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Sabbath and Sunday Observance in the Early Church

WHY DID early Christians start observing Sunday instead of the seventh-day Sabbath?

The most attractive answer is that they did it out of love for Jesus.

There is no doubt, for example, that Justin Martyr loved the Lord. In the middle of the second century Justin willingly gave his life for Christ's sake and was beheaded by Roman authorities. Shortly before his arrest, but when he already knew that his life was in danger, he had the courage to publish a tract in the city of Rome in which he wrote, "I both boast and with all my strength strive to be found a Christian."¹ All his life Justin was fond of witnessing for Christ as an active Christian layman. He studied Bible prophecy with pagans and Jews alike, and appears to have won a considerable number to the church. There is no doubt that Justin loved the Lord.

And there is no doubt that he preferred Sunday to the seventh-day Sabbath. "Sunday is the day," he wrote, "on which we [Christians] all hold our common assembly." And why did they do so? Because on that day God "made the world" and Jesus Christ "rose from the dead."² According to Justin, Christians also worshiped on Sunday because that day "possessed a certain mysterious import"³—as a symbol of sanctification and as the Christian replacement for Old Testament circumcision—which in Justin's view "the seventh day did not possess."

Even earlier in the second century, a Christian writer, usually known today as Barnabas (though we don't know his name for certain), delighted in the observation that Christians "celebrate with gladness" the "eighth day."⁴ The term "eighth day" was commonly applied to Sunday by early Christians because it followed the seventh day and

I. They Loved Jesus

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because it reminded them of the covenant promises of circumcision, a rite that was performed when a Jewish child was eight days old. And why did Christians celebrate with gladness the eighth day? Because, said Barnabas, "on that day Jesus rose from the dead."

As a whole, the second- and third-century Christians whose writings have come down to us provided Christ-centered reasons for preferring the first day of the week to the seventh. Christ was the New Law, they said. Christ introduced the New Covenant. Christ, even though He kept the Sabbath as a Jew, abolished sacrifices, circumcision, and Sabbath for the Christian Church. Christ, after His second coming, would provide heavenly rest during the eternal eighth day that would follow the millennium. The commonest reason given for emphasizing Sunday was, of course, the fact that Jesus on that day rose from the dead.

This is not surprising. By the time Barnabas and Justin were writing, Christ's resurrection was only a century or so in the past. Abraham Lincoln lived about a century prior to our time today, yet many things he did stand out vividly in our awareness. Now suppose that after being killed by Mr. Booth, and buried, President Lincoln had come back to life. What an impact that would have had on people all around the world! It is not difficult to imagine the effect that Christ's resurrection had on the people who lived in the world in the early Christian centuries. Think of the impact it still has!

The Gospels repeatedly assert that Jesus rose from the dead on the "first day of the week."⁵ It follows naturally that Gentile Christians tended to look on the first day of the week as something very special.

There is something else to be consid-

ered. The Gospels show plainly that in Christ's day the Sabbath had been so encrusted with man-made regulations that it no longer reflected the beauty of God's original creation. Jesus Himself fearlessly defied these traditions, and it is little wonder that many early Christians felt there was a sharp contrast between Sabbathkeeping as practiced by the Son of God and as it was kept by the Jews of their era. Viewed from this standpoint, those Christians who gave up the Sabbath (many did not give it up and others kept both days) did not abandon the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments but the Sabbath of contemporary legalism. Sunday, with its joyous resurrection, seemed a vastly superior memorial of their Saviour's love.

Now some historians have suggested other reasons than the love of Christ for the change of emphasis from Sabbath to Sunday. Some, for example, have supposed that it was done in obedience to specific instruction left behind by Jesus Christ Himself. But if the early Christians knew of any such directive they never quoted it or even alluded to it. This is remarkable.

Another group of scholars has suggested that the second- and third-century Christians adopted Sunday in preference to the seventh-day Sabbath as a result of the influence of pagan sun worship. Without question, the sun was worshiped by people who lived in the Roman Empire during the centuries under discussion here and sun worship did play a vital role in the early fourth century when the Sunday rest was decreed by Constantine (A.D. 321), but there is little evidence that the sun occupied the unique position attributed to it by some modern authors. When the Emperor Caracalla tried to impose sun worship in the early years of the third century, the Romans laughed at him. Although sun worship has always played a role in pagan religions, it wasn't until the end of that century that the sun enjoyed real prominence among the Roman gods—and by that time many Christians, at least, had been observing Sunday for 150 years.⁶ In his *Apology* addressed to the Roman Government, the great Christian writer Tertullian specifically refuted the charge that Christians worshiped on Sunday in honor of the sun.⁷

If we are going to draw our conclusions from the clearest evidence available, it seems that we shall have to say that those second- and third-century

“Those second- and third-century Christians who preferred Sunday to the Sabbath did so largely because they loved the Lord.”

Christians who preferred Sunday to the Sabbath did so largely because they loved the Lord and thought that Sundaykeeping honored His memory.

Sixteenth-Century Challenge

Ever since the early centuries, Sunday observance has continued to dominate the Christian church. Nonetheless, Sunday was vigorously challenged in the sixteenth century, after the onset of the Reformation.

