



Basic Doctrines: Finding a Church

iFOLLOW

Walking with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series

About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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www.ifollowdiscipleship.org

Basic Doctrines: Finding a Church

This material is designed to help you communicate with a person or persons who have recently become followers of Jesus and now need to join a church.

Learning Objectives

1. To discover good reasons for joining a church
2. To look at why someone might choose your church
3. To see the options available
4. Self-examination: to see why you are here

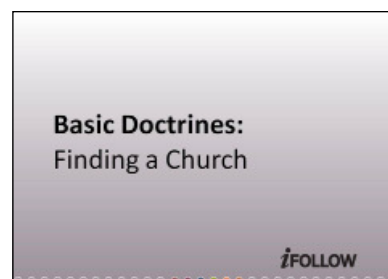
Content Outline

1. How much choice is there?
2. Emotion versus doctrine: Where is the Spirit?
3. The Bible is a safe bet
4. Wiggle room: how much room is there for interpretation?
5. Is there a true church?

Background Material for the Presenter

For many of us, the church is already chosen! Either our parents were our denomination or we chose the church ourselves and now are members. But think about the person who does not belong to a church. If you were in their place and began to think about choosing a church, how would you go about doing so?

There are a lot of choices out there. Handout One gives a short list of different denominations, but under each of these denominational headings there are many different subgroups that are not listed. For example, in the category "Baptist" there are nearly 100 denominations, such as Bible Baptists, Old Time Missionary Baptists, Sovereign Grace Baptists, Old Regular Baptists and Southeast Conservative Baptists, to name a few. The same is true for most of the other categories, Methodists, Presbyterians,



Catholics, Lutherans and Pentecostals. Each differs from the others in some practice or doctrinal stance. There are literally thousands of options available to us when shopping for a church. It's a little overwhelming!

So how do we cull through the choices? Some people look for a church based on locality to their home. For example, one woman says, "For an entire year I attended a church because it was literally around the corner from my house. Did I believe in their doctrines? Not many of them. Did I particularly like the people there? No! I was alarmed when I actually ran into one of them and they asked me to help out in the service. I just wanted a church to go to where I could slip into the back pew, have some churchy ambiance, and be alone with my prayers."

Many people choose a denomination because their parents raised them in that faith. Traditionally, churches have been chosen for doctrinal reasons. But whether you select a church to avoid a long commute or for other reasons, will it keep you coming back? Will it make a difference in how you live your life?

While we know that there are hundreds of options when it comes to church shopping, how much choice do we really have? I mean, using a church for a quiet, cool place to pray on a summer afternoon isn't exactly the kind of "choosing" that we are talking about. We are looking at how to choose a family, a fellowship where you can participate, be in agreement and belong. So when looking for this kind of church, how much choice is there really? From all of the different denominational movements, from all of the different doctrinal stances and emphases, from all the different congregations to choose from, how many are likely to be a good fit for you?

Pedigree often factors into the choice of church. When your family has attended one church for generations, there is a lot of pressure to continue attending that church. Perhaps family members put on the pressure for you to keep up appearances, or perhaps you know everyone there and there is comfort in staying under the shade of the family tree. If your cultural heritage is linked to a particular tradition, such as Mennonite or Amish, there is a temptation to choose a church where you feel you belong culturally. But is that enough?

Often, when searching for a church, we discover conflicting attributes in particular denominations or even within congregations. For example, a young adult might be drawn to a Pentecostal Assembly, looking for other young adults. However, the individual might be quite conservative and speaking in tongues may turn them off. Some characteristics or doctrines of a particular denomination might appeal while others do not. The search for a church just got more complicated.

The point of finding a church to join is not only to find a place to feel comfortable, to find a congregation that will accept you. The point of finding a church is to find a place where you can experience Him most fully and grow into His purpose for your life. That is

a daunting challenge. How can you find such a place? How do you know when you've found it? How do you even start the search?

