

## **Sabbath and Sunday in History:**

**Research Papers by Michael D. Morrison, Thomas C. Hanson, and Ralph G. Orr**

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# **Sabbath and Sunday in Early Christianity**

By Michael Morrison

## **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 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 either the seventh day or 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 had conflicts with 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).<sup>1</sup> 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).

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

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 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).

However, 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. He taught that Christians should not be judged about special days (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).<sup>3</sup>

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" (Revelation 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 were meeting, or should meet.

None of the texts 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 Judea, 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 Judean 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...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."<sup>4</sup> This curse was supposedly designed to identify Christians in the synagogues. Anyone who refused to pronounce the curse was suspected

of being a Christian. This implies that at least some Jewish Christians were 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 keeping the Sabbath in the fourth century,<sup>5</sup> and their observance of Jewish laws goes back at least to the second century<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 did not think that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath.<sup>8</sup> Although most of this rabbinic evidence 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.<sup>9</sup> There is no direct evidence for either meeting time, which can be explained by the fact that neither practice would have created controversy. It would be 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,”<sup>10</sup> 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 Jews. Moreover, Colossians 2:16 and Galatians 4:10 *may* be Paul’s answer to Judaizers’ teachings about the Sabbath.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> These scriptures are addressed in more detail in *What Do the Scriptures Say About the*

*Sabbath?* See <http://www.gci.org/law/sabbath1#Jesus>.

<sup>2</sup> “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,” chapter 9 in D.A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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?” 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), 92).

<sup>4</sup> 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), 135.

<sup>5</sup> Bacchiocchi writes:

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).

<sup>6</sup> "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, 352]).

Eusebius reports that some of them denied the virgin birth and divinity of Jesus.

<sup>7</sup> "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, 233).

<sup>8</sup> "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., 23], as quoted in C. Mervyn Maxwell and Gerard Damsteegt, eds., *Source Book for the History of Sabbath and Sunday* [Berrien Springs, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1992], 75).

The Noachian laws are also listed in *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 16:6 (Soncino ed., 131), *Sanhedrin* 56 a, b; and *Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:2(5) (Soncino ed. 26-7) (*ibid.*, 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, 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., 314], quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, 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., 23-4], quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, 75)

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, 58).

<sup>9</sup> Bauckham writes about Jewish Christians in Judea

(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, 237)

<sup>10</sup> Bacchiocchi, 132.

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## Sabbath and Sunday in the Early Second Century

### 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, “If we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace.... It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize.”<sup>3</sup>

More specifically about the Sabbath, Ignatius praised some who were “no longer observing the Sabbath.”<sup>4</sup> 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., Isaiah 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.”<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that all Jewish Christians had abandoned the Sabbath, but some had, and Ignatius was praising them to the Magnesians. 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.”<sup>6</sup> The meaning here is debated, since “day” is not in the Greek, and a textual variant exists. Space does not permit a detailed discussion,<sup>7</sup> 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. 70<sup>8</sup> or as late as 132.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup>

Barnabas cites Isaiah 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

Justin is clear: It was the widespread practice of Christians to observe Sunday.<sup>15</sup> “Perhaps there were some Gentile Christians who kept the Sabbath...but if so, they found no spokesman whose writings survive.”<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

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 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?<sup>20</sup>

And Justin replied that Christians were indeed obedient to God, even when obedience was

extremely 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?<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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."<sup>23</sup> Justin argued that, since Sabbaths and sacrifices and feasts began with Moses, then they ended with Christ, who was the new covenant.<sup>24</sup>

Not only do Gentiles not have to keep the Sabbath, Justin concluded that "the just men who are descended from Jacob" do not have to, either.<sup>25</sup> Trypho asked, Could a Christian keep the Sabbath if he wished to? Justin knew of some Jewish Christians who kept the Sabbath and replied, Yes, as long as he doesn't try to force other Christians to keep the law of Moses.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96, Loeb 2:401-407, quoted in Maxwell and Damsteegt, 58.

<sup>2</sup> *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.

<sup>3</sup> *To the Magnesians* 8, 10; ANF 1:62-3.

<sup>4</sup> *To the Magnesians* 9; ANF 1:62.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> 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.*, 228-231).

<sup>8</sup> "Barnabas, Epistle of," in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1983), 134.

<sup>9</sup> Maxwell and Damsteegt, 60, and ANF 1:135.

<sup>10</sup> *Epistle of Barnabas* 15; ANF 1:146.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; ANF 1:147.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> 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, 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.

<sup>14</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 67; ANF 1:186.

