

Paul's Epistle to the Colossians (16): Filled in Christ Alone

In Colossians 2:6-15 the apostle had set forth Jesus Christ as the all-sufficient Lord and Savior of His people. Paul showed Him forth to be so for two reasons: first, He is the perfect Lord and Savior to us because “in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9), and second, because “you have been filled in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority (Col 2:10). And so, Christians are to see their salvation through Him alone. But further, they are to regard their identity and purpose in life solely through and due to their spiritual union their Savior. God had brought them into the fullness of their blessed relationship with Him when He had regenerated them, or had caused them to be born again (2:11). Their baptism showed forth their union with Him (2:12). In His death they died to their former lives. In His resurrection they were raised to a new existence, a new creation, even new life in Him (2:12, 13). They were to see their self-identity, their purpose, and their aspirations as centered in Him. The whole of their existence was in Jesus Christ and Him alone. For He had removed all former legal demands that had condemned us, through Jesus Christ bearing our punishment on His cross. And further, due to His cross, He defeated all spiritual forces that had held us in control when we were in our sin; He had rescued (saved) us from their dominion, having brought us into the blessed kingdom of God.

It is then that the apostle gave forth the warning that they were not to allow anyone to convince them otherwise. And so, we now read **verses 16 through 23**.

¹⁶Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—²¹“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²²(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

As we look over these verses, we may discern an outline that might help us in our understanding of the apostle's emphases.

- I. Paul instructed his readers to maintain their faith and their identity in Christ alone (2:16-19)
 - A. To let no one pass judgment upon them due to their practice (2:16-17)
 - B. To let no one disqualify them for their failure to conform to the expectations of their detractors (2:18f)
- II. Paul reasons with his readers for the wisdom and righteousness of his instruction (2:20-23)
 - A. The false teaching to which they were exposed is of human origin without divine sanction (2:22)
 - B. The false teaching to which they were exposed may have a false appearance of legitimacy (2:23).

Perhaps for our purposes, a more practical and helpful outline may be as follows:

- I. A warning against legalism (2:16-17)
- II. A warning against mysticism (2:18-19)

III. A warning against asceticism (2:20-23)¹

I. A warning against legalism (2:16-17)

Paul wrote, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”

We had touched on the problem of legalism earlier in our passage, but here the subject is again addressed. The false teachers in the city of Colossae were promoting the keeping of the Law of Moses as the necessary means to obtain salvation. In doing so they were directing the Christians to take their eyes off of the fullness that was theirs in Christ, to focus, rather, upon themselves and their own works, their performance of keeping the law.

The phrases that Paul uses, “questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath”, are terms that we associate readily with the Law of Moses, and it is understandable that we do so. But the false teachers were probably promoting a perversion of the Moses’ law, rather than the law precisely set forth in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Indeed, the Law of Moses had set forth detailed stipulations regarding the foods the people of Israel were to eat and the annual festivals and observance of ceremonies established according to the lunar calendar they observed. There were three great feasts each year at which time all males in Israel were required to travel to the temple. Each festival was a week in duration. There were also monthly worship services that were scheduled according to the phase of the moon. And then there were detailed laws regarding clean and unclean meats, which meats were allowed to be eaten and which were forbidden to them. There were not many laws respecting what they were to drink. There were laws against priests drinking wine when they served in the temple. And those who took a Nazarite vow were forbidden drinking wine during the period of their vow. But Paul declared that these Mosaic laws had been temporary, preparatory, and typical of the realities in Jesus Christ to which they pointed the people of Israel. They were as shadows that had portended the appearance of that to which they had cast a shadow. The shadow cast by those Old Testament laws and practices revealed Christ approaching. Christ was due to come into the world and the laws of Moses had served to reveal and direct the Lord’s people to desire and anticipate His coming. But to impose laws on the people of God in the place of Christ is great error. And this is what the false teachers were perpetrating upon the Christians in the church at Colossae.²

Legalism is the heresy that says that in order for a person to gain salvation, *he must earn his way by the merit of his own righteousness*, by his own works. This is what the false teachers were advocating to the Christians in the church at Colossae. Of course the Holy Scriptures teach us that no one will be saved by trusting in his good works for salvation. Paul made this clear in **Galatians 2:16**,

knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; *for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified*.

And so, *legalism is present when good works are viewed as meritorious for the obtaining or retaining of God’s favor*. When people believe God accepts them because of something they are doing or have done, or will do, they are legalists. They believe that through their own effort they move God to be favorable to them. These ones do not have salvation. God tells us that He justifies us in His sight through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Any person who believes that he will be justified in the Day of God’s Judgment because he has kept the Ten Commandments, or the Golden Rule, or any other rules that others or he himself has devised, will be sorely

¹ Where the first outline might reflect better the substance of what Paul was conveying, this three point outline reflects better the sentence structure of the Greek text. In Greek our passage is set forth in three sentences, (1) vs. 16 and 17, (2) verses 18 and 19, and (3) verses 20-23.

² This is the same lesson taught in *The Epistle to the Hebrews*.

surprised when he stands before God. No man can save himself from God's wrath. It must be of God's grace, wholly of grace, through Jesus Christ alone.

The Jews who did not believe on Jesus solely were legalists. The reason that they did not believe on Jesus Christ is because they trusted in themselves that they were righteous. They were legalists. Paul described them in **Romans 10:1-3ff**.

