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## SABBATH VS. SUNDAY: THE REST OF THE STORY

# 'Deception': Christians war over worship day

## Centuries-old clash continues over disputed commandment

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By Joe Kovacs  
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Two thousand years after Jesus walked the Earth, Christians are at war with each other concerning – as strange as it may sound – a day of the week mentioned in the Ten Commandments.

The issue boils down to: "When is God's Sabbath?" In other words, what is His holy day of rest?

Most Christians today think it's Sunday, when the majority of churches hold services.

But others confidently say it's Saturday, calling Sunday worship "the most flagrant error of mainstream Christianity," believing Sunday-keepers are victims of clever deception.

Some high-profile evangelical pastors such as California's Greg Laurie say it's simply "wrong to set Saturday apart as a special day for worship."

Today, some high-school sports teams [refuse to play in state tournaments](#) for the sole reason the events are held on Saturday – what they say is God's Sabbath.



typical of churches announcing their worship services on Sunday.

Conversely, the 1981 film "[Chariots of Fire](#)" was based on the story of [Eric Liddell, a Scottish sprinter and Christian missionary who disqualified himself from his best event at the 1924 Olympics because the race was on Sunday – the Sabbath in his view.](#)

Christians seem irreparably split, as this issue goes back to the beginning of time itself.

### In the beginning ...

There are seven days in a week, but historians have no consensus about the cycle's origin, since it has no basis in astronomy.

The Bible, though, indicates God created the Earth and its life forms in six days, and then



Scottish sprinter Eric Liddell

rested on the seventh.

"And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it." (Genesis 2:2-3)

Biblically speaking, the first six days of the week had no special name. They were simply identified by ordinal numbers, such as the first, second and third day. But the seventh day was given a unique name. In Hebrew, it's "shabbat," meaning "rest." In English, the word is "Sabbath," and it's detailed in the Fourth Commandment.

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work ... . For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day." (Exodus 20:8-11)

In many languages, the word used for the seventh day of the week – what we call Saturday – is actually the same word used for "Sabbath." In Greek, it is sabbaton; Italian, sabato; Spanish, sábado; Russian, subbota; Polish, sobota; and Hungarian, szombat. Even the French "samedi"

is from the Latin "Sambata dies," for "day of the Sabbath."

Names of days in today's English come from ancient paganism, where they were originally associated with celestial objects and heathen gods.

<i>dies Solis</i>	Sun day		Sunday
<i>dies Lunae</i>	Moon day		Monday
<i>dies Martis</i>	Mars's day	Tiw's day	Tuesday
<i>dies Mercurii</i>	Mercury's day	Woden's day	Wednesday
<i>dies Jovis</i>	Jupiter's day	Thor's Day	Thursday
<i>dies Veneris</i>	Venus's day	Frigg's day	Friday
<i>dies Saturni</i>	Saturn's day		Saturday

Table traces the seven days of the week from their pagan Latin origin through the names of Norse gods to their current names in English

In the King James Version of the Bible, the word "Sabbath" appears 137 times. The word "Sunday" is absent, though its equivalent, the first day of the week, occurs eight times – nine if the "first day" of creation is counted.

Some examples of the use of Sabbath include:

- "Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant." (Exodus 31:15-16)
- "But pray ye that your flight be not in winter, neither on the sabbath day." (Matthew 24:20)
- "Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath." (Mark 2:28)

Most biblical scholars have little disagreement when asked what day the Bible specifically calls the Sabbath.

"The seventh day, Saturday," says [Richard Bauckham](#), professor of New Testament at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. "No other day is called the Sabbath in Old or New Testaments."

In 2001, Jan Marcussen, a Seventh-Day Adventist from Thompsonville, Ill., was so sure there was no Bible verse declaring the first day to be the Sabbath, [he offered up to \\$1 million](#) for clear, Scriptural proof.

"I didn't get even one response claiming the \$1 million from any theologian, bishop, cardinal, pope or anyone else," Marcussen, author of ["National Sunday Law,"](#) told WND. "Why not?"

Because they can't. [Observing Sunday as the Sabbath] is the biggest hoax the world has ever seen."

But while the Bible never calls the first day of the week a Sabbath, the vast majority of Christians today gather for worship then. Many think Sabbath-keeping was either abolished or moved to Sunday once Jesus rose from the grave.