<sup>15</sup> Additional evidence of the near-universality of Sunday comes from:

- \* Aristides of Athens (c. 160), who criticized Jewish Sabbaths (Bauckham, 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, 108, and Bauckham, 228).
- \* The *Epistle to Diognetus* (late second century?) criticizes Jews’ “superstitions about sabbaths” and other practices (Bauckham, 267)
- \* Hegesippus, a Judean-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, 85).
- \* Clement of Alexandria (c. 190) equated the Lord’s day and the eighth day in *Miscellanies* 5:14 (ANF 2:469).

<sup>16</sup> Bauckham, 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.

<sup>17</sup> Maxwell, op. cit., 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)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 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., 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., 271). Bauckham cites evidence from Tertullian, Jerome and others that Sunday was not considered a rest day (p. 286).

<sup>19</sup> 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. Ac 15:5). The prominence of new moons is also interesting (cf. Col 2:16).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 10; ANF 1:199.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 18; ANF 1:203.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 10-12; ANF 1:199-200.

<sup>23</sup> 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 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 43; ANF 1:216.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26; ANF 1:207.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 47; ANF 1:218.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 41; ANF 1:215. Justin’s argument seems to presuppose that Trypho knew that Christians observed the eighth day, i.e., Sunday.

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## **Sabbath and Sunday in the Writings of 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 (Matthew 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 [Mt 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 Justin's reasoning, it is evident that he 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.<sup>2</sup>

Irenaeus, like Justin, said that the patriarchs before Moses did not keep the Sabbath.<sup>3</sup> But he also said that they kept the Decalogue and that Christians also had to!<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> The meaning here is debatable, since Gnostics often gave words unusual meanings. Everything needed an "interpretation."<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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,<sup>10</sup> said that the Patriarchs did not observe it,<sup>11</sup> interpreted it in terms of morals<sup>12</sup> and worshipped on Sunday.<sup>13</sup> He gives yet more evidence that second-century Christians had 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 worshiped the Lord, and the day became known in the second century as "the Lord's day [*kuriakē hēmera*]."<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> Let us survey the evidence for this term.

In the late first century, John used *kuriakē hēmera* in Revelation 1:10, but the meaning there is debated. In the early second century, Ignatius used *kuriakē* alone, and textual variants cause the meaning to be debatable.<sup>18</sup> The Gospel of Peter 35 and 50 (middle second century) used

*kuriakē* to designate the day of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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"<sup>21</sup> — 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*]."<sup>22</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (c. 190) also gives clear evidence that *kuriakē* meant the eighth day, Sunday,<sup>23</sup> and he spoke of "keeping" the Lord's day.<sup>24</sup> He quoted a Valentinian Gnostic who equated the *kuriakē* with the ogdoad, the eighth heaven.<sup>25</sup> "The same identification of *kuriakē*, the eighth day, with the ogdoad, the eighth heaven, is found in the antignostic Epistula Apostolorum [also second century]."<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> Even in the early second century, Sunday-keeping was the norm throughout 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.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.8.2-3; ANF 1:471.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4.16.2; ANF 1:481.

<sup>4</sup> "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).

<sup>5</sup> “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, 267-9).

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 96 (Joseph Smith, trans. Ancient Christian Writers [Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1952], vol. 16, 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 people do not lust, they do not need a command about adultery because they are already obeying it. Likewise, in Irenaeus’ thought, if people are always acting justly, they do not need a command about the Sabbath, because they are always obeying it.

<sup>7</sup> James Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 129.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas 1; Robinson, 126.

<sup>9</sup> “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, 265).

<sup>10</sup> *Apology* 21; ANF 3:36 and *Against Marcion* 1:20; 5.19; ANF 3:285, 471.

<sup>11</sup> *An Answer to the Jews* 2; ANF 3:153.

<sup>12</sup> *An Answer to the Jews* 4; ANF 3:155.

<sup>13</sup> *Apology* 16; ANF 3:31; and *On Idolatry* 14; ANF 3:70.

<sup>14</sup> The Ebionites and Nazarenes were the primary exceptions. But they were 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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).

<sup>16</sup> 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, 225).

<sup>17</sup> “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, 139).

<sup>18</sup> 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, 347).

<sup>19</sup> 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” (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, 346-7).

<sup>20</sup> Bauckham is again cautious: “A reference to weekly Sunday worship seems very probable but not certain” (p. 229, citing Eusebius’ *History* 4.23.11).

<sup>21</sup> Bauckham, 229, citing *Act. Verc.* 29.

<sup>22</sup> Maxwell, 106-8, and Bauckham, 227-8.