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

The Jews were guilty of legalism. They did not believe in grace alone as the way of salvation. But recognize that their error is the common error of most religions of the world. All religion apart from biblical Christianity sets down methods or laws or principles of living whereby people may establish their own righteousness. The common message that needs to be proclaimed universally is that they have not submitted to the only righteousness that can save their souls from hell, the righteousness that God grants as a gift of His grace to those who believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Now, the Jews that did not believe in Jesus were legalists, but there are also those who say that they believe in Jesus, who are also legalists. *Legalism is also present when people add additional requirements to faith in Jesus Christ in order to be forgiven of sins and accepted by God.* Whereas the Jews, who refused to believe on Jesus, were legalists because they thought that they were righteous apart from Him, this second form of legalism occurs among those who claim to have faith in Jesus, but they do not believe that faith alone is sufficient to bring them into a right relationship with God. They say that a sinner becomes right with God through faith in Christ *plus something else*. For one to say: "It is my faith in Christ *along with* the merit of my baptism, or the merit my repentance, or obedience, or it is Christ and my sincerity that renders me accepted by God", this man is guilty of legalism.

The teachings of salvation by grace and salvation by works are incompatible with one another. There can be no mixture of the two. Any effort to do so results in grace no longer being present, but works only, which cannot save. Again, Paul wrote of this in **Romans 11:6f**,

Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.

Paul addressed this form of legalism in **Galatians 5:2f**:

Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law.

Paul was correcting an error that was being perpetrated among the churches in the region of Galatia Paul had begun the churches based on the promise of the gospel that God would forgive their sins and bring them into a right relationship with Himself through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Some said, "Yes, you must believe on Jesus, but you must also observe the laws of Judaism in order to be saved. It was Christ plus something that they said was the grounds of God accepting sinners. Paul essentially wrote, "If you add anything to Christ, you lose the benefit that Christ brings to His people." Salvation is in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone.

Legalism is addressed and corrected chiefly in the book of Romans and the book of Galatians. Legalism was a common problem in the churches of the New Testament era. Legalism has remained a threat to grace throughout the church age. Legalism characterizes whole denominations today. Often when bringing people to understand the gospel of the grace of God, this error of legalism must be addressed and corrected in the ones whom we are attempting to reach for Jesus Christ. A person cannot be saved until he abandons all trust in himself or his own ability to please God apart from Christ alone, and he comes to trust in Jesus Christ alone as His Lord and Savior.

The church at Colossae was being plagued by those who were teaching the heresy of legalism. Paul exhorted them very strongly not to embrace this false teaching. He wrote, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:16-17).

But Paul not only warned these Christians of the danger of the teaching of legalism, but he also warned them of the dangerous teaching of mysticism.

II. A warning against mysticism (2:18-19)

In verses 18 and 19 of Colossians 2, we read the warning of the apostle against the error of embracing subjective spiritual experience as a means to determine the truth, that is, the will of God.

¹⁸Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

These false teachers were teaching the Christians in Colossae that through subjective, personal, spiritual experience, they could come into a true or deeper relationship with God. If you did not experience what they claimed was possible and necessary to experience, then you were not the Christian. Ones who claimed to have ecstatic experiences, such as visions or impressions, which were in actuality not of the Lord, but born from their corrupt minds, claimed to have direct communication with God. Others claimed that they worshipped angels, who they believed were intermediaries between God and man.

The essence of this error is that these people do not believe that God's revelation of Himself and His will is complete and limited to His written Word, the Bible. They claim that through their devotion, prayer, and meditation *they receive direct and immediate communion with God and receive direct communication from God.*

Mysticism is a common error in evangelicalism. It is commonplace in many Pentecostal denominations, but it is not only common with them. The Quaker denomination is characterized by mysticism. Mysticism is seen as a common belief and practice by many television preachers. But there are very many churches in broad evangelicalism who claim to believe the Bible, but they combine mysticism with biblical teachings.

Some in the church at Colossae had been teaching the need to worship angels. These people perhaps projected the idea that they were very humble people, who were not worthy to come to God directly, so they seek, trust, and even do homage to angels, for it was believed that they have direct access with God and would assist those who sought God through them. As one described these false teachers,

Perhaps the suggestion that has been offered by more than one commentator is correct, namely, that the teacher of error was trying to create the impression that he considered himself to insignificant to approach God directly, hence sought to contact Deity through the mediation of angels, and since the angels were willing to perform this service for him--or, in order that they might oblige--worshipped them.³

The evangelical scene is rife with the idea that *God communicates directly with your spirit.* The first problem with this is they have a wrong understanding of what constitutes a human being. They teach that every Christian has a *spirit*, which is believed to be a heavenly, spiritual self that is distinct from the *soul*. They then claim that God communicates directly with your spirit. It is a matter above and beyond your mind, which is an aspect of your soul existence. They claim that your spirit has the capacity for a higher, more desirable, and purer kind of knowledge and experience with God, which your soul could never contemplate or encounter. Their thinking may conclude something like this:

³ William Hendriksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Baker, Academic, 1964), p. 125.

“What use is doctrine? For God has spoken to my spirit! And this is what is really important. So what? What is most important is what God has said to my spirit.”

This is not biblical. I would argue it is not even Christian. It is pure mysticism in Christian dress, yet many, many, are deceived with this silly and foolish idea of spirituality. What matters to many people is not the Word of God, for they are looking for an “impression”, a “feeling”, that God “spoke to their spirit.” May God deliver us from this error. May we look to the written, authoritative, inerrant Word of God in the Scriptures, for it is through the Scriptures alone that the Lord speaks to His people.

