

1 Corinthians 16:1-2

Pastor: 1 Corinthians 16:2: The early Christians met on the first day of the week, a clear abolishment of the Jewish Sabbath.

“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the [assemblies] of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come.”

Throughout most contemporary Christian examination, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 has been assumed to provide a First Century, New Testament testimony (frequently in association with traditional interpretations of other passages: i.e., Acts 20:7; Revelation 1:10), to an early observance of Sunday as the time for the Messiah followers to gather for worship, prayer, and teaching.¹ The wider context in which Paul’s statement, “On the first of the week let each one of you put aside and store it up” (PME), appears, concerns the Apostle’s collection for the Jerusalem Believers (1 Corinthians 16:3-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Romans 15:25-27). Paul wants the offerings to be put aside on the first of the week.

Commentators tend to be relatively uniform about 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 being a reference to what would develop into the tradition of Sunday church services.² A standard conclusion reached regarding Paul’s direction for offerings, to be put aside on the first of the week, is that this reflects how the early Believers in Yeshua gave the first day of the week, or Sunday, an importance because of Yeshua’s resurrection. (This writer believes that it was the empty tomb actually found on Sunday morning; see examination of Mark 16:1; Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1 in the *Messianic Sabbath Helper*.) Some of the commentators quoted below, do think that Sunday observance was something distinct and different from the Sabbath, while others think that Sunday was regarded as a new Sabbath:

- Leon Morris: “As distinct from the Jewish sabbath, the first day was a weekly commemoration of the resurrection of the Lord, which indicates the importance the Christians attached to the event.”³
- Gordon D. Fee: “The fact that Paul makes such a reference at all implies that there is some significance to their setting money aside on *this day* rather than, for example, ‘once a week.’...[This] implies that this is the day when believers from a very early time gathered for their specifically Christian celebration of worship...”⁴
- Ben Witherington III: “[T]he money was to be set aside by each individual Christian and then collected at each home on the first day of the week, that is, Sunday. We have evidence here that the day of religious duty and worship for the Christian, even in Paul’s time, was Sunday, not the Jewish sabbath.”⁵
- Marion L. Soards: “Although there is no way to be certain, the mention of **the first day of the week** probably indicates that the Christians in Corinth had developed the practice of meeting on Sunday, which became the Christian Sabbath, recalling the day on which Jesus was resurrected. Should this be Paul’s assumption in making this remark, this is the earliest mention of the practice of Christian Sunday worship.”⁶

In the debate over the post-resurrection era continuance of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, it needs to be recognized how most Christian people who afford special religious and spiritual significance to the first day of the week or Sunday, do so on the basis of passages like 1 Corinthians 16:2. **They do not**

¹ This entry has been adapted from the *Messianic Sabbath Helper*.

² W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 10:293.

³ Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 324.

⁴ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, pp 813, 814.

⁵ Witherington, *1-2 Corinthians*, 315.

⁶ Soards, 360.

associate the first day of the week with First or Second Century Christianity somehow adopting pagan practices. As David E. Garland asserts in his commentary, “Paul appears to avoid the heathen term ‘Sunday.’”⁷

It is misplaced to focus one’s deliberations on the first day of the week perhaps also being a day of pagan reverence. A Bible reader’s focus instead needs to be how we should approach what “first of the week” meant to a First Century Jew like Paul, writing to a mixed group of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Ancient Corinth. Generally speaking, it is recognized that it was not until the mid-Second Century C.E. that observance of the seventh-day Sabbath had been widely superseded by Sunday activities. Anthony C. Thiselton thinks,

“How quickly the full principle of Sabbath observance was actually *replaced* by **Sunday**...is disputed...The replacement of the Jewish Sabbath by the Christian *Lord’s Day*, *first day*, or **Sunday**, has...begun to be *in process* within the New Testament period, although the evidence is not decisive before the second century.”⁸

The closest parallel with 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 is Acts 20:7, which interpreters have debated as involving either a Roman or Jewish reckoning of hours, the latter making “first of the week” a Saturday evening fellowship time that extended into Sunday. While examiners of Acts 20:7 (previously addressed) will frequently acknowledge the possibility of how “first of the week” might be Saturday evening, and not a Sunday evening gathering—they are not at all prone to mention this possibility for 1 Corinthians 16:1-2.

