

Did the Apostolic Church Observe the Sabbath and Holy Days?



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Many professing Christians believe the apostolic church rejected the Sabbath and festivals of the Old Testament and adopted new customs to distinguish themselves from the Jews. But is this true? What does the Bible say about early Christian practice?

The temporal references in the Book of Acts and Paul's epistles demonstrate that the early New Testament church kept time according to the traditional Jewish calendar. References to the seventh-day Sabbath and some of the festivals of the Lord are scattered throughout the aforementioned documents. Noticeably absent from the New Testament are any mention of days or observances connected to the numerous contemporary pagan calendars. The exclusive use of the Jewish calendar in New Testament documents is evidence suggesting that the apostolic church observed the seventh-day Sabbath and the feasts mentioned in Leviticus 23 and elsewhere. Some scholars outside of the Church of God tradition are beginning to acknowledge this fact based upon their review of the internal evidence from the New Testament.

Pentecost

The first temporal reference in the Book of Acts occurs early. In Acts 2:1, Luke records, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." The margin of the NASB States that this phrase literally means "was being fulfilled." In other words, Luke was recording the fact that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred at the exact moment the festival of Pentecost was being celebrated. The fact that the disciples were all gathered in one place when the day of Pentecost was being fulfilled is certainly an indication they were observing the feast.

The feast of Pentecost is again mentioned in Acts 20:16: "For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost." There is more in the verse than perhaps meets the eye. The Greek word translated "to be" in this verse is *ginomai*. It is Strong's Reference Number 1096. When this word is used in reference to a festival, it means "festivals to be held or celebrated." (See "1096 *Ginomai* [II] [GI," *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992, 368. Ed. Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D.) Thus, in Acts 20:16, Paul expresses his desire not simply to physically be pre-sent in Jerusalem on Pentecost, but to celebrate the festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Paul later confirms this fact in his address to Governor Felix in Acts 24:11, where he states: "[S]ince you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago *I went up to Jerusalem to worship*" (emphasis added).

Finally, Paul mentions Pentecost in passing in his first epistle to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 16:8, he writes, “But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost.” Some scholars have noted that Paul’s reference to Pentecost in this place indicates that the festival had special significance to Paul and to the recipients of the letter. *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* notes, “The NT shows *clearly* that Pentecost was celebrated in the first century and that it came to have a special Christian significance. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul says that he plans to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8). Apparently, he expects his readers to understand his meaning, a fact that has led some interpreters to suggest that *Pentecost had become a Christian observance as early as Paul’s time*” (“Pentecost,” *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985. Ed. Paul J. Achtemier. Emphasis added.)

In *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, Thomas J. Talley writes in connection to this verse as follows:

“Paul writes around A.D. 55 from Ephesus in Asia Minor, a city with whose synagogue he had an extended relationship (Acts 19:8). Writing, possibly, from around the time of Passover, he tells the Corinthians that he intends to remain in Ephesus until Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8). His references to Passover and Pentecost *show that these times were significant for him, and he seems to assume that they have a definite meaning for the Corinthians to whom he writes*” (Talley, Thomas J., *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991, 4; emphasis added).

As noted in the above-cited works, the reference to Pentecost in this verse indicates that the festival had some meaning or significance to Paul’s audience. It should be remembered that the Corinthian church was made up primarily of Gentiles who, prior to their introduction to Christianity, would have had little familiarity with the festivals in the Jewish liturgical calendar, however, Paul’s reference to this festival in his letter demonstrates that Pentecost had taken on relevance to the Gentile believers at Corinth. This verse, therefore, is an indication that Pentecost had a distinctly Christian significance to congregation at Corinth in the mid-first century A.D.

Passover/Days of Unleavened Bread

Luke references the Passover and/or the Festival of Unleavened Bread twice in the Book of Acts. In Acts 12:3-4, Luke records the persecution of the apostles John and Peter by King Herod Agrippa. After Herod killed James the brother of John, Luke records, “When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of unleavened bread. When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people.”

In Acts 20:6, Luke writes, “We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days, and there we stayed seven days.” The “we” referenced in this verse includes Paul, Luke, and at least six other Gentile Christians (see verses 4-5).

Luke’s mention of the Days of Unleavened Bread in Acts 20:6, when coupled with

Paul's statements to the Church at Corinth, leaves little doubt that there was a Christian celebration of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread in apostolic times. Paul writes to the Corinthians about A.D. 55, "Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). Clearly, Paul is encouraging the predominately Gentile church at Corinth to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is interesting to note that Paul exhorts the Corinthians to cleanse themselves from the leaven of malice and wickedness "just as you are in fact unleavened." This would indicate a literal observance by the Corinthian Christians of the command in Exodus 12:15 to remove leaven from the home during the seven-day festival.