"There's not a simple answer," said Dr. Roger Felipe, a Baptist preacher from Marco Island, Fla., who is also director of programs for [Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, part of Trinity International University](#). "From [today's] Christian point of view, the Sabbath is Sunday."

There is little, if any, argument Jesus and His fellow Jews observed the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week, as the Bible states, "as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up to read." (Luke 4:16)

But it's what took place after His death and resurrection that's key.

### The rising of the Son

One reason many Christians provide for gathering on Sunday is the belief Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week.

"It's a powerful symbol," says Felipe.



Prof. Richard Bauckham



An angel informs women that Jesus is not in the tomb, but has already risen.

His sentiments echo a [1998 writing by Pope John Paul II](#) in which the pontiff referred to the origins of Sunday-keeping.

"In the weekly reckoning of time, Sunday recalls the day of Christ's Resurrection," the pope stated.

But the idea Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday is not universal.

The Bible is actually silent on the precise moment of resurrection. Jesus' followers came to His tomb before dawn on the first day of the week (Sunday), but they did not witness Him coming back to life. They merely found an empty tomb.

### A tomb with a view

"Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen," is what an angel told the women. (Luke 24:5-6)



John Pinkston, Congregation of God Seventh Day

"Christ was already gone!" exclaims [John Pinkston](#), a retired Air Force navigator who is founder and president of the [Congregation of God Seventh Day](#) in Kennesaw, Ga. "So that shoots in the foot the belief that He was raised on Sunday."

Pinkston is typical of many Sabbath-keepers, believing Jesus was neither killed on a Friday, nor raised on Sunday. He believes Jesus was actually put to death on a Wednesday, and remained in the grave 72 hours until Saturday evening. When the women came to the tomb early Sunday, they found it empty, indicating Jesus arose prior to their arrival.

Even the late [Rev. Jerry Falwell](#), a Sunday-keeper and chancellor of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., agreed with that timetable, [telling WND in 2001](#), "I personally believe He was crucified on Wednesday evening ... and rose after 6 p.m. Saturday evening."

Most Christians today think Jesus died on a Friday and rose on Sunday. They point to Scriptures indicating a Sabbath day followed Jesus' execution. But Sabbath-keepers claim it was not the weekly Sabbath of Saturday approaching. Rather, they say it was an *annual* Sabbath, a "high" holy day in the Hebrew calendar known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which supposedly occurred on a Thursday the week Jesus was killed. The Gospel of John mentions that Sabbath was the annual type.

"The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) ... ." (John 19:31)

In other words, Sabbatarians say there was more than one day of rest that week. Their timeline has Jesus slain on Wednesday – the day before the "high day" annual Sabbath on Thursday. They believe Jesus was in the grave for a full three days and three nights, finally arising Saturday evening, the second Sabbath of the week.

The mention of "three days and three nights" is important for many, as Jesus used that phrase to prove His divine identity:

"For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so I, the Son of Man, will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights." (Matthew 12:40, New Living Translation)

There's disagreement if that phrase means a full three days and three nights – 72 hours – or merely parts of three days and three nights, leading many to stick with the Friday-evening-to-Sunday-morning timeline.

### The last shall be first?

Beyond the resurrection issue, there are several Bible references to "the first day of the week," none of which are clear on the Sabbath issue.

"The New Testament evidence is not conclusive, and nowhere 'ordains' or instructs [Sunday-keeping]," said [Margaret M. Mitchell](#), professor of New Testament and Early Christian Literature at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

Mitchell says the "evidence is, historically speaking, tantalizing but not absolutely clear."

She notes the apostle Paul, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 16:2, "calls on the Corinthians to treasure up on the first day of the week."

"He does not explicitly say there whether the envisioned context is a gathering of the assembly, or if this refers to what people do in their own homes," Mitchell said.

Another mention of the first day is in Acts 20:7, as Paul is shown breaking bread with fellow believers in ancient Troas, a peninsula in modern-day Turkey: "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them ... ."

Mitchell told WND: "This text appears to show a particular Sunday eucharistic gathering, but it does not tell us if this replaced the Sabbath observance or stood alongside it, [i.e., people observed both]."