As devout Roman Catholics throughout central Europe grappled with Martin Luther's appeal for a return to “the Bible, and the Bible only,” the hearts of many of them were deeply stirred. The cry, *sola scriptura*, soon rang from their lips also, and they too determined to put aside tradition in favor of the Word of God. Hundreds of thousands of Catholics abandoned the confessional and penances of the medieval church and adopted Luther's definition of righteousness by faith. And they did so at the risk of their lives.

Some of these brave Christians who were so deeply grateful for Luther's new insights soon began to wonder if the good professor himself were following his convictions to their logical conclusions. Andreas Fischer and Oswald Glait,⁸ who asked whether Christians had any basis in *sola scriptura* for observing the first day of the week instead of the seventh, both ultimately died for their faith.

Fortunately for us, Luther sent theologians to dialog with Fischer and Glait. From their records we learn that Fischer and Glait insisted that Jesus nowhere asked His followers to keep holy the day on which He rose from the dead. They asked where any scriptural authority could be found for such a belief. Certainly the second- and third-century church fathers had never cited such a command from Christ, and Fischer and Glait affirmed that they couldn't find one either.

The Sabbath, said these Sabbatarians, was not to be confused with the types and symbols of the ceremonial law. It was not to be linked with circumcision and sacrifice. The Sabbath, they said, was sanctified by God as far back as Creation week; thus the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27) before man sinned, before he needed a ceremonial system.

Further, Glait and Fischer emphasized that the seventh-day Sabbath was

placed in the Ten Commandments, where it stands not as a typological ceremony prefiguring the future coming of Christ as Redeemer but as an appropriate memorial to work previously completed by Christ as Creator. According to the Bible, said these men, the Sabbath belongs to the unchangeable moral law.

And if Jesus nowhere asked His followers to change from the seventh to the first day, did He anywhere state the opposite, that they should not? In the Sermon on the Mount, Glait and Fischer observed, Jesus said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:17, R.S.V.). But did His apostles change the day? Glait and Fischer pointed to the second chapter of the book of James, where an apostle says that if we break the law in any one point we break it all.

Then if neither Christ nor His apostles authorized the change from Sabbath to Sunday, who is responsible for the change?

Glait and Fischer called attention to both Old and New Testament prophecies. On the basis of *sola scriptura* they referred to Daniel 7 and 2 Thessalonians 2. Daniel 7:25 predicted the emergence of a powerful religious movement that would think to "change times and laws." Second Thessalonians 2:7 warned that even in the middle of the first century the "mystery of lawlessness" (R.S.V.) was already at work.

Glait and Fischer loved the Lord. Like

"They looked appropriately into Christ's empty grave, but not closely enough at His written Word."

Justin in the second century they too were willing to die for their Saviour, and they did give up their lives for Him. Fischer was thrown over a castle wall. Glait was hurled into the Danube.

Is it possible that men who loved Christ with all their hearts and were willing to die for Him could all have been right about the Sabbath—in the second century and in the sixteenth century—when they said such opposite things about the holy day?

If we judge these men by their motives, we rejoice that all alike appear to have loved their Lord. But if we judge their teachings by *sola scriptura*, what shall we say?

Is it possible that Fischer and Glait had a valid point when they referred to 2 Thessalonians 2, with its "mystery of lawlessness"?

A mystery is something that requires special insight in order to be adequately understood. Is it possible that good men like Justin and Tertullian and Barnabas and countless other early Christians were unwittingly misled by their teachers and their own hearts and that thereafter they looked appropriately into Christ's empty grave but not closely enough at His written Word? ■■

¹ Justin, *Second Apology* 13, *Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)*, 1: 192, 193.

² Justin, *First Apology* 67, *ANF*, 1:186.

³ Justin, *Dialogue With Trypho* 24, *ANF*, 1:206.

⁴ Barnabas, *Epistle* 15; compare the translation here with *ANF*, 1:147.

⁵ Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19.

⁶ Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, is the most popular source for the assertion that Mithraic sun worshipers directly influenced Christian Sundaykeeping. But Cumont provides no evidence that Mithraists did in fact treat Sunday in a special way. In any case, Mithraism rose to prominence too late to explain Christian Sunday observance.

⁷ Tertullian, *Apology* 16, *ANF*, 3:31.

⁸ See Gerhard Hasel, "Sabbatarian Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century," two parts, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* V (July, 1967), 101-121, and VI (January, 1968), 19-28.

IN THE New Testament Era, the seventh-day Sabbath was not only the day on which Christ Himself customarily entered the synagogue (see Luke 4:16) and when during the time of Christ's death the women who intended to anoint His body rested (see Luke 23:54-56). It also continued to be a day when apostles met for worship services (Paul especially is mentioned; see Acts 13:14, 42-44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). As for Sunday (designated the "first day of the week" in the New Testament), that day is noted as the day of Christ's resurrection (see,

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for example, Mark 16:1-6, 9); and on it there were occasionally some meetings for special reasons, such as on the evening when the disciples met behind shut doors "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19) or when Paul held a night meeting at Troas—probably Saturday night—in view of his plans to depart on the next day (Acts 20:6, 7, N.E.B.).*

However, there is no evidence whatever that Sunday was, as is often claimed, the regular day for Christian weekly worship services at that time. In fact, a highly recognized British scholar,

C. W. Dugmore, has correctly and pertinently indicated that the first clear evidence of Christian Sunday observance comes from Justin Martyr in Rome about the middle of the second century A.D., and Dugmore makes an additional interesting observation regarding "how little evidence there is in the New Testament and in the literature of the Sub-Apostolic age that Sunday was the most important day in the Christian Week."¹

We may well query: If Sunday had replaced the Sabbath during the New Testament period, would not the literature have indicated this specifically, and might we not also have expected some polemical overtones in the rather numerous references to these two days? After all, the many references to circumcision in the New Testament almost invariably carry an overtone of polemicism, reflecting the Christian attitude toward *change* in this regard. And in later Christian history, controversial matters have normally left their indelible witness in polemical literature—whether this was in connection with the Christological controversies in the early church councils or the justification-by-faith issue of the Protestant Reformation, et cetera. Should we expect less at the time when Sunday was tending to replace the long-standing Biblical weekly day of worship, the seventh day of the week?

