

FAITH UNDER PRESSURE: THE SABBATH AS CASE STUDY

**Even before any official declaration of Rome,
the worship of Sabbath
on the seventh day was under attack.**

The Adventist insight into the cosmic conflict provides an unusual advantage in understanding why such antipathy exists between God's ways and what often is favored by our culture. A review of the experience of Sabbath keepers in the past will suggest what to anticipate in the future, not only what pertains to the Sabbath, but other of God's truths as well.

Persistent conflicts in human relations are sadly familiar, whether interpersonal, family, intra-societal, inter-societal, or, in recent history, massive, continent-wide conflicts. A similarly checkered career has marked God's great revealed truths. Each can be traced, one by one, through the valley of the shadow, only to be elevated in another setting.

It is remarkable how little discussion of the Sabbath is found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Contrast, for example, the ample attention given to themes such as idolatry. The Sabbath is instituted at Creation, where it is the crowning act of God, tied directly to the concept of His intentional pause in activities. In fact, how it was observed is not fleshed out in detail, although since the Creator Himself is introducing it to His newly fashioned human creatures, we can assume with confidence that His introduction of it was thorough. We can only imagine what means

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God employed in orienting the new humans to a totally fresh existence. The Sabbath was a part of it.

Mention of the Sabbath does not occur in the Flood narrative or the Abraham/Isaac/Jacob/Joseph reports, even though it must have been an element in God's revealed plan. Abraham kept God's charge, commandments, statutes, and laws (Gen. 26:5). Just how God's people fared under circumstances unfavorable to Sabbath observance, such as Joseph in Potiphar's service, is not included in the scriptural account.

With the story of the Exodus, the Sabbath comes to the forefront. Manna is given every day with exception of the Sabbath, with explicit instructions about how to relate to it (Ex. 16). The law with its Sabbath commandment is given at Sinai, with additional incidents and laws relating to the Sabbath. Its origin is explicitly tied to the Creation. Deuteronomy traces the reintroduction of the Sabbath back to the Exodus experience.

Of course, there are additional Old Testament references to the Sabbath, but long gaps in Hebrew history pass without serious reference to it. It is clear, however, that the Sabbath remained a feature of the covenant walk with God, designed as a blessing, not only for the Hebrews, but to non-Hebrews as well. The fourth commandment itself includes the "stranger within thy gates." Even more detailed is the Lord's gracious call in Isaiah 56

where God holds out His covenant blessing to Gentile believers who accept Him and keep His Sabbath (Isa. 56:1-8). Later, in Nehemiah's reform, Sabbath observance is again underscored (Neh. 13:15-22). Despite these occasions, at times Sabbath observance was reduced to ritual formality, treated as a hindrance to ambitious plans compelled to wait until sunset to be resumed (Amos 8:5).

The New Testament includes frequent references to the Sabbath because the way in which it is to be observed became a matter of controversy. At times, Jesus seemed to cooperate with the prevailing patterns governing Sabbath observance. At other times, He deliberately provoked controversy to teach a new understanding of its purpose.

Cases of these two are easily seen. Sabbath passages occur especially in the Gospels and Acts, much less so in the Pauline and general epistles. The reference to the Lord's day in Revelation (1:10), although debated, should best be interpreted in light of previous clear usage of the term, where it refers to the Sabbath, rather than the later application to Sunday found in the church fathers.

Hostility between Jews and early Christians reported in the New Testament appears to stem from religious leaders, not the common people. The Gospel of John outlines this most clearly, although its frequent reference to "the Jews" is interpreted

by some as bias against all Jewish people. This idea appears to be read into the context, however, for John cites no cases of hostility by the ordinary populace. The clashes arise from rabbinic and priestly leaders.

As a historical report of the early church, the Book of Acts reports numerous clashes (13:50; 14:5, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:12, 13; 19:9; 20:3; 23:12; 24:1-9). There is increasing exclusion of Christians from the synagogues, also noted in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

The record suggests that many Christians, particularly those of Jewish ancestry, continued to attend Sabbath worship in synagogues. The Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15) was called to meet certain issues raised by this group, and Paul addressed them directly in his epistles to the Galatians and Romans.

Relations between Jewish-Christians and the Jewish community continued to deteriorate, following a sporadic pattern. Recently there has been a revival of scholarly interest in how the two groups, Jews and Christians, arrived at final division. Current opinion identifies both doctrinal and social factors: doctrinal in the role of the Messiah, social in the fact that Jewish identity and covenant were at stake. Who is a Jew, and who is not one? Could the Jew who accepted Jesus as the center of God's outreach to humanity continue to be treated as a full brother

or sister, or something less?

