

Sabbath and Sunday in Early Christianity

Part 1: The First Century

Introduction

The earliest Christians were Torah-observant Jews in Jerusalem, who attended Jewish festivals and observed Temple rituals (Acts 2:1; 3:1; 15:5; 21:20). They apparently observed the seventh-day Sabbath, too. However, in the second, third and fourth centuries we find that almost all Christians observed Sunday — sometimes as a Sabbath-like day of worship meetings and rest, sometimes as a day for worship and work, sometimes in addition to the Sabbath and sometimes instead of the Sabbath.

How did the change in worship day occur? This historical question is of interest to all Christians, but it is especially relevant for those who observe the Sabbath or who observe Sunday as a Sabbath.

This paper examines the written evidence we have for the first and second centuries. It defends this thesis: Although the New Testament does not command a particular day for Christian worship, the earliest records we have show the vast majority of the Christian church rejecting the Sabbath and assembling on Sunday. Reasons for this development will be explored.

The first century

To begin our research into first-century Christian worship days, we look first at the New Testament. The Gospels report that Jesus conflicted with the Jewish leaders several times over Sabbath issues. Jesus rejected the restrictive traditions of the elders. He allowed his disciples to pluck grain, he healed, he taught, and he told a man to carry his sleeping mat (Matthew 12:1-12; Luke 14:1-6; John 5:1-18).¹ Jesus noted that priests worked on the Sabbath, that animals could be rescued or taken to water, and circumcisions could be performed (Matthew 12:5-6, 11; Luke 13:15; John 7:22). Jesus claimed to have authority over the Sabbath, to set people free on the Sabbath, and to work on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:12; Luke 13:16; John 5:17).

But Jesus did not break the Sabbath, since he was born under the law and lived under the old covenant requirements (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 4:15). His activities broke Pharisaic rules, but not the law of God. Early Christian writers did not claim that Jesus broke the Sabbath.²

The first disciples of Jesus were pious Jews in a Jewish culture. They apparently kept the Sabbath according to contemporary Jewish customs. Luke tells us that some female disciples rested

¹ These scriptures are addressed in more detail in *What Do the Scriptures Say About the Sabbath?* (Pasadena, Ca.: Worldwide Church of God, 1995).

² “Even Gentile writers of the second and third centuries never cite Jesus as a precedent for breaking the Sabbath commandment” (R.J. Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church,” chap. 9 in D.A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), p. 257. “Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4:8:2; Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 4:12, are the earliest full discussions of the question of Jesus’ Sabbath conflicts. Both are concerned to argue, against Marcion, that Jesus’ Sabbath healings fulfilled rather than violated the Sabbath laws” (p. 289, n. 51).

on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment (Luke 23:56), and that the apostles taught in the temple courts (Acts 3:1; 5:12, 25). Paul customarily preached in synagogues on the Sabbaths (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2; 18:1-11).

We are also told that the disciples met daily (Acts 2:46), and that Paul preached daily (Acts 19:9). There is no record that Paul taught his converts to keep the Sabbath. Actually, he taught that special days were something about which Christians should not be judged (Colossians 2:16), and he asked the Roman Christians to tolerate differences in worship practices having to do with foods and days (Romans 14:5).³

The New Testament gives us examples of Christians meeting on the first day of the week. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples on two Sundays (John 20:19, 26), but there is no mention that he gave any command for a weekly commemoration of the resurrection. Paul's traveling party once stayed seven days at Troas, and met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), but this was an unusual farewell meeting, not necessarily indicative of normal practice. Paul told the Corinthians to set aside an offering on the first day of each week (1 Corinthians 16:2), but this may also have been an exceptional practice rather than a normative one. John had a vision on "the Lord's day" (Rev 1:10), but some debate whether this is a reference to Sunday. Moreover, the verse does not say that this was a day on which Christians should meet.

In short, none of the texts just discussed give any command for Christians to meet on or to avoid meeting on any particular day. None of the texts can be used to prove that Christians regularly met on any particular day of the week.

Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that some Jewish Christians, especially in Palestine, continued to observe the Sabbath. This is shown in three ways:

1) Paul was accused of teaching Diasporan Jews to turn away from Moses (Acts 21:21), which implies that Palestinian Jewish Christians had *not* turned away from Moses. If Christians taught that the Sabbath should no longer be observed by Jews, the Jewish leaders would have criticized them for leading *Jews* away from Moses.

2) "Another indirect indication of the survival of Sabbath observance among Palestinian Jewish Christians is provided by the curse of the Christians (*Birkath-ha-Minin*), which the rabbinical authorities introduced (A.D. 80-90) in the daily prayer."⁴ This curse was supposedly designed to identify Christians in the synagogues. Anyone who refused to pronounce the curse was suspected of being a Christian. The point is that Jewish Christians were still attending synagogues and may have been keeping Jewish customs such as the Sabbath.

3) Ebionites and Nazarenes, groups who claimed descent from the Jerusalem church, were

³ In Galatians 4:10, Paul warned his gentile converts against observing special days and seasons, apparently meaning Sabbaths and festivals. These scriptures are addressed in more detail in "What Do the Scriptures Say About the Sabbath?" pp. 14-17. If any first-century document clearly commanded Sabbath observance, the Sunday-observing churches of the second and third centuries would probably not consider it canonical. This is indirect evidence that the New Testament does not command Sabbath observance (cf. Willard M. Swartley, *Sabbath, Slavery, War and Women* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1983), p. 92).

⁴ Samuele Bacchiocchi, "The Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity," chap. 7 in Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), p. 135.

keeping the Sabbath in the fourth century,⁵ and their observance of Jewish laws goes back at least to the second century⁶ and probably back to apostolic times.

The above evidence shows that it is unlikely that there was any apostolic authority for requiring a complete transfer of the Sabbath command to Sunday. Early Sunday observers did not claim any such authority.⁷ The earliest Jewish Christians kept the Sabbath.

However, this conclusion is limited in two ways. First, it does not address Gentiles. Acts 21:21 implies that if Paul had taught Gentiles to ignore the laws of Moses, Jewish believers would not have cared. Acts 21:25 indicates that the Jerusalem decree (Acts 15:29) had already been enough. Was the Sabbath considered to be part of the law of Moses not required for Gentiles? The rabbis, at least, did not think that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath.⁸ Although most of this rabbinic evidence

⁵ “Eusebius...and Epiphanius...inform us that the church of Jerusalem up to the siege of Hadrian (A.D. 135) was composed of, and administered by, converted Jews. Eusebius describes a group of them, known as Ebionites, as being ‘zealous to insist on the literal observance of the Law.’ Epiphanius adds that those Jewish Christians who fled from Jerusalem became known as the sect of the Nazarenes, who ‘fulfil till now Jewish rites as circumcision, the Sabbath, and others.’ The fact that the Nazarenes, who represent ‘the very direct descendants of the primitive community’ of Jerusalem, retained Sabbathkeeping as one of their distinguishing marks for centuries after the destruction of Jerusalem shows persuasively that this was the original day of worship of the Jerusalem church” (ibid.). Eusebius reports that the Ebionites, in addition to keeping the Sabbath, also kept the Lord’s Day with other Christians: “like us, they celebrated the Lord’s Day as a memorial of the resurrection of the Saviour” (*Ecclesiastical History*, III 27.5).

⁶ “They use the Gospel according to Matthew only, and repudiate the Apostle Paul, maintaining that he was an apostate from the law.... They practise circumcision, persevere in the observance of those customs which are enjoined by the law, and are...Judaic in their style of life” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I 26.2 [Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1885, 1987), vol. 1, p. 352]). Eusebius reports that some of them denied the virgin birth and divinity of Jesus.