Interestingly, while most Bible versions use the phrase "first day of the week" in Acts 20:7, a 1990 word-for-word translation of the same Scripture by Greek experts Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort in the [New Greek English Interlinear New Testament](#) from Tyndale House Publishers, actually renders it as "one of the Sabbaths."



Prof. Margaret M. Mitchell

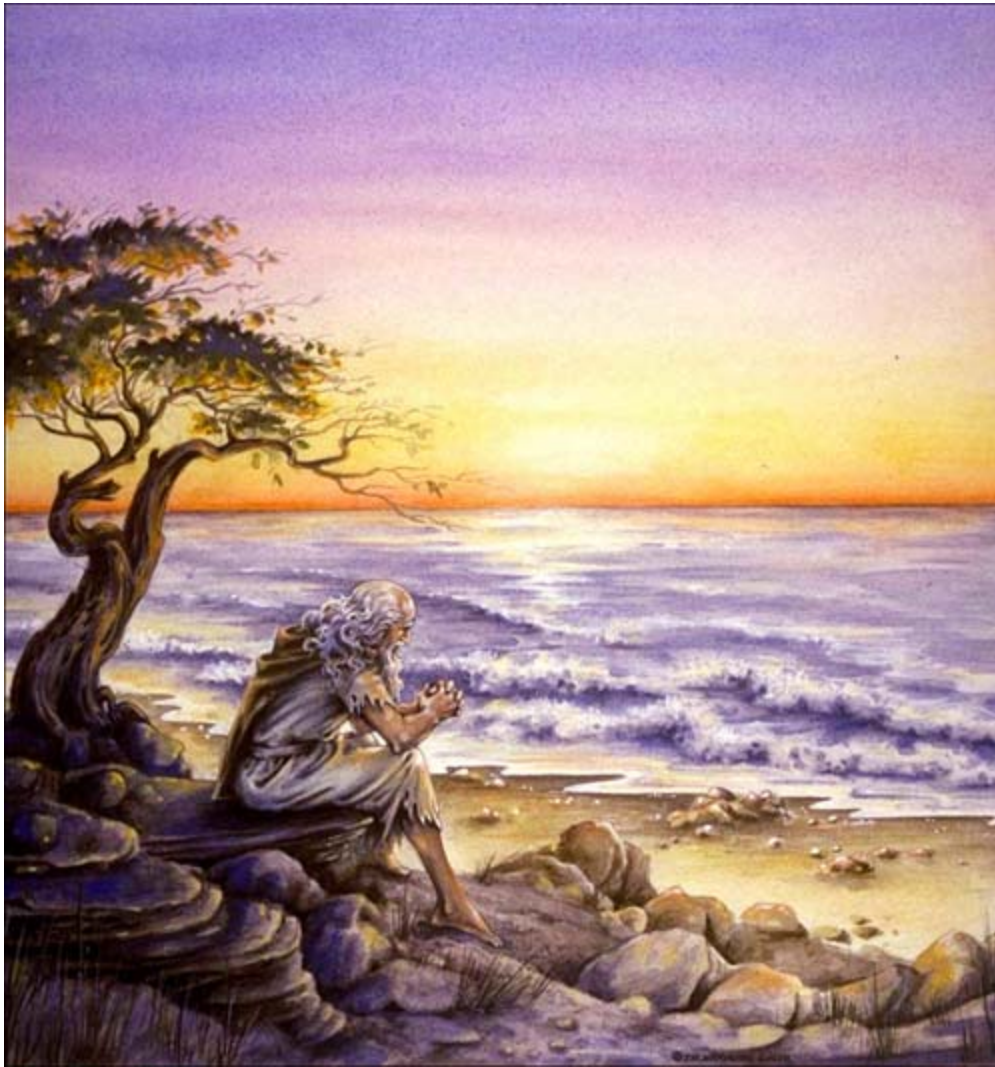
Their version reads: "And on one of the Sabbaths having been assembled us to break bread, Paul was lecturing them ... ."

If the Tyndale translation is accurate, it could heighten the Saturday-vs.-Sunday controversy, since this alleged evidence for Sunday worship may not have been a Sunday at all, but the usual Saturday Sabbath.

### **'The Lord's Day' – or is that 'Day of the Lord'?**

And then there's something called "the Lord's Day." Though mentioned just once in the Bible, many today assume it means Sunday.