The matter-of-course way in which New Testament references about attendance at Sabbath services are given, together with the lack of emphasis on Sunday as a new day for Christian worship, would suggest that this absence of evidence of struggle and argumentation over the two days means that *status quo* was still obtaining. In other words, the seventh day was still the day for Christian weekly worship, whereas Sunday had not yet taken on this particular role. Apparently, Sunday was not at first generally looked upon as a substitute for the seventh-day Sabbath. For some time *both days* were kept side by side—a matter that will become more clear as we proceed.

The Second Century

Perhaps the most observable feature regarding Sabbath and Sunday in the second century (at least, until near the end of the century) is the general lack of information—or perhaps rather, the basic *silence*—about them. From only two localities, Alexandria and Rome, is

"The first clear witness to Christian Sunday observance was Justin Martyr about A.D. 150."

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there evidence. The earliest witness is the so-called Barnabas, who may have written from Alexandria about A.D. 130, and his remark is only a passing mention within a fairly long letter in which he endeavors allegorically to interpret Old Testament teaching. In speaking of the 6,000-year concept of earth's duration, he refers to the Sabbath as portraying a sort of millennial period of rest (the seventh "millennial" day). This, he says, is to be followed by "a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world [evidently eternity]"—a concept that he connects with the keeping of "the eighth day [Sunday] with joyfulness."²

The first clear witness to Christian Sunday observance was Justin Martyr, who wrote from Rome about A.D. 150. In his famous *Apology* he describes rather briefly to the Roman emperor and Roman senate the Christian Sunday services: "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read . . ." In the same context he refers to administration of communion at the gathering, with the emblems being also taken by deacons to absent members.³ Regarding the seventh-day Sabbath, Justin deals in greater length, in his *Dialogue With Trypho, a Jew*. Among his many negative statements about the Sabbath in this polemical work, the following will serve as an example: "Do you see that the elements are not idle, and keep no Sabbaths? Remain as you were born."⁴

Toward the end of the second century, Clement of Alexandria is our first example of a church father who clearly uses the term "Lord's Day" to refer in highly allegorical context to the weekly Sunday.⁵

From the end of the second century (or early third century) onward the evidence for a weekly observance of Sunday throughout Christendom becomes more apparent and is more widespread. Two fifth-century historians, Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomenus, refer to weekly gatherings to celebrate communion on *both* Sabbath and Sunday generally throughout Christendom, except at Rome and Alexandria.^{6,7}

It is of more than passing interest to notice that the two places mentioned as exceptions to Sabbath observance by these fifth-century historians are precisely the two places from which our earliest evidence of Sunday observance,

together with a negative attitude toward the Sabbath, derives in the second century.

Third Through Fifth Centuries

Although the two church historians whom we have just mentioned belong to the fifth century, their testimony pertains not only to the practice that existed in their own day but obviously points also to that practice as having been in vogue for some time. From the late second or early third century onward the evidence indeed multiplies that early Christians were by then observing two weekly days of worship—Sabbath and Sunday. Furthermore, the evidence from the third through fifth centuries reveals that controversy existed regarding the manner of observance, and also regarding the question of whether Sunday should be observed to the exclusion of the Sabbath.

For instance, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a fourth-century compilation with materials of varying date from the third and fourth centuries, urges observance of *both* Saturday and Sunday, the former as “the memorial of creation” and the latter “of the resurrection.”⁸ This source also specifies that slaves should work five days, but that “on the Sabbath-day and the Lord’s day” they should be given “leisure to go to church for instruction in piety.”⁹ A third- or fourth-century interpolator of Ignatius declares that “every one of you” should “keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner,” and that following this Sabbath observance every “friend of Christ” should keep “the Lord’s Day as a festival . . .”¹⁰ And John Cassian, whose life bridged the fourth to fifth century, wrote concerning certain Egyptian monks that “except Vespers and Nocturns, there are no public services among them in the day except on Saturday and Sunday, when they meet together at the third hour for the purpose of Holy Communion.”¹¹

Not only, however, does the evidence of the third through the fifth centuries give a picture of widespread observance of both Sabbath and Sunday; many of the sources reveal *controversy*, as well.¹² For example, the interpolator of Ignatius, in the passage called to attention above, specifically decries the “Jewish manner” of observing the Sabbath, thus implying that there were Christians adhering to Jewish restrictions such as “walking within a prescribed space.”¹³

“Evidence from the third through fifth centuries reveals that controversy existed regarding the question of whether Sunday should be observed to the exclusion of the Sabbath.”

However, the controversy over Sabbath and Sunday during these centuries extended beyond the *manner* of Sabbath-keeping. The very fact that Rome and Alexandria had ceased to have worship services at all on the Sabbath would imply this. And other evidence concurs.

