

Should Christians Follow the Jewish Calendar?

Allen Webster

A Jewish day runs from sunset to sunset instead of midnight to midnight. Thus, in general terms, Jews begin their days at 6:00 P.M., whereas we begin ours at 12:00 A.M. (the modern world having followed the Roman reckoning of time).

The Jewish day is modeled on the Creation account and is of no fixed length, except generally the day was considered to be twelve hours and the night twelve hours (John 11:9). Based on the reference to “the evening and the morning were the first day” (Genesis 1:5), the Jewish day starts in the evening instead of the middle of the night.

Accordingly, standard times and time zones have no place in the Jewish calendar. However, the steady progression of sunset around the world and seasonal changes results in gradual time changes from one day to the next based on observable astronomical phenomena (the sunset) and not on man-made laws and conventions.¹

Some have concluded from this that Christians may worship on Saturday nights and be as scriptural as those who worship on Sunday mornings. Is this the case?

FIRST, LET US NOTE THAT THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK IS THE CHRISTIAN DAY OF WORSHIP.

Wayne Jackson² points out how easily this can be seen in the Scriptures:

1. Early on, the disciples began meeting together on the Lord’s day (John 20:19, 26). Robertson says this

passage “seems to mean that from the very start the disciples began to meet on the first (or eighth) day” (339). It is interesting that the disciples were not meeting on the Sabbath as had been the Jews’ custom for fifteen hundred years. Why the sudden change from Saturday to Sunday? Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday!

2. The church was established on Sunday, thus its first worship services were on the first day of the week (Acts 2:1). Sunday was the day the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles, and therefore was the day the church of Christ began on earth (Mark 9:1; Acts 1:8; 2:1–47).

3. The congregation in Troas was meeting on Sunday (Acts 20:7) when Paul visited there. During this third missionary journey, Paul was in such a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost that he did not have time to make a trip inland to Ephesus (Acts 20:16). However, he waited seven days in Troas to meet when the disciples met “to break bread” on the first day of the week (Acts 20:6–7). Why? That is when they would all be present for the worship service.

Specifying the “first day of the week” implies a weekly meeting. If the text read, “And at evening when we met to break bread,” it would have signified daily meetings. If it said, “And on the fifteenth day of the month when we met to break bread,” it would have indicated a monthly meeting. If it said, “On the first day of the new quarter when we met to break bread,” it would have shown a quarterly assembly. If it said, “On the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month, when the disciples met together to break bread,” it would have shown an annual meeting.³ Thus, this passage clearly shows that the early church worshipped each Sunday.

4. There was a regular contribution into the church treasury “every first day of the week” (1 Corinthians 16:2, Greek Text).

5. For the first several centuries of the church’s existence, the written testimony is uniform that

Christians met for worship on Sunday. “All Christians were unanimous in setting apart the first day of the week, on which the triumphant Saviour arose from the dead, for the solemn celebration of public worship.”⁴ In the *Didache*⁵ (xiv) the injunction is given: “On the Lord’s Day come together and break bread. And give thanks (offer the Eucharist), after confessing your sins that your sacrifice may be pure.”⁶ Ignatius⁷ speaks of Christians as “no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord’s Day, on which also Our Life rose again.” The Epistle of Barnabas (xv) reads: “Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day (i.e. the first of the week) with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.” Although Sunday was a work day in the ancient world, the disciples set it apart for worship. It became known as “the Lord’s day” (Revelation 1:10).⁸

SECOND, A STRICT OBSERVANCE OF FOLLOWING THE JEWISH EXAMPLE WOULD REQUIRE ADJUSTING OUR CLOCKS TO MIDDLE EASTERN TIME.

When it is 6:00 P.M. on Saturday night in Jerusalem, it is 10:00 A.M. on Saturday here. And, of course, it could vary up to twelve hours, depending on where one is on the globe. Jesus recognized this truth relative to His second coming: it will be both day and night when He comes back unexpectedly (Matthew 24:40–41; Luke 17:34). If one is going to adjust to Jewish time and worship on Saturdays at 6:00 P.M., then he is also obligated to adjust to Jerusalem time as well. Again, we see the wisdom of God’s saying only to worship on the first day of the week, and allowing each to understand that phrase within his own world.