The Scripture, written by the apostle John on the Greek island of Patmos, says, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet." (Revelation 1:10)



Depiction of John on Patmos by Pat Marvenko Smith, (c) 1992. Used with permission. [Revelation Illustrated](#)

Some Sabbatarians like Pinkston believe the term has no connection to the first day of the week.

"It's not talking anything about Sunday," he said. "It's talking about the 'Day of the Lord' mentioned in the Old Testament. It's prophecy about when Christ comes back. The Book of Revelation reveals the events of the 'Day of the Lord.' It has nothing to do with a worship day."

Others think it is indeed a worship day, but not Sunday. They suggest "the Lord's Day" is actually a Saturday Sabbath, noting Jesus called himself "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28) and that God referred to the Sabbath as "my holy day." (Isaiah 58:13)

Thus, according to this reasoning, if any day of the week were really "the Lord's Day," it's the seventh-day Sabbath, not Sunday.

However, Prof. Bauckham in Scotland believes there's good evidence from early Christian sources the phrase does indeed refer to Sunday.

"John probably means that his visionary experience happened during the time when other Christians were gathered for worship," he said.

"The other interpretation [equating it with the 'Day of the Lord'] doesn't really make sense because the earlier parts of the vision are not placed temporally at the end of history. That is only approached over several chapters [into Revelation]."

The [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) equates Sunday with "the Lord's Day" in Christianity, stating, "The practice of Christians gathering together for worship on Sunday dates back to apostolic times, but details of the actual development of the custom are not clear."

The New Testament, penned within the first century, never specifically mentions a Sabbath change.

"From a logical point of view," says Pinkston, "if the New Testament had intended for us to start worshipping on the first day of the week, then we'd find ample evidence for it. Yet, it's not in there."

One example Sabbatarians point to is when Paul is shown preaching to both Jews and Gentiles (non-Hebrews) on a Sabbath, and not Sunday. He's then asked to preach again on the following Sabbath.

"And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath. ... And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God." (Acts 13:42-44)

The argument is, if there were some kind of worship on the first day of the week, then Paul would have just told the people – especially those with no connection to Jewish customs – to simply come back tomorrow (Sunday) to learn more, rather than wait an entire week for the next Sabbath to arrive.

### Man of the Sabbath

A well-known expert on the Sabbath is [Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi](#), a retired theology professor at Andrews University in Michigan.



Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi

Bacchiocchi earned his doctorate in Church History at the [Pontifical Gregorian University](#) in Rome and was awarded a gold medal by Pope Paul VI for his *summa cum laude* class work and dissertation, "[From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity.](#)"

Bacchiocchi, a Seventh-Day Adventist, believes there's no Scriptural mandate to change or eliminate Sabbath-keeping, and he singles out the Catholic Church for its role in changing the day.

"The Church of the capital of the empire, whose authority was already felt far and wide in the second century, appears to be the most likely birthplace of Sunday observance," he writes.

In the 1876 book, "The Faith of Our Fathers," James Cardinal Gibbons, the Catholic archbishop of Baltimore, agreed the shift to Sunday was not based on the Bible, but was solely the work of the Catholic Church.

"You may read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and you will not find a single line authorizing the sanctification of Sunday. The Scriptures enforce the religious observance of Saturday, a day which we never sanctify," Gibbons wrote.

Bacchiocchi also told WND: "Anti-Judaism caused the abandonment of the Sabbath, and pagan sun worship influenced the adoption of Sunday."

He says [evidence of anti-Judaism](#) is found in the writings of Christian leaders such as [Ignatius, Barnabas and Justin in the second century](#). He notes these three "witnessed and participated in the process of separation from Judaism which led the majority of the Christians to abandon the Sabbath and adopt Sunday as the new day of worship."

Bacchiocchi also explains the [influence of pagan sun worship](#) provides a "plausible explanation for the Christian choice of Sunday" over the day of Saturn. Its effect wasn't just limited to Sunday. It apparently led to the placement of Jesus' birth in late December.

"The adoption of the 25th of December for the celebration of Christmas is perhaps the most explicit example of sun worship's influence on the Christian liturgical calendar," Bacchiocchi writes. "It is a known fact that the pagan feast of the Dies Natalis Solis Invicti – the birthday of the Invincible Sun, was held on that date."

