



Map showing the deviation in the date line in the South Pacific Ocean.

Date Line Issues in the South Pacific

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There are many anomalies around the alignment of the days of the week with the international date line. This continues to cause concern for Seventh-day Adventists and their worship on the seventh day of the week.

Survey of the Problem

People went to bed on Thursday night, December 29, 2011, as they had on any other day in the Pacific Island nation of Samoa. But when they awoke next morning, it was quite different. Instead of being Friday, the sixth day of the week, the Samoan parliament had legislated it to be Saturday, December 31.¹ There was no Friday the thirtieth for them, and it meant that their seventh day was now Sunday. The declared reason for the change was to make it easier for their commerce and tourism with their nearest major trading partners, Australia and New Zealand, realigning the Samoan week to coincide with them.²

What were Seventh-day Adventists to do? They knew eight months in advance of the government's decision to make this change, so they had time to discuss it. But when the new "Saturday" dawned, most resident Samoan Seventh-day Adventists were not convinced this was the day to go to church. It was only six days since they last worshipped on Sabbath. Meanwhile, expatriate Samoans, now citizens of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, were hurt that they were not included in the discussions in their homeland, and Internet blogs and forums buzzed with their frustration.

It is interesting to note that this calendar change is not an isolated case. In the past few centuries at least 14 different (mostly island) nations have felt the need to "rebadge" their days. These nations include the Philippines, Pitcairn, French Polynesia, Alaska, Niue, Tuvalu, Samoa, Cook Islands, Tonga, Tokelau, Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, and Wallis and Futuna. The need for this phenomenon originated with their initial contact with the European traders and missionaries who came to them, in a time before international naval charts were standardized or an internationally agreed date line was in place.

When these traders and missionaries came into the Pacific either from around the tip of Africa and eastward through Asia, or around the tip of South America westward across the Pacific Ocean, they reinforced the uncertainty that met the first Europeans that circumnavigated the globe. Magellan's westerly expedition (September 20, 1519, to September 6, 1522) first demonstrated that during globe travel, time adjustments had to be made, or the traveler would be out of sync with the port of departure upon return. When the survivors of this expedition were almost home (Magellan had been killed en route), they called in at the Cape Verde Islands to restock, and in checking on the date with the locals, they were amazed to find out that "it was Thursday . . . for to us it was Wednesday, and we knew not how we had fallen into error."³

Each nation of seafarers attempted their own solution to this problem, hence the confusion caused when their traders, settlers, and missionaries came into the Pacific Ocean. Spaniards traveled westward from Mexico to settle the Philippines in 1571, placing it in a different time zone from nearby Asian lands that the Portuguese had settled traveling from the opposite direction.⁴ A number of other countries similarly were positioned in time

zones inappropriate to their geographic position: the HMS *Bounty* mutineers settled on Pitcairn in January 1790 after coming through Asia, and so did various missionaries to evangelize French Polynesia in 1797, Tonga in the same year, Cook Islands in 1821, Samoa in 1830, Niue in 1830 and 1842, Wallis and Futuna in 1837, and Tokelau in 1861,⁵ all pushing beyond what was later established as the international date line (IDL).

With growing international travel it became increasingly obvious that there had to be universal agreement on where to draw the lines of longitude on naval charts, and where one day ended and another began. This was eventually done at the International Meridian Conference in Washington, D.C., October 1884.⁶ The table below shows the ramifications of this conference as at least ten nations changed their reckoning of days to fit the new global measures.

