? Many have said yes, but there are some problems with this understanding.

For instance, if the author were indeed referring to an actual day called the Lord's Day, it would still need to be *proven* that he meant Sunday, not just assumed!

Scholars are quite divided on this passage. While many do believe the passage refers to Sunday, others

have offered valid alternatives. Some scholars have even suggested that the author was referring to the Sabbath day!

For instance, in the New Testament, Yeshua said that he is “the Lord of the Sabbath” in Matthew 12:8, Mark 2:28, and Luke 6:5. Thus, it would appear from those passages that *the Sabbath* is the Lord’s Day.

Additionally, internal evidence in the Didache itself might also suggest Sabbath observance among these early Christians. Didache 8:1 uses the name “preparation day” (παρασκευή), which is the traditional Jewish designation for Friday—that is, the day before the Sabbath (Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:14; also see Josephus, *Ant.* 16:163).

Since this name carries connotations of preparing for the Sabbath, the author’s use of it might imply that these Christians prepared for and observed the Sabbath.

In any case, since the Didache passage is unclear, the Sabbath seems just as plausible an option as Sunday.

Other scholarly suggestions regarding the meaning of the supposed reference to the “Lord’s Day” in the Didache passage are:

- Passover
- Saturday night Havdalah ceremony (that is a traditional Jewish meal closing out the Sabbath and going into the first day)
- Yom Kippur

So there are plenty of options to be considered, not just Sunday.

However, a different interpretation—one that seems most likely—is that the passage might not be referencing a particular day at all. The original Greek text of the passage is quite ambiguous.

Here is the Greek text in the Didache. The highlighted text is what is usually translated as “on the Lord’s own day”:

Κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου συναχθέντες κλάσατε ἄρτον καὶ εὐχαριστήσατε. . . .

The first problem with the standard English translation is that, unlike the passage in Revelation, the word “day” (ἡμέρα) doesn’t appear in the Didache passage. A literal translation is “Lord’s of the Lord.” Most translators have inserted the word “day” in the passage. However, there doesn’t appear to be anything in the context of the passage itself that would demand such an insertion.

Second, the Greek word at the beginning of the passage, which is translated “on the” (Κατὰ), can also be translated “according to,” as it usually is in other places in the document (1:5; 2:1; 4:13; 6:1, 11; 13:6). Based on these factors, some scholars have suggested that the phrase should be translated, “According to the commandment of the Lord.” It seems that inserting the word “day” makes sense only if translating the first word, Κατὰ, as “on the” instead of “according to.”

But why insert the word “commandment” into the passage? Isn’t that just like inserting the word “day”? Well, unlike “day,” there might be a good reason to think “commandment” is implied in the text. According to Bacchiocchi:

Didache 14:1 is linked by the conjunction “and—*de*” to the previous chapter, which closes with the exhortation to “give according to the commandment” (13:7). The repetition of “according to—*kata*” could have caused the omission of the word “commandment” or “doctrine.”

-Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome, Italy: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), p. 125, n. 73

In other words, according to Greek grammar rules, the “and” conjunction links 14:1 with the previous verse, which allows for the word “commandment” to be omitted in 14:1 since it is used in the previous sentence.

So, again, the passage is likely not referring to a particular day at all. After all, the author later urges his readers to “gather together frequently” (16:2), not on *any* day exclusively. Thus, the author could simply be saying, “according to the Lord’s [commandment], when you gather together, break bread and give thanks...” The passage goes on to give prerequisites for the times this community gathers: the believers must confess their sins and reconcile with one another.

In summary:

- This passage from the Didache is hardly evidence of early Christian Sunday observance. If the author was talking about a particular day, the theory that he meant Sunday is merely assumed and far from conclusive.
- The passage gives us no evidence that the term “Lord’s Day” was used with reference to Sunday by this time. This is demonstrated by the fact that the Greek text is ambiguous and doesn’t say nor imply a particular day.
- The author likely wasn’t referring to a particular day, but *the way to conduct* the gathering in accordance with the Lord’s command.

