

Is Sunday the Lord's Day?

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The Teaching of Roman Catholicism

In article 638 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we read:

2174 Jesus rose from the dead “on the first day of the week” (Cf. Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:2; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1). Because it is the “first day,” the day of Christ’s Resurrection recalls the first creation. Because it is the “eighth day” following the sabbath, it symbolizes the new creation ushered in by Christ’s Resurrection. For Christians it has become the first of all days, the first of all feasts, the Lord’s Day – Sunday

We all gather on the day of the sun, for it is the first day [after the Jewish sabbath, but also the first day] when God, separating matter from darkness, made the world; and on this same day Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead.

In Rev. 1.10, John begins his book with an inaugural vision by saying:

1:10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet

Since John is having this theophany, this inaugural vision, “in the spirit” probably means “under the control of the Spirit.”

The Lord’s day is generally taken to be the first day of the week, Sunday, but scripture doesn’t demand it. It also doesn’t define or explain what the Lord’s day is. In the author’s early years of preaching in the northwest part of the United States, he frequently debated preachers from Sabbath-keeping denominations (Seventh-day Adventists, Seventh-day Church of God, Church of God Seventh-Day, etc.), on whether Christians were to observe the Sabbath commandment. I was happy to deny their affirmatives. On the other hand, when they wanted me to affirm that the Lord’s Day was the first day of the week, I always respectfully declined to do so, because I

couldn't prove it from the Bible. Over forty years later, I still can't. The term only occurs once in the New Testament, and that instance doesn't equate the Lord's Day with the first day of the week. We can't just assume it's the first day. Many *assume* that since Jesus was raised from the dead on the first day of the week (Mt. 28.1ff), that the Lord's day is the first day of the week. However, that's just another unprovable assumption. Some *assume* that since the Corinthians contributed to their local church treasury on the first day of the week (I Cor. 16.1ff), the Lord's day is the first day of the week. It's still just another unprovable assumption. Many *assume* that since the early church partook of the Lord's supper on the first day of the week, the Lord's day is the first day of the week. Again, it's just another unprovable assumption. (For more discussion on the Sabbath question, please see Chapters 13-15 in the author's *Denominational Doctrines: Explained, Examined, Exposed*, available from Amazon.com.)

F. I. Stanley, a preacher in Churches of Christ and author of a commentary on Revelation, affirms that the term isn't explained or defined in the Bible:

The term "The Lord's Day" was so well understood by all that it did not need an explanation. Why should it? Every Christian knew the day that belonged to the Lord. They knew the day of their covenant just as well as the Hebrew people know theirs. (F. I. Stanley, *As A Lamb Slain, A Unique Commentary on the Book of The Revelation* (Rogers, AR: F. I. Stanley, 1985, p. 41-43.)

If you wonder if Stanley's take on the covenant day of the Mosaic Law and the New Covenant smacks of the concept that Sunday is the Christian sabbath, your suspicions will prove correct. For now, we merely mention Paul's teaching in Rom. 14.5 that Christians could "esteem every day alike." There are no holy days in the New Testament. This certainly wasn't the case under the Law of Moses!

Obviously, Stanley agrees with my take on the Lord's day, that it's not defined or explained in the Bible. His contention was that it didn't need to be because everyone knew it meant Sunday. Even if that were true, shouldn't we still be prepared to answer non-believer's questions about its meaning? Also, Sabbatarian groups wouldn't assent to Stanley's contention at all. I doubt that he ever debated any of them, nor was he prepared to if he didn't think scripture defined or explained the term.

Stanley continues:

In fact, it was so well understood that only to mention it was enough for all to understand. To us, it is without question and beyond argument. (*Ibid.*, p. 43.)

This assertion won't set well with one who takes to heart Paul's command to "prove (test, examine) all things, hold fast that which is good, abstain from every form of evil (I Thes. 5.21-22), nor will it with one who is a child of light, for Paul commands in Eph. 5.8, 10:

8 For ye were once darkness, but are now light in the Lord: walk as children of light...10 proving what is well-pleasing unto the Lord;

Simply asserting that everyone understood the term "the Lord's day," the way Stanley understood it isn't proving what is well-pleasing to the Lord, and merely accepting such assertions isn't walking as a child of light. I know of no subject the Bible touches upon that is beyond question and argument. Do you?