I'm not going to tell you the answer to these questions. I'm not going to tell you that the Adventist church is the answer you've been looking for. But I can tell you this: if the right church for you is the one where you can find God's purpose for your life, then just any church where the service is lively and the people are nice will not do. There may be a lot of churches to choose from, but the choice narrows rapidly when you ask God to guide you and seriously commit to finding His future for you.

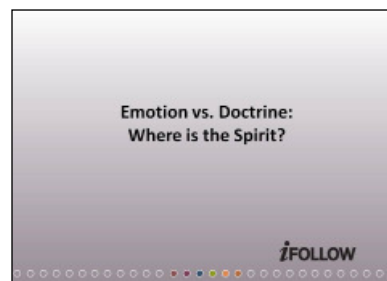
The only One who can guide you to the right church is God. Only He knows where you belong and only He can lead you there. So ultimately, is there a large and shiny menu of churches to choose from? Well, if the Holy Spirit is leading you, then there is only one choice, to follow the Spirit!

Emotion vs. Doctrine: Where is the Spirit?

So you've been doing some church shopping, looking around and attending some services. You picked up brochures for visitors. You've asked a few questions of the greeting teams. You've seen some congregations you think you like. How do you know when you've arrived?

"I will feel it," you might say. "I will know when I see it." But what is it that you feel, exactly? Is it a feeling of comfort around socially compatible people? Is it a feeling of companionship around friendly people? Is it a feeling of contentment in an atmosphere that is appropriate to your tastes regarding music or the level of formality or the order of service? Or, is the Holy Spirit actually speaking to you?

Feelings can be an important "gut reaction." Baseball provides an illustration. The distance from home plate to the pitcher's box is 60 feet and six inches. The bases are 15 inches square and are spaced out 90 feet apart. The baseball weighs five ounces and is nine inches in circumference. The bat is a solid wooden piece, not more than 2.75 inches in diameter at the thickest part, and not longer than 42 inches. If the pitcher can throw the ball at 90 miles per hour it takes half a second to reach the plate. The normal human reaction time is two-tenths of a second. So when the major league batter eyes the pitcher, sees him wind up, and then must choose to swing, step back, bunt or let it go, he makes a decision almost instantaneously. However, that instinctive decision is made based on many measurements and known facts. The batter does not tell you that he logically thought the process through, did some math in his head, pondered his options then made a solid decision. No, the batter reacts in a split second and works entirely on instinct. (See infoplease.com and exploratorium.edu on the Web for the source of the technical details above.)



So a “feeling” about a church could be the subconscious accumulation of facts and observations that by-passed the logical decision making part of the brain and went straight to that instinctive feeling. Or, from a more spiritual perspective, that “feeling” about a church could be the whisper of the Holy Spirit, speaking in that still, small voice. God created our amazing brains that absorb and respond to information faster than we are consciously aware, and He uses it to speak to us if we let Him. But are feelings always reliable? Is it possible to have some red herrings?

There may be times when your feelings delude you. For example, when you know that you should do something, but don't feel like it. Or, when it is more comfortable to stay where you are than to step out in faith. I am not suggesting that when we get that “this is wrong” feeling that we should ever go against it. However, we might get a “this is right” feeling, and be entirely wrong! Part of it might be right, but we might be missing a major piece of the puzzle if we aren't able to look at things objectively before making a solid decision.

Decisions cannot always be made emotionally. Recent research has shown that the human brain uses conflicting areas of the brain to make decisions: the logical part and the emotional part. (National Institutes of Health) A logical decision might be to save for the future. An emotional decision might be to buy something now for immediate gratification. Emotions might not always be steered by the Holy Spirit, and they might steer us wrong. If a church tends to be filled with people in our age bracket or socio-economic level, we might feel more comfortable. But is this enough to choose a church on? Is uniformity that is aligned to our preferences the same as the presence of the Holy Spirit?

The Bible says to search God's Word “precept upon precept, line upon line.” (Isaiah 28:10) This text suggests that searching for a church should be just as methodical. Acts tells us about a group of people who used a responsible mix of emotion and logic: “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.” (Acts 17:11) They were excited about the message, so their emotions were definitely engaged. However, they didn't stop there. They investigated the very thing that excited them before accepting it.

