

WHY THE CHURCH DECIDED AS IT DID

Why has the Church in the Pacific decided that in some island nations close to the equator, Sabbath should be observed on Sunday? There are a number of reasons for this, not least of which is its commitment to the Sabbath and to the Lord of the Sabbath. As Adventists we have historically recognized the Sabbath as sanctified time, and that the sequence of days has not changed until recent times when governments have made changes that suit their individual economies. The church values its history, recognizing that in the Pacific, Adventists have consistently worshipped on the same seventh day. It is important to recognise that the Sabbath is determined by sunset as it moves over the land.

a) Commitment to the Sabbath

The Church's commitment to the Sabbath can be understood in at least four ways. First, from the Creation account; second, as embedded in the Ten Commandments; third, by the way the OT prophets spoke of it; and fourth, how Jesus magnified it.

1. The Sabbath was God's final act of Creation. Note the verbs used to describe God's creation of the Sabbath:

²And on the seventh day God **ended** His work which He had done, and He **rested** on the seventh day from all His work which He had **done**. ³Then God **blessed** the seventh day and **sanctified** it, because in it He **rested** from all His work which God had **created** and **made**.
(Gen. 2:2, 3)

To have so many verbs in one sentence is unusual in Scripture. It highlights that the Sabbath did not just come about by default, but was as much a part of the action of creation as the previous six days. It is also important to notice the role of the sun, created on the fourth day:

to divide the day from the night (Gen. 1:14)

to rule the day (Gen. 1:16)

Therefore the setting of the sun (and not the moon, as some are trying to suggest) defines the bounds of the seventh day —

"... From even to even you shall keep your Sabbath" Lev. 23:32 (NASB)—not just the Sabbath and the special feast days. All days are to be defined in this way.

2. The Ten Commandments also are an integral part of the Church's recognition of the Sabbath. The commandments were in fact given twice—first at Sinai weeks

after escaping from Egypt, and again on the plains of Moab, weeks before crossing the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. When the Sabbath command was proclaimed on Mount Sinai the reason given was because God is the Creator (Exod. 20:8–11). However on the plains of Moab, just before crossing the River Jordan a different reason was given—“because God redeemed you from slavery” (Deut. 5: 12–15). It was the same command, but two very different reasons were given for two very different generations. One generation needed to know of the all-powerful Creator God who created all the natural forces worshipped by the Egyptians. Their children, a generation later, needed to hear about a God who redeemed people from slavery, gave them value, and empowered them to govern themselves who had no previous experience of self-rulership.

3. The way the prophets dealt with the Sabbath is crucial. Not only was the desecration of the Sabbath pinpointed as the reason for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile (Jer. 17:27; Neh. 13:15–18) but also honouring the Sabbath was shown to be the basis for restoration and covenant renewal (Isa. 56:1–8). Jesus brought this out in His first public appearance in the synagogue. It is not surprising therefore that when the prophets mentioned the Sabbath they pointed forward to the work of Messiah (Isa. 58:6–14).

4. Neither is it surprising that Jesus magnified the Sabbath. This is best seen in the seven Sabbath miracles:

- Paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:1–18)
- Demoniac in Capernaum synagogue (Mk 1:21–28)
- Peter’s mother-in-law (Mk 1:29–31)
- Man with a withered hand (Mk 1:29–31)
- Man born blind (Jn 9)
- Woman with bent back (Lk 13:10–17)
- Man with dropsy (Lk 14:1–6)

These miracles in no way lessened the value of the Sabbath; instead they revealed its true value in the salvation of humanity. Therefore Jesus is recognised as Lord of the Sabbath (Mk 2:27, 28).

b) Sanctified TIME – the SEVENTH day

The Sabbath is described in very different terms than the other days. Each of the other days of Creation are described in a similar way: “the evening and the morning

were the first day,” “second day,” “third day,” and so on. The different description of the seventh day shows its specialness—its holiness. It is described in a different way, not because the physical parameters are any different to the previous six days, but to draw attention to its uniqueness among the other days.

