

Keep
SUNDAY
Special

Eight Questions Of Faith About Sundays

by Michael Schluter

© Jubilee Centre, 3 Hooper Street,
Cambridge CB1 2NZ



KEEP SUNDAY SPECIAL CAMPAIGN

EIGHT QUESTIONS OF FAITH ABOUT SUNDAYS

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1. Why is Sunday Different from the OT Sabbath?

In the OT, the Sabbath occupied a very special place. Over and over again it is spoken of as a “sign of the covenant”. It symbolised that special relationship which God has with Israel (e.g. Exodus 31:12-18, Ezekiel 20:12). As it was a sign or symbol of that relationship, to break it was the same as repudiating God himself. “I don't care about the Sabbath” meant “I don't care about God” That is why God decreed the death penalty for the man who went and collected twigs for a fire on a Sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36).

In the NT, Jesus does not inaugurate Sunday as a sign of the New Covenant. Two of the signs of the New Covenant are the bread and wine which we eat when we celebrate the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-29). When some in the fellowship died in Corinth, Paul attributes it to the fact that they treated these symbols of the special Christian relationship with God lightly (1 Corinthians 11:25-32); this is reminiscent of the OT punishment for breaking the Sabbath, Nowhere in the NT is there a command to keep the Sabbath, whereas the other nine Commandments are repeated in the NT. Even the shift from Sabbath to Sunday which occurred in NT practice is never made part of NT teaching. It seems extraordinary that neither Jesus nor Paul mention the importance of Sunday observance if Sunday is to be treated in exactly the same way as the OT Sabbath. Sundays are still of vital importance to the Christian, but not because they are the symbol of the New Covenant relationship with God.

2. How did Jesus use his Sabbaths?

The gospels tell us quite a bit. Jesus used to go to the synagogue regularly on the Sabbath; Luke speaks of him going “as was his custom” (Luke 4:16). Often Jesus used opportunities in the synagogue on a Sabbath as part of his teaching ministry (e.g. Luke 4:31; Mark 1:21). After attending the "service" (which probably was mainly discussion on an OT passage), he went home one day to Peter's house, probably to have a meal. Peter's mother-in-law was sick, so he healed her (Mark 1:29-31). We read of Jesus walking through the fields and his disciples picking the ears of corn, which caused a controversy (Mark 2:23-28). Perhaps the aspect of his use of the Sabbath which is most frequently noted is his healing of the sick (e.g. Mark 1:21-25; Luke 6:6-11; John 5:1-15). The Pharisees were highly critical, and wondered why he couldn't do it the next day.

Jesus' main point in his Sabbath actions was undoubtedly 'Christological' i.e. he was demonstrating that he was 'Lord of the Sabbath' (Mark 2:28, John 5:16-17) Jesus' response was also to emphasise the purpose of keeping one day special for God - as an opportunity to show love for God and love for neighbour, an opportunity to 'do good' (Mark 3:1-6). No amount of silent threats and intimidation prevented him from showing care for the needy on the Sabbath.

3. Did the Apostles Keep Sunday Special?

It is nowhere commanded by the apostles that Christians should keep Sunday special - but it does seem to have been a part of the apostles' way of life. After the Crucifixion, Jesus' first appearance to the eleven was on a Sunday evening.. “the first day of

the week” (John 20:19). A week later, on another Sunday evening, the apostles were meeting again when Jesus appeared and silenced Thomas' doubts (John 20:26). In Acts, Paul spent seven days at Troas, but it was on the first day of the week, again in the evening, that the Christians in Troas met together to break bread (Acts 20:7).

At one period of Paul's ministry, there was a terrible famine in Jerusalem. There may not have been a Band-Aid Concert, but there was at least Paul-aid fund-raising! When writing to the Corinthians, Paul tells them to put aside money “on the first day of every week”, and this is the same instruction that he gave to Galatian churches (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). It seems most likely that Paul chose the first day of the week because Sunday was the new ‘Lord's Day’ in the Christian Church – particularly suitable for acts of charity because Jesus had chosen the Sabbath for this (e.g. Mark 3:1-6). (Certainly more likely than the possibility that Sunday was pay-day in ancient Greece and Asia Minor.)