Countries That Have Had Issue With the Reckoning of Days

Country	First foreign entry	Direction of travel	When day reckoning changed
Philippines	1571	westward	January 1, 1845
Pitcairn	January 1790	eastward	c. 1814
French Polynesia	March 6, 1797	eastward	1844–1846
Alaska	Russian inhabitants	eastward	October 18, 1867
Tonga	1797	eastward	no change
Cook Islands	1821	eastward	December 25, 1899
Samoa	1830	eastward	July 4, 1892
Wallis and Futuna	November 8, 1837	eastward	2008 (first SDA converts)
Niue	1846	eastward	Pre 1893
Tokelau	November 1861	eastward	July 1892
Tuvalu	1861	eastward	unchanged
Marshal Islands	October 13, 1885	eastward	unchanged
Kwajalein Atoll	February 6, 1944	westward	August 21, 1993
Phoenix and Line Islands	Act of Kiribati govt.	eastward	January 1, 1995

There are a few anomalies in this table. Pitcairn changed its reckoning after visits by British ships coming via Cape Horn;⁷ Alaska changed its reckoning after the USA purchased it from the Russians, who had settled Alaska after crossing the Bering Strait when it was frozen over, and who were not only using “Eastern time,” but they were still using the Gregorian Calendar. Therefore for Alaskans, after the United States purchase, Friday, October 6, was followed by Friday, October 18, 1867, correcting their calendar on two counts.⁸

With the first visit by SDA missionaries to Tonga in 1891,⁹ it was recognized that the Tongan day count was incorrect, but the practice had become so entrenched, that Adventists decided to observe Sabbath according to Tonga's position on the nautical charts, meaning that all Christians would worship on the same day of the week. Wallis and Futuna were evangelized by missionaries coming through Asia. There has been no change of time sequence for them, but after the first SDA converts in 2008, the decision was made to go with the day reckoning to the east of the IDL (where their geographical location places them).

The other two anomalies are Kwajalein Atoll (in the Marshall Islands) and the Phoenix and Line Islands. The former was taken over by the U.S.A. in 1944 for nuclear weapons testing. Its sequence of days was changed to coincide with Hawaii to make it easier for the U.S. military to coordinate their plans. This was reversed on August 21, 1993, when the atoll reverted to Marshall Island control, bringing Kwajalein back into harmony with the rest of the nation.¹⁰ The Phoenix and Line Islands are in the far east of the nation of Kiribati. The nation is comprised of 32 atolls and a coral island, spread across 2,500 miles (4,000 kilometers) of ocean that straddles the IDL. However, the Kiribati government legislated change to bring both halves of the nation into the same day by moving the dateline beyond the far east of the country on January 1, 1995. The change also had the added attraction of allowing Kiribati to be the first nation in the world to usher in the new millennium.¹¹ The Adventist believers in Kirimati (Christmas) Island in the far east chose to remain with their original day sequence, so that their seventh day is now called Sunday.

These anomalies were commented on by early Adventist visitors to the Pacific. On May 19, 1888, George Tenney, an Adventist worker from the United States on his way to Australia, noticed that Christians in Samoa were out of sequence with their day of worship. They worshipped on what they thought was Sunday, but for that longitude it was the seventh-day Sabbath.¹² Similarly, Joseph Marsh, captain of the *Pitcairn* (on August 2, 1891), noticed that the LMS (London Missionary Society) churches in Samoa also worshipped on the seventh day, thinking it was Sunday. And E. H. Gates noticed that people in Tahiti were doing the same thing.¹³

Theological Implications

From the outset it must be stated that God never blessed one day in seven. He blessed only the seventh day, and has never blessed any other. The pattern was fixed at Creation, the sequence confirmed with the falling of the manna during the Exodus, and in the Sabbath miracles of Jesus, and by the Jewish people ever since. That sequence has never been lost.

In the online debates swirling around calendrical changes that have impacted Adventist believers there are two main areas of concern: "What happens in countries where SDAs worship on Sunday with the Adventist understanding of Sunday laws and the preaching of 'Adventist distinctives'?" and "What do Adventists do with the sequence of six days of work and the seventh for worship, as begun at Creation and prescribed in the Ten Commandments, when suddenly they wake up one morning and a day has been removed from their calendar?"

Neither of these questions are comfortable. And it must be stated that none of these date line changes came as a result of the church asking for them, but that these issues have been thrust upon it, and its people have had to decide what was best for them going forward.

So how do Seventh-day Adventists relate to the concern that in these anomalous countries, Adventists go to church on Sunday like everyone else? Does that neuter their witness? Would these places become wonderful retreats for Adventists elsewhere who want to escape the Sunday laws? Do the obvious statements in Ellen White's *Great Controversy* override biblical affirmations of Sabbath observance?