It is quite amazing to me how many evangelical voices are asserting that Christians are to look to other sources than the Bible in order to hear from God. This is counter to what evangelicals have affirmed since the Protestant Reformation of the 1500’s. Some are more blatant in their assertions than others. **Jack Deere**, a former seminary professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian minister, and the leading theologian for the Vineyard church movement, wrote this,

In order to fulfil God’s highest purposes for our lives we must be able to hear his voice both in the written word and in the word freshly spoken from heaven Satan understands the strategic importance of Christians hearing God’s voice so he has launched various attacks against us in this area. One of his most successful attacks has been to develop a doctrine that teaches God no longer speaks to us except through the written word. Ultimately, this doctrine is demonic even [though] Christian theologians have been used to perfect it.⁴

Understand what he has written. *This evangelical says that the historic Protestant doctrine concerning the sufficiency of Scripture to direct the people of God in all matters of faith and practice is demonic.*

There are others who are less overt in their assertions, but they are saying essentially the same thing. One very influential Southern Baptist, **Henry Blackaby** (along with Claude King) wrote a book that has sold over 250,000 copies. It is entitled “*Experiencing God*.” It is a very popular book that contains much helpful material, but unfortunately it advocates the Christian’s need and ability to hear from God apart from the Scriptures in order to experience a vital relationship with God. Blackaby speaks of a “will of God” outside of the Scriptures that is found by properly reading day-by-day events that occur in one’s life. He advocates the importance of a life of “experiencing God” that is largely based on the subjective interpretation of personal experience rather than through the authoritative and objective revelation of the Scriptures. This is a departure from historic evangelical understanding and practice. This is the kind of Christian experience promoted by the false teachers at Colossae.

I will cite one more example. **Bill Bright** was the founder and director of Campus Crusade International. His organization is worldwide. It is one of the largest and most influential evangelical ministries today. It receives hundreds of millions of dollars a year in donations. It is the organization that has funded and promoted the Jesus Film project throughout the world. Bill Bright said this,

There will be an awakening in America;... our World Center will be erected; we will see the International Christian Leadership University developed, where Vonette and I will take the basic truths and messages of Campus Crusade to thousands... I am telling you what God told me and I’m willing to stake my life on it.⁵

In one of his books, Bright declared that God told him after he had completed a 40 day fast, that God would bring revival to America if Bright could get 100,000 Christians to fast for 40 days. He wrote a book saying that the 40-day fast was the secret key to see the blessing of God in this day. All of these assertions about God’s will are extra-biblical.

Let me correct a possible misunderstanding. When we are asserting that Bible alone is the sole rule in all matters touching what we are to believe and how we are to live, we are not saying that God does not presently

⁴ Armstrong, John, gen. ed., *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1996), p. 78.

⁵ From Bill Bright’s newsletter, *The Brightside*, as cited in Craig A. Parton, “From Arrowhead to Augsburg: Bill Bright in the Light of the Lutheran Confessions, in *Reformation & Revival Journal*, Vol. 5, Number 1, Winter 1996, 91.

“lead” His people. Evangelicals have always affirmed that God guides and directs His people as the Holy Spirit illuminates the Scriptures to them. The Holy Spirit prompts actions, brings to remembrance Scriptural principles, and places upon our hearts the desire to do good works. But what these evangelicals are saying is quite different. *They are saying that God gives additional revelation apart from His Bible that is necessary for His people to know His will and be used and blessed by Him. They are saying that God speaks in ways that cannot be found in the Bible. This is a departure from historic evangelical faith.* This denies what the Bible itself asserts with respect to its sufficiency in matters of faith and practice.

The corrective to Christian mysticism is restoring the role of the mind as the arbiter of the truth of God as informed solely by the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. Romans 12:1 and 2 underscores this truth. It sets forth the primary role of the mind of understanding truth as the divine means of sanctifying God’s people. **Romans 12:1 and 2** read,

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Here we see that Paul appeals to the need for Christian to experience transformation, in other words, the believer’s sanctification. How is this experienced by the believer? The “mind” needs renewed through acquiring truth. The believer is then to order his life according to that truth that his mind has acquired. This is the way of sanctification, through the hegemony (domination) of the mind. Restoring the leading role of the mind to understand and apply biblical truth is the corrective to mysticism.

III. A warning against asceticism (2:20-23)

Paul wrote a further warning regarding the false teaching that was taking place in the church at Colossae. Asceticism is the teaching that *the Christian life can be enhanced and that the Christian can become holy by denying himself of certain foods or restricting his activities.* These practices are viewed as conveying grace. These ascetics fail to look for the grace they need that God gives only through the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Verses 20 through 23 read,

“If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ ²²(referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

Asceticism is the belief that if you can separate yourself from a worldly environment, deny yourself of certain pleasures, devote yourself wholly to a strict religious discipline, that this style of life will result in a closer and deeper relationship with God. It is this kind of teaching that was and is the basis of monasticism. Paul declared here that, although it may appear humanly speaking to be a noble and good pursuit, it actually will not result in the individual defeating sin in his life.