THIRD, JUDAISM HAS BEEN DONE AWAY (ROMANS 7:1–7; COLOSSIANS 2:14; HEBREWS 8:6–7), AND SABBATH WORSHIP WITH IT.

The Sabbath in the Old Testament was a day of rest sanctified to the Lord (Exodus 16:23; 31:15; Deuteronomy 5:14), but Paul lists the Sabbath among the Jewish observances that are not required of Christians (Colossians 2:16; Galatians 4:9–10; Romans 14:5). Sunday is not “the Christian Sabbath”

as it is sometimes called. The New Testament never refers to it in this way.

FOURTH, SINCE THE NEW TESTAMENT DAY OF WORSHIP CELEBRATES JESUS' RESURRECTION, WHICH OCCURRED EARLY SUNDAY MORNING (MATTHEW 28:1; MARK 16:1, 9; LUKE 24:1; JOHN 20:1) AND NOT ON SATURDAY NIGHT, IT FOLLOWS THAT WORSHIP SHOULD BE ON SUNDAY.

Sunday was also the day the resurrected Christ made appearances to various disciples (Luke 24:1-43; John 20:19).

FIFTH, THE FIRST SUNDAY OF WORSHIP WAS CONDUCTED WHEN THE "DAY OF PENTECOST WAS FULLY COME" (ACTS 2:1).⁹

The Day of Pentecost was always on the first day of the week (Sunday) (Leviticus 23:15-21). According to Strong's Concordance, "day" refers to the space between dawn and dark. Thayer says it means "the interval between sunrise and sunset; in the daytime." "Fully come" means "completely" or "entirely." Thus this phrase means that the assembly was held after dawn on Sunday morning. So the early church did not meet on Saturday night but on Sunday morning.

SIXTH, THE GOSPEL WAS DESIGNED TO BE A UNIVERSAL RELIGION, NOT A JEWISH RELIGION.

Jesus said, "Go ye into all the world . . . teach all nations" (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19). Although the church was born in a Jewish environment, it was not meant to be tied to the particulars of Jewish culture (Colossians 2:14). As the church moved from Jewish culture to the Roman world, it began using Roman measures. By the end of the first century, when John wrote his biography of Jesus' life, he was using Roman time.

For instance, John wrote, "And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King!" (John 19:14). When compared to Matthew's account (Matthew 27:45), it is evident that John was reckoning time differently from Matthew's method. Further, in commenting on the phrase "When therefore it was evening

on that day" in John 20:19, A. T. Robertson points out that "day" is an old word "for the time from six to nine (John 6:16)." This was the same day as Jesus' resurrection (20:1) and was still being referred to as "that day" after 6:00 P.M.! Thus John was using Roman time instead of Jewish time. Robertson further points out that the addition of the phrase "the first day of the week"¹⁰ "proves that John is using Roman time, not Jewish, for here evening follows day instead of preceding it."

CONCLUSION: Since Christians are to come together for their weekly communion and worship on the first day of the week, could we worship at 6:00 P.M. on Saturday nights?

No, we should worship according to the clock and calendar of the world in which we live. The first day of our week begins at 12:00 P.M., not 6:00 P.M. Saturday night.

ENDNOTES:

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_calendar.

² The main points are from Jackson (http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/read/what_about_a_saturday_night_observance_of_the_lords_supper); the discussion under them is mine or from other sources as noted.

³ Adapted from <http://www.gospeladvocate.com/ga/ga0698a.htm>.

⁴ Mosheim, John Lawrence (1959 Reprint), *Ecclesiastical History* (Rosemead, CA: Old Paths). Two Volumes.

⁵ Dated back to A.D. 115 in Syria.

⁶ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14335a.htm>.

⁷ Ep. ad Magnes. IX.

⁸ Wayne Jackson, http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/read/what_about_a_saturday_night_observance_of_the_lords_supper.

⁹ Thanks to Gene Horton for this research.

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