Paul’s intention here is not to make any sort of statement on the nature of *when* the Corinthians conduct congregational business; Paul’s intention is that the Corinthians *regularly accumulate funds* for the poor in Jerusalem: “On the first day of the week, let each of you set something aside, saving up whatever is gained, so no collections take place when I come” (1 Corinthians 16:2, TLV). This is a free will offering for the Jerusalem Believers (cf. Deuteronomy 15:14; 16:10, 17), “a sum of money in keeping with [the] income” (NIV) of each of the Believers.

Paul’s intention in gathering up this collection was to insure unity and interdependence between the Believers in Judea and those in the wider Mediterranean basin. Paul’s Jerusalem collection is often compared to being associated with Tanach expectations of the wealth of the nations streaming to Zion (i.e., Isaiah 45:14; 61:6; Micah 4:13; cf. Tobit 13:11; 1QM 12.13-15). Paul would later observe to the Corinthians how, “at this present time your abundance *being a supply* for their need, so that their abundance also may become *a supply* for your need, that there may be equality” (2 Corinthians 8:13). He would also state in Romans 15:27, “For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.”

That this collection would take place at the designated time of, “the first of the week,” was intended to make sure that it was done in an orderly manner, with the funds presumably held in a congregational treasury. Paul’s collection for the Jerusalem poor (cf. Acts 11:29) was not just some spur of the moment appeal to raise money; this offering was actually a specific “fundraising” event over the long term, where he would later take the monies to Jerusalem for personal delivery (Acts 24:17).

So when was *kata mian sabbatou hekastos* (κατὰ μίαν σαββάτου ἑκαστος), which most Bibles render as “On the first day of every week”? This cause notably does lack the term *hēmera* (ἡμέρα) or “day,” making “first of the week” better. And, Thiselton makes the valid linguistic point of how “σαββάτου [*sabbatou*] more usually occurs in the plural to denote week (as in Mark 16:2), but sometimes the singular form is used elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Luke 18:12, νηστεύω δις τοῦ σαββάτου [*nēsteuō dis tou sabbatou*], *I fast twice a week*).”⁹

⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 753.

⁸ Thiselton, pp 1322, 1323.

⁸ Ibid., 1322 makes reference to Second Century Christian materials that do afford first day of the week as Sunday a special status (*Didache* 14:1; *Ignatius Letter to the Magnesians* 9:1; also *Gospel of Peter* 35:50; *Irenaeus Fragments* 7).

This has been evaluated of Chapter 4 of the *Messianic Sabbath Helper*, “How Did We Lose the Sabbath?” by J.K. McKee.

⁹ Ibid., 1321.

Frank S. Thielman notes in the *ESV Study Bible* how this has been customarily taken as “A Jewish expression for Sunday.”¹⁰ And indeed, “Every Sunday” (NEB/REB, *NIGTC*¹¹) or “On *Sunday*, the first day of the week” (The Voice), are the paraphrased alternatives one will find for *mian sabbatou*. Craig S. Keener’s thoughts on 1 Corinthians 16:2 are about as far as any Christian examiner may go, however, in expressing some doubt as to whether the beginnings of Sunday Church are actually in view here:

“That the believers set aside resources on the first day of each week (16:2) may suggest Sunday services (cf. Acts 20:7) or a connection with the resurrection (Mk 16:2), but need not do so. It might instead emphasize setting aside the Lord’s offering first (cf. Ex 23:16; Lev 27:26), because most working believers worked and earned money daily, excepting Jewish believers on the Sabbath; believers had to meet in the evenings (cf. 11:23; *deipnon* in 11:20-21) or early morning, before work (Pliny *Ep.* 10.96). (Certainly the idea of Sunday as a ‘new Sabbath’ is a later development; cf. Ignatius *Magn.* 9.1; *Barn.* 15.8).”¹²