With the advance of Christian faith into the Gentile world, it seems clear that by A.D. 50 the numerical balance began to tip away from Jewish to non-Jewish Christians. Jewish-Christians, increasingly in the minority, are identified by early church historians as Ebionites, they themselves divided into mediating and rigorous parties.

The Book of Acts clearly presents the Jerusalem church as the mother congregation, with even Paul returning from his journeys to bring reports to the Jerusalem congregation. This practice must have served to maintain the standing of the Jerusalem church as membership increased elsewhere.

Two significant events early drove new wedges between the Jewish leadership and the developing church. One was royal persecution of the apostles, especially Herod Agrippa I's execution of James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John in A.D. 44, only months prior to Herod's own ghastly death recorded in Acts 12:20-23. The second came when in A.D. 68 the Christian community in Jerusalem fled the besieged city in response to the earlier warning of Jesus (Matt. 24:15-22). This could only have been interpreted by the city's defenders as abandonment at just the time of urgent need. The damage of relationships was irreparable.

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The center of gravity in Jewish life was itself shifting from priestly to rabbinic. In less than one generation, rabbinic councils, notably at Jamnia, were busily restructuring the actual format of Judaism. In the process of separation between Jews and Christians, a remarkable fact stands out that presents serious problems for those who claim that Christians early abandoned the Sabbath to substitute Sunday in honor of the Resurrection. In all the sources, both biblical and extra-biblical, no support appears anywhere for an apostolic Sunday observance. Clearly, which day is the holy day was not an issue between Christians of the Apostolic Era and Judaism.

Considerable attention has been given the Jamnia council's inclusion of an anathema in the daily prayer, *Shemoneh Esreh*. Added around A.D. 90, it pronounced a curse upon Nazarenes and Mimim. Probably its purpose was to draw strong distinction between Jews and Christians. If so, it was successful, being cited by Justin, Epiphanius, and later Jerome, who complains, "Three times daily in all the synagogues under the name of Nazarenes you curse the name of the Christians."¹

It seems clear that in the Jerusalem church, and Judea in general, the fate of Christians was bound up with wider Jewish fate, for a strong Jewish affinity continued among Christians.² Christian historians report a period of relative toleration by Jewish leaders between A.D. 70 and the end of the century. After A.D. 120, however, there are reports of tension and a developing anti-Christian persecution as extremists gained ground in the Jewish community. Bar Kochba's messianic

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claims, supported by the respected Rabbi Akiba, and the revolt of A.D. 131-135, would end in disaster and termination of the Jewish nation. To the degree that Christians identified with Judaism, they too suffered.

By the first century A.D., Jews comprised an important minority segment of the empire, not so much by reason of numbers as from the Diaspora network that planted a Jewish community in virtually every major city, particularly in the East. Their adeptness brought them influence beyond their actual numbers, at the same time engendering envy and resentment. Among these Jewish communities Paul and other Christian workers often began their work.

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In a few years, however, Roman officers acknowledged a separation, although the Jewish origins of Christianity remained clear. Possibly the insight came to Nero through his

wife, Poppea, who reportedly was a proselyte to Judaism.⁵ Although the early Nero was relatively benevolent, by A.D. 64 he was torturing Christians, whom he held responsible for a great fire that for days burned through wooden tenements in Rome,⁶ and it was he who ordered the execution of Paul, and, if tradition can be trusted, Peter.

From A.D. 49 onward, Jewish fortunes sank. Roman officials suppressed Jewish riots in several of the major cities. Two years before his untimely end, Nero sent Titus to Jerusalem to deal with the rebellion there. Its end brought total demolition of the city with exception of the Tower of Antonia, a Roman fortress well inside the city. The following 30 years saw a series of persistent Jewish riots in the East, testing Roman patience and alienating the Roman populace. Ostracism grew. Titus abandoned his plans to marry Berenice, sister of Herod Agrippa II. A new capitation tax was levied on Jews. Suetonius reports that in time the tax was extended also to those who “live as Jews.”⁷ Following the death of the crazed Domitian, his successor, Nerva, revoked the tax on Christians, by doing so tacitly acknowledging their difference from Jews.