Ignatius’ Epistle to the Magnesians

Now let’s take a look at the letter from Ignatius to the Magnesians. Ignatius was an early Christian bishop of Antioch. He wrote a series of letters during a trip to Rome, where he was condemned to be executed for his Christian beliefs. His letter to the believers at Magnesia is often cited as an early witness to Sunday observance because of his alleged use of the term “Lord’s Day.” As scholar Richard Lewis explains:

[Ignatius’] testimony is considered particularly valuable inasmuch as his letters are thought to have been written not later than A.D. 117. Use of the term “Lord’s day” by him would therefore very likely constitute the earliest example of it after Rev 1:10.

-Richard B. Lewis, *Ignatius and the “Lord’s Day”* (AUSS, 6.1, 1968), p. 1

One of the issues that Ignatius addresses in his letter is the problem of “Judaizing.” Ignatius’ view of Judaizing, according to the scholar Fritz Guy, “is not a matter of external ritual, but an inner, spiritual attitude” (Fritz Guy, *The Lord’s Day in the Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians*). Ignatius admonishes his readers that if they continue to live “in accordance with Judaism,” then they have not received grace. Within this context, Ignatius says the following:

And so those who lived according to the old ways came to a new hope, no longer keeping the Sabbath but living according to the Lord's day, on which also our life arose through him and his death—which some deny. Through this mystery we came to believe, and for this reason we endure, that we may be found to be disciples of Jesus Christ, our only teacher.

-Ignatius, Magnesians 9:1 (Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 249-250)

The common interpretation of this passage is that Ignatius was encouraging the Magnesian believers to drop Sabbath observance and keep the Lord's Day—presumably Sunday—instead. However, just like we've seen with the Didache, the Greek text does not include the word "day." The Greek text that's used for our English translations just says, "according to the Lord's." The translators added the word "day," most likely because the statement was contrasted with "sabbatizing," which is translated as "keeping the Sabbath."

So again, just like with the Didache, the passage is ambiguous. Contrary to the popular claim, then, it's not conclusive proof of an early use of the term "Lord's Day" with reference to Sunday.

But there's much more to be considered. A variant in the manuscript evidence might shed some light on this controversial passage. Scholar Ranko Stefanovic explains:

The statement under consideration comes from the commonly accepted Greek edition of the middle recension of the Ignatian letters. The only surviving Greek manuscript of the middle recension, Codex G (*Codex Mediceus Laurentius*), **considered to be the parent of other Greek manuscripts in existence today as well as the Latin translations**, actually reads Κατὰ κυριακὴν ζωῆν ("according with the Lord's life"). However, the Greek text, reconstructed by modern editors and which serves as the basis for English translations, omits the substantive ζωῆν [life] after Κατὰ κυριακὴν [according with the Lord's]. Such a reading bears an obvious impact on the common understanding of the meaning of Κατὰ κυριακὴν [according with the Lord's].

-Ranko Stefanovic, "The Lord's Day of Revelation 1:10 in the Current Debate," *AUSS* (Andrews University Press, 2011), Vol. 49, No. 2, p. 265

So, Ignatius' original statement was likely, "living according to the Lord's *life*." This is supported by the best manuscripts, whereas "living according to the Lord's *day*" is based purely on conjecture.

Additionally, the context supports the "life" interpretation over the "day" interpretation. Ignatius contrasts living in accordance with Judaism to living in accordance with Christ in 8:1-2. In 10:1, he again admonishes his readers to live in accordance with Christianity. The "according with" construction used in the comparative verses suggests that our passage in question refers to *a way of life*. As the scholar Robert A. Kraft explains:

It is certainly illegitimate to see behind this context a simple Sabbath/Sunday controversy. It is rather a contrast of two different ways of living—one apart from "grace" ("Judaizing"), the other in the power of the resurrection life.

