Did Paul Change the Sabbath Command?

What was Paul’s practice? And what did he expect of those he taught?

Some who argue against keeping the Fourth Commandment acknowledge that Jesus kept the seventh-day Sabbath but contend that He did so because He was a Jew and that He later authorized Paul to abandon this command when teaching gentiles (non-Jews). Even though some of Paul’s writings are “hard to understand” and are therefore misinterpreted (2 Peter 3:15-16), his personal example regarding the Sabbath is quite clear.

Paul’s custom

As the son of a Pharisee and as one who zealously lived as a Pharisee prior to his conversion to Christianity (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Philippians 3:5), Paul’s practice was to observe the seventh-day Sabbath every week. After his conversion, this part of his life remained the same.

When he traveled to Thessalonica and learned there was a synagogue there, “Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ”’ (Acts 17:2-3, emphasis added throughout). Note that Paul had the same “custom” as Jesus when it came to keeping the Sabbath (compare with Luke 4:16).

When Paul came to Corinth, Luke records that Paul “reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4). Again, we see that Paul’s habit was to observe the Sabbath by going to the synagogue “every” Sabbath.

Paul’s teaching and instruction

He told the Corinthians to imitate or follow his actions, including keeping the Sabbath, just as he imitated or followed Christ’s (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul did not have a different form of Christianity than the one taught and practiced by Christ.

When gentiles in Antioch wanted to hear God’s Word preached to them, Paul had them come the next Sabbath (Acts 13:42-44). Had Sabbath-keeping no longer been God’s expectation of gentiles, Paul could have simply told them that he would preach to them the next day.

In writing to the church at Thessalonica, Paul praised the members of this largely gentle congregation (1 Thessalonians 1:9) for being “examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything” (verses 7-8).

So did this largely gentle congregation in Thessalonica that set the example for all the other congregations that were being established abandon the Sabbath, or did it follow the example of the Sabbath-keeping congregations comprised primarily of Jews in Judea? Paul answers this question saying, “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 2:14).

The churches—whether made up of Jews or gentiles—that were established by Paul’s teaching observed the Sabbath. The scriptural record shows that Paul personally kept the seventh-day Sabbath and that he taught the gentiles to do the same.

Did Christ Break the Sabbath?

Jesus was criticized sharply over the way He observed the Sabbath. But was He disobeying God’s Sabbath law or only the man-made rules that had been attached to it?

During His ministry as a human here on earth, Jesus was accused of breaking the Sabbath (Matthew 12:2, 10; Mark 2:24; 3:2; Luke 6:2, 7; 13:14; John 5:16, 18; 9:16).

Based upon these accusations, some have mistakenly concluded that it is okay for them today to “also” break the Sabbath. Before making such a judgment, consider whether the accusations were correct. Did Jesus Christ really break God’s Sabbath law?

Jesus’ custom

Jesus’ custom was to go to the synagogue to worship God on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). God designated the Sabbath as a “holy convocation” (Leviticus 23:2, 4) —meaning that it was a time to assemble with others to worship God.

The accusations of Sabbath breaking against Christ were not because He neglected to assemble with others on this day to hear God’s law read and to listen to exhortations to serve God. The accusations arose over the additional rules the Jews had established about how they thought the Sabbath was to be observed.

The Mishnah—a written record of Jewish oral traditions completed in the second century after Christ—
lists 39 forbidden types of work on the Sabbath. In
general, the rabbis believed that all work that was
creative and exercised control or dominion over the
environment was forbidden (http://www.jewfaq.org/
shabbat.htm).

Noting that God had ceased from His creative work
after preparing the earth for mankind in six days
(Genesis 2:1-3), the rabbis reasoned that similar
types of work prohibited on the Sabbath would in-
clude agricultural activity such as plowing, sowing
and harvesting.

Two of the major Jewish accusations of Sabbath
breaking are recorded in Matthew 12:1-13. One of
these occurred when Jesus’ disciples picked a few
heads of grain and ate them as they walked through
a grain field on the Sabbath. The accusers consid-
ered this harvesting. The other arose over Jesus healing a
man’s withered hand on the Sabbath. The accusers
considered this miracle to be work.

The Lord of the Sabbath
Instead of arguing with their definitions, Jesus sup-
plied scriptural references and logical examples
showing that what He and His disciples had done
did not break the Sabbath. Then Jesus added that He
is the “Lord” of the Sabbath—the One who can
properly explain how the Sabbath is to be observed
(Matthew 12:8).

Jesus’ actions had not broken the Sabbath. His activ-
ities were teaching opportunities for those who
wished to understand how the Sabbath was to be
observed. Sadly, instead of accepting this teaching,
the Pharisees then “plotted against Him, how they
might destroy Him” (verse 14).

The truth is that Jesus lived a perfect, sin-free life. As
Paul explained: “For He made Him who knew no
sin to be sin for us, that we might become the right-
eousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus
did not break the Sabbath. Instead, He showed how
it is to be observed. Those of us who wish to serve
God are to “walk just as He [Jesus] walked” (1 John
2:6). We, too, need to keep the Sabbath.

Did the Early Christians Worship on Sunday?

Should we follow the clear instruction
of the Bible, Jesus Christ and the apos-
tles—or the practice of early Christians
in later centuries?

A common but mistaken teaching is that the first-
century apostles and Christians changed the day of
worship from Saturday to Sunday in honor of Christ’s
resurrection. The change did not originate with the
apostles and is not taught by the New Testament.

Later, however, Sunday worship did spread to
many churches. Around A.D. 150 Justin Martyr
wrote: “On the day called Sunday, all who live in
cities or in the country gather together in one
place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writ-
ings of the prophets are read. … Sunday is the day
on which we all hold our common assembly, be-
cause 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” (Justin Martyr,
First Apology, 67; ANF 1:186).

Other church historians document the fact that by
the middle of the second century Sunday had be-
come the predominant day of worship. Based upon
these secular writings, some have mistakenly con-
cluded that the New Testament must include ac-
counts of worship on Sunday.

Who do we follow?
So what about the historical records that many be-
gan worshipping on Sunday by the middle of the
second century? Does this support the validity of the
change?

We need to understand two important facts. First,
Sunday does not really honor Christ’s resurrection
because Jesus did not rise from the grave on Sunday.
When Mary came to the tomb before sunrise on Sun-
day morning, she found that He had already risen
(Matthew 28:1-6). The Bible indicates that He rose
from the grave just before sunset on Saturday.

Second, we need to understand that secular records do
not override the authority of the Bible. Just because a
large number of people abandoned the Sabbath in favor
of Sunday does not mean that this was acceptable to
God. When ancient Israel abandoned the Sabbath, God
was not pleased and punished the nation severely for its
sins. God has not changed His mind about sin. It is still
wrong. It still leads to death (Romans 6:23).

Warnings of apostasy
Furthermore, the Bible indicates that toward the end of
the first century, many departed from the faith.
As Jude wrote: “Beloved, while I was very diligent
to write to you concerning our common salvation, I
found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to
contend earnestly for the faith which was once for
all delivered to the saints. For certain men have
crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out
for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the
grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only
Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (verses 3-4).

Peter likewise warned the Church: “But there were
also false prophets among the people, even as there
will be false teachers among you, who will secretly
bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord
who bought them, and bring on themselves swift
destruction. And many will follow their destructive
ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blas-
phemed” (2 Peter 2:1-2).

Based upon these warnings from faithful ministers
at the end of the first century, we should expect the
historical record to document deviations from the
teaching and practices of Jesus and the apostles.