It is worth noting at this point that when the Sabbath was being desecrated in ancient times, God would send a prophet to bring people back to its faithful observance. Isaiah, Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all thundered against the desecration of the Sabbath. Isaiah said such things as Sabbath had become unbearable to God because of the way that people were treating it (Isa 1:13), but in contrast there would be abundant blessing for the one not profaning it (Isa 56:1–7) and honoring it (Isa 58:13, 14). Around the same time, Hosea warned the nation that because of their persistent idolatry, God would put an end to their Sabbaths (Hos 2:11).

About two centuries later the nation of Judah was in exile. Before Jerusalem had been finally destroyed, Jeremiah, who ended up staying back in Judah, warned that if people refused to listen to his warnings about desecrating the Sabbath, God would “kindle a fire in [Jerusalem’s] gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched” (Jer. 17:21–27). After the prophesied destruction Ezekiel reminded the people why it had happened. The desecration of the Sabbath was said to break the relationship between God and His people (Ezek. 20:18–24), and the seriousness of this fact explains why since the time of the exodus, God had warned of the consequences of profaning the Sabbath (Ezek. 20:12–14).

It is no surprise, then, that when the people were repatriated after the exile, Nehemiah became concerned when he saw the Sabbath again being profaned (Neh. 13:15, 16). He confronted the nobles, warned the traders, and commanded that the city gates be shut (Neh. 13:17–19). He further warned the traders that camped outside the walls ready for the next opportunity to market their wares that he would lay hands on them if they did not pack up and leave (Neh. 13:20, 21).

Economic convenience, then, is not a new issue when it comes to Sabbath observance. It is that very feature that drives us back to the Creation account. Six days, and all that happened in them, are carefully counted out, and they are followed by the seventh day that God set aside and sanctified. Therefore, the first full day enjoyed by humans was the Sabbath. They were shown that before they began their cycle of six days of work followed by the day of rest, God had already completed His work. Therefore the work that humans do (and the money they earn from it) is possible only because God first worked for us. Similarly in the work of redemption it is the work of Jesus for us that gives humans a future to work for Him. The Sabbath contains the germ for these two great biblical themes.

Therefore it is not surprising that Jesus spent most of His ministry in restoring the Sabbath. His seven Sabbath miracles threatened the traditions of strictness that had arisen out of the postexilic realization that it was the desecration of the Sabbath that had led the nation into Babylonian exile. More important, Jesus' Sabbath miracles revealed the Sabbath's significance in the relationship between God and humanity. When the paralytic was healed at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–18), the demoniac in the Capernaum synagogue (Mark 1:21–28), Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31), the man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1–6), the man born blind (John 9), the woman with the bent back (Luke 13:10–17), and the man with dropsy (Luke 14:1–6), it was not only His way of confronting the misunderstanding of the religious leaders, but it showed how various groups of people, previously excluded from regular worship, were included as part of God's special treasure (1 Peter 2:9). These miracles in no way lessened the value of the Sabbath; instead they affirmed its lasting value in building the kingdom of God. It is not something to be flipped to one side because of the vagaries of convenience, especially when in the context of these Sabbath controversies, Jesus is recognized as Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27, 28).

Ellen White and the Date Line

Ellen White was first made aware of the date line on her journey from the United States to Australia. "Between Samoa and Auckland we crossed the day-line, and for the first time in our lives we had a week of six days. Tuesday, Dec. 1, was dropped from our reckoning, and we passed from Monday to Wednesday."¹⁴ This statement suggests she followed the advice of the ship's captain, who would have made this announcement, and she was not convinced that the time being kept on Samoa was correct. It was not until a few months later that the change was made there to correct the error introduced by the first traders and missionaries.