Stanley then quotes from St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, in a letter to the church at Magnesia. Ignatius died in AD 107, so these words were probably penned in the latter part of the first century:

Let everyone of you keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner, rejoicing in meditation on the law, not in relaxation of the body, admiring the workmanship of God, and not eating things prepared the day before, nor using lukewarm drinks and walking within a prescribed space, nor finding a delight in dancing and plaudits which have no sense in them. And after the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection day, the queen and chief of all the days...If then those who had walked in ancient practices attained unto newness of hope, no longer observing sabbaths but fashioning their lives after the Lord's day, on which our life also arose through Him and through His death which some men deny..." (Epistle to the Magnesians, ix, 1.v., p. 63, cited by Stanley, *op. cit.*, p. 44.)

If you think Ignatius makes a murky distinction between the sabbath and Sunday, again, your suspicions will be proven correct. Of

course, Ignatius' statements that the Lord's day was the resurrection day and the chief of all the days is language Stanley would like to find in the Bible, but cannot. This is the very thing lacking in the inspired text, and is hardly proving what is well-pleasing unto the Lord. It's what is well-pleasing to Ignatius and Stanley! Stanley then tells us what weight he assigns to the testimony of Ignatius:

We feel that no greater proof can be given than the writings of these men who lived and worshipped in the time of the apostles...Since the Lord's day and the first day of the week were being used synonymously by the early Christian fathers during the first century, we see no reason why it should be questioned here. (*Ibid.*)

This author couldn't disagree more. Greater proof of the assertion that the Lord's day was Sunday would be a simple definition or explanation from scripture, which Stanley has admitted isn't there!

What credence should be attached to Ignatius' testimony? A simple survey of his doctrinal stands will help. Ignatius affirmed a single bishop in each city with assistance from the elders in the congregations of that city:

Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest" — Letter to the Magnesians 2, 6:1

This in spite of the New Testament's teaching that bishops and elders referred to the same men (Ac. 20.17, 28).

He also affirmed the infallibility of the bishop:

It is not lawful to baptize or give communion without the consent of the bishop. On the other hand, whatever has his approval is pleasing to God. Thus, whatever is done will be safe and valid." — Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8.

Ignatius' teaching formed a foundation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession, which they view a mark of the true church.

He was also a proponent of the doctrine of transubstantiation, that the bread and fruit of the vine in the communion becomes the literal flesh and blood of Jesus. Speaking of a congregation that didn't agree, Ignatius said:

They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. — Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6:2–7:1.

Ignatius was the first known Christian writer to argue in favor of Christianity's replacement of the sabbath with the Lord's day. Sabbatarians now gleefully quote the Roman Catholic Church's claim that they changed the sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. Those who came out of Roman Catholicism in the Reformation Movement brought Ignatius' concepts with them. Later, those who abandoned their denominational allegiance in the Restoration Movement in the United States, brought Ignatius' concepts with them, as well. One has to ask, "When will those of us striving to be just Christians ever get all the Roman Catholicism out of our teaching?"

Is the Day of the Lord Equivalent to the Lord's Day?

There is a grammatical distinction between the two phrases, but it's a distinction without a real difference. For example, scripture speaks of the Lord's house and the house of the Lord, but no one thinks those two terms refer to different things. Scripture speaks of the servant of the Lord and the Lord's servant, but again, no one thinks those two things are different. Likewise with the will of the Lord and the Lord's will, the supper of the Lord and the Lord's supper, or the table of the Lord and the Lord's table. Isn't it just an assumption to assume that there's a distinction between the day of the Lord and the Lord's day? Clearly, if we know what the house of the Lord is, we know what the Lord's house is. If we know what a servant of the Lord is, we know what a Lord's servant is. If we know what the will of the Lord is we know what the Lord's will is. If we know what the supper of the Lord is, we know what the Lord's supper is. In exactly the same way, if we know what the Day of the Lord is, we know what the Lord's day is.

Realizing this, when John says “I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day,” from our knowledge of the day of the Lord, we know what John meant. Likewise, in the rest of Revelation, we’ll see further evidence of this same Lord’s day. In Rev. 6.15-17, we see:

15 And the kings of the earth, and the princes, and the chief captains, and the rich, and the strong, and every bondman and freeman, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains; 16 and they say to the mountains and to the rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: 17 for *the great day of their wrath is come*; and who is able to stand?

From our previous discussion in the introductory chapter of this quotation from Isaiah 2.2, 12, and 20-21,” we know that these verses are fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy of the day of the Lord in Old Covenant Israel’s last days. Thus, it’s also referring to the Lord’s day in their last days. In Rev. 16.13-14, when John speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem at “war of the great day of God, the Almighty,” this is another reference to the Lord’s day. Similarly in Rev. 18.8, when Jerusalem’s end finally comes, John will say:

Therefore *in one day* shall her plagues come, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire; for strong is the Lord God who judged her.

Surely this “one day” is another reference to the day of the Lord or the Lord’s day.