### Christian facts, pagan Mithras

One of the Roman names for this "Invincible Sun" god in the days of the apostles was Mithras. There are striking similarities between the ancient worship of Mithras and today's Christianity, leading some to think early Christians adopted Sunday worship from heathen customs.



The pagan sun god Mithras, also known as 'the Invincible Sun'

For instance, Mithraism's sacred day of Sunday was said to be called "the Lord's Day."

Donald Morse, a retired professor at Temple University, wrote a 1999 essay comparing the tenets of Mithraism to modern Christianity, explaining Mithras was worshipped on Sunday; was born of a virgin known as the "mother of God" on Dec. 25; was part of a holy trinity; and had a "Last Supper" with his 12 followers before his death and resurrection at Easter time near the spring equinox.

Mithraists were also taught they had immortal souls that went to a celestial heaven or an infernal hell at death.

"All of these religions intermingled in those days," Morse, who is Jewish, told WND. "There's no way to know who stole from whom."

On the change from Sabbath to Sunday, Morse suggested early Christian leaders including Paul felt "the best way to convert pagans was to not have them change too much. Just accept their [pagan] holidays, as long as they accepted Jesus as Messiah. They didn't really have to do much more than that."

### **There's no place like Rome**

As Christianity spread through the pagan Roman Empire, it was finally given official toleration in the year 312 by [Emperor Constantine](#), who purportedly had a vision that prompted his soldiers to fight under a "symbol of Christ," leading to a key military victory. The emperor then restored confiscated church property and even offered public funds to churches in need.



Roman Emperor Constantine purportedly sees a symbol of Christ in the sky before the battle at Milvian Bridge outside Rome in A.D. 312

Sunday observance received a historic boost when Constantine – himself a pagan who purportedly adopted Christianity at least nominally – established Sunday as the first day of the week in the Roman calendar and issued a mandatory order prohibiting work on that day, in honor of the sun god.

On March 7, 321, he decreed, "On the venerable Day of the Sun, let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed." Farmers were given an exception.

"The importance of the actions of Constantine cannot be overstated," says author Richard Rives in "[Too Long in the Sun.](#)" "During his reign, pagan sun worship was blended with the worship of the Creator, and officially entitled 'Christianity.'"

Before the end of the 4th century, Sunday observance prevailed over Saturday.

At the [Council of Laodicea](#) in 363, the Church of Rome – today known as the Roman Catholic Church – declared: "Christians must not judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honoring the Lord's Day [Sunday]; and, if they can, resting then as Christians. But if any shall be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ."

In 380, Emperor Theodosius made [Sunday-keeping Catholic Christianity the official religion](#) of the empire, outlawing all other faiths:

We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics.

While some went along with the decrees, others apparently did not. A letter from Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, possibly reveals Saturday Sabbath-keeping in his own town, while Sunday was being observed in Rome. It led to the well-known proverb, "[When in Rome, do as the Romans do.](#)"

Once Sunday had the imperial power of the Roman Catholic government behind it, Saturday Sabbath-keepers became less visible, though some Sabbatarian websites have [documented mentions](#) of seventh-day observers through the centuries.

For example, the Catholic Church persecuted [Sabbath-keepers in the 15th century](#). At the Catholic Provincial Council of Bergen, Norway, in 1435, it was said:

We are informed that some people in different districts of the kingdom, have adopted and observed Saturday-keeping.

It is severely forbidden – in holy church canon – [for] one and all to observe days excepting those which the holy pope, archbishop, or the bishops command. Saturday-keeping must under no circumstances be permitted hereafter further than the church canon commands. Therefore we counsel all the friends of God throughout all Norway who want to be obedient towards the holy church to let this evil of Saturday-keeping alone; and the rest we forbid under penalty of severe church punishment to keep Saturday holy.

The Catholic Encyclopedia even refers to Sabbath-keeping as "[the superstitious observance of Saturday](#)," noting it was forbidden by that council.

