

Truth or Tradition?



The following notes contain some of the material presented in the series "Is God for Real?"

Are there certain things that you and your family have done traditionally for years that you can no longer remember the reason for? In this presentation, we examine a long-held tradition in the Christian faith and explore whether or not it has any biblical authority.

In our last presentation we discussed the seventh day Sabbath of the Ten Commandments. We saw how it had been established in the creation week in Genesis 2:1-3, and was kept by God's people throughout the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments, and how it will be observed in the Earth made new, (Isaiah 66:22-23). Many naturally ask the question, what about Sunday worship? Does it come from the Bible? Is it sacred? Where did it come from and when? To begin answering these questions we will need to look at the history of the church.

Notice what one church scholar wrote, "You may read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and you will not find a single line authorizing the sanctification of Sunday. The Scriptures enforce the religious observance of Saturday." --JAMES CARDINAL GIBBONS, "The Faith of Our Fathers," page 111-112. This Roman Catholic Cardinal is clearly stating that Sunday observance does not have any authority from the Bible. Both Catholic and Protestant Scholars over the centuries have acknowledged this point on many occasions. Notice what one Methodist wrote, "The reason we observe the first day instead of the seventh is based on no positive command. One will search the Scriptures in vain for authority for changing from the seventh day to the first." CLOVIS G. CHAPPELL, "Ten Rules For Living," page 61. In this statement the seventh day referred to by Chappell is Saturday, and the first day – Sunday. If we look up the word Saturday in the dictionary, the encyclopedia or most regular calendars we find that it is the seventh day of the week. So how did Sunday replace the biblical Sabbath?

The attempted change was gradual. Between 70AD and 135AD the Jews were heavily persecuted by the Romans. Christians were regarded as a sect of the Jews, and so some Christians wanted to distance themselves from the Jews. At the same time many Pagans were becoming Christians, so a gradual compromise began where the Bible Sabbath was replaced by the day that was traditionally honoured by Pagans worshipping the sun god. Thus Sun-day began replacing Sabbath. As mentioned the change was gradual, and for a while believers would keep both days. We still experience the legacy of this in the notion of 'weekend' being Saturday and Sunday, where many still have both of these days off work.

In some circumstances Sabbath was declared to be a fast day, and Sunday to be a feast day. In this situation it isn't difficult to see why, over time, people would come to regard Sunday with much greater affection than Sabbath. People tend to enjoy feasting more than fasting! Of course the gradual change from biblical Sabbath keeping to the tradition of Sunday wasn't the only compromise that crept into the early Christian church. As one 19th Century Presbyterian writer acknowledges, "Between the days of the apostles and the conversion of Constantine... rites and ceremonies of which neither Paul or Peter ever heard, crept silently into use, and then claimed the rank of divine institutions." Dr W D Killen, *The Ancient Church*, p. 15-16.

Before Constantine became Emperor, (306 – 337 AD), the church had been persecuted and outlawed by the Roman Empire. However, when Constantine claimed to have converted to the Christian faith, the church faced challenges of a different kind. Christianity gradually moved from being prohibited to become the state religion and further compromises would follow. On March 7, 321AD the first civil law was passed prohibiting work on Sunday by Constantine. The new law stated that, “On the venerable ‘Day of the Sun’ let the magistrates and people residing in the cities rest, and let all the workshops be closed.” History of the Christian Church, v3, p.380. Just a few years later, “In the year 325, Sylvester, Bishop of Rome changed the title of the first day, calling it the ‘Lord’s day’.” Historia Ecclesiastica, p.739. Thus Sunday observance began to be heralded as a central teaching of the Christian church, in spite of its lack of scriptural support. At the same time biblical Sabbath keeping was discouraged and eventually condemned. At the Council of Laodicea in 364 AD Sabbath keeping was outlawed by the church, with the historical documents recording, “Christians shall not Judaize (keep Sabbath), and be idle on Saturday... But shall work on that day; but the Lord’s day (Sunday), they shall especially honour, and, as being Christians, shall if possible, do no work on that day. If, however they are found Judaizing, (keeping Sabbath), they shall be shut out... from Christ.” A History of the Councils of the Church, v2, p.316.

In spite of this, some Christians were still observing the Sabbath in the sixth century, for Pope Gregory denounced as ‘prophets of antichrist those who maintained that work ought not to be done on the seventh day.’” C.B. Haynes, From Sabbath to Sunday, p.43. The church, like the western world, would then enter a period of time known as the Dark Ages, when ignorance, superstition and ritual replaced Biblical teaching and the simple faith of Jesus Christ. The Medieval Church dominated people’s lives in every area - Political, Social, Economic and Spiritual. Finally, on 31st October 1517 Martin Luther sparked the Protestant Reformation listing 95 objections to the practices of the medieval church. Luther advocated a return to Biblical truth. The major principle of the Protestant Reformation was the Bible and the Bible only as the Christian’s rule of faith.

The Roman Catholic Church set up a major church council in response to the Reformation, called the Council of Trent, (1545-1563). In it the church concluded that Tradition should have greater influence than the Bible in deciding church teaching. One historian writes, “Finally, at the last opening on the eighteenth of January 1562, all hesitation was set aside: the Archbishop of Reggio made a speech in which he openly declared that tradition stood above scripture. The authority of the church could therefore not be bound to the authority of the scriptures because the church had changed... the Sabbath into Sunday, not by a command of Christ but by its own authority.” H.H. Holtzman, Canon and Tradition, p.263.

The question is, does the church have the right to set aside or change the law of God? What should our guide of faith be? The Bible or Tradition? Jesus challenged people about following tradition in His day. He said, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?” Mark 7:6-9. He also quoted Isaiah on the same theme.

Today God is calling His people to return to Him and remember the seventh day Sabbath. Jesus reminds us that, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven,” Matt 7:21. What will our response be? Will we continue to cling to the teachings of men? Will we continue to follow the unbiblical practice of Sunday observance, or will we choose to believe and practice the teachings of the Word of God and remember to keep the Sabbath day holy? What will your choice be?

If you would like to know more about this subject, or others in the series, ‘Is God for Real?’ then please contact one of our staff and they will be happy to help you.