⁷ “It is not very likely that our historical investigation will yield an authority for Sunday worship that the early church itself did not claim” (Bauckham, p. 233).

⁸ “The children of Noah...were given seven Laws only, the observance of the Sabbath not being among them” (*Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:21 [Soncino ed., p. 23], as quoted in C. Mervyn Maxwell and P. Gerard Damsteegt, eds., *Source Book for the History of Sabbath and Sunday* [Berrien Springs, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1992], p. 75). The Noachian laws are also listed in *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 16:6 (Soncino ed., p. 131), *Sanhedrin* 56 a, b; and *Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:2(5) (Soncino ed. pp. 26-7) (ibid., p. 74). Gentiles could be considered righteous if they observed these laws, which did not include the Sabbath. Nor did they include restrictions about pork. Rabbi Judah could say that there was a time for the “sons of Jacob when unclean beasts were still permitted to them” (*Hullin* 7:6, as quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 74).

The rabbis did not think that the Sabbath had been given to Gentiles: “Why does it say, ‘The Lord hath given you’ (Ex. 16:29)? To you hath he given it [the Sabbath], but not to the heathen. It is in virtue of this that the Sages stated [*Sanh.* 56b] that if some of the heathen observed the Sabbath, then not only do they not receive any reward [but they are even considered to be transgressing]” (*Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 25:11 [Soncino ed., p. 314], as quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 74).

“A non-Jew who observes the Sabbath whilst he is uncircumcised incurs liability for the punishment of death. Why? Because non-Jews were not commanded concerning it.... The Sabbath is a reunion between Israel and God, as it is said, ‘It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel’ (Ex. 31:17); therefore any non-Jew who, being uncircumcised, thrusts himself between them incurs the penalty of death.... The Gentiles have not been commanded to observe the Sabbath” (*Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:21 [Soncino ed., pp. 23-4], as quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 75).

comes from the fourth century, it likely reflects first-century attitudes as well.

Second, this says nothing about the possibility of a day *in addition to* the Sabbath. After the Christians heard the Law and the Prophets read in the synagogues, they would want to meet separately to discuss the Christian interpretation of the scriptures they had heard. They would also want to break bread together, encourage one another, and worship Jesus Christ. These Christian meetings could have been held on Saturday evenings, or on Sundays.⁹ There is no direct evidence for either meeting time, nor is any likely, for neither practice would have created controversy. It would be quite possible to observe both Sabbath and Sunday (as fourth-century churches did).

Bacchiocchi says, “If Paul had been the promoter of Sunday observance, he would have met and answered objections from a Judaizing opposition,”¹⁰ but his conclusion is too sweeping. Paul *could* have (whether he did or not is another question) promoted Sunday observance if it were in addition to rather than a replacement for the Sabbath. And he *could* have promoted Sunday observance among Gentiles, even to the exclusion of the Sabbath, without objections from orthodox Judaism. Moreover, Colossians 2:16 and Galatians 4:10 *may* be Paul’s answer to Judaizers’ teachings about the Sabbath.

Part 2: Early Second Century and Justin Martyr

Early second century

Our earliest evidence from the second century comes from the letter of Pliny to Trajan, describing the practice of Christians: “They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light.”¹¹ It is interesting that the Christians met before sunrise (perhaps to avoid persecution and to allow work during daylight hours), but unfortunately Pliny does not tell us which day the Christians met on, or even whether it was weekly.

More substantial evidence is given by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, in letters he wrote c. 115. He warned Christians to reject those who “preach the Jewish law.”¹² Similarly, “If we still

Further evidence of the antiquity of this rabbinic understanding comes from the second-century B.C. book of *Jubilees*: “The Creator of all blessed it, but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the sabbath thereon with the sole exception of Israel. He granted to them alone that they might eat and drink and keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth” (Jubilees 2:31, James Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, [New York: Doubleday, 1985], vol. 2, p. 58).

⁹ “Jewish Christians in Palestine (and probably many in the Diaspora too) continued to rest on the Sabbath and attend the temple or synagogue services, but they also met (as Bacchiocchi himself points out) as Christians in private houses to hear teaching from the apostles and to break bread together.... Their specifically Christian meetings had to occur at some time, and it is even arguable that precisely because they remained faithful in their attendance at temple and synagogue services on the Sabbath some other time had to be found for Christian worship” (Bauckham, p. 237).

¹⁰ Bacchiocchi, p. 132.

¹¹ Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96, LCL 2:401-407, quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 58.

¹² *To the Philadelphians* 6:1; *ANF* 1:82. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* prints two versions of Ignatius’ letters. I have quoted the shorter version. The longer version was apparently created in the fourth century. This conclusion appears to be the consensus of church historians, and is accepted by at least three Seventh-day Adventists: 1) C. Mervyn Maxwell, “Early Sabbath-Sunday History,” in Maxwell and Damsteegt, op. cit., pp. 146-7. 2) Kenneth A. Strand, “The Sabbath and Sunday From the Second Through Fifth Centuries,” app. B in Strand, op. cit., p. 325. 3) Werner

live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace.... It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize.”¹³

More specifically about the Sabbath, Ignatius praised some who were “no longer observing the Sabbath.”¹⁴ Clearly, Ignatius did not observe the Sabbath. It is debated, however, whom he is praising. In the previous section, he was talking about the Old Testament prophets, but it does not seem likely that he would accuse them of abandoning the Sabbath, even though some patristic writers cited the prophets’ criticisms of Sabbath-keeping (e.g., Isa 1:13). More likely, he is praising Jewish Christians who had given up the Sabbath — “those who were brought up in the ancient order of things.”¹⁵ This does not mean that *all* Jewish Christians had abandoned the Sabbath, but some had, and Ignatius was praising them to the Magnesians Christians. The lack of extensive argumentation indicates that the Magnesians, like Ignatius, did not observe the Sabbath, but that Judaizers existed who advocated the Sabbath.

Furthermore, Ignatius praised some people for “living in the observance of the Lord’s Day.”¹⁶ The meaning here is debated, since “day” is not in the Greek, and a textual variant exists. Space does not permit a detailed discussion,¹⁷ but Ignatius’ attitude toward the Sabbath makes it likely that he was observing a different day, in a different way.

Our next evidence comes from the *Epistle of Barnabas*, which was probably written from Alexandria, perhaps as early as A.D. 70¹⁸ or as late as 132.¹⁹ He writes against Jewish sacrifices, fasts, circumcision and other laws. Those laws were types prefiguring Christ. He gives a figurative meaning for unclean meat laws, and then a figurative meaning for the Sabbath: “Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, ‘He finished in six days.’ This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with him a thousand years.”²⁰

Barnabas cites Isa 1:13-14 as criticism of the Sabbath, concluding, “Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world.”²¹ He also mentions our present inability to keep any day holy by being “pure in heart,” concluding that we will be unable to keep the Sabbath holy until the eschatological new world, after we have been made

K. Vyhmeister, “The Sabbath in Asia,” chap. 8 in Strand, op. cit., pp. 151.

¹³ *To the Magnesians* 8, 10; *ANF* 1:62-3.

¹⁴ *To the Magnesians* 9; *ANF* 1:62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ R.J. Bauckham argues that “day” was not in the Greek text because *kuriakē* had already become a technical term for a day. He cautiously favors a reference to Sunday. Although *kuriakē* could have been a reference to Easter, it is not likely that a technical term would switch without notice from an annual festival to a weekly one, and *kuriakē* is clearly used for Sunday not many years after Ignatius. (“The Lord’s Day,” chap. 8 in Carson, op. cit., pp. 228-231).