The apostle has already warned against the *pervasive arguments* of the deceivers (Col. 2:4). He has described this type of propaganda as *philosophy and vain deceit according to the tradition of men* (2:8). He has shown that if even the law of God as a code of ceremonial ordinances and rules and as a means unto salvation, was blotted out and nailed to the cross, then surely *man-made* instructions regarding eating, drinking, etc., must be discarded (2:14, 16). Such added rules and regulations and the teachings of which they are the outgrowth are nothing puerile notions, *worldly rudiments*. They amount to no more than high-sounding nonsense that is distinctly worldly in its origin and character.⁶

⁶ William Hendriksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Baker, Academic, 1964), p. 130.

The basic problem is that these standards of behavior are not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures, rather, they are devised by human beings. They produce spiritual pride and a false confidence that they are living a life that is pleasing to God. These teachings seem to be the right way to seek God by unspiritual people who are untaught in the Holy Scriptures. The false teachers at Colossae were deceiving the people into thinking that they had attained a level of spiritual devotion and commitment. But because this way of life and the rules which they self-impose upon themselves is not prescribed by God, their way was not according to truth.

May our Lord help us not to be distracted or diverted from viewing our fullness in Jesus Christ. He is the one whom God has set forth to be the source and meaning of all of life. In Him alone the Christian may find and experience all of the spiritual treasures that God has for His people.

“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.” Amen. (Eph. 3:20f)

Below is an attempt to show how the Lord brought His people to recognize Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, which was a change of practice from the Jewish observance of Saturday as the Sabbath.

The Christian Sabbath and Colossians 2:16

We might address the doctrine that Sunday, the Lord’s Day, is the Christian Sabbath. Again Paul wrote, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Col. 2:16). How are we to understand this verse and the Christian Sabbath? Does it teach us that New Testament Christians are not to observe the Lord’s Day as the Christian Sabbath?

Now Christians since the early centuries have observed Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. Our confession reflects the common historic and reformed belief and practice:

7. As it is the law of nature, that in general a proportion of time, by God's appointment, be set apart for the worship of God, so by his Word, in a positive moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men, in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath to be kept holy unto him, which from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ was the last day of the week, and from the resurrection of Christ was changed into the first day of the week, which is called the Lord's day: and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath, the observation of the last day of the week being abolished. (Exo. 20:8; 1 Cor. 16:1, 2; Acts 20:7; Rev. 1:10).

8. The Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all day, from their own works, words and thoughts, about their worldly employment and recreations, but are also taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy. (Isa. 58:13; Neh. 13:15-22; Matt. 12:1-13)⁷

Interestingly, the King James Version (KJV) and the New King James Version (NKJV) of Colossians 2:16 have the English word as plural, “Sabbaths.” The newer translations, such as the ESV above, have the singular “Sabbath.” Actually, Israel observed Sabbath days other than the seventh day of each week. For

⁷ *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, art. 22, par. 7, 8.

example, the Day of Atonement, which was in the autumn of each year, was to be regarded as a Sabbath for the people of God. Leviticus 29: read:

“This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you. ³⁰For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the LORD. ³¹It is a Sabbath of solemn rest for you, and you shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever.” (Lev. 16:29-31)

These false teachers, I suspect, were teaching the Christians in the church that they needed to continue to observe all of the Sabbaths prescribed in the Mosaic covenant.

Now many evangelicals advocate that this verse teaches that New Testament Christians have no obligation to observe the Sabbath Day, the fourth of the Ten Commandments.⁸ They use this verse, Colossians 2:16, to argue that New Testament Christians need not observe a weekly Sabbath day. Sometimes you will read also hear the argument that the fourth commandment is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated after Pentecost.⁹ But simply because a law is not repeated after Pentecost does not mean that law is invalid. Paul declared of all of Scripture that it is profitable for instruction in righteousness (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16).

There was a time not too long ago when the people of God observed the Lord’s Day, Sunday, as the Christian Sabbath. For the most part, even professing Christians no longer do. But we should do so, for God’s Word commands that we do. The truth is that *the Lord’s Day should be a day of rest and to be enjoyed by Christians as such*. We should not view the prospect of observing the Lord’s Day as something to be a burden or a cause of grief. Our Lord Jesus taught us *“the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath”* (Mark 2:27). God gives blessed promises to those who hallow His day. We starve and impoverish ourselves of His blessing when we fail or refuse to do so.

To underscore the blessing of keeping the Lord’s Sabbath, let us look at the promise of God to Israel in **Isaiah 58**. Here our Lord speaks His promise of salvation that He brings to His people through the Messiah, which He has fulfilled through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Here we read a prophecy of His people in the future, in the days of the Messiah, this current church age, the Lord’s people would observe the Sabbath.

⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
You shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’
“If you take away the yoke from your midst,
The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
¹⁰If you extend your soul to the hungry
And satisfy the afflicted soul,
Then your light shall dawn in the darkness,
And your darkness shall be as the noonday.
¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
And satisfy your soul in drought,
And strengthen your bones;
You shall be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.
¹²Those from among you
Shall build the old waste places;
You shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
And you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach,
The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In.

¹³*“If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,*

⁸ For example, this is John MacArthur’s view. See the note on this verse in his study Bible.

⁹ Charles Ryrie makes this point in his note on this verse in his study Bible. See *Ryrie’s Study Bible* (Moody Press, 1986, 1994), p. 1834.