Probably the most significant Sabbath-Sunday controversy in the early Christian church was regarding whether or not there should be fasting on the Sabbath. As restrictive as the Jews were concerning Sabbath observance, they nevertheless did not fast on that day. Fasting implied sorrow (see Mark 2:18-20), and the Jews considered the Sabbath to be a day of joy rather than of sadness.¹⁴

However, a practice of Sabbath fasting did creep into early Christianity. But it did so only in certain geographical regions—particularly in Rome and some other places in the West. John Cassian refers to the practice as existing among “some people in some countries of the West, and especially in the city [Rome]”; and Augustine (d. A.D. 430) speaks of it as being a practice in “the Roman Church and some other churches” near it and remote from it.¹⁵ Indeed, even in the West the important church in Milan in northern Italy did not observe the Sabbath fast; and Christians in the East did not adopt that fast at all. In fact, this question of the Sabbath fast remained a controversial matter between eastern and western segments of the Christian Church as late as the eleventh century.¹⁶

Augustine reveals the acuteness of the conflict over Sabbath fasting in referring to a certain Roman advocate of the practice who had made extreme denunciation of any who refused to fast on the Sabbath. Although Augustine himself took a mediatory position, he felt that this Roman spokesman was far out of line in condemning those who did not fast on the Sabbath.¹⁷ A position diametrically opposed to that of the Roman advocate of Sabbath fasting is evidenced in Canon 64 of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which specifies, “If any one of the clergy be found to fast on the Lord’s day, or on the Sabbath-day, excepting one only, let him be deprived; but if he be one of the laity, let him be suspended.”¹⁸ Similarly, the third- or fourth-century expander of the writings of Ignatius states that “if any one fasts on the Lord’s day or on the Sabbath, except on the paschal Sabbath only, he is a murderer of Christ.”¹⁹ (It should be

¹³ From *The New English Bible* © The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of The Cambridge University Press, 1970. Reprinted by permission.

noted that on one Sabbath only, the anniversary of the Sabbath during which Christ was in the tomb, Christians in general throughout all Christendom—both East and West—considered it appropriate to fast, in sympathy with the disciples who mourned the absence of their Lord.)

Although it is not our purpose to follow developments beyond the third through fifth centuries, it should be stated that the major eclipse of the Sabbath in favor of Sunday took place in subsequent centuries. But even in that earlier period Sunday was already gaining pre-eminence. Legislative actions undoubtedly helped foster this trend. Such actions would include Emperor Constantine's civil Sunday law of A.D. 321, and church decisions at the regional Council of Laodicea (ca. A.D. 364) prescribing worship on Sunday and ordering that work be done on Saturday.²⁰ Nevertheless, down through the centuries of the Christian Era there have been, of course, many adherents of the seventh-day Sabbath—usually without concurrent observance of Sunday.

From the foregoing pattern of historical development the following facts emerge: (1) In the early church the weekly Sunday was not generally considered as a substitute for the Sabbath, for both days were being kept side by side as late as the fifth century. (2) The question of the two days as in any possible conflict with each other does not become evident until the late second or early third century except, possibly, in Rome and Alexandria. (3) The relative silence in the first and second centuries concerning any Sabbath-Sunday controversy would be strong indication that the earlier practice had continued on, without any threat to the seventh-day Sabbath from a new weekly day of worship entering in. (4) The third-through-fifth-century evidence of controversy, coupled with the earlier silence, would tend to pinpoint the major rise and spread of weekly Sunday observance as belonging to that time period and fostering a struggle in which eventually Sunday emerged as the main day of weekly Christian worship.

Now the question arises, What factors were operative in bringing about the change that eventually gave Sunday the pre-eminence over the Sabbath? The following list is not exhaustive, but will indicate some of the more important elements that were most likely involved



F. R. GRUGER, ARTIST

The Roman Emperor Constantine issues the first civil Sunday laws in A.D. 321.

The relative silence in the first and second centuries concerning any Sabbath-Sunday controversy is strong indication that the earlier practice of keeping the seventh day was being continued.

in this transition.

1. *Anti-Jewish Sentiment.* Various of the anti-Sabbath polemical statements in the early church reveal an anti-Jewish sentiment. For example, Victorinus of Pettan (d. ca. A.D. 303), in advocating the Sabbath fast, even emphasized that the preparation day (Friday) should "become a rigorous fast, lest we should appear to observe any Sabbath with the Jews . . ." ²¹ Such anti-Jewish sentiment was sparked and spurred on by Jewish opposition to the early Christians and also by the disfavor into which Jews had come in official Roman circles because of various Jewish revolts, culminating in that of Bar Cochba in A.D. 132-135. Indeed, Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) issued decrees against Jewish observances, including the seventh-day Sabbath.

2. *The Sabbath Fast.* Making the Sabbath a day of fasting and gloom, in contrast to Sunday as a day of joyous celebration, surely had an important bearing in the historical transition from Sabbath to Sunday as the main weekly day of Christian worship.