¹⁸ “Barnabas, Epistle of,” in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1983), p. 134.

¹⁹ Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 60, and *ANF* 1:135.

²⁰ *Epistle of Barnabas* 15; *ANF* 1:146.

²¹ *Ibid.*; *ANF* 1:147.

completely holy.

In this passage, Barnabas does these four things, which will be repeated by later authors: 1) He interprets the Sabbath in terms of moral holiness, not rest, 2) He associates the Sabbath with the eschatological age, 3) He associates the new age with the eighth day — which he then associates with the eighth day of the week: “Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.”²² 4) He associates the Christian day of worship with the resurrection of Jesus.

Barnabas, with antagonism against Jewish laws, transferred the Sabbath command entirely into the future and, since the future age was called not only the seventh but also the eighth, could view Sunday-keeping as likewise picturing the future. Thus first-day observance was only indirectly related to Sabbath observance.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr gives us evidence from yet another location: Rome, c. 150. His comments probably reflect Christian custom in other cities, too, such as Ephesus, where he lived for a while.²³

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read.... Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.²⁴

Justin is clear: It was the widespread practice of Christians to observe Sunday.²⁵ “Perhaps there were some Gentile Christians who kept the Sabbath...but if so, they found no spokesman

²² Ibid.

²³ His “assertion that all Christians meet on Sunday should be understood as coming from a man who had traveled widely and who was attempting to speak to the government on behalf of all Christians” (Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 64); cf. *ANF* 1:160. Justin’s evidence agrees with Ignatius of Antioch and Barnabas of Alexandria, showing that Sunday observance was practiced throughout the Roman Empire.

²⁴ Justin, *First Apology*, 67; *ANF* 1:186.

²⁵ Additional evidence of the near-universality of Sunday comes from:

- Aristides of Athens (c. 160), who criticized Jewish Sabbaths (Bauckham, p. 267, citing *Apol.* 14).
- Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (c. 180), when quoting the Ten Commandments, omitted the Sabbath in *Apology to Autolytus* 3.9 (*ANF* 2:114).
- The *Didache* 14 (c. 180) instructed Christians to meet and offer the Eucharist “on the Lord’s Day of the Lord” (Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 108, and Bauckham, p. 228).
- *The Epistle to Diognetus* (late second century?) criticizes Jews’ “superstitions about sabbaths” and other practices (Bauckham, p. 267)
- Hegesippus, a Palestinian-born Jew, traveled through many cities on his way to Rome (c. 180) and “found the same doctrine among them all” (Eusebius, *Church History* 4.19-22; Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 85).
- Clement of Alexandria (c. 190) equated the Lord’s day and the eighth day in *Miscellanies* 5:14 (*ANF* 2:469).

whose writings survive.”²⁶ Maxwell concludes:

Many Christians were already honoring Sunday near the beginning of the second century.... Evidence is very strong...that many if not most Christians had given up the Sabbath as early as A.D. 130.... Just as Sunday observance came into practice by early in the second century, so among Gentile Christians Sabbath observance went out of practice by early in the second century.²⁷

But this was not a replacement for the Sabbath:

Sunday was observed only as a day for worship, not as a Sabbath on which to refrain from work.... Sunday was not at first celebrated as a ‘Sabbath.’... It was not observed in obedience to the fourth commandment.... Sunday was regarded by Christians generally not as a day of rest or holiness but as a day of joy.²⁸

Justin gives a lengthy explanation of his understanding of the Sabbath in his debate with the Jewish teacher Trypho, who explained the Jewish way to be accepted by God:

First be circumcised, then observe what ordinances have been enacted with respect to the Sabbath, and the feasts, and the new moons of God; and, in a word, do all things which have been written in the law; and then perhaps you shall obtain mercy from God.... To keep the Sabbath, to be circumcised, to observe months, and to be washed if you touch anything prohibited by Moses, or after sexual intercourse.²⁹

Trypho criticized the Christians:

You, professing to be pious, and supposing yourselves better than others, are not in any particular separated from them, and do not alter your mode of living

²⁶ Bauckham, p. 269. Some might argue that pro-Sabbath documents would have been destroyed by the later church. But numerous pro-Sabbath documents survive from the fourth century. There is no evidence that the church tried to suppress the evidence.

²⁷ Maxwell, op. cit., pp. 136, 142. He writes: “What do we mean by ‘Sabbath keeping’?... A person must set aside the entire day as sacred from sundown to sundown, refraining from all secular work.... If we demand evidence for this kind of true Sabbath-keeping.... we have to say categorically that there is no evidence for any of it in the literature which has survived from the second *and* third centuries. This is not to say that no Christians anywhere did in fact keep the Sabbath.... we believe indeed that some did. It is to say, however, that we have no documentary evidence that any did so” (pp. 153-4).

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 137, 139. Strand writes, “Sunday was not considered a substitute for the Sabbath.... When the Christian weekly Sunday first emerged, it continued to be a day of work, although it included a worship service” (op. cit., pp. 324, 330). As further evidence that Sunday was not a replacement for the Sabbath, Bauckham notes, “Few second-century writers compare and contrast the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday. Derogatory discussions of the Jewish Sabbath do not usually refer to the Christian Sunday. If Sunday were a recent substitute for the Jewish Sabbath, we should expect far more discussion of the superiority of Sunday to the Sabbath” (op. cit., p. 271). Bauckham cites evidence from Tertullian, Jerome and others that Sunday was not considered a rest day (p. 286).

²⁹ Justin, *Dialogue With Trypho* 8, 46; ANF 1:198-9, 217. It is interesting that Trypho specified that one must be circumcised before keeping the Sabbath and other laws (cf. Acts 15:5). The prominence of new moons is also interesting (cf. Colossians 2:16).

from other nations, in that you observe no festivals or sabbaths and do not have the rite of circumcision.... Yet you expect to obtain some good thing from God, while you do not obey His commandments. Have you not read, that that soul shall be cut off from his people who shall not have been circumcised on the eighth day?³⁰

Justin replied that Christians *were* obedient to God, even when obedience was painful:

We too would observe the fleshly circumcision, and the Sabbaths, and in short all the feasts, if we did not know for what reason they were enjoined you,—namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts. For if we patiently endure all things contrived against us by wicked men...even as the new Lawgiver commanded us: how is it, Trypho, that we would not observe those rites which do not harm us,—I speak of fleshly circumcision, and Sabbaths and feasts?³¹

Justin explained the reason Christians ignored the Jewish laws:

We live not after the law, and are not circumcised in the flesh as your forefathers were, and do not observe sabbaths as you do.... An eternal and final law — namely, Christ — has been given to us.... He is the new law, and the new covenant.... The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you.... If there is any perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so; if any adulterer, let him repent; then he has kept the sweet and true sabbaths of God.³²

In Justin's view, the Sabbath command was an admonition to morality, and Christians, by behaving morally on every day, were in perpetual obedience to the purpose of the Sabbath.

Justin repeatedly said that the patriarchs Abel, Enoch, Lot, Noah and Melchizedek, “though they kept no Sabbaths, were pleasing to God.... For if there was no need of circumcision before Abraham, or of the observance of Sabbaths, of feasts and sacrifices, before Moses; no more need is there of them now.”³³ Justin argued that, since Sabbaths and sacrifices and feasts began with Moses, then they ended with Christ, who was the new covenant.³⁴

Not only do Gentiles not have to keep the Sabbath, Justin concluded that “the just men who are descended from Jacob” do not have too, either.³⁵ Trypho asked, Could a Christian keep the Sabbath if he wished to? Justin knew of some Jewish Christians who kept the Sabbath and

³⁰ Ibid., 10; *ANF* 1:199.