*From doing your pleasure on My holy day,
And call the Sabbath a delight,
The holy day of the LORD honorable,
And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,
Nor finding your own pleasure,
Nor speaking your own words,
¹⁴Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD;
And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,
And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.
The mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isa. 58:9-14)*

God has established a principle, a pattern in the world that He has created. We need rest from our labor. When a person, a family, a church, a community, a society neglects this creation principle and fails to keep the Sabbath, weariness, discouragement, and before long the complaining begins. Our whole society seems to have “chronic fatigue syndrome.” Maybe one of the reasons is that we all have forsaken the Lord’s Sabbath?

Now in advocating our observance of a weekly Sabbath day, we refuse to be like the “scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat”, who “bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers” (Matt. 23:4). No, we desire that observing the Lord’s Day as the Lord’s Sabbath we would be relieved of our heavy burdens. God desires that you rest from your labor, so that you may both take time to reflect and enjoy on what He has done through you, and so that you may become reinvigorated for the week before you. May the Lord help us to view His Sabbath as a delight to be enjoyed not a burden to be borne.

I. Two dangers respecting observance of the Christian Sabbath

There are two dangers respecting the observance of the Lord’s Day as the Lord’s Sabbath. One is *the neglect or failure to observe the Lord’s Day*; this is a transgression of God’s law—it is sin. God has recorded for us in **1 John 3:4**, “Whoever commits sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.” Literally, he is guilty of lawlessness who fails to fulfill the law. The second is *the error of legalism respecting the observance of the day*. I suspect that we are guiltier of the first than the second, but let us consider them both.

1. There is the danger of neglect or transgression respecting the Lord’s Day.

Many of us, I fear, are rather lawless in our observance of the Lord’s Day. Please recognize that God has established one day in seven that we are to “remember” and to “observe.” We have a responsibility to do so and we have problems when we fail to do so.

Some argue that we need not observe Sunday as the Sabbath, because it is argued, “the Sabbath Day spoken of was Saturday; and we are no longer to regard a day as a Sabbath day, for we worship God on Sunday, the Lord’s Day.” We will perhaps later show when and why the Lord’s Day, Sunday, replaced the seventh day, Saturday, as the Lord’s Sabbath. Others reason that we need not keep the Lord’s Day as the Lord’s Sabbath because that Fourth Commandment was a part of Moses’ law and we are “no longer under the law but under grace.” Now it is true that Israel was to keep the Sabbath Day according to the letter of the law and in a manner that we are no longer bound to do. But to say that we are not to regard the Lord’s Day as a Sabbath day because we are no longer under the Mosaic Law but under grace is to misunderstand the role of the law for the believer. We are no longer under the law as a covenant, but we are certainly under the law as a rule of life as directed and enabled to do so by our Lord Jesus Christ. **1 Corinthians 9:19-23** teaches this quite clearly:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (*not being without law toward God, but under the law toward Christ*), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I

became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

Paul wrote that he lived in this manner for two reasons. First, he wanted people to embrace the gospel. He in no way wanted his behavior to be a hindrance to others coming to Christ. Secondly, he lived in this manner so that he may also be a partaker of the gospel that he proclaimed. The point that he makes, however, in all of life he was never "without the law toward God"; rather, he was always and everywhere "under the law", but under the law "to Christ."

The argument that says we need not keep the Lord's Day as the Lord's Sabbath because that Fourth Commandment was a part of Moses' law and we are no longer under the old covenant is also invalid because it fails to recognize and consider that *the observance of the Sabbath Day predated God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses*. It has been argued that the Fourth Commandment reads, "**Remember** the Sabbath Day," because they had been keeping the day all along. At Mount Sinai observance of the Day had been codified into their national covenant with God, but they had observed the Day prior to coming to Sinai. We read in **Exodus 16:1-30** of Israel's observance of the Sabbath Day after they had left Egypt in the Exodus but before they arrived at Mount Sinai where they received the Ten Commandments.

¹And they journeyed from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they departed from the land of Egypt. ²Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³And the children of Israel said to them, "Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat *and* when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, *that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not*. ⁵And it shall be on *the sixth day* that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily."

⁶Then Moses and Aaron said to all the children of Israel, "At evening you shall know that the LORD has brought you out of the land of Egypt. ⁷And in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD; for He hears your complaints against the LORD. But what are we, that you complain against us?" ⁸Also Moses said, "This shall be seen when the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening, and in the morning bread to the full; for the LORD hears your complaints which you make against Him. And what are we? Your complaints are not against us but against the LORD."

⁹Then Moses spoke to Aaron, "Say to all the congregation of the children of Israel, 'Come near before the LORD, for He has heard your complaints.'" ¹⁰Now it came to pass, as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

¹¹And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹²"I have heard the complaints of the children of Israel. Speak to them, saying, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. And you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

¹³So it was that quails came up at evening and covered the camp, and in the morning the dew lay all around the camp. ¹⁴And when the layer of dew lifted, there, on the surface of the wilderness, was a small round substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵So when the children of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.

And Moses said to them, "This is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat. ¹⁶This is the thing which the LORD has commanded: 'Let every man gather it according to each one's need, one omer for each person, according to the number of persons; let every man take for those who are in his tent.'"

¹⁷Then the children of Israel did so and gathered, some more, some less. ¹⁸So when they measured it by omers, he who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack. Every man had gathered according to each one's need. ¹⁹And Moses said, "Let no one leave any of it till morning."

²⁰Notwithstanding they did not heed Moses. But some of them left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them. ²¹So they gathered it every morning, every man according to his need. And when the sun became hot, it melted.