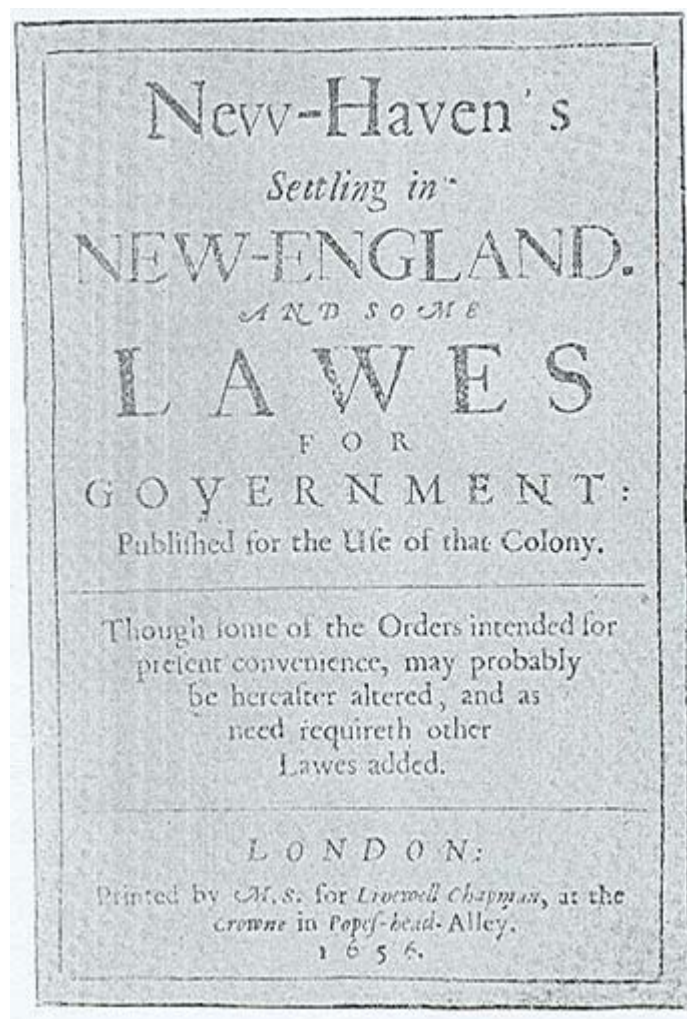
### Coming to America

As Christianity headed west, the earliest settlers to America included both Sunday-keepers – such as the Puritans who landed at Plymouth Rock, Mass., in 1620 – and Sabbath-observers like the [Seventh Day Baptists](#), whose first church was founded in Newport, R.I., in 1671.

When the Puritan Christians used the word Sabbath, they would mean Sunday – "the Lord's Day" – and passed rules enforcing its observance from sunset Saturday to sunset Sunday.

Connecticut's so-called [Blue Laws](#) of the 1650s had strict codes of conduct said to include:

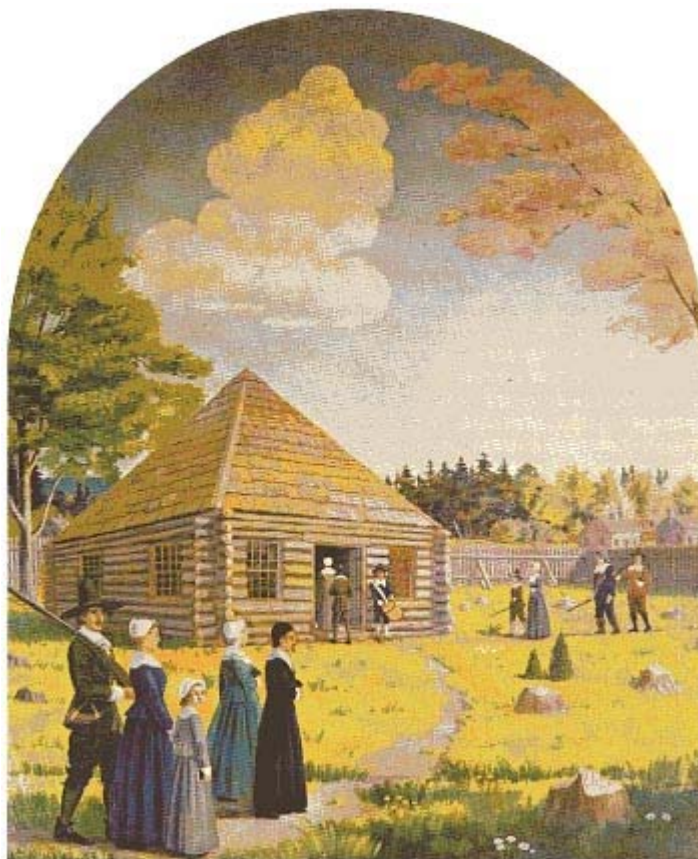
- No one shall run on the Sabbath day, or walk in his garden or elsewhere, except reverently to and from meeting.
- No one shall travel, cook victuals, make beds, sweep house, cut hair, or shave, on the Sabbath day.
- No one shall read Common-Prayer, [keep Christmas](#) or saints-days, make minced pies, dance, play cards, or play on any instrument of music, except the drum, trumpet, and the Jews-harp.
- Adultery shall be punished by death.