One last possible reference to Sunday being special comes in Revelation where the apostle John writes of “being in the Spirit on the Lord's Day”. The only other place this adjective is used in the NT is to refer to the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20). While we cannot be sure John is referring to Sunday, it seems likely he is. The term ‘Lord's Day’ in the OT referred to the Sabbath (Isaiah 58:13), and the context includes a reference to the Resurrection, which happened on a Sunday. Based on the practice of the apostles, we have good reason to keep Sunday rather than Saturday as the day we treat as special for God.

4. What Can We Learn from OT Sabbath Teaching

There is wealth to gain from studying OT teaching on the Sabbath. By studying God's purposes and intentions behind the fourth commandment, as taught by Moses and the prophets, we can begin to understand the mind of God. Four lessons which many have found helpful are as follows:

(a) A weekly day of rest is a creation ordinance (Genesis 2:2-3). It falls into the, same category as the marriage ordinance. They are not commands which must be obeyed, but statements of how the human machine has been designed to operate most effectively. Jesus did not say: “The Sabbath is just for the Jews”. He said: “The Sabbath is made for man” (Mark 2:27; cf. Matthew 4:4). This means all men. Everybody needs a weekly day of rest, so we ignore a weekly rest day to our cost.

(b) It seems the Sabbath was designed to help people give priority in their use of time. The fourth commandment lies between those concerned with honouring God and those to love one's neighbour. Sundays today are a help to Christians to give the best of their time to God, and not just its ‘fag ends’.

(c) The Sabbath was a weekly family festival. All members of the household had to take time off together (Exodus 20:8-11). Sundays today are vital for family life as they ensure there is at least one day of the week when family members are all at home at the same time.

(d) A fourth objective of the Sabbath seems to have been to provide legal protection to low-income workers who could otherwise be forced to work seven days a week under exploitative conditions (Deuteronomy 5:15). Restrictions on Sunday trading in some countries (e.g. Germany, France and Italy) today serve the same purpose of protecting low income workers, as well as supporting family life. Other forms of legislation to achieve this have proved extremely difficult to design and enforce.

These objectives of rest, honouring God, family time and protection for low paid workers could all be achieved by other means if Sundays are no longer kept special. But in practice, are we likely to make the necessary arrangements? If not, keeping Sunday special is worth campaigning for.

5. Is Legalism Still a Threat Today?

The Pharisees stuck carefully to the outward form of Sabbath observance. They would never have gone shopping, or participated in organised sport. But they missed the heart of the Sabbath. There was no love in their hearts for those around them. They were more concerned to keep the rules than alleviate a man's suffering (Mark 3:1-6). Why couldn't he come back tomorrow to be healed? Isaiah teaches that the emphasis of the Lord's Day should not be formal worship (sacrifice), or denying ourselves what we enjoy (fasting); instead it should be reaching out to the homeless, the sick, the needy (Isaiah 58:5-9). Paul equally warns against the emphasis on outward observance over against the inward reality (Colossians 2:16-17). It is so easy for us today to fall into the same trap. We ensure we take adequate rest for ourselves, we go to the church service and eat a family meal together. We even ensure that we do not make others work by avoiding shopping and organised entertainment. All this is good but it can easily be entirely selfish. We are just looking after ourselves, when all around us are people in need. Many of the elderly, single people and foreign visitors desperately need our time and our love. Other relatives also have a special right to our time as well as our money (1 Timothy 5:3-8). Do we make a point of helping those in need around us on a Sunday? If not, are we ourselves wandering in the direction of legalism without realising it?

6. Does God Mind How We Use Our Sundays?

For many, time is the most precious resource they have. Sundays are about how that resource is used, about giving God first

place in how we spend our time. All our time rightly belongs to God. Seven days a week should be dedicated to serving him. But God wants us to stop working for one day in the week to focus our minds in a special way on our relationship with him. People have always been too busy to give time to God. In one of the parables, Jesus describes how people refuse the King's invitation to the banquet because they were too busy. Shopping and family responsibilities left no time for God (Luke 14:15-24). The same is true today. The rat race to reach the office. Time pressure resulting from TV, radio, DVD, telephone, computer games and email. The number of people we meet each day. So God in the end often gets just the 'fag ends' of our time.