<sup>23</sup> *Miscellanies* 5:14; ANF 2:469.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:12; ANF 2:545.

<sup>25</sup> Exc. ex Theod. 63:1, quoted in Bauckham, 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, 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).

<sup>26</sup> Bauckham, 274. On 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.

<sup>27</sup> Bauckham writes:

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, 154-7).

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## **Sabbath and Sunday — Adventist Theories**

### **Bacchiocchi's theory**

Modern Sunday-keeping Christians often conclude that the apostles authorized or even commanded Gentiles to meet on Sundays instead of Sabbaths.<sup>1</sup> This conclusion is rejected by anyone who thinks that Christians should observe the Sabbath day.<sup>2</sup> 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 century.”<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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 possible candidate for the beginning of Sunday observance. Because of the need 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.<sup>5</sup>

However, Bacchiocchi's theory has numerous problems, as noted by Strand, who is also an Adventist.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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 an accepted 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.<sup>10</sup> There is no evidence for such a factor (Tertullian specifically rules it out<sup>11</sup>), it is historically unlikely, and the selection of Sunday can be explained without resorting to pagan precedents.<sup>12</sup> The early church resisted pagan practices. Christians would die rather than do something as simple as call the emperor "Lord."

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 calendar(s).<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup>

This theory, however, in addition to being entirely speculative, 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!). This theory does not work for the Quartodeciman Christians, and all evidence is that even the



Quartodecimans observed Sunday.<sup>16</sup> Strand feels that his theory explains why Sunday is a “resurrection festival,” but no explanation for that is needed; it would 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.”<sup>17</sup>

This theory also has 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 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 (see above). Maxwell also commented on the correct translation of Socrates:

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.<sup>18</sup>

Socrates 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,<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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 request to set aside money for the poor on Sundays.<sup>22</sup>

### **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.<sup>23</sup> 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. 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 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.<sup>24</sup>

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 or written discussion, 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.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 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 [Judea]. 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 [Judean] churches.

(Bauckham, 236)

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

<sup>2</sup> It is theoretically possible that the apostles encouraged Sunday worship meetings in addition to requiring the Sabbath as a rest day. Such a theory would be particularly 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.

<sup>3</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: Reviews and Herald, 1957) 166-7, cited by Swartley, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (FSS) (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian

University, 1977), 211, and Bacchiocchi in Strand, op. cit., 136).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> As evidence that Rome did not have such power, we can note:

- \* Ignatius does not greet a bishop of Rome.
- \* Irenaeus disagreed with the bishop of Rome regarding policy toward Quartodecimans.
- \* Polycarp and Polycrates acted as equals with the bishop of Rome.
- \* It was only with difficulty and recorded controversy that Rome pressured a change in the date of Easter for one area in Asia Minor.
- \* Even in later centuries, Rome was unable to force other cities to observe the seventh day as a fast day.
- \* 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* (AUSS) 17 (1979), 96-99. Strand also notes that "Christian influences were still moving largely from East to West rather than vice versa" (*Sabbath*, 332, n. 22).

<sup>8</sup> 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)

<sup>9</sup> Maxwell, 138.

<sup>10</sup> Bacchiocchi, *FSS*, 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).

<sup>11</sup> Apology 16; ANF 3:31.

<sup>12</sup> 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. The only day of the week (other than the Sabbath) mentioned in the Gospels is the first.

<sup>13</sup> Strand writes,

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, 327)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 327, citing Lawrence T. Geraty, “The Pascha and the Origin of Sunday Observance,” *AUSS* 3 (1965):85-96.

<sup>15</sup> Strand, *Sabbath*, app. B, 323.

<sup>16</sup> “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, 96).

<sup>17</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe...: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1988), 259, footnoting as source Justin, Bacchiocchi, and Socrates 5.22.

<sup>18</sup> Maxwell, 142.

<sup>19</sup> “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, 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)

<sup>20</sup> *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 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.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Maxwell, 161C. Maxwell is not arguing for Sunday-keeping, but for honest 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.

<sup>23</sup> Maxwell writes,

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, 145)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 154-56.

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## Sabbath and Sunday — A New Hypothesis

### My reconstruction

I agree with the reasons Maxwell has given, but I wish to add one: 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 in synagogues 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 Jesus as 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 an after-Sabbath meeting time for Christian worship. Eventually Gentiles from pagan backgrounds were also added, e.g., in Alexandria, Ephesus and 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 also 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 Christians (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.<sup>2</sup>

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> I am open to the possibility 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 independent development of the same practice become slimmer.