On this note, William Conybeare, in his work, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, comments on the above-cited verses from 1 Corinthians: "If we take 'as ye are unleavened' in a metaphorical sense, it is scarcely consistent with the previous 'cast out the old leaven'; for the passage would then amount to saying 'Be free from leaven (metaphorically)'; whereas, on the other view, St. Paul says, 'Be free from leaven (metaphorically) as you are free from leaven (literally)'. There seems no difficulty in supposing the Gentile Christians joined with the Jewish Christians in celebrating the Paschal feast after the Jewish manner, at least to the extent of abstaining from leaven in the love-feasts. And we see that St. Paul *still observed the 'days of unleavened bread' at this period of his life, from Acts xx.6*. Also, from what follows, we perceive how naturally this greatest of Jewish feasts changed into the greatest of Christian festivals" (Conybeare, William. *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Company, 1978, emphasis added).

Another scholar has drawn a similar conclusion from Paul's statement in this verse: "[W]e have in this text the first historical testimony to the existence of a Christian feast of Passover, distinct from the Jewish one" (*Easter in the Early Church: An Anthology of Jewish and Early Christian Texts*, Colleagueville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993, 127. Annotated by Raniero Cantalamessa).

Based upon the texts in Acts and 1 Corinthians, it would appear that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were celebrated as Christian festivals by Gentile converts to Christianity in the apostolic period.

The Day of Atonement

In Acts 27:9, Luke writes, "When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul began to admonish them." The margin in the NASB states that the phrase "the fast" is a reference to the "Day of Atonement in September or October."

Luke's mention of the Day of Atonement in the Book of Acts indicates to at least one Christian author that Luke's audience was observing this fall festival of the Lord. Daniel Stokl Ben Ezra comments on Acts 27:9 as follows: "The community of Luke-Acts observed Yom Kippur.... Commentators are unanimous in understanding 'the Fast' to be a reference

to Yom Kippur. Scholars assuming a close relationship between the author of Luke-Acts and Paul, such as R.P.C. Hanson and J.D.G. Dunn, deduce that Paul observed Yom Kippur. While I am hesitant about the significance of Luke's statement in relation to Paul's religious behavior, *I cannot but draw the conclusion that Luke himself and his implied readers observed Yom Kippur*. Why else would Luke use a 'Jewish calendrical reference for a secular problem'? He clearly presumes that his readers will understand what he is referring to.... [W]e can assume a positive attitude of Luke and his implied audience to the fast of the Day of Atonement. In other words, Luke and his community observed Yom Kippur" (Daniel Stokl Ben Ezra, "Christians' observing 'Jewish' festivals of Autumn," *The Image of the Judeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2003,61-62. Ed. Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers-Petry. Emphasis added.)

Acts 18:20-21

Luke wrote in Acts 18:20-21 (κϿν), "When they desired him [Paul] to tarry longer time with them, he consented not; but bade them farewell, saying, I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem; but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus." The word translated 'keep' in this verse comes from the Greek word *poieo*. This is Strong's Reference Number 4160 and includes the meaning "celebrate." Clearly, Paul was expressing his desire to celebrate this unnamed feast in Jerusalem.

Although some Greek manuscripts do not contain this verse, the vast majority of the Greek texts (Byzantine) do contain it. In addition, the very next verse in the text indicates that Paul did, in fact, go to Jerusalem. "And when he had landed at Caesarea, *and gone up*, and saluted the church, he went down to Antioch" (Acts 18:22, κϿν). New Testament authors often describe visiting Jerusalem as "going up" to Jerusalem (Luke 2:42; John 7:8-10; Acts 15:2). The context of Acts 18 suggests that Paul "went up" to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the feasts of the Lord, which was certainly consistent with his practice as described by Luke throughout the Book of Acts.

The Sabbath

Luke often describes Paul and his companions as attending Sabbath services in the synagogues they encountered during their missionary travels. In Acts 13:14, Luke notes that Paul went into the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia on the Sabbath. After delivering his message, Luke writes, "And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath" (Acts 13:42, κϿν). This is clearly an indication that the Gentile "God-fearers" were already attending the synagogue on the Sabbath. Luke then records, "And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God" (Acts 13:44, κϿν). In Acts 16:13, Luke records a Sabbath observance by Paul and his companions at Philippi: "And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down and spake unto the women which resorted thither" (κϿν). Other references to Paul attending synagogue on Sabbath are found in Acts 17:2 and Acts 18:4. These are indications that Paul

and his Gentile converts attended Sabbath services in the synagogue during his missionary journeys.