²²And so it was, on *the sixth day*, that they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. And all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. ²³Then he said to them, “This is what the LORD has said: ‘*Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.*’” ²⁴So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. ²⁵Then Moses said, “*Eat that today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field.*” ²⁶*Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none.*”

²⁷Now it happened that some of the people went out on *the seventh day* to gather, but they found none. ²⁸And the LORD said to Moses, “How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? ²⁹See! For *the LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.*” ³⁰*So the people rested on the seventh day.*

Now notice, the people of God failed to keep the Sabbath Day properly even before the giving of the Ten Commandments. They knew what they should have done. They failed to do so out of rebellion, not ignorance. We see also they suffered terrible consequences for having failed to do so.

The point is this: the observance of the Sabbath Day was not first instituted when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The observance of the Sabbath Day is not only a Mosaic law or ordinance; the observance of the Sabbath is a *creation ordinance*. Now granted, at various times the Lord’s Sabbath was neglected, even forgotten, for perhaps long periods of time, nevertheless the principle and command to keep the Sabbath Day of rest dates from creation.

⁸Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day *is* the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who *is* within your gates. ¹¹*For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.*

May we not neglect the Lord’s Day as an observance of a Sabbath before the Lord.

2. There is the danger of *legalism* respecting the Lord’s Day.

This is a very real danger, but frankly, I do not think that too many of us are threatened with legalism respecting the Lord’s Day. Our Lord encountered legalism regarding the Sabbath Day as He ministered to the people of God. We will not go into detail concerning this. But it is clear that our Lord Jesus on a number of occasions rebuked and corrected the practice of the Jewish leaders and their legalistic practice of observing the Sabbath Day.

II. The transition from Saturday the Jewish Sabbath to Sunday the Christian Sabbath

When and *how* did the transition take place from the practice of Saturday as the Sabbath to Sunday as the Christian Sabbath? We readily admit that there is no direct statement in the New Testament that commands Christians to observe Sunday rather than Saturday as the Christian Sabbath. The early church’s observance of Sunday as the Lord’s Day may be shown through *descriptions* and *suggestions* of their practice, not through direct command. But recognize this, when I say that it is difficult to show *when* and *how* the transition took place in the practice of the early Christians, it is not difficult to show *the fact* that the change did occur. That is a matter of history. Although there have been different views of Sunday as to Sabbath observance, clearly the vast majority of Christians have observed the Lord’s Day as their day of worship since the earliest stages of Christianity. It is also not difficult to show *why* the change took place; it was because Sunday commemorates the resurrection from the dead and the exaltation of Jesus to be Lord and Christ.

And so, what we would like to show today is the following: *first*, an Old Testament prophecy of worship on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day; *second*, the New Testament evidence for the change from gathering

for worship on Saturday to gathering on Sunday; and *third*, the testimony from early Christian writings on the Christian observance of the Lord's Day on the first day of the week.

1. An Old Testament prophesy of worship on Sunday, the Lord's Day—Psalm 118:24

Let us turn to **Psalm 118**. This psalm is a prophecy of Jesus Christ, as we will show. And although the psalm reflects the experience of an ancient psalm writer, being a prophet, he voiced the words that express the experience of our Lord Jesus in His conflict with fallen man, his resultant rejection and crucifixion, and his resurrection from the dead and exaltation to become the promised King of Israel.

²²*The stone which the builders rejected*

Has become the chief cornerstone.

²³*This was the LORD's doing;*

It is marvellous in our eyes.

²⁴*This is the day the LORD has made;*

We will rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵Save now, I pray, O LORD;

O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity.

²⁶*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!*

We have blessed you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷God is the LORD,

And He has given us light;

Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.

²⁸You are my God, and I will praise You;

You are my God, I will exalt You.

²⁹Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!

For His mercy endures forever.

This psalm is the last in a collection of six psalms (beginning with Psalm 113) that the Jewish people sang during the annual Passover celebration. It is very probable that the night that our Lord observed the Passover with His apostles, the night that He was betrayed, that they sang this hymn before leaving the Upper Room (cf. Matt. 26:30). Earlier our Lord quoted **verses 22** and **23** when he had spoken a parable that revealed and denounced the wickedness of the Jewish leadership who desired to kill Him. We read of this in **Mark 12:1-12**.

¹Then He began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. ²Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. ³And they took him and beat him and sent him away emptyhanded. ⁴Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully treated. ⁵And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some. ⁶Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ⁷But those vinedressers said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ⁸And they took him and killed him and cast him out of the vineyard.

⁹Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰Have you not read this Scripture:

'The stone which the builders rejected

Has become the chief cornerstone.

¹¹*This was the Lord's doing,*

And it is marvellous in our eyes?'"

¹²And they sought to lay hold of Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.

Jesus made it clear that these verses prophesied of God raising Him from the dead and enthroning Him as His King in spite of the Jews' rejection of Him. Although they would not have Jesus to be their king and therefore they crucified Him, God highly exalted Him. He became the chief cornerstone of God's temple.

Now **Psalm 118:24** follows the words that our Lord quoted. It speaks of the day in which God raised His Son from the dead.