³¹ Ibid. 18; *ANF* 1:203.

³² Ibid., 10-12; *ANF* 1:199-200.

³³ Ibid., 19, 23; *ANF* 1:204, 206. In section 46 (*ANF* 1:218), Trypho agreed that the patriarchs did not keep the Sabbath; this harmonizes with the rabbinic views in note 8.

³⁴ Ibid., 43; *ANF* 1:216.

³⁵ Ibid., 26; *ANF* 1:207.

replied, Yes, as long as he doesn't try to force other Christians to keep the law of Moses.³⁶

Justin explained some typology between Old Testament rituals and Christian significance. Among these were a connection between circumcision and Sunday:

The command of circumcision, again bidding [them] always circumcise the children on the eighth day, was a type of the true circumcision, by which we are circumcised from deceit and iniquity through Him who rose from the dead on the first day after the Sabbath, our Lord Jesus Christ. For the first day after the Sabbath, remaining the first of all the days, is called, however, the eighth.³⁷

Part 3: Irenaeus, and “the Lord’s Day”

Irenaeus

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the last half of the second century, also gives us lengthy comments on the Sabbath, and his views probably reflect those of Asia Minor, since that is where he was from. He had also been in Rome and may have been influenced by Justin Martyr. Irenaeus, commenting on the grainfield incident (Matt. 12), notes that Jesus did not break the Sabbath, but Irenaeus gives a rationale that applies to Christians, too:

The Lord...did not make void, but fulfilled the law, by performing the offices of the high priest...justifying His disciples by the words of the law, and pointing out that it was lawful for the priests to act freely [Matthew 12:5]. For David had been appointed a priest by God, although Saul still persecuted him. For all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank. And all the apostles of the Lord are priests.³⁸

The implication is that, since all believers are priests, and priests are free to work on the Sabbath serving God, then Christians are free to work on the Sabbath. Regardless of the validity of his reasoning, he obviously did not believe that Christians had to keep the Sabbath. Just as circumcision was symbolic, he says, the Sabbath command was, too, typifying both morality and eschatology:

The Sabbaths taught that we should continue day by day in God's service...ministering continually to our faith, and persevering in it, and abstaining from all avarice, and not acquiring or possessing treasures upon earth. Moreover, the Sabbath of God, that is, the kingdom, was, as it were, indicated by created things; in which [kingdom], the man who shall have persevered in serving God shall, in a state of rest, partake of God's table.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., 47; ANF 1:218.

³⁷ Ibid., 41; ANF 1:215. Justin assumes that Trypho knew that Christians observed the eighth day, i.e., Sunday.

³⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.8.2-3; ANF 1:471.

³⁹ Ibid., 4.16.1; ANF 1:481. He called the future kingdom “the seventh day...the true Sabbath of the righteous” in 5.33.2 (ANF 1:562).

Irenaeus, like Justin, said that the patriarchs before Moses did not keep the Sabbath.⁴⁰ But he also said that they kept the Decalogue and that Christians also had to!⁴¹ This discrepancy can be explained in two ways. Bauckham suggests that Irenaeus used the term “Decalogue” loosely, as synonymous with the natural law, as suggested in 4.16.3.⁴² Another possibility, which I prefer, is that Irenaeus considered a moral person to be de facto keeping the Sabbath command, as suggested in 4.16.1 and in another work: “Nor will he be commanded to leave idle one day of rest, who is constantly keeping sabbath, that is, giving homage to God in the temple of God, which is man’s body, and at all times doing the works of justice.”⁴³

As another item of evidence probably from the second century, let us consider the *Gospel of Thomas 27*: “If you do not fast as regards the world, you will not find the kingdom. If you do not observe the Sabbath as a Sabbath, you will not see the father.”⁴⁴ The meaning here is debatable, since Gnostics often gave words unusual meanings. Everything needed an “interpretation.”⁴⁵ This can be seen in *Thomas 27*. Fasting “as regards the world” does not mean ordinary fasting, but avoiding worldly sins. Similarly, it was not sufficient to say, “observe the Sabbath.” The words “as a Sabbath” may suggest an esoteric meaning, such as cessation of sin.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.16.2; ANF 1:481.

⁴¹ “If any one does not observe [the Decalogue], he has no salvation” (4.15.1; ANF 1:479). “The righteous fathers had the meaning of the Decalogue written in their hearts and souls, that is, they loved the God who made them, and did no injury to their neighbor. There was therefore no occasion that they should be cautioned by prohibitory mandates, because they had the righteousness of the law in themselves” (4.16.3; ANF 1:481).

⁴² “Extant example of early Christian paraenesis based on the Decalogue show that it was used with considerable selectiveness and flexibility, and normally with reference only to the second table.... The Decalogue is a less precise term than we expect it to be. It may be that Irenaeus and Ptolemaeus were so used to the flexible and selective use of the Decalogue in Christian paraenesis that the term suggested to them not so much ten individual commandments to be mentally listed, but simply the moral law” (Bauckham, pp. 267-9).

⁴³ Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 96 (Joseph P. Smith, trans. *Ancient Christian Writers* [Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1952], vol. 16, p. 105). This passage in *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* illustrates Irenaeus’ understanding of the law:

He does not wish those who are to be redeemed to be brought again under the Mosaic legislation—for the law has been fulfilled by Christ—but to go free in newness by the Word, through faith and love towards the Son of God.... We have no need of the law as pedagogue.... For no more shall the law say: “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” to him who has not even conceived the desire of another man’s wife; or “thou shalt not kill,” to him who has put away from himself all anger and enmity.... Nor will it demand tithes of him who has vowed to God all his possessions, and who leaves father and mother and all his kindred, and follows the Word of God. Nor will he be commanded to leave idle one day of rest, who is constantly keeping sabbath, that is giving homage to God in the temple of God, which is man’s body, and at all times doing the works of justice. (89, 95-96; ACW 16:103, 105)

The point is that if a man does not lust, he does not need a command about adultery because he is already obeying it. Likewise, in Irenaeus’ thought, if a man is always acting justly, he does not need a command about the Sabbath, because he is always obeying it.

⁴⁴ James Robinson, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 129.

⁴⁵ *Thomas 1*; Robinson, p. 126.

⁴⁶ “The metaphorical sense of the logion in its surviving version depends entirely on the words *ton kosmou* [as regards the world].... By means of this emendation an originally literal requirement to keep the Jewish Sabbath has become a metaphorical command to keep some form of spiritual Sabbath” (Bauckham, p. 265).

Tertullian wrote in both the second century and in the third. Space does not permit a detailed evaluation of his works, nor is it necessary, since he agrees completely with Ignatius, Barnabas, Justin and Irenaeus. He rejected the literal Sabbath,⁴⁷ said that the Patriarchs did not observe it,⁴⁸ interpreted it in terms of morals⁴⁹ and worshipped on Sunday.⁵⁰ He is additional evidence that second-century Christians had generally abandoned the Sabbath and observed Sunday as the day for Christian worship.

The Lord's day

Almost all second-century Christians observed Sunday as a day of worship (not a day of required rest), rather than the Sabbath.⁵¹ No matter what the original reason(s) may have been for meeting on the first day of the week, Christians could have easily seen a biblical significance to that day: It was the day on which the risen Lord appeared to the disciples.⁵² Of all the days of the week, only the first and the seventh were ever considered, and Sunday was quickly understood as *the* day for Christian worship.