Instructions for colonists in New Haven, Conn., drafted in 1655 and published in London in 1656 became known as blue laws.

In her 1909 book, "[The Sabbath in Puritan New England](#)," historian Alice Morse Earle documented "lists of arrests and fines for walking and travelling unnecessarily on the Sabbath," regarded here from Saturday evening to Sunday evening:

A Maine man who was rebuked and fined for "unseemly walking" on the Lord's Day protested that he ran to save a man from drowning. The Court made him pay his fine, but ordered that the money should be returned to him when he could prove by witnesses that he had been on that errand of mercy and duty. As late as the year 1831, in Lebanon, Conn., a lady journeying to her father's home was arrested within sight of her father's house for unnecessary travelling on the Sabbath; and a long and fiercely contested lawsuit was the result, and damages were finally given for false imprisonment.



Spring of 1642: Puritan settlers in New England observe the Sabbath on Sunday, Courtesy the Stamford Historical Society, Stamford, Conn.

Christians observing the Sabbath on Saturday also spread throughout America, but in fewer numbers than Sunday-keepers.

The teachings of the Seventh Day Baptists are said to be instrumental in the founding of the [Seventh-day Adventist Church](#) – which claims a [membership today of 15 million](#) – and the [Church of God \(Seventh Day\)](#) – which boasts more than 200 congregations in the U.S. and Canada and a [worldwide fellowship](#) of more than 300,000.

Other Christians promoting Saturday rest include [many offshoots of the Worldwide Church of God](#), such as the [United Church of God](#), [Living Church of God](#), [Church of God International](#), [Philadelphia Church of God](#) and [Intercontinental Church of God](#).

Messianic Jews, including Dallas-based [Zola Levitt Ministries](#), are also seventh-day proponents.

Some Sabbatarians, such as Richard Ames of the Living Church of God, produce TV shows like "Tomorrow's World," asking, "[Which day is the Christian Sabbath?](#)"

On one program, Ames points to Luke 4:16 in the Bible and says, "It was Jesus' regular custom to worship on the Sabbath, and since that time, and centuries before, the Jewish community has very carefully documented their observance of the seventh-day Sabbath, Saturday. In other words, history demonstrates that time has not been lost, that the seven-day cycle has been accurately recorded to this day."

In [another episode](#), Ames' colleague, Roderick C. Meredith, calls Sunday observance "the most flagrant error of mainstream Christianity" and "the most obvious deception of all."

"Do you realize that this deception is blinding millions of people from knowing God?" asks Meredith.

Despite such rhetoric, many Catholic and Protestant Sunday-keepers reject Sabbath-keeping on Saturday.



Greg Laurie

Greg Laurie, a [WND columnist](#) and senior pastor of [Harvest Christian Fellowship](#) in Riverside, Calif., one of the eight largest Protestant churches in America, maintains it's wrong for Christians to observe Saturday, claiming Jesus and the apostles never taught anyone to keep the Sabbath. He says it's the only one of the Ten Commandments not specifically repeated in the New Testament.

"Of all the New Testament lists of sins, 'breaking the Sabbath' is never mentioned," Laurie said. "That is because it was given to the Jews, not the non-Jews."

Back in Florida, Sunday-keeper Roger Felipe thinks God is not overly concerned with the Sabbath issue.

"Paul is very clear that we Christians don't use [one particular day] as a determining factor if someone is right with God," Felipe said.

At the same time, though, the minister supports the idea of resting one day each week to stay on track with God.

"Humanity has forsaken the importance of Sabbath rest," he said. "God desires us to be renewed spiritually. We should observe a day ... to be consecrated and to be devoted to God, to be renewed and refreshed. In terms of affecting the human quality of life, it would do us very well to observe a Sabbath rest."

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