Also on the day of the Lord, in Ac. 2.20, Peter quotes Joel 2.28-32, referring to the destruction of Jerusalem *in the last days of the Mosaic age*, and uses the same apocalyptic language Jesus used in the Olivet Discourse when he says, “The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before *the day of the Lord* come, *That great and notable day*.” Again, the term is used here of the destruction of Jerusalem when men called on the name of the Lord. In I Cor. 5.5, Paul commanded the Corinthians to withdraw fellowship from an impenitent fornicator, saying, “to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in *the day of the Lord Jesus*.” Here, the term is used in the same way as Peter used it in the first gospel sermon, as it is in I Thes. 5.2, where he said: “For yourselves know perfectly that *the day of the Lord* so cometh as a thief

in the night.” The only day of the Lord we know of in the New Testament is the one coming on the Jews of the first century, and especially in Thessalonians, as avenging the martyrs at the destruction of Jerusalem. In II Thes. 2.2, Paul addressed that event again: “to the end that ye be not quickly shaken from your mind, nor yet be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by epistle as from us, as that *the day of the Lord is just at hand.*”

The KJV and ASV introduce confusion into this verse with the expression “just at hand,” which makes it sound like Paul was correcting their misunderstanding about the near coming of Jesus. The phrase translated “just at hand” is actually in the perfect tense. Literally, the phrase is “has already happened.” The Thessalonians were not confused because they thought the coming of the Lord was *near*, it was because *they thought it had already occurred!* In essence, they thought the entire Christian age lasted only 20 years, yet as we’ve seen, the age of the Messiah was to have no end (Isa. 9.6-7 Lk. 1.33). To be sure, as we’ve already seen in Mt. 16.27-28, Mt. 24.29, 34, Heb. 10.37, Jas. 5.8, and Rev. 22.10, 12, Jesus and his apostles taught that his return was near, but the Thessalonians thought the Lord had come! That’s what the text says.

Again, the popular view of the return of Christ, that every eye will see him, the dead will come forth from their graves, a universal judgment will occur, and the planets and stars will be burned up, doesn’t fit this text at all. If your preacher announced that the day of the Lord had occurred yesterday, and the Lord had returned, the dead were raised, the earth burned up, and the stars, too, wouldn’t you think it was time for the straitjacket to come out? Do you suppose the Thessalonians really believed that Christ had come (though none of them saw him), that the resurrection had taken place (although the cemeteries were all still intact), the judgment had taken place (though none of them had participated), and the planet had burned up (though they were still walking around on it)? They actually believed none of this, yet they thought the Lord had returned. Obviously, their concept wasn’t the popular one of today. This alone should convince us that we might need to go back to the drawing board with our concepts of the return of Christ, don’t you think? (For a full discussion of the eschatology of Thessalonians, please see Appendix 5, “The Eschatology of Thessalonians” in the author’s *Essays on Eschatology: An Introductory Overview of the Study of Last Things.*)

The last New Testament passage containing the day of the Lord is found in II Pet. 3.10, where Peter says:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

There are three sets of “heavens and earth” in this text, the first before the flood, the one Peter was living under, and the new heavens and earth that was about to replace the one Peter lived under. In no case did the term refer to the planet and stars. We live on the same planet and under the same stars that Peter and Adam did! The term heavens and earth represented a covenantal system. In addition, we popularly take “elements” in this passage to be atomic elements, yet every other time the word (*stoichion*) is used, it refers to the fundamental elements of the law of Moses! For a full discussion of this passage, please see Chapter 5, “II Peter 3: Destruction of the Universe or Jerusalem?” in the author’s *Essays on Eschatology: An Introductory Overview of the Study of Last Things*.)

One last usage of the day of Jehovah is found in Zech. 14.1-2, again, in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem:

1 Behold, *a day of Jehovah* cometh, when thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee. 2 For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city.

All six passages which use the term “day of the Lord” refer to a day of judgment on a city or region on the earth, which is exactly how John is going to describe the harlot Babylon, and its replacement by New Jerusalem. Babylon is identified in Rev. 11.8 as “where the Lord was crucified.” In Rev. 18.24, Babylon was destroyed because “in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all that have been slain upon the earth (*ge*, lit., land—SGD). As we noticed in the introductory chapter of *Revelation Realized: Martyr Vindication from Genesis to Revelation*, our commentary on Revelation, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, the author of Hebrews, John, and Paul made clear that Jerusalem was going to be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets in his generation! Jerusalem was destroyed to avenge the martyrs on the day of the Lord.

This essay is excerpted from *Revelation Realized: Martyr Vindication from Genesis to Revelation* by Samuel G. Dawson, available from Amazon.com