Although a few Christians observed the Sabbath, Sunday was more distinctively Christian. It became the day on which believers worshipped *the* Lord, and the day became known in the second century as “the Lord’s day [*kuriakē hēmera*].”⁵³ The term was so well known that the word for “day” became unnecessary — if a Christian wrote about the *kuriakē*, readers would understand that Sunday was meant. This term therefore gives additional evidence that Sunday was the Christian day of worship in the second century.⁵⁴ Let us survey the evidence for this term.

In the late first century, John used *kuriakē hēmera* in Rev 1:10, but the meaning there is debated. In the early second century, Ignatius used *kuriakē* alone, and textual variants cause the

⁴⁷ *Apology* 21; *ANF* 3:36 and *Against Marcion* 1:20; 5.19; *ANF* 3:285, 471.

⁴⁸ *An Answer to the Jews* 2; *ANF* 3:153.

⁴⁹ *An Answer to the Jews* 4; *ANF* 3:155.

⁵⁰ *Apology* 16; *ANF* 3:31; and *On Idolatry* 14; *ANF* 3:70.

⁵¹ The Ebionites and Nazarenes were the primary exceptions. But they were clearly heterodox—they rejected Jesus’ virgin birth and the apostle Paul, and they required circumcision and other laws of Moses. The New Testament shows the early church fighting on two broad fronts: libertine antinomianism on one side and legalistic Judaizing on the other. In the second century, these groups are represented by Gnostics on the libertine side, and Ebionites on the Judaistic side. The Ebionites were spiritual, if not genetic, descendants of the Pharisee Christians who wanted Gentile believers to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:5). The Sunday-keeping majority cannot be called libertine. If anything, they tended to be strict.

⁵² Bauckham writes: “Whether the choice of Sunday was originally a matter of mere convenience or whether it was initially chosen as the day of the Resurrection, there can be no doubt that it was soon associated with the Resurrection, and only this can really account for the fact that worship on Sunday acquired normative status throughout the Christian world” (p. 240).

⁵³ The genitive form, “day of the Lord [*hēmera tou kuriou*],” could not be used because it already had a different technical meaning in the Septuagint (cf. Bauckham, p. 225).

⁵⁴ “Another evidence of the early observance of Sunday is the fact that Christians frequently referred to it as the Lord’s day during the second century.... The designation ‘eighth day’ was very popular among Christians in the second and third centuries; however, the most common Christian term for Sunday was ‘Lord’s day.’ The term ‘Lord’s day’ was in wide use by the end of the second century and may also have been in use near the beginning of it” (Maxwell, p. 139).

meaning to be debatable.⁵⁵ The *Gospel of Peter* 35 and 50 (middle second century) used *kuriakē* to designate the day of Jesus' resurrection.⁵⁶ Eusebius reports that Dionysius of Corinth (c. 170) wrote, "Today we have kept the Lord's holy day [*kuriakē hagia hēmera*], on which we have read your letter."⁵⁷ The Acts of Peter (last half of the second century) "clearly identifies *dies dominica* ('the Lord's Day') with 'the next day after the Sabbath,' and the *Acts of Paul* [also last half of the second century] represents the apostle as praying 'on the sabbath as the Lord's Day [*kuriakē* alone] drew near"⁵⁸ — both clearly referring to Sunday. *Didache* 14, which may date from the second half of the second century, referred to "the Lord's [day] of the Lord [*kuriakē de kuriou*]."⁵⁹

Clement of Alexandria (c. 190) also gives clear evidence that *kuriakē* meant the eighth day, Sunday,⁶⁰ and he spoke of "keeping" the Lord's day.⁶¹ He quoted a Valentinian Gnostic who equated the *kuriakē* with the ogdoad, the eighth heaven. "The same identification of *kuriakē*, the eighth day, with the ogdoad, the eighth heaven,⁶² is found in the antignostic *Epistula Apostolorum* [also second century]."⁶³

In summary, evidence for the use of "Lord's day" is clear for the latter half of the second century, but it is less clear for the first half. The terminology, however, is a secondary issue. The actual day observed by Christians is clear: *Throughout the second century, all written evidence shows Christians rejecting the literal Sabbath and observing Sunday as the day for Christian worship.*⁶⁴ Even in the *early* second century, Sunday-keeping was the norm throughout

⁵⁵ Neither Barnabas nor Justin use the term Lord's day, "but they use instead the designations 'eighth day' and 'Sunday' for the first day of the week.... Their specific Sunday statements are in [apologetic] contexts that would preclude their use of this term even if they were acquainted with it" (Strand, p. 347).

⁵⁶ Bauckham, as with other texts, is cautious: "It is clear that *kuriakē* is already an accepted technical term and refers to a day, but the nature of the context makes impossible a final decision between Sunday and Easter" (p. 229). Irenaeus may have used *kuriakē* in fragment 7, but it may not be his word, and it may refer to Easter ("Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus" 7, ANF 1:569-70; Strand, p. 346-7).

⁵⁷ Bauckham is again cautious: "A reference to weekly Sunday worship seems very probable but not certain" (p. 229, citing Eusebius' *History* 4.23.11).

⁵⁸ Bauckham, p. 229, citing *Act. Verc.* 29.

⁵⁹ Maxwell, pp. 106-8, and Bauckham, p. 227-8.

⁶⁰ *Miscellanies* 5:14; ANF 2:469.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 7:12; ANF 2:545.

⁶² *Exc. ex Theod.* 63:1, quoted in Bauckham, p. 230; Irenaeus mentioned the Gnostic ogdoad in *Against Heresies* 1.5.3 (ANF 1:323). It is difficult to interpret their numerology: "The eighth may possibly turn out to be properly the seventh, and the seventh manifestly the sixth, and the latter properly the Sabbath, and the seventh a day of work" (*Miscellanies* 6:16; ANF 2:512). Clement explained the "rest" of the Fourth Commandment as "abstraction from ills" and as impassibility in preparation for the eschaton (*ibid.*). In this, he agreed with his Gnostic opponents. Epiphanius said that the Valentinian Ptolemaeus taught that Jesus rejected the literal Sabbath and that Ptolemaeus interpreted the Sabbath as commanding "us to be idle with reference to evil actions" (Bauckham, pp. 265-6, citing Epiphanius, *Pan.* 33:3:5:1-13). Clement also used a similar interpretation for the Lord's day: "He...keeps the Lord's day when he abandons an evil disposition" (*Miscellanies* 7:12; ANF 2:545).

⁶³ Bauckham, p. 274. On p. 223, Bauckham cites *Epistula Apostolorum* 18. He also cites "Melito of Sardis, *ap.* Eusebius *HE* 4:23:12," but I could not find this in an English translation of Eusebius 4:23:12, nor did Bauckham discuss this text in his chapter.

⁶⁴ Bauckham writes:

Christendom (except for Jewish sects) — with *no trace of controversy or any evidence that the custom was a recent innovation*. The church that began as a Sabbath-keeping group became a Sunday-keeping group that rejected literal Sabbath-keeping. Now let us explore how this change could have come about.

Part 4: Adventist Theories

Bacchiocchi's theory

Modern Sunday-keeping Christians often conclude that the apostles themselves authorized or even commanded Gentiles to meet on Sundays instead of Sabbaths.⁶⁵ Of course, this conclusion is rejected by those who think that Christians should observe the Sabbath day.⁶⁶ Therefore, Seventh-day Adventists have proposed ways in which the vast majority of professing Christians could have become deceived about the Sabbath. One authoritative SDA book claimed that the change from Sabbath to Sunday “was introduced at Rome about the middle of the second

All second-century references to the Sabbath commandment either endorse the metaphorical interpretation or reject the literal interpretation as Judaistic or do both.... For all these writers the literal commandment to rest one day in seven was a temporary ordinance for Israel alone. The Christian fulfills the commandment by devoting all his time to God.... No writer of the period betrays any thought of its being a provision for needed physical rest (pp. 269, 266).