3. *Christian Observance of the Sabbath in Judaistic Fashion.* Another influence toward the transition may have derived from the very fact that some

Christians tended to keep the Sabbath in a Jewish legalistic fashion. We may recall, for example, the polemical statement of the interpolator of Ignatius, who urged that the Sabbath should be kept in a "spiritual manner" and not in Jewish fashion. John Chrysostom (d. A.D. 407) referred to "many among us now, who fast on the same day as the Jews, and keep the sabbaths in the same manner," and he declares that "we endure it nobly, or rather ignobly and basely."²² Although the interpolator of Ignatius did not reject Sabbath observance as such, other early Christians did do so. A corrective swing of the pendulum seldom stops midway, and thus certain well-meaning Christians went to the opposite extreme of the Judaizing Christians in the early church by ejecting the Sabbath completely and replacing it with Sunday.

4. *Influence of the Pagan Sunday.* Although the Christian Sunday could hardly have originally entered the Christian church directly from paganism, the influence of the pagan Sunday is not necessarily to be entirely discounted. Even as early as the third century its impact may well have begun to be felt, and it could possibly have been a factor in hastening the development of a weekly Christian Sunday that itself had sprung from other roots. Indeed, Christians in their efforts to evangelize pagans may have considered Sunday observance as a point of *common ground*. Especially after the time of Constantine in the early fourth century, the influence of pagan institutions on early Christianity became even more basic and central, as historians have generally recognized.

5. *The Background of an Annual Easter Sunday.* A consideration that has generally been given little attention in the rise of the weekly Sunday is its possible derivation from a prior *annual* Christian Sunday observance. Recent research has brought to light this possibility.²³

In Conclusion

The historical data suggest the following pattern for the transition from Sabbath to Sunday: In the New Testament the Sabbath was the weekly day for Christian worship. During the second century Sunday began to supplant the Sabbath in such places as Rome and Alexandria, although the seventh day was still observed in the rest of the Christian world. In the third through

"During the second century Sunday began to supplant the Sabbath in such places as Rome and Alexandria."

fifth centuries Sunday observance spread much more widely, and considerable controversy arose as to how to keep the Sabbath and as to whether to keep the Sabbath at all.

Various factors were involved in bringing Sunday eventually into pre-eminence, prominent among them being an anti-Jewish sentiment on the part of many early Christians. At one stage in our presentation we called attention to Constantine's Sunday law and to legislation by the regional Council of Laodicea, actions of a type that undoubtedly helped spur on the transition that made Sunday the main day of Christian worship. But the question may pertinently be asked whether legislation of this sort was indeed true to the intents, methods, and purposes of original Christianity as reflected in the New Testament. ■■

¹ Dugmore, "Lord's Day and Easter," in Oscar Cullmann Festschrift volume *Neotestamentica et Patristica* ("Supplements to Novum Testamentum," vol. 6; Leiden, 1962), pp. 272-281. See especially pp. 274, 275.

² Barnabas, chap. 15 (ANF, 1:146, 147). Quotations from the fathers in this article will be from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF) and *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (NPNF) sets because of the general accessibility of so much of the material in these particular sets. In many cases, other more recent English translations are available, as well.

³ 1 *Apology*, chap. 67, ANF, 1:186.

⁴ *Dialogue*, chap. 33, ANF, 1:206.

⁵ *Miscellanies*, 5:14 (ANF, 2:469). The so-called earlier "Lord's Day" references of the Didache and Ignatius (the word "Day" is actually missing in the texts, so that the reading is simply "Lord's") have been given interesting treatment by Lawrence T. Geraty, "The Pascha and the Origin of Sunday Observance," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 3 (1965): 87, 88; Fritz Guy, "The Lord's Day' in the Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians," *AUSS* 2 (1964): 1-17; and Richard B. Lewis, "Ignatius and the Lord's Day," *AUSS* 6 (1968): 46-59.

⁶ Socrates, *Eccl. Hist.*, 5:22, NPNF, second series, 2:132.

⁷ Sozomen, *Eccl. Hist.*, 7:19, NPNF, second series, 2:390.

⁸ *Apostolic Constitutions*, 7:23, ANF, 7:469.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8:33, ANF, 7:495.

¹⁰ Ignatius to the Magnesians, Long Recension, chap. 9, ANF, 1:62, 63.

¹¹ Cassian, *Institutes*, 3:2, NPNF, second series, 11:213.

¹² In a sense, sources such as the *Apostolic Constitutions* items quoted above may reveal controversy (or at least they imply, and seek to counteract, a laxity of some sort).

¹³ See n. 10, above. He also opposes Sabbath "idleness," and may in fact be approaching an attitude manifested in the Council of Laodicea, mentioned later in this article.

¹⁴ See, e.g., the Book of Jubilees 50:10, 12, 13. Josephus, *Life*, 54, makes mention of the requirement in his day to eat the noon meal on the Sabbath.

¹⁵ Cassian, *Institutes*, 3:10 (NPNF, second series, 11:218); and Augustine, *Epistle* 36 (to Casulanus), par. 27, NPNF, first series, 1:268.

¹⁶ For the position of Milan, see Augustine's *Epistle* 36 (to Casulanus), par. 32 (NPNF, 1st series, 1:270), and *Epistle* 54 (to Januarius), par. 3 (NPNF, 1st series, 1:300, 301). Regarding the controversial status of Sabbath fasting as late as the eleventh century, see R. L. Odom, "The Sabbath in the Great Schism of A.D. 1054," *AUSS* 1 (1963): 74-80.

¹⁷ Augustine's treatment of this particular situation is in response to Casulanus' inquiry, and appears as Augustine's *Epistle* 36 in NPNF, first series, 1:265-270.

¹⁸ In ANF, 7:504.