If we agree that emotions can deceive us, then what should we base our decision on? Emotion, of course, should not be ignored. Our emotions tell us a lot about certain aspects of life. However, our emotional experience must be backed up by our logical experience. And what logical foundation is necessary?

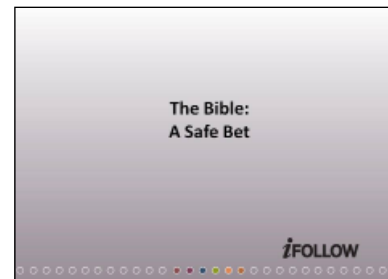
Many people believe that the logical, doctrinal platform of an organized church does not matter so much as “the Spirit moving” within the congregation. This sets them up for dangerous disappointment. Waves of emotion do not necessarily denote the presence of God. In fact, Christian evangelists have used the emotions of their audience to send in money, then misused the funds for their own affluent lifestyles. (Belle) When the foundation of a church is based on one idea from the Bible (such as the “prosperity gospel”) but

not founded on the entire Word of God, the positive emotional experience of the parishioners could be misleading.

So how important is doctrine when looking for a church? Doctrines define a church's approach to Scripture and its belief structure. If a church believes that the parishioners should be lining the pockets of the minister in order for God to hear their prayers, then you should be highly suspicious! But when the church's belief system can be logically laid out for examination and when the doctrines reflect the Bible honestly, then your decision is based on something more substantial than a feeling. It is based on a foundation that was built "line upon line, precept upon precept" from the Word of God.

The Bible: A Safe Bet

As followers of Jesus the Bible is our primary communication from God. However, not all Christians and churches take the Bible literally. Some say it is highly symbolic, with broad ideals and parables, but not to be taken as a straightforward document. Another unit covers why the Bible is reliable, for our purposes here it is important to note that if a church takes a high view of Scripture it will encourage its members to study the Bible themselves and use the Bible in making practical decisions in their own lives and in the life of the congregation.



It is a mistake for a church to make Bible study so mysterious that it is of no use to the believer. For example, if the Ten Commandments were not meant to be taken literally, but are simply social codes that helped to smooth the living conditions of a large number of people living together, then are Christians to conclude that stealing is not wrong?

If Jesus was simply a "good man" as many people claim, then what difference does He make to humanity? Why should we even consider being Christians? Such an approach to the story of Jesus in the Bible leaves us with only two options and both of them suggest an existence that is pointless. If Jesus claimed to be the Son of God when, in fact, He was not, then either He was deluded or He was lying. What kind of universe is it that has a God who is delusional or one who lies to us on such basic matters? What sense does it make to be part of a Christian church and then cut the foundation out from under that faith by an approach to the Bible that nullifies it as the Word of God?

If Jesus did not die for our sins, then the hope that pervades the entire Bible is a hoax and we can have no confidence that there will be anything beyond this life at all. If the claim that Jesus died for our sins is a lie and we claim to believe that Jesus existed and that there is a God, then we have no proof that God is good in any way, because we have already been lied to on a very large count!

The Christian life does not guarantee us “the most” out of life on earth. It involves sacrificing, putting others ahead of ourselves and fighting our baser desires. If we are simply on this earth to live once; if God doesn’t really love us like His children, but instead has a distant interest in us (like a person with an ant farm); then there is no reason to live by principles of compassion and justice. We might as well take whatever we can for ourselves before we die. Why not just look out for Number One and make the most for ourselves? In fact, with ground cut out from under us, why bother with life? Suicide or slow self-destruction both become logical alternatives.