<sup>2</sup> 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 for believers to eventually abandon the Sabbath and keep only Sunday. Whether this was apostasy is answered not by church history but by Scripture.

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# **The Origins of Sunday Worship in the Early Church**

By Thomas C. Hanson

**Thesis statement:** Although seventh-day Sabbatarians cite evidence that Jesus and the primitive church kept a seventh-day Sabbath, nevertheless first and second-century church writers show that some Christian communities began to meet on the first day of the week after Jesus' resurrection, and that worship began to shift from the seventh day to the first day of the week at that time. The early church gave warrants for making this shift from the Gospels and the Pauline writings.

## **Outline**

### I. Pauline churches—conflicts concerning the Sabbath and Judaizers

- A. Gal. 4:10
- B. Col. 2:16-17
- C. Romans 14:5-6
- D. 1 Cor. 16:2

### II. How each Gospel writer portrayed Jesus, the Sabbath and the first day of the week

- A. Mark
- B. Matthew
- C. Luke and Acts
- D. John
- E. The first day of the week

### III. Second-century churches

- A. Sunday worship now the norm
- B. Epistle of Barnabas
- C. Justin
- D. Use of the term Lord's Day in second-century writings to refer to first day of week (as the term is used in Revelation 1:10)

## **Method of analysis and presentation**

We begin with a discussion of the main groups that made up first-century Christianity: Jewish Christians from Judea and Galilee, the Hellenistic Jewish Christians represented by Stephen, and the Pauline churches. We will then look at references Paul made to the sabbath and Sunday worship.

Then we will look at how the Gospel writers (including Luke-Acts) referred to the sabbath and the first day of the week. The recurring charge we will see against Jesus is breaking the sabbath. Next, we will move on to post-apostolic writings into the second century to look at the

shift from worship on the sabbath to worship on Sunday.

### **The early Christian communities**

The apostolic faith took on many forms of expression in the first decades of its life as it responded to cultural, social, political and religious pressures.<sup>1</sup> We see in Luke's writing of Acts that the first Christians were Jews, and the earliest church is classifiable as a messianic sect within Judaism. The disciples are frequently found in the temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1-3; 5:21, 25, 42), and since they were held in high regard by the people (Acts 2:47; 5:13), it can be assumed that they continued to observe the law, circumcision, sabbath worship and the food laws.<sup>2</sup>

Those who met in Jerusalem for Pentecost were Jews and proselytes (Acts 2:10). Those Jews and proselytes who became believers were firmly attached to the temple, attending the daily hours of prayer (Acts 2:46; 3:1). Luke's account of the earliest period of the life of the new community ends with them not having stirred from Jerusalem and still largely focused on the temple (Acts 5:42).

In Acts 21:20 the Jewish Christian members, led by James, tell Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law." Paul's act of fulfilling the vow in the temple shows the continuing role of the temple in the lives of the conservative Jerusalem Christians.

However, Jewish Christianity was anything but a single, unified phenomenon. It was present in many locations throughout the Mediterranean world, and expressed itself in orthodox and heretical forms.

Following are other examples of Jewish Christianity.

### **The Judean Christian community in James**

Paul calls James one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:9), and he notes that "certain people came from James," by their continued observance of circumcision and ritual purity, undermined the gospel of his Gentile mission in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-15).<sup>3</sup> Acts does not record that any of the Jerusalem church came to help Paul when he was arrested.

James and the elders gave this description of Jewish Christians: "how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law" (Acts 21:20).

### **Hellenistic-Jewish community (Stephen's circle and Antioch)**

When Stephen, a Hellenist, came on the scene in Acts 6:1-5, the church began to broaden

while still within the confines of Judaism. Stephen was accused by what are referred to as “false witnesses” of speaking against the temple and the law (Acts 6:13). The speech Luke records in Acts 7 shows that this accusation was not entirely untrue. Stephen castigated the ancestors for not obeying Moses (7:39), a charge that they had leveled against him (6:11). Stephen said that the temple had limited importance and that “the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands” (Acts 7:48).

Stephen’s speech led to his martyrdom and ignited the first persecution of the church, of Jews by Jews. That the twelve apostles were able to remain in Jerusalem while the Hellenist members were forced to flee indicates that the persecution was not directed at the apostles, probably because they dissociated themselves from the views of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians.<sup>4</sup> As the persecuted Christians fled Jerusalem, they preached the gospel (8:4, 11:19-20), eventually reaching Antioch, the church that launched the Pauline mission to the gentiles (Acts 13:1-3).