¹⁹ Ignatius to Philipppians, chap. 13, ANF, 1:119.

²⁰ See especially Canon 29, which specifies that "if possible" no work should be done on Sunday, but that Christians "shall not Judaize and be idle on the Sabbath, but shall work on that day." English translation is available in Charles J. Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils* (Oxenham trans.; Edinburgh, 1896), 2:316.

²¹ Victorinus of Pettan, *On the Creation of the World*, par. 4, ANF, 7:341, 342.

²² Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians*, comment on 1:7, NPNF, first series, 13:8.

²³ Cf., e.g., the evidence cited by Geraty, pp. 90-95.

A THESIS currently being espoused and defended by numerous scholars is that the change from Sabbath to Sunday observance took place in Jerusalem, the mother church of Christendom. The apostles themselves, it is claimed, were responsible for the change, and made it at the very inception of the church in order to commemorate the resurrection and the "Easter" appearances of Christ. It is assumed that they celebrated the day with the Lord's Supper, or communion.

When we look carefully at the New Testament and the early patristic accounts, however, we find that such an assumption is altogether unwarranted. The change had to have happened later. Let us look at a few of the evidences.¹ At the first Christian ecumenical council held in the year A.D. 49-50 in the city of Jerusalem, James, the presiding officer, remarked that the Gentile-Christians were receiving instruction from Moses in every city, "for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues" (Acts 15:21, R.S.V.). Christians were evidently still attending the synagogue, listening to the reading and exposition of the Scriptures "every Sabbath." Obviously the problem of a new day of worship had not come up; the total silence of the council on the topic indicates that it was not an issue. Moreover, although this council exempted Gentiles from the requirements for circumcision, the apostle James and others later vacillated on that issue (Gal. 2:12). This shows that the early church leaders were deeply committed to traditional Jewish practices.

About ten years later Paul paid his last visit to Jerusalem. James and the elders, who appear to have been the governing body of the church there, again showed their deep loyalty to Jewish religious legal traditions. They informed Paul that the many thousands of converted Jews were "all zealous for the law" (Acts 21:20, R.S.V.), and they also confronted him with a report that he was telling the Gentiles "not to circumcise their children or observe the customs" (verse 21). Then they went so far as to pressure him into undergoing a rite of purification at the temple to demonstrate that he also "live[d] in observance of the law" (verse 24). Because they lived in such a climate of profound attachment to Jewish religious observances, it is inconceivable that they should even think of abrogating such a long-standing and cherished custom as

3. Rome and the Origin of Sunday Observance

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Sabbathkeeping in favor of a new day of worship.

Some scholars prefer to place the origin of Sunday observance at a somewhat later time, A.D. 70.² In that year the Christians fled from Jerusalem to Pella and the Temple was destroyed; these events might have encouraged Palestinian Christians to break away from Sabbathkeeping. According to Eusebius, however, between A.D. 70 and 135 the Jerusalem church was composed of and governed by converted Jews who "were zealous to insist on the literal observance of the law."³ Epiphanius adds that the Judeo-Christians who fled from Jerusalem and who became known as the sect of the Nazarenes "fulfill till now Jewish rites as the circumcision, the Sabbath and others."⁴ It was after the destruction of Jerusalem that the rabbinical authorities introduced (ca. A.D. 80-90) the curse of the Christians (Birkath-ha-Min) in their daily prayer, designed to bar Christians from attending and participating in the synagogue services.

In A.D. 135 a much more radical change took place in the church of Jerusalem. At that time Emperor Hadrian destroyed the city and expelled not only the Jews but also the Judeo-Christians. What survived of the city was repopulated by foreigners, and only Gentile-Christians, not Jewish-Christians, were allowed to enter. It was at that time, according to Epiphanius, that the "(Passover) controversy arose,"⁵ apparently over the proposal of a new Easter Sunday date, which many Christians were unwilling to accept.

These historical facts make it difficult for us to see how the Jerusalem church prior to A.D. 135 could have been the champion of liturgical innovations such as Sunday worship. Of all the Christian churches, in fact, this was both racially and theologically the closest and most loyal to Jewish religious traditions. Hadrian's actions after A.D. 135, however, could have had profound effects on the Christian church; he decreed that the practice of the Jewish religion, and particularly the observance of the Sabbath, should be categorically prohibited.⁶ It may well be that church leaders at this time introduced Sunday observance, along with Easter Sunday, in an attempt to distinguish themselves from the Jews. To verify this as a hypothesis we need to ascertain (1) the relationship between Easter Sunday and the weekly Sunday, (2) the birthplace of Easter

Sunday, and (3) the causes of the change of the Jewish Passover date of Nisan 14 to Easter Sunday, at least in Christian practice.

Several patristic statements could be cited where the weekly Sunday and Easter Sunday are treated as basically the same feast, commemorating at different times the same event of the resurrection.⁷ Pope Innocent I (A.D. 402-417), for example, explicitly stated: "We celebrate Sunday because of the venerable resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, not only at Easter but in actuality by the single weekly cycle (i.e. every Sunday)."⁸ The basic unity existing between the two festivities suggests the possibility that both could have originated contemporaneously in the same place and from similar causes.