The first command is to love God with all our hearts and minds. Love is about relationships, and relationships need time. How can we get to know God if we have no time to spend listening to what He is saying to us through his word, and no time to pour our hearts out to him? With shopping on Sundays, there is yet another thing to do which pulls us away from time with God and time with people. When we die, we cannot take our shopping with us! Our relationships with God and with our fellow believers then will be the only things that matter. Is this what matters most to us now?

7. Practical tips on how to Use Sundays

The points below are offered very tentatively. This is not an attempt to lay down any rules. The only rules which matter are those in the Bible. But perhaps one point or another may prove helpful to somebody.

(a) Time at Church Many who work on Sundays (not all!) gradually grow lukewarm in their faith. This is because one hot piece of coal by itself soon gets cold. The writer to the Hebrews underlined the importance of meeting together with other Christians (Hebrews 10:25). Although it can easily become a dry formality, it is hard to stay alive and strong as a Christian without fellowship.

(b) Time with immediate family and relatives The purpose of the old Sabbath is that everybody in the household should have a day of rest (Exodus 20:8-11). Paul makes it clear to Timothy that obligations extend to a wider circle of relatives, and especially the elderly (1 Timothy 5:3-8). A family meal at home, a visit out to see old granny, getting together with brothers and sisters and their children, just talking and listening within the family, and doing things together - all these things are good. (But try to avoid the kinds of special meals which just create a lot of extra work, especially for 'mum'!)

(c) Time for the needy According to recent estimates, twelve million people in Britain would describe themselves as lonely. Some groups are specially affected - foreigners, the elderly, the sick. More than anything else, they need our time and our homes. The need for hospitality is stressed repeatedly in the NT (e.g. Romans 12:13; Titus 1:8; 1 Peter 4:9). What better day for it than Sunday?

(d) Time for personal rest and relaxation I put this last. Often we want to put it first, so it can easily become a purely selfish goal. However, undoubtedly it is part of God's plan for our lives. True rest can only be found in Christ (Matthew 11:28). However, physical rest on Sundays is something good, to be enjoyed and to be thankful for. Even God himself rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:1-3).

8. Could the Sunday Issue be an Instrument of Revival in Britain?

In both the Old and New Testaments, social reform was often an integral part of spiritual renewal. Nehemiah's reforms, for example, which included tackling debt, employment issues and Sabbath trading, were the cornerstones of Israel's renewal at that period. As a organised a self-help building programme (2 Chronicles 14:7): Jehoshaphat created a new set of courts, including a court of appeal (2 Chronicles 19:4-10); Hezekiah reinstated national festivals (2 Chronicles 30). All those were part of spiritual renewal in the OT. In the NT, it was when the gospel challenged commercial interests that strong opposition to the church was aroused (Acts 16:16-24; Acts 19:23-41).

In a special way, the Sunday issue offers a chance for Christians to reassert the primary importance of spiritual values in Britain. We have a golden opportunity to speak of why Sundays matter for our relationship with God, and to speak on behalf of many low-income groups who find it difficult to speak effectively for themselves. The emphasis of using the Lord's Day to show special care for the needy is positive and attractive to society as a whole. With the media coverage the issue continues to generate, there is also the chance to raise fundamental questions about the kind of society we want. Whether this issue sparks renewal may well depend on our commitment to see reform. Often we say we want to see renewal, but in reality prefer the comfort of our armchairs watching TV to the spiritual battle in prayer for renewal of our country. God from his side promises that if we seek, we shall find - if we seek with all our hearts (Jeremiah 29:13).

If you wish to explore this issue further, the Jubilee Centre has also produced a set of four Bible Studies entitled Why keep Sunday special? They may be obtained for free from the Jubilee Centre website, at <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/>