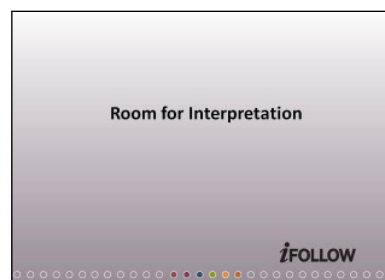
The Bible must be taken as the Word of God or else all hope is gone, all humanity disappears. As Christians who have experienced God, who know that God exists and cares for us, how can we set aside the Bible and only take the parts to our liking? If this is God’s Word, then we must take it seriously and do our best to follow “all that I have taught you.” (Matthew 28:20)

If we are going to take the Bible seriously and believe it to be the straight-forward Word of God and not some kind of fantasy, then we must find a church that does the same thing! Basing our faith just on our own ideas ignores the will of God. But when we base our beliefs on the Bible as the Word of God, we are allowing God to speak to us and to shape our lives.

Therefore, in our search for a church, finding a church that follows the Bible, studies the Bible, respects the Bible and accepts it as the true Word of God is of utmost importance. Nothing can be more fundamental than finding a church that brings us closer to God by helping us to hear Him through Scripture.

Room for Interpretation

Almost all Christian churches base their beliefs on the Bible to a greater or lesser extent. No one says, “Oh, we just do that because it seems appropriate. It’s not Biblical, at all.” So all churches believe that what they do is based on Bible principles. They simply interpret the Bible differently than do others. How much room is there for different interpretations?



There are many differing doctrines between denominations, and all of them, even the opposing ones, are based on the Bible. So how are you supposed to sift through all of these? And does it matter which ones you choose? If they are all based on the Bible, what does it matter anyway? Is it possible for all of them to be right? There are many contradictory doctrines held by various denominations, far too many to list here and now.

Logically, two doctrines that contradict each other cannot both be right. Jesus cannot come with trumpets and shouts that wake the dead and also come silently and sneak His people off the earth. We cannot go immediately to heaven or hell when we die and also rest in our graves until the resurrection. It is not possible for both to be true. Therefore one doctrine must be mistaken. But how is that possible when both are based on the Bible? How can you tell which is right and which is wrong? How can you tell if they are both wrong?

It is possible to misinterpret a verse in the Bible. Many people have done it in the past. It can happen with the best intentions. How can we, being fallible human beings, know which interpretations are right, which are wrong, and which hold some truth but confuse the total picture?

The only way to find the truth is by study. It is easy to jump to a conclusion based on one text, but when you take all of the texts that pertain to a topic, lay them all out and examine them, only then can you discern the pattern of God's truth. Two or three texts might seem to point in one direction, but when you gather all of the texts a more detailed picture is revealed.

So how much wiggle room do we have for different interpretations? Well, we are all human and therefore fallible. We would be hypocritical indeed if we looked down on other Christians who also base their beliefs on the Bible, but have not studied all the texts for ourselves. The Bible warns us, "Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings." (Hebrews 13:9) You will undoubtedly be introduced to all kinds of exciting ideas with new appeal, but there is only one truth. We are closest to that truth when we carefully study all of Scripture on the topic. However, it is only by grace alone that we are saved, and it is only by His grace that we have the luxury and ability to study His Word. We must never forget that and get cocky and aloof with other people who believe differently. Nor should we be easily swayed by new teachings. We must demand proof, test that proof and think seriously about our beliefs.

In finding a church, does it not make sense to find a church that does the same? To move ahead clearly in your walk with Jesus it is important to find a church that carefully studies the Bible and does not easily accept either traditional positions or new views on important topics.

Is There a True Church?

We have seen that there are many different churches with varied beliefs, worship styles and structures. Christianity has a long, sorry history of splintering, infighting, debate and disagreement. On many occasions Christians have killed one another in large numbers over theological disagreements. (See *Constantine's Sword* by James Carroll.)



Is there one true religion which you must belong to in order to make sure that you will be saved?

Most North Americans reject this idea, even most Christians of all kinds. In a survey conducted in 2008 by the Pew Research Center seven in ten Americans who are members of some religion agreed that “many religions can lead to eternal life” and “there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of my religion.” Among Protestants two-thirds agreed. A majority of the most conservative Protestants agreed. Nearly two thirds of Seventh-day Adventists agreed. Only Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses among faiths of any significant size disagreed. (Logo, summary, Table 2) In other words the concept of one true church is not an effective way to reach all but a handful of people today in the U.S. Canada is generally more secular than the U.S. and even has a law against making defaming comments about other religions.