Regarding the place of the origin of the Easter Sunday tradition, Eusebius, in his *History of the Church*, provides a valuable dossier of documents.⁹ He presents Bishop Victor of Rome (A.D. 189-199) as the champion of the Easter Sunday custom, who demanded that all the Christian communities adopt it. Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, representing the Asian churches, refused to comply, because he said he followed the example of the apostles Philip and John in celebrating the Passover on Nisan 14. Bishop Victor thereby excommunicated Polycrates. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon (from ca. A.D. 178), intervened as peacemaker in the controversy. He urged Bishop Victor to emulate his predecessors, "Anicetus and Pius and Telesphorus and Xystus,"¹⁰ who, though they had celebrated Easter on Sunday, had nevertheless been at peace with those who observed it on Nisan 14.

The fact that Irenaeus mentions Bishop Xystus (ca. A.D. 116-126) as the first nonobservant of the Quartodeciman Passover, suggests that the feast may have begun to be celebrated in Rome on Sunday at about his time. Bishop Xystus governed the Church of Rome at the time of Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-138), who had shown some sympathy with Christianity. Since Hadrian had adopted such a radical policy of repression toward Judaism, it is easy to see why the Bishop of Rome would have been inclined to substitute practices regarded as Jewish with new and different ones.

While the exact time of the origin of Easter Sunday may be a subject of dispute, scholars seem to agree quite generally that Rome was its birthplace.

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Some even label it as "Roman Easter."¹¹ This is suggested not only by the role of the Church of Rome in enforcing the new custom but also by statements in later historical sources. In two related documents, the conciliar letter of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) and a personal letter from Constantine addressed to all the bishops, the Church of Rome is presented as a prime example to follow on the matter of Easter Sunday. This was undoubtedly because of the church's historical position and role in championing its observance.¹²

Inclination to Break Away From Judaism

One might ask, What caused Rome to abandon the Jewish Quartodeciman Passover and to adopt Easter Sunday in its place? The same forces may have led the church to repudiate the Sabbath and introduce Sundaykeeping, since Sunday was regarded by many Christians as an extension of the annual Easter. (Italians still refer to Sunday as *pasquetta*, that is, "little Easter.") Many scholars acknowledge that the Roman custom of celebrating Easter on Sunday instead of on the 14th of Nisan was due to, in J. Jeremias' words, "the inclination to break away from Judaism."¹³ J. B. Lightfoot holds, for instance, that Rome and Alexandria adopted Easter Sunday to avoid "even the semblance of Judaism."¹⁴ M. Righetti similarly points out that after "having eliminated the Judaizing Quartodeciman tradition," Rome and Alexandria repudiated even the Jewish computations, making their own time calculations. He says that "such dependence on the Jews must have appeared humiliating."¹⁵ The Nicene conciliar letter and the personal letter of Constantine perhaps best exemplify their marked anti-Judaic motivations for repudiating the Quartodeciman Passover. The Emperor, desiring to establish a religion free from any Jewish influences, wrote:

"We ought not therefore to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Saviour has shown us another way: . . . in unanimously adopting this mode (i.e., Easter Sunday) we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews."¹⁶

Nicaea represents the culmination of a controversy initiated two centuries earlier by people with strong anti-Judaic feelings and responsive to influences from Rome. Because of the close nexus between Easter Sunday and the

weekly Sunday, it would seem reasonable for us to assume that the same anti-Judaic motivations that led people to abandon the Jewish Passover and introduce Easter Sunday also led them to substitute Sunday worship for Sabbath-keeping at the same time.

Several factors present particularly in the city of Rome support this conclusion. We can mention only some of them in this article and refer the reader to other studies that provide a more extensive treatment.¹⁷

Even though in the West there was no uniformity in the observance of the Sabbath, the Church of Rome took a unique stand on Sundaykeeping and urged all the Western and Eastern Christian communities to abandon the observance of the Sabbath. Justin Martyr, writing from Rome in the middle of the second century, presented the most devastating condemnation of the Sabbath. He emptied the day of all its theological meaning, reducing it to a mark that God imposed only on the Jews "to single them out for punishment they so well deserve for their infidelities."¹⁸

Negative View of Sabbath Seen in Beginning

Such a negative view of the Sabbath is reflected in the early introduction of the Sabbath fast by the Church of Rome, in spite of the opposition of Eastern and several Western churches. The fast was designed not only to express sorrow for Christ's death, but also, as Pope Sylvester (A.D. 314-335) emphatically stated it, to show "contempt for the Jews (*exsecratione Judaeorum*)" and for their Sabbath "feasting (*destructiones ciborum*)."¹⁹

A church which kept a strict Sabbath fast would naturally be unable to celebrate the Lord's Supper, since partaking of its elements would be regarded as breaking the fast. Consequently, as reported by several Fathers,²⁰ the Sabbath was made in Rome not only a day of fasting but also a day in which no religious assemblies were allowed. The Church of Rome appears therefore to have taken concrete measures, on the one hand, to force Christians away from the veneration of the Sabbath, and on the other hand to enhance exclusively Sunday worship.

One might ask why the Church of Rome pioneered and promoted the adoption of new liturgical festivities such as Easter Sunday, the weekly Sunday, and later the date of December

The Church of Rome took a unique stand on Sunday-keeping and urged all the Western and Eastern Christian communities to abandon observance of the Sabbath.

25 for the celebration of the birth of Christ. Here we can mention only a few of the significant factors.