With the turn of the century, Jewish fortunes continued almost in free fall. Critics attacked, maligned, gossiped about, and ridiculed Jews. Tacitus, Horace, Cicero, Juvenal, Dio Cas-

sius, and Ovid satirized Jews and cast them in the most unfavorable light. It became chic to mock Jews. Dramatists portrayed Jews as mean, penurious, despicable characters, liars, thieves, treacherous, low-life types.

The late Menahem Stern has collected in three formidable volumes all the known classical references to Jews.⁸ It comprises a sad narrative. To cite only one example from Tacitus: “All their customs, which are at once perverse and disgusting, owe their strength to their very badness. . . . They regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies. They sit apart at meals, they sleep apart, and though as a nation they are particularly prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women.”⁹

Josephus’ greatest work, *Antiquities of the Jews*, was his attempt to renovate and, if possible, soften the pall of public scorn against Jews. It was at this point, as noted earlier, that Bar Kochba arose with messianic claims. As he was endorsed by the respected Akiba, Palestine’s Jews, chafing under taxes, indignities, and Roman scorn, in large numbers accepted him, leading to a major revolt. Hadrian, a hard military man (ruled 117-138), seized the opportunity to eliminate once and for all the festering Jewish problem. Again Jerusalem was devastated and Palestine’s Jewish population was essentially depleted by mass removal. Hadrian’s new city on the site of Jerusalem, Aelia Capitolina, centered

on a temple to Jupiter, and Jews were prohibited from the city. Throughout the empire the practice of Judaism was banned.

It is not by accident that the earliest verified reports of weekly Sunday observance come from this very time. Bacchiocchi gives special attention to the Jerusalem congregation, noting that up to Hadrian's destruction in A.D. 135, all the bishops of Jerusalem included on Eusebius' list were "of the circumcision." The city was rebuilt as a non-Jewish community, and Eusebius notes a resurgent Christian presence, with the church now under non-Jewish leadership. Bacchiocchi concludes, "The more probable explanation . . . is that after the disappearance of the bishops of the circumcision (ca. A.D. 135), a group of Judaeo-Christians, desirous of reintegrating themselves in the majority, adopted the observance of Sunday in addition to the Sabbath."¹⁰ Note that Bacchiocchi acknowledges by this time a substantial Sunday observance outside Jerusalem.

Hadrian's destruction was final. From A.D. 135, there was total cessation of sacrifices, dismantlement of Israel as a nation, and prohibition of Sabbath observance. Although the decree against Sabbath observance was rescinded by Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius (A.D. 138-161), the weight of social disapproval led to increasing Christian abandonment of the Sabbath.

The failure among Sunday advocates to construct a strong rationale in defense of Sunday is striking. Uniformly, the early patristic arguments focus on the evils of Jewish practice rather than the merits of Sunday observance. The abandonment of the Sabbath with its consequent adoption of Sunday stands as a classic example of religious capitulation in the face of hostile social disapproval.

With the turn away from its original Hebrew roots, Christianity advanced rapidly toward Hellenization. Greek dualism displaced the biblical understanding of reality, and rapid changes followed.

It is true that Christians faced severe disadvantages by persisting in Sabbath observance, at times even illegal status. The older religions of the empire had served to create social bonds that held society together.

Christianity moved in a different direction. As is well known, early Christians intentionally distanced themselves from the state and its social structures. Generally Christians did not serve in the army, refused the festivals of the state gods, and refused to enter into any form of political leadership or civil service. By rejecting the old Roman gods, they appeared to their peers as atheists, a charge often made against them. To bear the additional social burden of the Sabbath with its connection to the Jews seemed overwhelming to many.

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As Sabbath observance declined, in its place arose the honoring of Sunday, a practice far more compatible with the traditional state religions. Social pressure had overcome biblical truth, and the church entered a new trajectory.

The British scholar Lightfoot's classification of the apostolic fathers' attitudes toward Judaism is helpful: The Didache, Hermas, and possibly Papias are favorable; the Epistle of Barnabas and Epistle to Diognetus negative; the remainder mediating. Not surprisingly, the critique of things Jewish found in Ignatius (A.D. 115) develops into Barnabas' open rejection of Sabbath for its Jewish connections (A.D. 135). The earliest detailed description of a Sunday worship service appears in the final section of Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (ca. A.D. 153), which some regard as a later addition.

Thus Sabbath observance, despite its solid biblical basis, capitulated under pressure from public ostracism and the desire to be accepted.

This does not explain, however, how Sunday observance became the accepted substitute despite its complete lack of biblical support.

Religious history is replete with similar changes. A striking example is the case of conversions to Islam, especially in the seventh century. In rapid succession total populations once nominally Christian changed to an Islam sponsored by the new ruling class, this under the influence of minimal physical, but substantial social coercion.

