

Chapter 13

The example of the apostles

Scripture doesn't actually say that the apostles kept the Sabbath, but they probably did (many Jewish Christians were keeping ceremonial laws as late as Acts 21). The apostles went to the temple on the Sabbath and preached in synagogues on the Sabbath, but they also met and preached on every other day of the week. Their example is not a command for Christians today.

Paul, like Jesus, customarily went to the synagogue (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2). But there is no reason to imitate the "Sabbath" part of the sentence and ignore the "synagogue" part. The fact that this was a synagogue should alert us to the historical situation and should caution us regarding specific customs. Paul went to the synagogue on the Sabbath because that is when and where people were assembled to hear discussions of Scripture. That is when and where he had a ready-made audience. He went to Jews first, and then to Gentiles, and the best way to preach to Jews would be to go to the synagogues on the day Jews were there.

Paul sometimes kept other Jewish customs, too, such as circumcision, making vows and participating in temple rituals. His *example* isn't automatically authoritative. If we imitate all the ways in which he lived like Jesus, we would have to be celibate traveling preachers. We need to discern which details of their lives were based on the circumstances they lived in, and which were based on Christianity.

Free to live like a Gentile

Paul considered himself under the law of Christ, not under the law of the old covenant (1 Corinthians 9:19-21). He was free to observe old covenant customs when with Jews, and he was free to ignore them in other situations. Peter was free to "live like a Gentile," and Paul was, too (Galatians 2:14). Today, we are to obey the commands of Jesus (Matthew 28:20), and Jesus never commanded anyone to rest on the Sabbath.

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul gave a controversial message in the synagogue: "Through Jesus the

forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39). The Jews and proselytes asked Paul to speak to them the next Sabbath (verse 42), and that is what Paul did. Paul did not demand an immediate change in their Sabbath-keeping custom. Large portions of the audience would have had to work the next six days and would not have been able to assemble on Sunday. Also, it would be good for them to think about and discuss Paul's message for a week. Because Paul waited a week, the entire city was able to hear about the controversy and therefore came to hear him speak (verse 44).

In the Gentile cities of Lystra and Derbe, however, nothing is said about the Sabbath. Even in Athens, where some Jews lived, nothing is said about the Sabbath. Instead, Paul reasoned "in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17). Daily preaching is a valid custom, too, if we want to follow the example set by Paul and Jesus.

Should not make it difficult

Moses was preached in the synagogues every Sabbath, James noted (Acts 15:21). But James was not encouraging Gentiles to attend synagogues! The new Christians needed to hear about Christ, not about Moses. The Jerusalem conference rejected the view of those who thought the Gentiles had to keep the entire "Law of Moses" (verse 5).

"We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (verse 19). Instead of requiring Gentile Christians to keep the Law of Moses, the council told them to abstain from blood, strangled things, idolatry and fornication (verse 20). The council gave a lenient decree because strict requirements were being preached in the synagogues (verse 21). The Sabbath was part of the Law of Moses, just as much as circumcision was — but no one said the Sabbath was any different than other

laws of Moses. The council did not tell Gentiles to keep the Sabbath, nor did Luke, who wrote many years later for Gentile readers.

Every day of the week

In Corinth, Paul again started in the synagogue, and there he argued every Sabbath (Acts 18:4). But soon Paul left the synagogue and began teaching next door (verse 7). After this, nothing is said about the Sabbath, and Paul could have taught every day of the week. Even while he made tents, he could discuss the Scriptures with anyone who had time to listen. In Ephesus, Paul preached every day of the week for two years (Acts 19:9). This is a valid custom, too.

On his way back to Jerusalem, Paul stopped seven days in Troas (Acts 20:6). But we do not hear anything about the Sabbath. What we hear is that the church (“we”) waited until the first day of the week to come together and break bread, and Paul preached after the Sabbath was over (verse 7). Why wait till then? Apparently the first day of the week was the time that the believers could get together. Although

Paul was in a hurry (verse 16), he waited until the first day of the week. This is a significant example, too.

In short, we are never told that Paul rested on the Sabbath, or that he taught anyone to rest on the Sabbath. What we are told is that he used the day as an evangelistic opportunity, and that he could use any day of the week to preach about the Savior. His example shows liberty, and nothing about requirements.

Paul taught on the Sabbath (Acts 18:1-11). Was he teaching the Gentiles to keep the Sabbath? This passage says only that he taught in the synagogues for a few Sabbaths — after that, it does not say when he taught. Although it may have been on the Sabbath, it may have been on other days, too, as it was in Athens and Ephesus. And the passage says nothing about avoiding work on a particular day of the week. The book of Acts tells us what Paul did on a few Sabbaths and a few other days. If we want to know what Paul himself taught about the Sabbath, we must turn to his epistles.

Review 13

- The apostles could keep Old Testament laws when they were in a Jewish culture.
- They could also “live like a Gentile.” What would that mean in the first century?
- Gentiles do not have to keep the laws of Moses. What would that include?
- Why did the church in Troas wait until the first day of the week to meet?

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