Those religions that are interested in evangelism generally no longer make the claim that they are the one true faith that has a monopoly on God’s truth. The Adventist Church has never claimed that only Adventists will be saved, although some individual church members and even preachers have made claims that seem to be very close to this.

What the Adventist Church does teach is that it has a unique role in the history of Christianity which is highlighted in Revelation 12:17: “And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” However, we are not the only church to claim the “remnant” label. If you search “Remnant Church” on the Internet, you come up with The Remnant Fellowship Church, the Remnant Presbyterian Church, the Remnant Westside Church, the Remnant Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and many others.

So in the Bible, there seems to be a group of people that follows God’s commandments and has the “testimony of Jesus.” In the New International Reader’s Version, this verse is translated as follows: “They obey God’s commands and hold firmly to what Jesus has said.” So who does that? Who obeys the commandments? Everyone, you might be tempted to say, but there is one commandment that seems to have slipped away from the vast majority of today’s Christians. That is the fourth commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day.” (Exodus 20:8) Most of Christendom worships on Sunday despite the fact that the first Christians—the ones you read about in the New Testament—celebrated the Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday as remembered by the Jews from the beginning of time. There is no place in the Bible that says that God changed the Sabbath. That is an idea that came along later and evidently for the basest of reasons; anti-Semitism.

So if we find a church that retains the Sabbath, does that make it the remnant church? Being part of the remnant church is more of an individual experience than an institutional one. The remnant, or the people who are left over near the end of the full sweep of the Bible story, keep God’s commandments and hold to what Jesus taught. If you would

like to find an authentic Christian experience then you need to find a group of believers that strives to do just that. A church or fellowship that (1) takes the Bible seriously, (2) tries to follow all ten of God's commandments and (3) hold onto what Jesus taught. And that brings us back to our topic: finding a church.

God is infinitely larger than we are. He is deeper, kinder, more mysterious than we could ever imagine. The realms of the universes, the extent of God's kingdom is so much larger than we can fathom, and so much more intricate than we can ever understand. In our simple, human thinking, we do our best to follow God's way and to keep His commandments. Is it possible for one church on our planet to have all of the truth? And in essence, is there one true church? Does such a thing exist?

That depends on what you are looking for in a "true church." If you are looking for a perfect organization that has no problems, no sinners or broken people, then the answer is no. However, our responsibility is not to find perfection, because that doesn't exist on this sinful world anymore. Instead, our responsibility is to find a church that strives to be what Jesus taught the church should be. Our responsibility is to find a church that tries to follow all God's commandments, take the Bible seriously and have a true relationship with Jesus.

I believe in my search for the "right church for me," I have found the church that comes closest to this standard. I have found a church that follows the Bible and takes it seriously from Genesis through Revelation. I have not found any other church that follows the Bible as closely as this church does. Other people and churches have noted the Adventists' pure adherence to the Bible. For example, a Roman Catholic document states the following:

Perhaps the boldest thing, the most revolutionary change the Church ever did, happened in the first century. The holy day, the Sabbath, was changed from Saturday to Sunday. "The Day of the Lord" (dies Dominica) was chosen, not from any directions noted in the Scriptures, but from the Church's sense of its own power. The day of resurrection, the day of Pentecost, fifty days later, came on the first day of the week. So this would be the new Sabbath. People who think that the Scriptures should be the sole authority, should logically become 7th Day Adventists, and keep Saturday holy." (*Sentinel*)

The *Catholic Universal Bulletin* states: "The Church changed the observance of the Sabbath to Sunday by right of the divine, infallible authority given to her by her founder, Jesus Christ. The Protestant claiming the Bible to be the only guide of faith, has no warrant for observing Sunday. In this matter the Seventh-day Adventist is the only consistent Protestant."

