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Why Do We Go to Church on Sunday?:
Responding to Seventh-day Sabbatarianism Part 1
By Tal Davis

In the last installment we discussed the fact that most Christians churches conduct their worship services and Bible studies on the first day of the week which is Sunday. We explained, however, that some denominations believe Christians should keep the Jewish seventh-day Sabbath (sundown Friday until sundown Saturday) as taught in the Ten Commandments and other places in the Old Testament.

One group that currently observes the seventh-day Sabbath is the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA), one of the fastest growing denominations in the world. That movement has approximately 18 million members worldwide and about 1.2 million in North America (USA and Canada). Another denomination that keeps the seventh-day Sabbath is the much smaller Seventh-day Baptist - General Conference of the United States and Canada. That group, which in every other way adheres to traditional Baptist theology, claims about 4500 members in the USA and Canada. Both of these movements contend that the Bible teaches that Christians should observe the seventh-day Sabbath (but not necessarily for the same reasons).

This raises the question, "Should Christians still be keeping the Sabbath and worship on the seventh day like theses Sabbatarian groups say?" The Old Testament Law clearly required the Jewish people to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. It also is true that early Christians who were Jewish normally kept the Sabbath and went to the syna-

gogue as was their tradition. Some Sabbatarians charge that the Roman Catholic Church, influenced by paganism in the centuries after the New Testament era, changed the Sabbath to Sunday to correspond with pre-Christian practices. Is that true? Actually, when we look carefully at the New Testament we see that many early followers of Jesus, especially those from Gentile backgrounds, met and worshiped regularly on the first day of the week. Let's consider several revealing Scripture passages in this regard.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written about AD 55, provides several clues about this fact. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 he says, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come." (NASB) Notice that this verse indicates that Corinth was not the only church that was taking up collections on the first day of the week, but so were the churches in Galatia. Apparently the first day was, by that time, the regular day for gathering together for worship and receiving gifts, at least in that region which was predominantly Gentile (see also 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:19-20).

Acts 20 is Luke's description of Paul being in Troas in Asia Minor (near present day Istanbul, Turkey). This was several years after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Acts 20:7 says, "On the first day of the week, when we (Luke himself was an eye-witness) were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight." (NASB) The Troas church

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gathered on the first day specifically to "break bread" (possibly a reference to a regular weekly time for the Lord's Supper) and to hear Paul speak. Note in verses 9 and 10 that Paul preached so long and so late that poor Eutychus could not stay awake. Paul had to bring him back to life! (I had the same problem when I was a pastor, but somehow they all miraculously revived at about 12 noon.)

The other verse that is often cited as addressing this question is Revelation 1:9-11. "I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, 'Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.'" (NASB)

Granted John does not identify "the Lord's day" (vs. 10) as the first day of the week, but given the time when he wrote (some forty years after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians) and in the context of the Asian churches to which he was writing (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) it is likely they would have understood it that way.

Thus, the first weekday came to be called the "Lord's Day" to celebrate the day of the week when Jesus was raised from the dead (see John 20:1). In time, the first day of the week became the traditional day for Christian churches to worship, study, and fellowship. Most Christians still do so today.

Now understand, the Bible does not prohibit Christians from keeping the seventh day Sabbath, but it does not command that we must do so, either. It is a matter of individual conscience for which we should not judge one another. As Paul says in Colossians 2:16-17, "Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day - things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." (NASB)

Let's be clear, however, the "Lord's Day" is not the same as the Jewish Sabbath, though some Christians incorrectly refer to it that way. For many Christians, the Lord's Day (Sunday) has much of the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath but focuses on Jesus. Above all, what really matters is that we go to church regularly to study the Bible and worship God together regardless of what day of the week we choose.

In past generations, most retail businesses in America were not open on Sundays. Now only a few still keep that practice (e.g.: Chick-fil-A restaurants). Some communities, to their credit, still restrict the sales of alcoholic beverages on Sundays. Nonetheless, the fact is, Sunday no longer has the sacred status in our increasingly secular society that it once held. As a result, many Christians are required to work on Sundays and thus cannot attend church on that day as used to be the custom. Consequently, more churches are now conducting worship services and Bible studies on other days of the week to accommodate those who cannot come on Sunday.

In conclusion, we concede that in the early days of the Christian movement, many Jewish believers kept the Jewish Sabbath. However, the Bible indicates that early in its history the New Testament church regularly met on the "Lord's Day" (first day of the week) as

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a memorial of Christ's resurrection. While there is certainly no prohibition in Scripture against it, any insistence that Sabbath-keeping is mandatory for Christians is unwarranted. Furthermore, the traditional SDA claim that Sunday worship is the mark of the beast is completely unfounded and is based on faulty biblical exegesis. Salvation and commitment to Christ are not demonstrated by adherence to external legalities (see Rom. 13:8-10, 14:4-13; 1 Cor. 16:2; Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:13-17). In any case, the issue of Sabbath-keeping should not be an issue of Christian fellowship.

Resources:

General Conference of SDA, Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines. Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988.

Harper, G. W. "Seventh-Day Baptists" in Dictionary of Christianity in America. Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce Shelly, and Harry S. Stout, eds. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

Knight, George R. ed., Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine, (annotated edition). Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003. (original ed. 1957).

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Martin, Walter. "The Puzzle of Seventh-day Adventism" (updated by Kurt Van Gorder). Appendix in The Kingdom of the Cults (rev. ed., Ravi Zacharias, Gen. ed.). Minneapolis: Bethany House Pub., 2003, pp. 534-627.

Melton, J. Gordon, "The Seventh Day Baptist - General Conference

USA and Canada" in Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions (8th ed.). Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning, 2009, pp. 506-507.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Website: www.adventist.org

The Seventh-day Baptist - General Conference of the United States and Canada. Website: www.seventhdaybaptist.org

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