

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

How can we Christians justify not keeping the Sabbath, since it is one of the Ten Commandments? I know Seventh Day Adventists argue that the Early Church kept the Sabbath until the Roman Catholic Church forbade Sabbath observance at the Council of Nicea in 325. What is the truth?

I disagree with Seventh Day Adventists and think Sunday observance by Christians does go back to early Christianity in the first century. While it is true that Acts portrays Paul going to the synagogue on Saturday to preach, that does not mean that Christian worship took place on Shabbat. In fact, the New Testament never explicitly says when during the week Christians met for worship. My theory is that from the beginning, they met on Sunday (“the Lord’s day” – Rev. 1:10), in commemoration of the Resurrection, after having worshipped with other Jews on Shabbat, possibly having their own distinctively Christian worship right after sundown on Saturday, when Shabbat was over. That would have been more convenient than meeting the next morning before work (since Sunday was a workday).

The first unambiguous reference to Christians worshipping on Sunday that I know of comes from the Didache: “On the Lord’s Day of the Lord come together, break bread and hold Eucharist, after confessing your sins that your offering may be pure” (14:1). The problem is that we are not certain of the date of the Didache. I am of the opinion that it is quite early, sometime in the first century, because of its “primitive” features, like wandering Chris-

tian prophets going from village to village and the lack of a monarchical episcopate. Instead there are bishops, deacons, prophets and teachers.

But the real question is not when early Christians worshipped but when they ceased to observe Shabbat (no work, *etc*). I think it was early in the Gentile mission, when Gentiles were first preached the Gospel and admitted to the Church without converting to Judaism (Acts 11:19-26). (The Hebrew Christianity in Jerusalem in contrast continued to be completely Torah-observant, including keeping Sabbath).

It seems to me that observing Shabbat was considered from the beginning of the Gentile mission (Acts 11) a “Jewish thing,” one not obligatory on Gentile Christians. Colossians 2:16 may be written against “Judaizers” who tried to get Gentile Christians to observe Jewish practices – “Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” Whether or not Paul wrote Colossians, it is clear from Galatians that Paul was firmly opposed to “Judaizers,” people who taught Gentile

Christians they should observe Jewish Law, including Jewish holy days like Shabbat (see Gal. 4:10).

I know there is a theological problem because in the theology of the Old Testament (a Jewish document), Shabbat is built into the structure of the universe and not an arbitrary, human invention (Gen. 1:1-2:4 concludes with the creation of Shabbat). And that Shabbat theology is never explicitly rejected in the New Testament. The closest thing to that is the argument in Hebrews 3–4, with its appropriation of the idea of Sabbath rest as something awaiting Christians. This may implicitly be undercutting the Jewish Sabbath.

The Ten Commandments get involved in this too, since they command Sabbath observance. Generally over the centuries Christians have believed that the Ten Commandments were of eternal and universal relevance and not part of Jewish religion from which Christians were free. So we have the phenomenon of Sabbatarianism, in which it is said that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath and therefore should not be worked on. I entertain the minority opinion that the Ten Commandments are specifically Jewish and not obligatory on Christians. If they

were, then Christian art would be forbidden (images!), and Christians would be obliged to observe Shabbat, which they never have been obliged to observe, unless they were Jewish and felt therefore they were obliged.

Shabbat, beautiful as it is, belongs to the Jewish people. It is a Jewish “thing.” If you convert to Judaism, then it makes sense to observe it, along with other Jews and along with all the other laws and religious practices of Judaism. But it makes no sense to me to pick out one or a few pieces of Jewish Law from the Bible and to insist that it or they are obligatory on all Christians. Why do you stop there? Why are not all the interrelated laws of Judaism equally binding on Christians?

Judaism and Christianity are two distinct communities that share a lot but are distinct. Paul says that insisting Christians keep Jewish observances makes one a Judaizer, which he did not mean as a compliment.

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