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Why Do We Go to Church on Sunday?:
Responding to Seventh-day Sabbatarianism Part 1
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Have you ever wondered, "Why do we go to church on Sunday? Why do we get up and go to Bible study and worship every week on that same day? Why not some other day of the week? Does it really matter what day we go to church? Why don't Christians keep the Sabbath as do the Jews? Wasn't it in the Ten Commandments?" Those are good questions. In this and the next installment we will examine and analyze the issue of Sabbatarianism and answer those and other questions about what day of the week Christians should worship.

Several Christian denominations strongly believe we should not worship on Sunday. The Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA), the Seventh-day Baptist - General Conference of the United States and Canada, and a few other small sects teach that Christians should attend church on Saturday, not Sunday. Why? Because they believe Christians are to observe the seventh day of each week, not the first, as a day of rest and worship.

This Sabbatarian teaching is based on the Ten Commandments and other Old Testament passages. The Hebrew (Jewish) people were required in the Old Testament Law to keep the seventh day of each week as what was called the Sabbath (see Exodus 20:8-11). The Sabbath (from the Hebrew word meaning "cease") was established for them to cease work and rest just as God rested on the seventh day of creation (see Genesis 2:1-3). It also provided a weekly day of spiritual emphasis.

By the time of the New Testament era, for many Jews, especially the sect of the Pharisees, the Sabbath had taken on an extremely legalistic value. Jesus clearly did not share that perspective. On several occasions, He intentionally did good works on the Sabbath to demonstrate His authority over it any other Law. In Matthew 12:1-13 Jesus established a guiding principle regarding the Sabbath.

"1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. 2 But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, 'Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.' 3 But He said to them, 'Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, 4 how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? 5 Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? 6 But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. 7 But if you had known what this means, "I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice," you would not have condemned the innocent. 8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

9 Departing from there, He went into their synagogue. 10 And a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' - so that they might accuse Him. 11 And He said to them, 'What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? 12

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How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.' 13 Then He said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand!' He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other.'" (NASB)

The key points in Jesus' statement was in verse 8: "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath", and, in verse 12, "How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Because of who He was He had complete authority to do whatever He wanted on the Sabbath, especially to do good. In Mark's account, Jesus further says, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27 NASB)

Sabbatarian churches maintain that the biblical Sabbath must still be observed on the seventh day of the week (Friday evening until Saturday evening). They argue that, just as the other nine of the Ten Commandments are still in effect, so is the Sabbath (Fourth Commandment) is still in effect for Christians.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA), the largest and fastest growing of Sabbatarian denominations, maintains that the New Testament church observed the Sabbath which they regard as the "Seal" of God's law. SDA founder and prophetess, Ellen G. White, actually adopted this view from the teachings of a sea captain named Joseph Bates (1792 - 1872) who claimed to have rediscovered the lost secret to understanding Scripture, which was the seventh-day Sabbath.

The official SDA website states this: "The Sabbath is God's gift to us, a time for rest and restoration of our connection to God and others. It reminds us of God's creation and Jesus' grace. The beneficent Cre-

ator, after the six days of Creation, rested on the seventh day and instituted the Sabbath for all people as a memorial of Creation. The fourth commandment of God's unchangeable law requires the observance of this seventh-day Sabbath as the day of rest, worship and ministry in harmony with the teaching and practice of Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is a day of delightful communion with God and one another. It is a symbol of our redemption in Christ, a sign of our sanctification, a token of our allegiance and a foretaste of our eternal future in God's kingdom. The Sabbath is God's perpetual sign of His eternal covenant between Him and His people. Joyful observance of this holy time from evening to evening, sunset to sunset, is a celebration of God's creative and redemptive acts. (Gen. 2:1-3; Ex. 20:8-11; Luke 4:16; Isa. 56:5, 6; 58:13, 14; Matt. 12:1-12; Ex. 31:13-17; Eze. 20:12, 20; Deut. 5:12-15; Heb. 4:1-11; Lev. 23:32; Mark 1:32)" (source: www.adventist.org)

Thus SDA churches have their weekly Bible studies and worship services on the last day of each week. Many people on Saturday mornings, on their way to play sports, shop at the mall, or enjoy other weekend activities, pass SDA church parking lots often full of cars.

Moreover, traditional Adventists argue that Christians who worship on Sunday are in grave error. SDA eschatology asserts that non-Sabbatarians in the last days will bear the "mark of the beast," which they consider to be worldwide Papal mandated and government enforced Sunday worship.

"Seventh-day Adventists believe that the prophecies of Daniel 7 and Revelation 13, relating to the beast, refer particularly to the Papacy (i.e.: Roman Catholic Church), and that the activities and future persecuting power will come into sharp focus just before the

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return of our Lord in glory. It is our understanding that the Sabbath will then become a worldwide test... We believe that in the end of time, in the light of clear divine prohibition, all men will be brought face to face with a decision to accept or reject Sunday observance." (Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine, Annotated Edition, p. 154) (For more on this and other unusual SDA teachings see: <http://www.marketfaith.org/what-about-seventh-day-adventism>)

Another group that maintains the importance of the seventh-day Sabbath is the Seventh Day Baptist - General Conference of the United States and Canada. Seventh Day Baptists trace their origin to 17th century Sabbath-keeping congregations in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. They state, however, that Sabbath-keeping is not related to acquiring or maintaining one's salvation. Like most Baptist groups they affirm that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus alone. (Ephesians 2:8,9).

"Though we are not saved by observing the Sabbath, we keep the Sabbath because we love the Lord. Jesus said, 'If you love me, keep my commandments' (John 14:15). Love is the reason we keep the Sabbath holy and obey all of the Ten Commandments. We also keep the Sabbath holy because we believe Jesus when He tells us that 'the Sabbath was made for man.' We believe that the Sabbath was given for man's benefit. The Sabbath truly is a gift of time for our benefit.

"Seventh Day Baptists believe that the Sabbath is important to God and to people. However, we also believe that we are not saved by observing the Sabbath. In fact, we are not saved by keeping any of the Ten Commandments. The Apostle Paul says, 'no one will be declared righ-

teous in his sight by observing the law' (Romans 3:20).

"Seventh Day Baptists believe that we are saved because 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son' (John 3:16). Jesus Christ came to earth to die and shed His blood so that people could be saved. Only those who surrender their lives to Jesus Christ will be saved." (source: www.seventhdaybaptist.org)

So we see that some modern Bible students are convinced that seventh-day Sabbath-keeping is still preferable and maybe even necessary for Christians. In part two we will look at several significant New Testament passages that will help answer the question: "Should Christians still be keeping the Sabbath and worship on the seventh day like these Sabbatarian groups say?"

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