The only explicit reference to the Sabbath in Paul's epistles is found in Colossians 2:16-17. Paul writes, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holyday, or of the new moon or of the sabbath days; which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ" (KJV).

This verse has traditionally been interpreted to mean that the Sabbath and holy days were shadows that had passed away with Christ and were no longer relevant to Christians, and that the opponents of the Colossian Christians were condemning them for their non-observance of these days. Some scholars, however, are beginning to admit that the traditional interpretation of this verse has been inaccurate. The opponents of the Colossians, who are generally understood to represent an early form of Gnostic asceticism, were

Condemning the Colossians for the *manner* in which the Colossians were observing the Sabbath and holy days. The ascetics were attempting to submit the Colossians to their ascetic lifestyle which included the following degrees: "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch" (Colossians 2:21). In other words, the ascetics were condemning the Christians for eating and drinking and celebrating on the holy days and the Sabbath.

In commenting on Colossians 2:16, D.R. de Lacey writes, "The 'judgment' seems to be criticism of the Christians' present practice, apparently of eating and drinking and enjoying Jewish festivals, in contrast to those whose watchword was 'do not handle, do not taste, do not touch' (Col. 2:21)" ("Holy Days," *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993, 403).

Troy Martin agrees with the above assessment of Colossians 2:16-17. After a detailed analysis of these two scriptures, Mr. Martin concludes, "Nevertheless, the preceding grammatical and syntactical investigation of the clause in Col 2:17 suggests that the practices mentioned in 2:16 are those of the Colossian Christians and not the opponents... [E]arly Christians observe both feasts and Sabbaths" ("But Let Everyone Discern the Body of Christ (Colossians 2:17)," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 114, No. 2, Summer, 1995, p. 255).

Thus, Colossians 2:16-17 demonstrates that the Colossian Christians were observing the Sabbath and the festivals of the Lord, which is certainly consistent with the practice of Paul and the apostolic church as described in Acts and 1 Corinthians.

Conclusion

In an article entitled "Pagan and Judeo-Christian Time-Keeping Schemes in Gal 4.10 and Col 2.16" (*New Testament Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Jan. 1996), Troy Martin makes the following observations:

"The references to time in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians exclusively reflect the adoption of a Jewish calendar. Even in a place like Corinth, Paul speaks of the first day from Sabbath (1 Cor 16.2), not the day of the sun. He builds an elaborate argument based upon the festivals of Passover and unleavened bread (1 Cor 5.6-8) in order to exhort the Corinthians, 'Let us keep the festival' (1 Cor 5.8). Although the temporal references in Paul's letters are

sparse, 1 Corinthians *provides strong evidence for the Pauline adoption of the Jewish practice that marked time by festivals and Sabbaths.*

“In addition to 1 Corinthians, the portrait of Paul and Christian communities in the book of Acts demonstrates that Christians adhered to the Jewish calendar. Paul enters the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia on several Sabbaths and proclaims the Gospel (Acts 13.14, 44). According to Acts, it was Paul’s custom to enter the synagogue on the Sabbath, and in Thessalonica he reasoned for three Sabbaths from the Scriptures (Acts 17.2). Paul addresses the community at Troas on the first day from Sabbath (Acts 20.7). Concerning feasts, Paul sails from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread (Acts 20.6) and intends to arrive in Jerusalem by the feast of Pentecost (Acts 20.16). *The portrayal of Paul in Acts supplies clear evidence that Christians mark time by the segments of festivals and Sabbaths*” (Id. at 108-109, emphasis added).

The temporal references contained in the book of Acts and the epistles of Paul are exclusively from the Jewish calendar. This indicates that the early apostolic church—both Jew and Gentile—regulated their religious celebrations around the weekly seventh-day Sabbath and the annual festivals named in Leviticus 23—the “festivals of the LORD.” In addition, the scriptural evidence suggests that early Christians did more than simply adopt the Jewish calendar. These festival celebrations had a distinctively Christian significance and meaning to the apostolic church. Despite the long passage of time from the days on the apostles, God’s Sabbath and festivals still hold deep relevance and meaning to Christians today, who are exhorted to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).



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