A Seventh-day Adventist agrees with this historical assessment:

It is unhistorical to say that the early fathers were ‘silent’ about the Sabbath. They were not silent about it, and what they had to say was hostile to literal Sabbath keeping.... A careful analysis of the four most noteworthy authors who dealt with the Sabbath in the second and early third centuries, Barnabas, Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, reveals a great unanimity of attitude toward the literal Sabbath. To a man, they opposed it. This is very significant, partly because Barnabas and Justin represented Christian attitudes as early as the 130s, and partly because these four writers encircled the Mediterranean basin: Barnabas in Alexandria, Justin first in Asia and then in Rome, Irenaeus first in Asia and then in Gaul, Tertullian for a while in Rome and then in Carthage (Maxwell, pp. 154-7).

⁶⁵ Historians even suggest that this decision was made before Paul began his travels:

Sunday worship appears, when the evidence becomes available in the second century, as the universal Christian practice outside Palestine. There is no trace whatever of any controversy [excepting, perhaps, some NT scriptures] as to whether Christians should worship on Sunday.... This universality is most easily explained if Sunday worship was already the Christian custom before the Gentile mission, and spread throughout the expanding Gentile church with the Gentile mission. It is very difficult otherwise to see how such a practice could have been imposed universally and leave no hint of dissent and disagreement....

Paul was not responsible for policy in the whole of the Gentile mission field (note that *Barn.* 15:9, one of the earliest evidences of Sunday observance, probably comes from Egypt). The conclusion seems irresistible that all of the early missionaries simply exported the practice of the Palestinian churches. (Bauckham, p. 236)

Jewett (*The Lord's Day*) and Rordorf (*Sunday*) reportedly also consider that Sunday observance originated before Paul.

⁶⁶ However, it is theoretically possible to admit that the apostles encouraged Sunday worship meetings *in addition to* requiring the Sabbath as a rest day. Such a theory would be difficult to reconcile with Romans 14:5, Colossians 2:16, and Galatians 4:10, and it would not explain why the Sabbath would be dropped by all Gentile churches throughout the empire without a trace of controversy.

century.”⁶⁷

In support of that position, Samuele Bacchiocchi argues that Sunday-keeping was a Roman Catholic innovation that achieved universality because of the authority of the Roman church.⁶⁸ Anti-Jewish sentiments were strong in Rome, and Gentiles became prominent in the church there. Since Hadrian fought against the Jews, his reign would be a likely candidate for the beginning of Sunday observance.

Because of the exigency that arose to separate Christians from the Jews and their Sabbath, Gentile Christians adopted the venerable day of the Sun, since it provided an adequate time and symbolism to commemorate significant divine events that occurred on that day.⁶⁹

However, Bacchiocchi’s theory has numerous inadequacies, as noted by Strand, who is also an Adventist.⁷⁰ Bacchiocchi argues that only a powerful church (i.e., Rome) could effectively switch the day of worship throughout the empire. Against his thesis, however, is the fact that Rome did not have that kind of power in the second century.⁷¹ Although Rome could influence some areas of the empire, it would not have been able to change long-standing customs, especially in the East, without any visible evidences of controversy, especially when those customs were based on apostolic practice.⁷²

Another major difficulty with Bacchiocchi’s theory is that Sunday-keeping is documented *before* the reign of Hadrian and *outside* of Rome: Ignatius of Antioch was not a Sabbath-keeper

⁶⁷ *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Reviews and Herald, 1957) pp. 166-7, cited by Swartley, p. 72.

⁶⁸ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday (FSS)* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1977), p. 211, and Bacchiocchi in Strand, p. 136).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁷⁰ Presumably Strand does not argue against Bacchiocchi’s theory because Strand wants to keep Sunday, but because he is convinced by the historical evidence that Bacchiocchi’s reconstruction is unlikely.

⁷¹ As evidence that Rome did not have such power, we can note:

1. Ignatius does not greet a bishop of Rome.
2. Irenaeus disagreed with the bishop of Rome regarding policy toward Quartodecimans.
3. Polycarp and Polycrates acted as equals with the bishop of Rome.
4. It was only with difficulty and recorded controversy that Rome pressured a change in the date of Easter for one area in Asia Minor.
5. Even in later centuries, Rome was unable to force other cities to observe the seventh day as a fast day.
6. In the fourth century, when many Eastern Christians began to observe the Sabbath as well as Sunday, Rome was unable or unwilling to stop the practice (Kenneth A. Strand, “From Sabbath to Sunday in the Early Christian Church: A Review of Some Recent Literature. Part II: Samuele Bacchiocchi’s Reconstruction,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 17 [1979], pp. 96-99. Strand also notes that “Christian influences were still moving largely from East to West rather than vice versa” (*Sabbath*, p. 332, n. 22).

⁷² Bauckham writes:

It therefore seems extremely unlikely that already in the *early* second century the authority of the Roman see was such that it could impose Sunday worship throughout the church, superseding [supposedly] a universal practical of Sabbath observance handed down from the apostles, without leaving any trace of controversy or resistance in the historical records.... Like all attempts to date the origins of Sunday worship in the second century, [Bacchiocchi’s theory] fails to account for the universality of the custom. Unlike the Sunday Easter and the Sabbath fast, Sunday worship was never, so far as the evidence goes, disputed. (p. 272).

and presumably observed Sunday, and the Magnesians and Philadelphians (and probably the other churches to which he wrote) probably agreed with him in this, and *Barnabas* gives evidence that Alexandrians were observing Sunday early in the second century. In no case is there evidence that the change in day of worship was recent. For Justin, too, “there is significant evidence that Justin may have been an observer of Sunday long before A.D. 155 — and long before he visited Rome.”⁷³ If second-century Rome ever decreed that Christians should observe Sunday (there is *no* historical evidence for such a decree), it could have been effective only if the majority of churches were *already* observing Sunday.

Nor can Sabbath-abandonment be explained simply as anti-Jewishness. The early church went to great lengths, against Marcion, to keep the Old Testament Scriptures in their canon. They did not feel at liberty to simply reject the Sabbath. Rather, they re-interpreted it and claimed to be keeping its intent. Also, at certain times in history it would have been to the Christians’ advantage to be seen as a branch of Judaism, since Judaism was a legal religion and Christianity was not. The complexity of the Christians’ attitude toward Judaism makes it highly unlikely that Rome could have convinced all Christians in all parts of the empire to change their day of worship. Many Christians would have had reasons to resist such a change.

Another element of Bacchiocchi’s theory is that sun-worship, such as Mithraism, influenced Rome to select Sun-day as the new day of worship.⁷⁴ Again, there is no evidence for such a factor (Tertullian specifically rules it out⁷⁵), it is historically unlikely, and the selection of Sunday can be explained without resorting to pagan precedents.⁷⁶ Moreover, the early church resisted pagan practices. Christians would die rather than do something as simple as call the emperor “Lord.”

In short, the theory of Roman initiation and enforcement is not historically credible.

Other Adventist theories

Strand suggests that weekly Sunday observance grew out of an annual Easter observance. He gives a possible reconstruction for the origin of the Quartodeciman controversy, with some Christians observing Sunday and others a day of the month, both with roots in the Jewish

⁷³ Maxwell, p. 138.