²⁴*This is the day the LORD has made;
We will rejoice and be glad in it.*

Notice, the psalmist prophesied that the people of God would rejoice and celebrate before God based on what God had done on this day that "the Lord has made." I would suggest that *this is a prophecy of the worship of God on the first day of the week, Sunday, the Lord's Day, the day "that the Lord has made."*

2. Early Christian practice in the New Testament respecting the Lord's Day

The first Christians were Jewish believers, who saw themselves as disciples of their crucified, risen, and enthroned Messiah, *but who continued to observe the faith and practice of the old covenant*. There is no specific description of them having abandoned their synagogues voluntarily in the earliest days after our Lord's resurrection. It would seem that their severance from the synagogues was probably due to their exclusion rather than voluntary abandonment. The Jews expelled believers in Jesus Christ from their congregations. Even when the Lord was alive and ministering among the Jews, the Jewish authorities had threatened exclusion of any Jews who believed on Him. We read in John 9 of the Jewish leaders' inquiry of the parents of a man that Jesus had healed of blindness. They were fearful to speak openly their opinion to the Jewish leaders. We may read of the reason for their fear in the account. Beginning in **John 9:19** we read,

¹⁹And they asked them, saying "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"

²⁰His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him, He will speak for himself." ²²His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that *if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue*.

I think that it is reasonable to conclude that one of the first reactions to the early Jewish disciples claim that Jesus was the crucified and risen Messiah/King was their exclusion from the Jewish synagogues. From the beginning Christians began to meet separately in congregations, that is, local churches. However, I believe that the evidence suggests that *these earliest Jewish Christians continued to observe the Mosaic Law in its entirety well into the Christian era*. We read, for example, that sometime after Pentecost that "Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (Acts 3:1). This does say that it was on the Saturday Sabbath that they did so, but it does, nevertheless, reveal that these apostles continued their customary Jewish pattern of worship and practice.

But even though the early Jewish Christians probably observed Saturday as their Sabbath, although they did not require that of Gentile believers, I believe that we could say *they also practiced the regular gathering of themselves together as Christians on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day*. The people of God under the old covenant had observed *the old covenant observance of Saturday as the Sabbath for two reasons*. *First*, it acknowledged God as the Creator of all things, Who Himself rested on the seventh day. *Second*, they observed Saturday as a Sabbath to show forth the rest that God had given them from their labor when He had redeemed them from Egypt, bringing them deliverance from their bondage in Egypt.

New covenant (i.e. new testament) believers, however, observed the Lord's Day also for two main reasons. *First*, they saw the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the onset of *a new creation* of which they were a part. Just as the people of God had honoured God on Saturday *the end* of the completion of *the old creation*, so

believers in Jesus Christ honoured God and their Savior on the first day of the week with regard to the **beginning of the new creation**. The old covenant Saturday had a backward look at creation. The new covenant Sunday celebrated the onset of the new creation in Christ. **Second**, the early Christians observed Sunday as the Lord's Day because it pointed to their anticipation of the **true rest that God had promised His people** that would be enjoyed by them in eternity. The old covenant observance of Saturday anticipated the rest they would enjoy in the Land of Promise that God would give them under Joshua, contingent on their faithful obedience to their God. The new covenant observance of Sunday looked forward to the true Sabbath rest that would be theirs in heaven, contingent on their persevering faith to Jesus Christ who had blazed the trail ahead of them and had secured their entrance into their heavenly Canaan (cf. Heb. 4:1-10).

The early Christian observance of Sunday as the Lord's Day may be gleaned from the emphasis that the New Testament gives to the first day of the week as the Lord's Day. The Lord Jesus rose from the dead early on Sunday the first day of the week, after He had laid in rest in the grave over the Saturday Sabbath. His thereafter began to meet together on that day.

Matthew 28:1ff. "Now **after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn**, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. ²And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. ³His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. ⁴And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.

John 20:19ff. Then, **the same day at evening, being the first day of the week**, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰Now when he had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹Then Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." ²²And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

John 20:24ff. But Thomas, called Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." ²⁶**And after eight days His disciples were again inside**, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" ²⁷Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." ²⁸And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Thomas because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Acts 2:1-4. (The day of Pentecost was on a Sunday, the Holy Spirit was given to the church on the Lord's Day when the disciples were gathered together.) "Now when the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ²And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. ⁴And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

1 Corinthians 16:1f. "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: ²**On the first day of the week** let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come."

Acts 20:7. “*Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread*, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.”

Revelation 1:9-11. “I, John, both your brother and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, ¹¹saying, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,’ and, ‘What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.’”

Now what we have shown is that the transition from Saturday observance of the Sabbath to Sunday observance was not sudden or universally practiced. It would appear that *the transition from old covenant practice to that which was consistent with the new covenant was gradual*. And in fact, the New Testament tells us that this is actually what would occur.¹⁰ The New Testament described the gradual transitioning from the old covenant to the new covenant, just as we have observed in the historical record. The grand event which sealed the complete passing of the old covenant that had been replaced by Jesus when He died upon the cross, was when *Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed in AD 70*. This brought an end of the cultural and religious connection and dependence of the people of God upon the temple. From then on the practice of new covenant Christianity, which had been practiced by mostly Gentile Christians, became the dominant and prevalent practice of the churches.

3) The testimony of the early Christian, post apostolic era

Some who maintain that Saturday should still be observed as the Sabbath maintain that the Catholic Church changed the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday, starting with a Sunday law enacted by Constantine the Great (306-337 A.D.) in 321 A.D. They would say that the change from Saturday to Sunday was the result of pagan influence; that it was not the will of God that churches do so. The assumption of these folks is that Constantine was the one who changed the day when he established as Roman law Sunday as the Christian Sabbath in his edict of AD 321. But Constantine did not enact a Christian law, but a civil one. Moreover, he could not have been a Catholic, since the Catholic Church as was known during the Reformation period was not even formally organized until several centuries later. It is even doubtful that he was even a Christian, though some make that claim. Christians by this time were already meeting together for worship on the first day of the week. Many, if not most, had been doing so from the first century. They referred to Sunday as the *Lord's Day*, in honor of Christ's resurrection from the dead and the observed this day for meeting together to worship God and fellowship with one another.