When the church remained in the confines of Judaism, we see no evidence in Acts of sabbath controversies. It is assumed that Jewish Christians kept the sabbath. However, as the church moved out of the confines of Jerusalem and into Gentile areas, the sabbath became a matter of concern, as noted by references made by Paul in his writings.

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## **Part I: Pauline churches—conflicts concerning the sabbath and Judaizers**

We will now look at several places in which Paul discussed the sabbath and Jewish holy days.

### **Gal. 4:10**

The Gentile church in Galatia (4:3, 8) was being troubled by Christian Jews who came from the Jerusalem church and demanded the Gentiles<sup>5</sup> be circumcised and observe the law of Moses. In Gal. 4:9-10 Paul accuses the Galatians of returning to and being enslaved by “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” by “observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years.”

Based on the context of combating Judaizing opponents, we conclude that these terms refer to the Jewish calendar. The context does not indicate that these days would be pagan days. *Days* would refer to the sabbath, or maybe also special festivals of one day’s duration. *Months* would refer to new moons that mark the beginning of months. *Seasons* would refer to Jewish festivals that last more than one day, such as the Passover and Festival of Tabernacles. *Years* would refer to sabbatical years, the year of Jubilee or Rosh Hashanah, the start of the new year.<sup>6</sup>

### **1 Cor. 16:2**

Despite his advice to others in Romans 14, Paul indicates in 1 Cor. 16:2 that he did not consider every day alike. Paul appears to regard the first day of the week above the others, as he designated it in 1 Cor. 16:2 as the day for the Corinthians to perform what he refers to in 2 Cor. 9:12 (which deals with this ministry to the saints, cf. 9:1) as a ministry of service (*leitourgia*).<sup>7</sup> If regular systematic giving were all that Paul intended, one day would appear as suitable as another for this purpose.<sup>8</sup> When Paul refers to this collection as ministry of service (2 Cor. 9:12), the designation of the day points to its religious significance.

If merely systematic giving were all Paul asked for, he would not have specified the day of the week. This verse indicates that Paul not only knew that Christians distinguished that day from others by using it for religious worship (the Galatian churches were also told to make this collection on the first day of the week, 1 Cor. 16:1), but that he also approved of that distinction by making it himself.<sup>9</sup> The reference to the first day of the week would have no significance unless Paul is assuming that this day was already a special day for the church.<sup>10</sup>

1 Cor. 16:2 and Acts 20:7 are the only places in the New Testament outside of the resurrection narratives (Mark 16:2; Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19) where the term “the



first day of the week” is used. The Corinthian church was aware (1 Cor. 15:1-8) that the resurrection occurred on the third day and the first day of the week.<sup>11</sup>

### **Romans 14:5-6**

In Romans 14, Paul refers to the weak as those who eat only vegetables, and the strong (with whom Paul identifies himself) as those who eat anything. How does Paul relate these two groups to the question of observing days? Paul says in Rom. 14:5-6: “Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.”

The problem is set in the context of tensions between the Jewish minority and Gentile majority in Rome (cf. Rom. 11). A sabbatarian argument is that these days refer to pagan days, but the problem appears to have arisen because many Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians influenced by Jewish tradition regarded the continued observance of the Jewish sabbath and festival days as of continued importance because they viewed the new movement they were a part of as a fulfilled form of Judaism.<sup>12</sup> Here, though, Paul speaks both of the freedom to keep or not to keep the sabbath.

### **Col. 2:16-17**

It can be argued that most of the Colossian members were Gentile converts because of 1) allusions to the pagan past of the letter’s recipients (see comments in the next paragraph), 2) a scarcity of OT allusions, 3) distinctive Gentile vices mentioned in 3:5-7 (“these are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life”), and 4) and a near lack of references to reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles.

Evidence of the recipients’ pagan past is shown in the first chapter: the recipients are referred to as outsiders brought inside: 1:12: “who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints”; 1:21: “you who were once estranged and hostile in mind”; 1:27: “to them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery.” Further, they were said to be once “dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh” (2:13).

Paul tells the Colossians in Col. 2:16: “Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.” The Colossian Christians had syncretistic practices that included ascetic regulations drawn from Judaism performed to

appease the elemental spirits (*stoicheia*) of the universe (2:8, 20).<sup>13</sup> Paul's use of "do not let anyone condemn you" about observing these days shows that Paul did not lay down any regulations over the use of the festivals; in other words, it was not required to keep the seventh-day sabbath or the other festival days.