⁷⁴ Bacchiocchi, *FSS*, pp. 236-268. He may have abandoned this aspect of this theory, however. In his chapter in Strand’s book, he writes, “The choice of the day of the Sun was not motivated by the desire to venerate the Sun-god on his day, but rather by the fact that such a day provided a fitting symbology” (p. 141).

Strand gives a convincing critique:

Just how likely a source for adoption of Sunday would Mithraism have provided to second-century Christians? Even during that century Mithraism was a *rival* oriental religion (later to become Christianity’s most dangerous rival and foe). Also, its spread in the Roman world was mainly by military legions.... Would it not be somewhat far-fetched to look to a pagan religion fostered mainly by soldiers in the Roman legions as the source for the Christian day of worship?... Why would Christians who were ready to give up life itself rather than to adopt known pagan practices (e.g., Justin Martyr, who did precisely this) choose an obviously pagan Sunday as their Christian day of worship?” (*AUSS* 16:90).

⁷⁵ *Apology* 16; *ANF* 3:31.

⁷⁶ If early Christians wanted to reject the Sabbath and pick some other day of the week, only one day could be found to have biblical significance in connection with Jesus Christ. His day of birth was not known, nor was his baptism, nor the Transfiguration or Ascension. The only day of the week (other than the Sabbath) mentioned in the Gospels is the first.

calendar(s).⁷⁷ He then notes that some early Christians “not only observed both Easter and Pentecost on Sundays but also considered the whole seven-week season between the two holidays to have special significance.”⁷⁸ He suggests that Christians began meeting on every Sunday in that season, and then eventually to every Sunday every week: “Throughout the Christian world Sunday observance simply arose *alongside* observance of Saturday.”⁷⁹

This theory, however, in addition to being entirely speculative, with no evidence, does not explain the universality of Sunday observance. Either we must suppose that this custom began before the Gentile mission did, or that it was so obvious that Gentiles everywhere came to the same conclusion (and if it was *that* obvious, then it would have begun before the Gentile mission!). Also, this theory does not work for the Quartodeciman Christians, and all evidence is that even the Quartodecimans observed Sunday.⁸⁰ Strand feels that his theory explains why Sunday is a “resurrection festival,” but no explanation for that is really needed; it would genuinely be an obvious connection for anyone meeting on a Sunday.

Another Adventist book proposes a dual observance lasting centuries:

By the middle of the [second] century some Christians were voluntarily observing Sunday as a day of worship, not a day of rest. The church of Rome, largely made up of Gentile believers (Rom. 11:13), led in the trend toward Sunday worship. In Rome, the capital of the empire, strong anti-Jewish sentiments arose.... Reacting to these sentiments, the Christians in that city attempted to distinguish themselves from the Jews. They dropped some practices held in common with the Jews and initiated a trend away from the veneration of the Sabbath, moving toward the exclusive observance of the Sunday.

From the second to the fifth centuries, while Sunday was rising in influence, Christians continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath nearly everywhere throughout the Roman Empire. The fifth-century historian Socrates wrote: “Almost all the churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this.”⁸¹

This theory has numerous deficiencies and inaccuracies, some of which we have already covered. First, it was in the *early* second century that some Christians were observing Sunday, and this was in Antioch and Asia Minor as well as at Rome and Alexandria. Rome did not

⁷⁷ “It would be natural for [Jewish] Christians to continue a first-fruits celebration. However, they would not keep it as a Jewish festival. Instead, they would keep it in honor of Christ’s resurrection.... Those who had been influenced by the Pharisees would hold their Easter festival on a different day of the week year by year, and those who had been influenced by the Boethusians or by the Essenes would hold their Easter festival on a Sunday every year” (Strand, *Sabbath*, app. B, p. 327).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 327, citing Lawrence T. Geraty, “The Pascha and the Origin of Sunday Observance,” *AUSS* 3 (1965):85-96.

⁷⁹ Strand, *Sabbath*, app. B, p. 323.

⁸⁰ “The Quartodeciman controversy had nothing to do with Sabbath observance; the Quartodecimans appear to have observed the weekly Sunday like most other Christians did at the time” (Maxwell and Damsteegt, p. 96).

⁸¹ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe...: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1988), p. 259, footnoting as source Justin, Bacchiocchi, and Socrates 5.22.

initiate this trend, nor is there evidence that anti-Jewish sentiments motivated them to abandon customs they held in common with the Jews.

Moreover, second-century Christians were not observing two days, but only one. Second-century writers are uniformly negative toward literal Sabbath-keeping. There is no evidence that anyone (other than Ebionites) kept the Sabbath in the second century, as Maxwell concluded (part 3, note 27). Maxwell also commented on the correct translation of Socrates:

In actual fact, Socrates did not say that the churches of Rome and Alexandria had *ceased* to observe the Lord's Supper (the "sacred mysteries") on the Sabbath, implying that once upon a time they had so observed it. Instead, he said that the churches *do not* observe the Supper on the Sabbath, leaving the reader to conclude, if he wishes, that the church in these places never did so observe it.⁸²

Socrates actually said, "Almost all the churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, do not do this." He was commenting on fourth-century practices,⁸³ with no implications about what had been done in earlier centuries. His comment cannot be used as evidence about the second century, especially if it contradicts all the other evidence we have from second-century documents.

The Adventist book correctly notes that early writers did not cite any biblical command for Sunday worship.⁸⁴ So why did early Christians choose Sunday? The book suggests two reasons: 1) the resurrection of Christ and 2) "the popularity and influence that the sun worship of the pagan Romans accorded Sunday undoubtedly contributed to its growing acceptance as a day of worship."⁸⁵ Although this may have played a role in later centuries, especially after Christianity became legal, it is unlikely to have played a role in the second century, for reasons given above.

Maxwell explains some of the reasons that contributed to Sunday observance:

(1) The extraordinary impact of the Resurrection. (This is the commonest reason given by the Christians themselves.) (2) The Christian desire to honor Christ in a special way. (3) The insistence of Gospel writers (including John in the later part of the century) on stating the day of the week when the Resurrection occurred. (4) The effect of following for some months, or even years, Paul's

⁸² Maxwell, p. 142.

⁸³ "The Sabbath observance Socrates describes was probably more of a revival than a survival. In any case, it wasn't full Sabbath observance but only the celebration of the sacred mysteries" (Maxwell, p. 125). Maxwell and Damsteegt show many fourth-century documents that are favorable to the Sabbath, in sharp contrast to the previous two centuries: "A sudden change is seen when we lay aside second- and third- century documents and start reading references to Sabbath and Sunday in fourth-century documents. At once, for the first time, we discover statements that speak favorably about Sabbath keeping. Especially is the change noticeable in documents from the second half of the fourth century, that is, from around A.D. 360 onwards" (p. 146).

⁸⁴ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, p. 259. However, the early writers did cite biblical authority for abandoning literal Sabbath observance — Galatians 4:10 and Colossians 2:16 — as well as arguments about the new covenant superseding Jewish traditions such as the Sabbath.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

request to set aside money for the poor on Sundays.⁸⁶

Maxwell's summary

The simple fact *that* early Christians abandoned the Sabbath has dominated this paper, but the *reasons* they give for abandoning the Sabbath are also of interest. Maxwell (an Adventist) gives an excellent summary of the teachings of the second- and third-century writers about the Sabbath. On page 158, he details five areas of agreement among the church fathers. I will paraphrase them:

1) Sabbath eschatology — The Sabbath foreshadows an age of sinlessness and peace beyond this present age. 2) Moral typology — Living a godly life every day fulfills the purpose of the Sabbath commandment.⁸⁷ 3) The Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments not binding on Christians. 4) The Sabbath is not a part of the natural law. 5) The patriarchs before Moses did not observe the Sabbath.