Moreover, some argue that Rome's claim to have changed the day from Saturday to Sunday. But this claim in some of their catechisms that they changed the sanctity of the Sabbath day to Sunday is not evidence that they actually did so. History does not support statements by the Catholic Church that they changed the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday. This is an inconsistent argument that fails to make any sense.

The early Christian Church fathers of the 1st and 2nd centuries did not consider the Saturday to be a day all Christians were obligated to observe as their Sabbath. They gave a different testimony. They met and worshipped on Sunday, the Lord's Day. While the following epistles and statements are not in Scripture and should therefore not be considered canonical, they help to provide useful historical information regarding prevalent beliefs of the early Church in its first centuries.

(a) Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians* (a. AD 110)

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch in Syria (1st-2nd century A.D.) and was martyred in Rome by “beasts” (a. 105-116 A.D.). On his way to Rome, he visited and wrote to various churches, warning and exhorting them. He also wrote ahead to Rome to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Ignatius warned the Church against heresies that

¹⁰ Compare Jeremiah 31:31-34 with Hebrews 8:16ff.

threatened peace and unity, he opposed Gnosticism and Docetism, and in his Epistle to Smyrna, insisted that Christ came in the flesh not just in spirit. He wrote these words:

Do not be deceived by strange doctrines or antiquated myths, since they are worthless. For if we continue to live accordance with Judaism, we admit that we have not received grace. For the most godly prophets lived in accordance with Christ Jesus. This is why they were persecuted, being inspired as they were by His grace in order that those who are disobedient might be fully convinced that there is one God who revealed Himself through Jesus Christ His Son, who is His Word which came forth from silence, who in every respect pleased Him who sent Him. If, then, those who had lived in antiquated practices came to newness of hope, no longer keeping the Sabbath but living in accordance with the Lord's day, on which our life also arose through Him and His death (which some deny), the mystery through which we came to believe, and because of which we patiently endure, in order that we might be found to be disciples of Jesus Christ, our only teacher, how can we possibly live without Him, whom even the prophets, who were His disciples in the Spirit, were expecting as their teacher? Because of this He for whom they rightly waited raised them from the dead when He came. Therefore let us not be unaware of His goodness. For if He were to imitate the way we act, we are lost. Therefore, having become His disciples, let us learn to live in accordance with Christianity. For whoever is called by any other name than this one does not belong to God. Throw out, therefore, the bad leaven, which has become stale and sour, and reach for the new leaven, which is Jesus Christ. Be salted with Him, so that none of you become rotten, for by your odor you will be examined. It is utterly absurd to profess Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism. For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity, in which "every tongue" believed and "was brought together" to God.

(b) Author unknown, *The Didache or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (early 2nd century)

This writing contained ethical instruction and community rules for liturgical practices and leadership conduct, ending with a short apocalyptic section. While some of the material might go back before the year 100 A.D., it is generally dated to the first quarter of the 2nd century. This document contained this statement:

On the Lord's own day gather together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure."

(c) *Epistle of Barnabas* 15:8-9 (c. 130 A.D.)

This was an early writing attributed falsely to Barnabas; nevertheless, it reflects the belief and practice of some who professed to be Christian.

Finally, He says to them: "I cannot bear your new moons and Sabbaths." You see what He means: it is not the present Sabbaths that are acceptable to Me, but the one that I have made; on that Sabbath, after I have set everything at rest, I will create the beginning of an eighth day, which is the beginning of another world. This is why we spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both arose from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended into heaven."

(d) Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, (a. AD 155); chapter 67 --weekly worship of the Christians.

And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things. And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost. And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given... And they who are well

to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

(e) Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (c. 178 A.D.). “The duty of celebrating the mystery of the resurrection of our Lord may be done only on the day of the Lord.”

(f) Eusebius, the Church historian, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, Chapter 27 (c. 315 A.D.)

The Ebionites cherished low and mean opinions of Christ. For they considered Him a plain and common man, and justified only by His advances in virtue, and that He was born of the Virgin Mary, by natural generation. With them the observance of the law was altogether necessary, as if they could not be saved, only by faith in Christ and a corresponding life. These, indeed, thought on the one hand that all of the epistles of the apostles ought to be rejected, calling him an apostate from the law, but on the other, only using the gospel according to the Hebrews, they esteem the others as of little value. They also observe the Sabbath and other discipline of the Jews, just like them, but on the other hand, they also celebrate the Lords days very much like us, in commemoration of His resurrection.

Also in **Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5, Chapter 23 (c. 315 A.D.)**

The churches throughout the rest of the world observe the practice that has prevailed from apostolic tradition until the present time, so that it would not be proper to terminate our fast on any other but the day of the resurrection of our Savior. Hence there were synods and convocations of the bishops on this question; and all unanimously drew up the ecclesiastical decree, which they communicated to all the churches in all places, that the mystery of our Lords resurrection should be celebrated on no other day than the Lords day.

Eusebius was a contemporary of Constantine, but wrote these words years before Constantine made Sunday an “official” state-imposed Sabbath. The conclusion is that Christians observed the Lord’s Day from the earliest of dates.