### **Conclusions about Paul and the sabbath**

In these passages Paul is contending with the dangers of some obligations being placed on his converts. The harshest of his responses is in Galatians, where these requirements were not only linked with a return to the "weak and beggarly elemental spirits" (*stoicheia*), but were being required for acceptance into the church. In Rome and Colossae, such requirements were used as a basis for judging fellow Christians (Rom. 14:4, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another?"; Col. 2:16, "Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths").

Paul opposes any attempt to require the observance of festivals. In Paul's view a person may keep the sabbath or not. In general, Paul would assume that a Jewish Christian would keep the sabbath and a Gentile convert would not (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19-23). It would seem unlikely that Paul pioneered in the observance of Sunday, because he is the only New Testament writer who warns his converts against the observance of days (Col. 2:17; Gal. 4:10; Rom. 14:6).

Had Paul introduced Sunday worship, he may have been accused of this in Acts 21:21, when he was accused of teaching against circumcision and against observing Jewish customs. However, Paul was not specifically accused of teaching against sabbath observance or promoting observance of the first day of the week at the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15. It can be argued that Paul found the custom already established among Christians when he began his Gentile mission, which would indicate that the custom originated among Jewish Christians.

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## **Part II: The Sabbath in the Gospels and Acts**

Next, we will look at the sabbath controversies in the Gospels to see how the Gospel writers portrayed Jesus in reference to the sabbath. We will examine these texts to see whether Jesus is shown to have broken the sabbath command as given in the Torah or whether he simply broke the halakic interpretations of the sabbath.

The Halakah was developed to guide the Jews in areas where the scriptural text was not explicit. The Halakah began to be developed after the Exile in the closing days of the prophetic movement (*m. 'Abot* claims that it goes back to Moses). With the lack of an authoritative word from God, the Jews could not always determine God's will on the basis of scriptural text alone. Thus, a need existed to interpret and apply the past revelation of God's will in various situations that confronted the Jewish community. As the process continued, the oral decisions of generations of Jewish teachers were codified in the Mishnah.<sup>14</sup>

The Torah was not explicit in many areas, especially when dealing with sabbath observance. Scripture gave little detailed guidance of how to keep the sabbath, and a substantial body of tradition developed that showed the Jews what they could do and could not do on the sabbath.<sup>15</sup>

### **Sabbath controversies in Mark**

#### **Mark 2:23-28**

This pericope along with the two preceding ones (2:15-17, 18-22) belongs to a complex of three conflict stories that involve Jesus, his disciples and the Pharisees.<sup>16</sup> The sabbath controversy involves the disciples plucking grain as they were going through the grainfields, and each of the synoptic Gospel writers includes the account.

This pericope is viewed as an apologetic for the early church's sabbath practices because the Pharisees question the behavior of the disciples, not Jesus. In other words, the disciples represent the reader, the church.<sup>17</sup> The church is seen to ascribe the justification of its sabbath customs to Jesus, and the church defends itself by appealing to its Master. This incident can also be seen with a Christological focus, that the Son of Man is greater than the sabbath.<sup>18</sup>

The Pharisees ask Jesus, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" (verse 24). The disciples' behavior on the sabbath was illegal. The Mishnah (*m. Sabb. 7:2*) classifies proscribed work on the sabbath, which would include plucking heads of grain. Exodus 16:27 also says that those who gathered manna on the sabbath were refusing God's

commandments and instructions.

Jesus gives scriptural proof for breaking the sabbath when he replies by asking whether they have read what David did when he and his companions were hungry (1 Sam. 21:6) and ate the bread of the Presence, “which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat” (cf. Lev. 24:8-9). This also can be seen as a Christological statement about Jesus and his ministry rather than an apology for the disciples’ (or later, the church’s) sabbath conduct. Just as David had the right to eat the bread of the Presence illegally, and to give those with him to eat it illegally, so Jesus had the right to permit his disciples to eat food gathered illegally on the sabbath.<sup>19</sup>

If taken as an apology for sabbath conduct, the disciples were clearly breaking the Torah. Jesus says that if David could break the Torah and eat the bread of the Presence, the disciples of Jesus could break the Torah and pluck grain and eat.

Then Jesus says: “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath”; and then he follows with a Christological statement: “The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (2:28), which declares the Son of Man’s authority over the sabbath.

Jesus is hardly universalizing the sabbath to all humanity from Israel (contra the sabbatarian argument), which saw itself as specially gifted of God with the sabbath.<sup>20</sup> To universalize the sabbath would have created another sabbath controversy because the Pharisees did not view the sabbath as binding on all humanity. Jesus’ statement can be viewed as compatible with, and not a departure from, Judaism.