It is this distinction that explains the meaning of the word “sanctified.” Something that is sanctified is separated from the ordinary—it becomes very special. In other words, the Sabbath is not just another day—and it is God who decides that, not governments or human traditions.

c) The sequence of days changed

When people in Samoa woke up on the day after 29 December, 2011, what day was it? When the sun set at the end of that day, what was the day-count up to? This conundrum has raised a number of very creative explanations, all of which beg the question, “What is a day and how is it measured?” There have been some very interesting definitions in the discussions, but it is safer to stick with Biblical definitions.

The Bible measures a day from evening to evening (Lev 23:32). That seems clear. But Jesus is even more specific: “Are there not twelve hours of daylight?” (John 11:9 NIV). The sun rose and set on those days as it always had, and people actually living there could easily count the days. The important point was that the sequencing of the name of the days was changed, not the actual rising and setting of the sun. And the Bible determines the Sabbath by the rising and setting of the sun, not the sequencing of names assigned to days.

d) History –consistent Sabbath worship

The first Europeans in the region assumed all island nations across the Pacific and in fact around the world shared the same day. There was no concept of a date line. Early (and mistaken) assumptions were corrected with the introduction of the dateline and its placement down the middle of the Pacific. The all-encompassing day assumed by the early traders and missionaries is not the “pure original” that some have claimed. It had to be corrected—and it was—by countries east of the dateline. All Adventist pioneers crossing the Pacific have respected that correction and all Adventists in the Pacific along that sunset line have consistently kept the same seventh day holy.

e) Sabbath determined by the sunset

The sun sets along a natural line, and that line is not arbitrarily bent. In contrast, the dateline looks nothing like the line of the setting sun. This is especially important when countries along the same lines of longitude are at the mercy of a convoluted and changing dateline that would put them into different days of the week. How could countries of similar longitude worship on two separate days? Midway Island, Niue and American Samoa all share the same longitudinal space as Samoa, and the recent change puts Samoa as the odd man out. The recent dateline change in Samoa means that Adventists in Samoa would worship on a day different to their surrounding neighbours, and that is simply not acceptable. On a round world, there is only one seventh day each week, and all countries need to recognise that divine pattern.

CONCLUSION

Nobody asked for this situation to be thrust upon us. The Church is endeavouring to chart a way forward for our people in response to a situation in Samoa in particular that came with almost no warning, and become law in less than five months. Either “option” is uncomfortable, but the church had to make a decision.

1. When God gave us the Sabbath, He blessed and sanctified time—a 24-hour period of time which He called us to “remember” in the fourth commandment.
2. Seventh-day Adventists believe that the integrity of the Sabbath has been preserved from the time of creation until the present.
3. The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Samoa has worshipped on the same 24-hour period of “blessed and sanctified” time since the Church came to Samoa.
4. The 24-hour period of “blessed and sanctified” time (as determined by the sun) has, since 30th December 2011, become Sunday in Samoa.
5. Nowhere does the Bible use the names “Saturday” and “Sunday” to name the days of the week. It only uses the numbers of the days of the week to name those days. The Sabbath (seventh-day) and the Preparation Day (sixth day) were the only exceptions.
6. All Seventh-day Adventists in the Pacific nations east of the 180th meridian worship on the same 24-hour “blessed and sanctified” time—the seventh-day Sabbath. In some places that day is called Saturday and in some places it is called Sunday.

7. Because time is determined as the sun appears to travel across the land, it follows that the same day of the week should be determined along the natural sun-set line.

FINALLY

A concern about future events should not override obedience to Jesus now. Just as Abraham completely trusted God when asked to sacrifice his son, (even though it seemed to contradict the Law of God), God's people now need to trust God with a similar test before His soon return. It may seem wrong to worship on Sunday, but that human logic cannot deny the reality of obedience now. We are asked to remember the seventh day, so we cannot fiddle with the facts and fudge the numbers to fit in with a Saturday-sacredness theory. God has asked us to worship every seventh day, and that is what we will continue to do.

Jesus is coming soon, and we need to focus on telling the world about Jesus' soon return. Maybe God has given this struggle to the church to help us see how unready we are for the Second Coming.