I want to be a part of a "consistent Protestant" church. I want to be a part of an organization that follows the Bible as closely as it can. This church is not perfect because it is made up of imperfect people, but I think that it is the closest church to the truth that we have available in this day and age. Search for yourself and find out if you agree.

Handouts in this Package

1. Christian Denominations
2. Others' Opinions about Seventh-day Adventists



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Discussion Questions

1. What are the best reasons for choosing a church? What are the worst reasons for choosing a church? Why?
2. How much do you think God uses our feelings to speak to us?
3. What might be some early warning signs that a church may not be as Bible based as it claims?
4. If we are a Bible based church, are there areas that we have traditionally left alone where we could be more true to the Bible?
5. Is there one true church or is the true church a group of people belonging to many diverse organizations?
6. Whether you were born into the church or were converted at a later date, what are your personal reasons for belonging to this church?

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Group Activity

Purpose: To help the group see other denominations as sincere, loving people who are doing their best to follow the Bible. The goal is to destroy some of our arrogant attitudes towards other faiths.

Preparation: Listed below are doctrines held by many churches. Put these on 3x5 cards. You will also need note pads and pencils or pens.

Assignment: Split the class into groups of two or three. Give each group one of the doctrine cards and have them find the scriptural basis for that belief. After they have found the scriptural foundation for that doctrine, have them provide more verses that show a different, perhaps more encompassing view of the doctrine.

Debrief: After discussing each topic as a class, here are some questions to think about: Can you better understand the positions of other faiths in regards to these doctrines? Is it fair of us to look down on other believers who base their faith on the Bible, even if they don't yet see the full picture?

Time: Allow 15 minutes for the small groups to find Bible materials that support or further refine the doctrine they are assigned. Allow at least 30 minutes for reports from the small groups and general discussion.

Common doctrines:

1. Sunday Sabbath
2. An eternally burning hell
3. Spirits visit us from beyond the grave
4. There is no such thing as forbidden food
5. God's blessing is on the wealthy; if you have faith you will be monetarily rich
6. A seven-year tribulation
7. The rapture
8. The Church has authority to pronounce people saved or lost

Handout 1

Christian Denominations

Anglican
Episcopal
Lutheran
Presbyterian
Catholic
United Church of Christ
Apostolic Christian
Mennonites
Church of the Nazarene
Church of God
Bible Fellowship
Missionary Church
Evangelical Free
Seventh Day Baptists
Plymouth Brethren
Pentecostal
Calvary Chapel
Charismatic Church of God
Bible Christian Mission
Seventh-day Adventist
House of Yahweh
United Fellowship
Children of God
Latter Day Saints
Church of Christ, Scientist

Church of England
Moravian
Christian Reformed
United Church
Orthodox
Amish
Hutterites
Methodist
Wesleyan
Church of Christ
Harmony Society
Salvation Army
Baptists
Catholic Apostolic Church
Apostolic Assemblies of Christ
New Life Church
The Vineyard
New Life Fellowship
Religious Society of Friends-Quakers
United Seventh Day Brethren
Layman's Home Missionary
Jesus Movement
Shakers
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Opinions about the Seventh-day Adventist Church

“Perhaps the boldest thing, the most revolutionary change the Church ever did, happened in the first century. The holy day, the Sabbath, was changed from Saturday to Sunday. “The Day of the Lord” (dies Dominica) was chosen, not from any directions noted in the Scriptures, but from the Church’s sense of its own power. The day of resurrection, the day of Pentecost, fifty days later, came on the first day of the week. So this would be the new Sabbath. People who think that the Scriptures should be the sole authority, should logically become 7th Day Adventists, and keep Saturday holy.” (*Sentinel*, Pastor’s page, Saint Catherine Catholic Church, Algonac, Michigan, May 21, 1995)

“The Church changed the observance of the Sabbath to Sunday by right of the divine, infallible authority given to her by her founder, Jesus Christ. The Protestant claiming the Bible to be the only guide of faith, has no warrant for observing Sunday. In this matter the Seventh-day Adventist is the only consistent Protestant.” (*The Catholic Universal Bulletin*, August 14, 1942, page 4)

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