The Church of Rome, unlike most Eastern churches, was composed of predominantly Gentile converts (Rom. 11:13). The result was that in Rome, as Leonard Goppelt says, "a chasm between the Church and the Synagogue is found everywhere, unknown in the Eastern churches."²¹ In the capital city Christians were early differentiated from Jews. The Jews are said to have instigated Nero to exculpate himself of the charge of arson by putting the blame on the Christians. Succeeding emperors, after Nero, took various repressive measures against the Jews, and these were felt especially in Rome. Titus, for example, had wanted to marry Berenice, sister of Herod the Younger; but because of the mounting hostility of the populace against Jews he was forced to ask her to leave the city.²² This undoubtedly encouraged the Church of Rome to do everything possible to distinguish itself from Judaism.

It was also in Rome that the Sun cults became dominant. Presumably they got official encouragement because they were associated with the cult of the emperor. The veneration shown by the pagans for the day of the sun and their celebration of the *Natalis Solis Invicti* (birth of the invincible sun) on December 25, seemingly inspired the Christians to adopt and "Christianize" these festivals. Apparently the Christians reinterpreted the symbolism of those events in the light of the Christian message. Justin Martyr, for instance, in expounding to the emperor about Christian worship, now stated twice that Christians held their assembly "on the day of the sun" but that they did it primarily because God had created light on that day.²³

Most of these things happened right in the city of Rome. We might add that the Bishop of Rome was the only one with enough prestige to influence the rest of Christianity to adopt such a radical new liturgical practice as a weekly Sunday rest day or a yearly Easter Sunday.

These few remarks are by no means a comprehensive survey of the factors that contributed to the origin of Sunday observance. If one is to gain a full picture of the circumstances he should consider several other factors such as the motivations of the Christians, the Sun cults, the Jubilee solar calendar,

the social and political situation of the times, and the tensions between the church and the synagogue. We have mentioned some of the more important evidences for believing that Sunday observance did not originate in the primitive Christian community of Jerusalem, but rather in the Church of Rome possibly a century after the time of Christ. Its basis is not Biblical, but historical.

Sunday observance seems to have originated in Rome, rather than in Jerusalem.

¹ For a more exhaustive treatment of the question, see Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Un esame dei testi biblici e patristici dei primi quattro secoli allo scopo d'accertare il tempo e le cause del sorgere della domenica come giorno del Signore* (Rome: unpublished dissertation presented to the Pontifical Gregorian University, 1974), pp. 12-88, 288-310; the fifth chapter of the dissertation has been published in English with the Roman Catholic imprimatur, under the title, *Anti-Judaism and the Origin of Sunday* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian Press, 1975); the book is distributed in the United States of America by Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, Michigan 49104.

² This is the position taken by Francis A. Regan, *Dies Dominica and Dies Solis. The Beginning of the Lord's Day in Christian Antiquity* (Washington, D.C.: unpublished dissertation presented to the Catholic University of America, 1961), p. 18.

³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.27.3; cf. 4. 5. 2-11; the question is discussed in *Anti-Judaism*, pp. 28, 29.

⁴ Epiphanius, *Adversus Haereses* 29, 7, PG 41, 402; cf. Jerome's letter to Augustine in PL 22, 924.

⁵ Epiphanius, *Panarion haereseon*, 70, 10, PG 42, 355.

⁶ Rabbinical sources refer repeatedly and extensively to Hadrian's decree and harsh policies. For references and discussion,

see *Anti-Judaism*, pp. 41, 42.

⁷ For references, see *Anti-Judaism*, p. 84.

⁸ Innocent I. *Epistola* 25, 7, PL 20, 255.

⁹ For the account of the Easter controversy, see Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5. 23-25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.24.13.

¹¹ See for instance, C. S. Mosna, *Storia della domenica dalle origini fino agli inizi del secolo V*, published dissertation (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1969), pp. 117-119.

¹² The conciliar decree of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) was discovered and edited by J. B. Pitra, *Juris ecclesiastici Graecorum historia et monumenta* (Rome: 1864) 1:435, 436, cited by Ortiz De Urbina in *Nicee et Constantinople, Histoire des Conciles Oecumeniques*, 12 vols. (Paris: editions de l'Orante, 1963), 1:259; cf. Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.9; Constantine's letter is reported by Eusebius, in *Vita Constantini* 3.18, 19; by Socrates, in *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.9; and by Theodoret, in *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.10; cf. C. J. Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1894), p. 322.

¹³ J. Jeremias, "Pascha," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed., Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), V, p. 903, fn. 64.

¹⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan Company, 1885), vol. 2, pp. 1, 88.

¹⁵ Mario Righetti, *Storia Liturgica*, 3 vols. (Milan: Editrice Ancora, 1955), vol. 2, p. 246.

¹⁶ Hefele, *History of the Councils*, p. 322 (emphasis supplied).

¹⁷ The factors which suggest Rome to be the birthplace of Sunday observance are discussed in *Anti-Judaism*, pp. 53-88.

¹⁸ Regan, *Dies Dominica*, p. 26; cf. Justin's *Dialogue With Trypho* 16. 1 and 21. 1.

¹⁹ S. R. E. Humbert, *Adversus Graecorum calumnias* 6, PL 143, 936.

²⁰ See the references to Innocent I, Socrates and Sozomen in *Anti-Judaism*, p. 76.

²¹ Leonard Goppelt, *Les Origines de L'Eglise* (Paris: Payot, 1961), p. 203.

²² Suetonius, *Titus* 7.1.2.

²³ Justin Martyr, *I Apology* 67.

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