Some of the most penetrating studies of the interplay between faith and society come from the French writer Jacques Ellul. As he observes, "Each generation thinks it has finally discovered the truth, the key, the essential nub of Christianity by ve-neering itself with the dominant influence and modeling itself on it."¹¹

Ellul sees the original Christian faith as radical in the sense of making absolute claims. Christ's kingdom was

not of this world, but centered on an entirely different authority—God. However, those who were attracted soon saw the utility of using social structures. Early Christianity bought into the legal spirit (Roman), the prevailing philosophical understanding of the world (Greek), and the mode of action (political, institutional). Christianity contextualized, abandoning its radical differences to absorb foreign elements for pragmatic purposes.

This insight leads Ellul to cite a concept Adventists can appreciate: “A familiar example for the mutation to which revelation was actually subjected is its contamination by the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul. I will briefly recall it. In Jewish thought death is total. There is no immortal soul, no division of body and soul. Paul’s thinking is Jewish in this regard. . . . The body is the whole being. In death there is no separation of body and soul. The soul is as mortal as the body. But there is a resurrection. . . . God creates anew the being that was dead. This is a creation by grace; there is no immortal soul intrinsic to us. Greek philosophy, however, introduces among theologians the idea of an immortal soul. The belief was widespread in popular religion and it was integrated into Christianity. But it is a total perversion. . . . All Christian thinking is led astray by this initial mutation that comes through Greek philosophy and Near Eastern cults. . . . This

idea completely contaminates biblical thinking, gradually replaces the affirmation of the resurrection, and transforms the kingdom of the dead into the kingdom of God.”¹²

Adventists are committed to the Scriptures as the source of truth. It is questionable, however, whether they are sensitive to the way social forces invade and mutate the faith originally given to the saints. Historically the Christian Church moved, step by step, led by a series of leaders persuaded that their choices represented enhancements of the faith, but absorbing elements alien to the revealed Word.

The religions of the Roman world were civic religions, social bonds that held society together. Jesus introduced a freedom never before seen, an escape from the bonds of the past, personal, hope-oriented. From civic cement, religion became grace, joy, liberty. In absorbing Roman law, Christianity returned to natural law and structure rather than the life validated by God. Greek philosophy turned theology into a search for abstract truth, whereas the Scriptures advocate a search for the Author of truth. God’s revelation is historical, to be found in God’s intervention in human experience.

The Bible is a series of stories, but not myths intended to unveil abstract truths. The stories are history, the history of God’s temporal interchange with His people. God reveals Himself

in action. Profoundly historical, even eternal things appear in temporal garb. The mistake of the early church that persists today is its willingness to absorb alien elements on the premise that they will enhance the growth of God’s work. That very process stains the footsteps of a church eventually captured by the very elements it absorbed.

The results: The church became the structural ideology of continuing society—once more the basis for social integration. From a personal walk with God, it became a collective ideology. Christianity’s prophetic freedom came to be molded into a new garb that outlines a social structure.

Adventists today are in desperate peril that faith will slip from the person in communion with God to parameters of a cultural subset, something called Adventist life or lifestyle. As in ancient Rome, religion will have become once more a mere social cement.

It was this perversion of faith that made it necessary for everyone to become a Christian. To defect was to threaten the whole. So saintly men such as Bernard of Clairvaux could pen glorious words such as, “Jesus the very thought of Thee, With sweetness fills my breast; But sweeter far Thy face to see, and in Thy presence rest,”¹³ only to mount a crusade of torture against heretics.

Not even Luther or Calvin detected fully the perversion repre-

sented in such religion, but certain of the Radical Reformers did, and it is to their insights that today’s Christian owes a debt of gratitude. In their attempt to return to the New Testament church, they advocated a return to the freedom conferred by Jesus. Almost Luther found it in his *Freedom of the Christian Man*, but soon it was smothered under a magisterial church.

From the beginning, God set humans free and made them responsible. It was that way in the first Eden; it will be that way in the New Jerusalem. □

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- ⁴ Dio Cassius, *History*, 60.6.
- ⁵ Josephus, *Ant.* 22.8.11. *vita* 3.
- ⁶ Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44.
- ⁷ Suetonius, *Domitian*.
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- ¹⁰ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: Anti-Judaism and the Origin of Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1975), p. 29.
- ¹¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 18.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ¹³ *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald Publ. Assn., 1985), No. 241.