-Robert A. Kraft, "Sabbath in Early Christianity," *AUSS* (Andrews University Press, 1965), p. 28

With this context in mind, we can perhaps also better understand "sabbatizing," which again, is contrasted with "living according to the Lord's life." It's entirely possible that Ignatius was not

discouraging Sabbath observance per se, but rather Sabbath observance *in accordance with Judaism*. In Ignatius' mind, this "sabbatizing" was an unbiblical approach to the Sabbath and contrary to the Lord's way of life.

Again, contextual evidence supports this interpretation. Let's look at the passage again:

And so **those** who lived according to the old ways came to a new hope, no longer [sabbatizing] but living according to the Lord's [life]...

Who are "those"? Ignatius is referring to the prophets in the Old Testament:

Do not be deceived by false opinions or old fables that are of no use. For if we have lived according to Judaism until now, we admit that we have not received God's gracious gift. **For the most divine prophets lived according to Jesus Christ.** For this reason also they were persecuted. But they were inspired by his gracious gift, so that the disobedient became fully convinced that there is one God, who manifested himself through Jesus Christ his Son, who is his Word that came forth from silence, who was pleasing in every way to the one who sent him.

-Ignatius Magnesians 8:1-2 (Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 249)

So, in 9:1, Ignatius is admonishing his readers to follow in the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets, no longer sabbatizing but living according to the Lord's life.

Why is this significant? Because the Old Testament prophets kept the Sabbath and urged Israel to keep it (Isaiah 56:1-8; 58:13-14)! Not only that, but they also rebuked people for their unbiblical approaches to the Sabbath (Isaiah 1:13-17). This is not unlike Yeshua, who likewise taught right observance of the Sabbath and rebuked the Pharisees for their distortion of it (Matthew 12:1-13). This is perhaps what Ignatius had in mind when he wrote about how the prophets "lived according to Jesus Christ."

Richard Lewis summarizes this point well:

[I]t is almost certain, if we are to avoid absurdity in our treatment of Magnesians 9, that **sabbatizing is equivalent to the general idea of Judaizing, a practice which could be avoided even while keeping the Sabbath.** This is the only feasible explanation inasmuch as it is the Sabbath-keeping Old Testament prophets who are described as "no longer sabbatizing." To interpret the next words of the same passage in such a way as to make the Old Testament prophets keep Sunday is, of course, equally absurd!

-Richard B. Lewis, *Ignatius and the "Lord's Day"* (AUSS, 6.1, 1968) p. 51

In summary:

- Ignatius does not appear to discourage Sabbath observance per se, but rather Sabbath observance *in accordance with Judaism*. In Ignatius' mind, this "sabbatizing" was an unbiblical approach to the Sabbath and contrary to the Lord's way of life.
- Based on manuscript and contextual evidence, Ignatius gives us no indication of early Christian Sunday observance.
- Ignatius likewise gives us no evidence of an early use of the term "Lord's Day" with reference to Sunday.

- Ignatius *does* give us evidence of early Christian Sabbath observance! If our proposed interpretation is correct, Ignatius encouraged keeping the Sabbath in accordance with the Lord's life. But even if we take "sabbatizing" to mean keeping the Sabbath per the commandment, the fact that Ignatius needed to admonish his readers against it indicates that some Christians at that time were still keeping it.

While Ignatius' epistle does not give us evidence of the early Christians altogether abandoning the Sabbath and observing Sunday instead, it certainly does reflect some of the historical tensions between Christianity and Judaism. As we'll learn a little later, these growing tensions did eventually lead to much of the Christian community severing their Jewish roots and throwing out the Sabbath.

But getting back to the issue of the "Lord's Day": upon a closer examination, it appears that these two early Christian writings—the Didache and Ignatius' letter to the Magnesians—do not, in fact, give us conclusive evidence of the term "Lord's Day" being used with reference to Sunday. The evidence points away from such an interpretation.

Therefore, the idea that Revelation 1:10 refers to Sunday by its use of the term "Lord's Day" is significantly weakened by the lack of early historical witness to such a definition of the term. It seems, then, that the "Lord's Day" terminology was applied to Sunday much later in history and therefore does not inform how we should understand John's use of the term in Revelation 1:10.