Messianic Jewish theologian David H. Stern is broadly alone in approaching “first of the week” not as being Sunday, but instead the time on Saturday evening that closes *Shabbat*. As 1 Corinthians 16:2 appears in his Complete Jewish Bible, “Every week, on *Motza’ei-Shabbat*, each of you should set some money aside, according to his resources, and save it up; so that when I come I won’t have to do fundraising.” *Motza’ei Shabbat* (מוֹצַאֵי שַׁבָּת), often involving the traditions and customs associated with *Havdallah* (הַבְּדִילָה), formally closes off the Sabbath at sundown on Saturday. In his *Jewish New Testament* commentary on 1 Corinthians 16:2, Stern raises the points,

“The Hebrew expression means, literally, ‘departure of the Sabbath’; it signifies Saturday night. It translates the Greek phrase which means, literally, ‘every one of a week,’ that is, every first day of the week. The question is: does this refer to Saturday night or to Sunday?”¹³

Stern offers six reasons for “first of the week” in 1 Corinthians 16:2 being Saturday evening, what he labels as “*Motza’ei-Shabbat*.” The most significant ones, in this writer’s view, include the points:

- “In the Jewish calendar, days commence at sundown, so that the ‘first day of the week’ refers to any time between sunset Saturday and sunset Sunday.”¹⁴
- “In the early days of the Messianic Community, Jewish believers continued to observe *Shabbat* as a day of rest and met for Messianic worship in the evening after it was over.”¹⁵
- “Sunday could not have been regularly celebrated by the early Jewish believers as *Shabbat* or as a *yom tov* (‘festival,’ literally, ‘good day’) because, since Judaism prohibits handling of money on such days, Sha’ul would never have suggested taking up a collection then to a congregation with Jews in it.”¹⁶

Noting the usage of the term *sabbaton* (σάββατον) for “week,” a Jewish-influenced Greek term via the Hebrew *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת)¹⁷—and perhaps in contradistinction to the more classical term *hebdomas* (ἑβδομάς), used by Aristotle to represent “a period of seven days” (*LS*)¹⁸—J. Paul Sampley interestingly concludes, “From such nomenclature of days, we see how completely socialized these gentiles were to the whole sense that they belonged to the family of God, whose roots are traceable directly to the people of Israel.”¹⁹

It is reasonable to conclude that the collection that the Apostle Paul wanted the Messiah followers like the Corinthians to gather for the Jerusalem Believers, took place on “the first of the week” or the Saturday evening that would close *Shabbat*. This would be a time when the Believers—many of whom could fully

¹⁰ Frank S. Thielman, “The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians,” in Wayne Grudem, ed., *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2216; also Shira Lander, “The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 313.

¹¹ Thiselton, 1316.

¹² Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, 136.

¹³ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 490.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 491.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ While widely designating the weekly Sabbath, the Hebrew term *Shabbat* can, in various contexts, mean “week” (*Jastrow*, 1520).

¹⁸ *LS*, 220.

¹⁹ Sampley, in *NIB*, 10:996.

observe the Sabbath as a time of rest and spiritual reflection (and others, dependent on their social conditions, as best as their circumstances permitted)—could then begin the new week, with the distinct impression of how much their brothers and sisters in Messiah, in Judea, needed their help. The time of *Motza'ei-Shabbat* would then be suitable for financial activities to transpire, with the Sabbath an inappropriate time to conduct such business.

Most importantly, to be sure, is how 1 Corinthians 16:2 and “first of the week” need not at all indicate that the seventh-day Sabbath has been abolished. As Skip MacCarty astutely concludes in *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views*, “It seems to us that God would hardly have chosen such an oblique vehicle as an offering appeal to announce the annulment of the sanctity of the day He sovereignly chose to bless and sanctify at creation, and embedded in the heart of the Ten Commandments.”²⁰

²⁰ Skip MacCarty, “The Seventh-Day Sabbath,” in Christopher John Donato, ed., *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 35.