Maxwell concludes that second- and early third-century writers had basically the same negative attitudes toward the Sabbath (see part 3, note 27). He then writes,

These writers taught that the new covenant had put an end to the old law — and that now the new spiritual Israel, with its new covenant and its new spiritual law, no longer needed the literal circumcision, literal sacrifices, and literal Sabbath. Barnabas observed that God “has circumcised our hearts.” Justin referred triumphantly to the new spiritual circumcision in Christ. Irenaeus taught that circumcision, sacrifices, and Sabbaths were given of old as signs of better things to come; the *new* sacrifice, for example, is now a contrite heart. Tertullian, too, had a new spiritual sacrifice and a new spiritual circumcision. Each of these writers also taught that a new spiritual concept of the Sabbath had replaced the old literal one....

This supplanting of the old law with the new, of the literal Sabbath with the spiritual, was a very Christ-centered concept for these four writers. God's people have inherited the covenant only because Christ through His sufferings inherited it first for us, Barnabas said. For Justin the new, final, and eternal law that has been given to us was “namely Christ” Himself. It was only because Christ gave the law that He could now also be “the end of it,” said Irenaeus. And it is Christ who invalidated “the old” and confirmed “the new,” according to Tertullian. Indeed Christ did this, both Irenaeus and Tertullian said, not so much by annulling the law as by so

⁸⁶ Maxwell, p. 161C. Maxwell, an Adventist, is not arguing for Sunday-keeping, but for objective use of the second- and third-century evidence. He claims that the early church was apostate in this practice, and that the apostasy occurred sooner, and on a wider scale, than previous Adventists admitted. Whether this was apostasy or not must be determined on biblical grounds; all we are discussing here is the historical evidence that Sunday observance began very early and was very widespread. Maxwell gives an excellent summary of Ante-Nicene thought about the Sabbath, as quoted above.

⁸⁷ Ironically, among writers who spoke harshly against the literal Sabbath, the idea persisted that true Sabbath keeping consisted in living *every day* like a true Christian. Justin's insistence on keeping “perpetual” Sabbath (that is, true repentance from sin) and Tertullian's doctrine of a “spiritual” and “eternal” Sabbath (a life devoted to the deliverance of the soul) are evidences that the concept of Sabbath as embedding something intrinsically good lived on in the second and third centuries. (Maxwell, p. 145)

wonderfully fulfilling it that He extended it far beyond the mere letter. To sum up: The early rejection of the literal Sabbath appears to be traceable to a common hermeneutic of Old and New Testament scriptures.⁸⁸

Maxwell does not agree with the writers he summarizes, but I do. I also suggest that they, even though they were from various parts of the empire, have a “common hermeneutic” because that same hermeneutic was used in the Gentile mission ever since Acts 15: a mission that did not require Gentiles to keep the laws of Moses, including the Sabbath. It is unlikely that churches throughout the empire would, without controversy, develop the same practice unless that practice had been present from the beginning. It is also unlikely that people throughout the empire would give the same *reasons* for their practice unless those reasons had also been present from the beginning. Their “common hermeneutic” is further evidence of antiquity and, with antiquity comes the implication of apostolic authorization.

Part 5: A Hypothesis

My reconstruction

I agree with the reasons Maxwell has given, but I wish to add one and emphasize it: Jewish Christians had a practical need for meeting times that did not conflict with synagogue observance, as mentioned earlier.

The second-century writers show that the vast majority of Christians met on Sunday and did not keep the Sabbath. They give no clues that would suggest that Sunday was a recent innovation. This suggests that Sunday observance began in the first century. The widespread nature of Sunday observance also argues for its antiquity. The second-century church did not have the organization or communication that might enable them to mandate a particular day of worship without generating disagreement and controversy. Therefore it is likely that Sunday observance began before or during the early stages of the Gentile mission.

It is possible that Sunday observance began in Jerusalem. Thousands of law-observant Jews came into the church. They attended temple and synagogue functions, yet they also wished to have more private meetings for believers only. They wished to discuss Scriptures, share meals, pray and sing Christian hymns. Initially, they met daily (Acts 2:46). Sabbath restrictions, however, might have made it difficult to prepare meals and gather large groups on Saturday evenings. Sundays would provide opportunities for large Christian gatherings. Scriptures that had been read the previous day would be discussed, especially if they had messianic significance. These discussions would be particularly interesting. Sermons would be given; Christians would celebrate their faith in Jesus the Messiah. As Christianity spread to Jewish communities in Antioch, Alexandria and Rome, similar situations would foster the development of post-Sabbath Christian meetings.

When Gentiles began to be added to the church, they were God-fearing Gentiles who attended synagogue readings and would also need a after-Sabbath meeting time for Christian worship. Eventually Gentiles from pagan backgrounds were also added, e.g., in Alexandria, Ephesus and

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 154-56.

Rome. These converts were not in the habit of attending synagogue, but they would nevertheless meet with the others after the Sabbath. Thus there were two groups of Christians: those who kept Sabbath and met after the Sabbath, and those who ignored the Sabbath and met only after the Sabbath. This dual development would have been common throughout the empire, since Jews lived in many cities, and evangelists preached to the Jews first. But the need for dual worship meetings would have ceased in most cities as Gentiles became the large majority. Anti-Jewish sentiment could have accelerated this development.

The custom of after-Sabbath meetings would have been spread by traveling evangelists, and the tradition would have been maintained even in areas without Sabbath meetings. Even in areas with synagogues, meeting on the Sabbath would become less important, since synagogue readings had to be interpreted, and the interpretations were given in the after-Sabbath meeting. The desire for attendance at the synagogue would become further reduced when Christian groups obtained their own copies of the Scriptures.

The Acts 15 conference had already concluded that Gentile converts did not need to keep the law of Moses and, judging by rabbinic writings, uncircumcised Gentiles were not expected to keep the Sabbath. Paul, writing to a church that contained both Jews and Gentiles, downplayed the significance of days (Romans 14:5). He explained that the Sabbath (like sacrifices) had typological significance and was not a matter for judging Christianity (Colossians 2:16). And he criticized any observance of any days that were part of a legalistic obligations (Galatians 4:10). The writer of Hebrews explained that the Sabbath typologically prefigured the eschatological rest, and it is that latter rest that Christians should strive to enter (Hebrews 4:1-10). These NT scriptures indicate that questions about worship days did arise in the first century, and that they were resolved at an early stage in church history.

This hypothetical reconstruction explains how an initially Sabbath-keeping Jewish group could become a Sunday-keeping Gentile group within a generation, and it explains how this could have been done throughout the empire simultaneously with a minimum of controversy: It was part of Christianity from the beginning.

It is possible that Sunday observance began independently in Antioch and Alexandria. Similar factors operated in both locations, including the need for post-synagogue meetings and the association of the first day with Christ's resurrection, permitting parallel development. However, as Christianity spread to more areas, the chances for simultaneous development of the same practice become much slimmer.

A Sabbath-keeper could agree with most of this reconstruction. The Sabbath-keeper could agree that Christians needed after-Sabbath meetings, and that this need existed from the very start. It would not be wrong to meet for worship on Sundays in addition to keeping the Sabbath. However, the Sabbath-keeper would disagree with the significance of the NT scriptures cited above, and the Sabbath-keeper would say that it was wrong to abandon the Sabbath and keep only Sunday. Whether this was apostasy is answered not by church history but by Scripture.⁸⁹

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