So what did John mean when he used the term "Lord's Day"? He was likely referring to the end-time "Day of the LORD/YHWH," mentioned throughout the Old Testament. This is not referring to a singular "day," but a future period of time when God will judge the world, which is then followed by the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. This end-time Day of the Lord is certainly a major theme of the Book of Revelation. When John said, "[I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day](#)," what he likely meant was that the Spirit transported him, by way of vision, to witness the events that will occur during this period known as the Day of the Lord.

This interpretation makes much more sense in light of the context and themes of Revelation. However, one common objection to this view is that John doesn't use the common Greek phrase for "Day of the Lord." For instance, the Hebrew *Yom YHWH* (יִּוֵם יְהוָה), "Day of the LORD," is typically translated into Greek in the Septuagint as ἡμέραν θυμοῦ κυρίου ("day of the Lord"). However, John uses a unique form not used in the Septuagint, τῆ κυριακῆ ἡμέρα ("the Lord's day").

One answer to this objection is to say that John simply rephrased the common terms and that it doesn't make a difference regarding the meaning. As Stefanovic writes:

John's use of the adjective κυριακῆ ("the *Lord's* day"), rather than the noun κυρίου in the genitive case ("the day *of the Lord*"), does not make a substantive change in meaning. For instance, κυριακὸν δεῖπνον ("the Lord's supper") in 1 Cor 11:20 is synonymous with τράπεζα κυρίου ("the table of the Lord") in 1 Cor 10:21. The basic difference between the two phrases in both cases is simply a matter of emphasis. When the emphasis is placed on the word "Lord," then the noun in the genitive case (κυρίου) is used; however, when the emphasis is placed on the word "day," then the adjective (κυριακῆ) with a qualifying noun is used.

- Ranko Stefanovic, "The Lord's Day of Revelation 1:10 in the Current Debate," *AUSS* (Andrews University Press, 2011), Vol. 49, No. 2, p. 279

In other words, the difference between the two expressions is not the *meaning* but the *emphasis*. For example, “the pastor’s son” and “the son of the pastor” mean the same person. Depending on which phrase you use, you are either emphasizes the person’s role as a son or emphasizing whose son he is. Thus, John’s use of “the Lord’s Day,” according to Stefanovic, was likely “for the purpose of emphasis, wanting to inform the reader that he was transported in vision into the context of the *parousia* [second coming] and the events leading toward it.”

So, in examining the evidence, we’ve established that there is nothing in Scripture that warrants replacing Sabbath observance with Sunday observance. Here is a quick summary of everything we’ve learned so far in this study:

- The New Testament demonstrates that the earliest Christians continued to keep the Sabbath per the commandment.
- The New Testament demonstrates that the Sabbath is the only day of the week on which the earliest Christians regularly gathered as a custom.
- The supposed biblical references to Sunday gatherings do not establish regular Sunday observance. Acts 20:7 was a special occasion due to Paul leaving the next day; Paul’s instructions for the first day of the week in 1 Corinthians 16:2 were for individual believers, not instructions regarding corporate gatherings.
- Upon closer examination, the external evidence provided for interpreting “Lord’s Day” in Revelation 1:10 as Sunday fails. The ambiguities in the Greek text of the supposed earliest witnesses to the term “Lord’s Day” cast significant doubt upon the common interpretation. The Didache likely refers not to the *time* but to *the way of conducting* the Christian gathering mentioned in 14:1; the letter to the Magnesians probably does not contrast *days* but *ways of living*. The “Lord’s Day” in Revelation 1:10 most likely refers to the eschatological Day of the Lord in light of the biblical context.

Since the Bible does not support replacing Sabbath observance with Sunday observance, how did this change occur? How did we get to where we are now, with most Christians not keeping the Sabbath on the seventh day? We will explore how the majority of the Christian church went from Sabbath to Sunday in the next part of this series.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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