In Jubilees 2, the sabbath is viewed as a gift from God to his people for their enjoyment. Jubilees 2:19: “I shall separate for myself a people from among all the nations. And they will also keep the sabbath. And I will sanctify them for myself, and I will bless them. And they will be my people and I will be their God.”

Taking 2:27 and 28 together answers the Pharisees’ question and explains the disciples’ conduct not on the principle of freedom in 2:27 but on the authority of the Son of Man in 2:28.<sup>21</sup>

M.D. Hooker points out that Jesus’ comments about David show how regulations made to safeguard something holy were set aside for David, who enjoyed a special position, and for those who were with him. In a similar way, regulations safeguarding the sabbath were here set aside for Jesus, in a special position, and those who were with him.<sup>22</sup>

Some argue that Jesus’ statement that “the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” gives universal scope for the sabbath. However, to do this is to see

something alien to the context. Jesus is here restricting the sabbath command, not broadening it. The context deals not with the universal scope of the sabbath, but the purpose of the sabbath rest.<sup>23</sup> The sabbath was created for the benefit of humans, and here Jesus is speaking against the burdensome requirements that the Jews had added to the original command. Jesus was not saying that the sabbath was made for all people—Jews and Gentiles. The Pharisees believed that the sabbath was for the Jews only. Had Jesus said that the sabbath was made for Gentiles, this would have created another controversy, but none is indicated here. The Pharisees were only concerned about Jewish conduct on the sabbath.

Though the Gospels do not show Jesus and his disciples generally violating sabbath law, the use of this passage by the early church to defend itself against the Pharisees shows that the early church continued to loosen the restraint of the sabbath and cited the example of Jesus to do so.

### **Mark 3:1-5**

In this account, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the sabbath. He precipitates a sabbath controversy by calling the man forward to perform the miracle. The controversy was whether it was lawful to heal a non-urgent malady on the sabbath. The Torah says nothing about healing on the sabbath, but the rabbis considered healing prohibited work based on Exodus 31:14 (“whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people”). The rabbis modified this rule to allow exceptions to save someone’s life (m. Shab. 18:3; m. Yoma 8:6). However, Jesus did not do any work here, and the man’s life was not in danger. Jesus simply spoke, and the man was healed. It is difficult to see how the Pharisees saw any wrong in this, and Mark records Jesus’ anger (3:5): “He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart.”

### **Sabbath conflicts in Matthew**

Matthew’s community is predominantly Jewish, as evidenced by its interest in Old Testament fulfillment, in the Pharisees and in the general Jewish flavor of the Gospel.<sup>24</sup> Matthew is said to show the Jewish Christians’ regard for the sabbath, as he alone says to “pray that your flight may not be...on a sabbath” (24:20).

Matthew’s view of the law can be seen especially in his redaction of Mark concerning Jesus’ comments about clean and unclean meats (Matthew 15:17-20/Mark 7:18-23). Mark reads (but Matthew does not include the italicized words in the following): ““Do you not see that whatever

goes into a person from outside *cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?*’ (*Thus he declared all foods clean*)” (verses 18-20). Whatever Matthew means by Jesus saying he fulfilled the law, it is not to be understood as superseding it or leaving it behind.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, there is a striking anti-Judaism in Matthew, as he refers to “*their synagogues*” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 10:17); the reference to Jews in 28:15 concocting a story to explain the resurrection of Jesus (“And this story is still told among the Jews to this day”); and worst of all (because it is used to incite anti-Semitism): “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matthew 27:15).<sup>26</sup>

### **Matthew 12:1-8**

Matthew highlights the Christological significance to the story about the disciples plucking grain on the sabbath by adding the following to Mark’s account:

Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless. I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless. (Matthew 12:5-7)

The above is an argument from minor to major: if the priests in the temple profane the sabbath and are guiltless, how much more so the disciples of Jesus, because “something greater than the temple is here.” Matthew alone has Jesus telling the disciples to pray that their flight not be on the sabbath (Matthew 24:20). Also to help justify the disciples’ actions to his possibly sabbath-keeping community, Matthew adds that the disciples plucked grain because they “were hungry” (Matthew 12:1). Matthew’s addition of “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (12:7) is from Hosea 6:6. The sabbath command must be interpreted in terms of mercy, not strict unbending demand. However, this is not a relaxing of the sabbath law, but applying it in terms of love (22:34-40) and doing good on the sabbath in the following pericope (12:12).<sup>27</sup>

### **Matthew 12:9-14**

Matthew adds the following:

He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more

valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:11-12)