It is significant that God raised up prophets in the past to bring people back to the Sabbath. Yet not once in the past 120 years has God raised up any "prophet" to warn Adventists in any of these nations impacted by Sabbath anomalies that they were observing the wrong day. It is unthinkable that political and commercial concerns of secular governments become the reformer to bring people back to the true Sabbath. Rather, history reveals that the only "living prophet" of our time clearly recognized the 180th meridian as the place to observe day change, and appropriately observed the day sequence of the hemisphere she found herself in.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that Ellen White was a prophetic voice among them. So did she have any warnings from the Lord when Adventists in French Polynesia, Tonga, Cook Islands, Samoa, Niue, or Tokelau began worshipping on a day that their national governments had adjusted to suit the date line? She asks the poignant question "Is it possible that so much importance can be clustered about those who observe the Sabbath, and yet no one can tell when the Sabbath comes? Then where is the people who bear the badge or sign of God? What is the sign? The seventh-day Sabbath, which the Lord blessed and sanctified, and pronounced holy, with great penalties for its violation."¹⁵ She clearly affirms, "God made His Sabbath for a round world; and when the seventh day comes to us in that round world, controlled by the sun that rules the day, it is the time in

all countries and lands to observe the Sabbath."¹⁶

These statements arose in a context when agitation arose about the date line, with some advocating that the "day-line" would be more correctly placed in Eden rather than in the Pacific. It appears nobody really knew where that was, but that did not stop the agitation. The net effect of this would be that people of the Americas, Europe, and Africa would all be observing the wrong day, and that Sunday would be the Sabbath for all of them. She said it quite plainly: "We are not to give the least credence to the day line theory. It is a snare of Satan brought in by his own agents to confuse minds. You see how utterly impossible for this thing to be, that the world is all right observing Sunday, and God's remnant people are all wrong. This theory of the day line would make all our history for the past fifty-five years a complete fallacy. But we know where we stand. . . . All those who hold the beginning of their confidence firm unto the end will keep the seventh-day Sabbath, which comes to us as marked by the sun. The fallacy of the day line is a trap of Satan to discourage. I know what I am speaking about. Have faith in God."¹⁷

On another occasion, while still in Australia, she relates an incident in her diary (June 1897) when she accompanied the Haskells and others to the railway station at Dora Creek, a short distance from Avondale College.

On the way Brother Haskell read an article on the day line, written to meet the fallacies that are coming in to make everything uncertain in regard to when the seventh day comes.

It would be very strange if the Lord God of heaven should set apart a day for people to observe, and bless and sanctify that day, and give it to man and enjoin upon man that it be kept holy unto the Lord as a memorial that He made the world in six days and rested upon the seventh day and blessed the Sabbath day, and yet that day become so uncertain the world cannot tell definitely when the seventh day comes to us.

Here is a day given, and the Lord declares it shall be observed throughout your generations 'for a perpetual covenant' (Exodus 31:16), as a sign of obedience and loyalty to God, and yet it is so obscured no one can tell when it comes!¹⁸

Focus for Witness

What about the concern that witness is lost in the nations where the Sabbath falls on Sunday? This suggestion ignores the reality that what Seventh-day Adventists proclaim covers every area of belief. The Sabbath is not just a peculiar add-on to a general body of faith common to many denominations of Christendom. Every doctrine that Adventists teach has an Adventist "flavor." For example, the way Adventists observe their Sabbath is quite different from the way that others observe their day of worship. That is especially seen in the islands, where cooking fires can be readily seen in non-Adventist villages on Sunday, but in the anomalous nations, Adventists prepare for their Sabbath meals the day before—the preparation day. And the Sabbath begins and ends at

sunset, not midnight.

The other major aspect of Adventist belief is the second coming of Christ. Adventists insist that Jesus is returning visibly to all nations, when the general resurrection of the dead occurs—for those who died in the hope of Jesus' return and who have been without life and consciousness while in the grave. Then there are the other clusters of belief, including Jesus' ministry for us in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 7:23–25; 9:23, 24); and living as healthily as possible (in an area of the world with one of the highest incidences of noncommunicable disease).¹⁹ Seventh-day Adventists still have plenty to do in sharing their message of hope to a broken world. They cannot afford to be sidetracked by issues that detract from the gospel commission that Christ has entrusted them with.

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