Here Jesus is shown as an interpreter of the law for the church, which in Matthew’s community still kept the sabbath (Matthew 24:20).<sup>28</sup> In Matthew’s account, the sabbath law is superseded by concern for the life of an animal. If kindness can be shown to an animal on the sabbath, how much more so to a human being. In Matthew, Jesus does not challenge the sabbath law, but the interpretation of it, showing that the determining factor is love.<sup>29</sup>

### **Matthew 24:20**

Matthew alone records this saying of Jesus: “Pray that your flight not be in winter or on a sabbath.” Matthew was writing to a mostly Jewish audience still keeping the sabbath, and this statement should not be taken to mean that Jesus taught his disciples that any kind of travel, including escape, on the sabbath day was wrong. Jesus does not suggest that they refrain from fleeing on the sabbath, but if they were forced to flee, he tells them to pray that it would be on another day. Several things could slow them down when they fled: pregnant women or nursing mothers (verse 19); winter rains or cold weather (verse 20); or sabbath regulations, which included the shutting of gates and closing of shops.<sup>30</sup> Mark, writing to a Gentile audience, says merely, “Pray that it may not be in winter” (Mark 13:18).

### **Sabbath controversies in Luke’s writings**

#### **Luke 6:1-5**

Luke omits Jesus’ reply in Mark 2:27: “Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.’” The final verse is an explicit comment from Jesus: “Then he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath’” (6:5).

Luke adds to Mark’s account that Jesus’ disciples plucked the heads of grain “and ate them,” thus apparently reassuring his readers that the disciples were not guilty of what was proscribed in Deut. 23:24-25. However, the plucking (reaping) and rubbing (threshing) are both against Pharisaic regulations.<sup>31</sup>

Luke also adds the word “took” to the comment in this phrase: David “entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence” (6:4). This suggests that David assumed this authority; it was not given to him by the priests. So also the Son of Man, whom Luke shows is

the Son of David (1:27, 32, 69; 2:4; 3:31; 18:38-39), is lord of the sabbath.

Commenting on Luke's account, Nolland notes that lordship here is the right to authoritatively represent the divine intention for the sabbath and a possible criticism of the Pharisees for making themselves lords of the sabbath.<sup>32</sup>

### **Luke 4:16-30**

This incident of Jesus speaking in the synagogue in Nazareth on the sabbath ended in confrontation. The anger of those in attendance had to do with comments made by Jesus about how God in two Old Testament cases took care of Gentiles while ignoring the plight of Jews. The crowd is angered to the point of almost committing murder on the sabbath.

Of interest to this study is Luke's statement that Jesus went into the synagogue on the sabbath day "as was his custom" (Luke 4:16). This is a reference to Jesus' synagogue teaching habits. It refers back to verse 15, where Luke writes that in Galilee, Jesus "began to teach in their synagogues."<sup>33</sup> Luke uses this expression in Acts 17:2, where he says that "Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures." The custom then is both Jesus (Luke 4:15) and Paul entering the synagogues to teach.

### **Luke 13:10-17; Luke 14:1-6**

In these tandem accounts, Jesus heals a woman in a synagogue on the sabbath day who had "a spirit that crippled her for eighteen years" (13:11), and he heals a man of dropsy while on his way to a sabbath meal at the home of the leader of the Pharisees (14:1-6). Jesus initiated the healing of the woman with the spirit that had crippled her. This and the fact that she had the infirmity for eighteen years shows that this was not an emergency case. The leader of the synagogue was indignant and "kept saying to the crowd" that there are six days in which work is to be done and to come on one of those days, not the sabbath, to be healed.

Jesus responds in similar ways to the Jews who reacted negatively to both healings. He reminds them that they give water to oxen and donkeys on the sabbath, and asks what is wrong with freeing a daughter of Abraham bound by Satan for eighteen years (13:15-16) and implicitly asks what is wrong with healing the man of dropsy on the sabbath. It is difficult to see how Jesus is guilty of breaking any precept in the Torah. Jesus does not claim that these are emergency cases, and therefore rejects the framework of the Halakah that forbade non-emergency healings on the sabbath.



## **Luke 23:52-56**

On the preparation day, Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for the body of Jesus, wraps it in a linen cloth, and lays it in a tomb. The women who had come with him from Galilee prepared ointments and “on the sabbath they rested according to the commandment” (verse 56). It would seem odd for these Jewish women to have done anything differently in a pre-resurrection setting.

## **Acts**

Now we turn our attention to how the sabbath is mentioned in the book of Acts. The sabbath is referred to in the following places in Acts.

**Acts 1:12:** “Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, a sabbath day’s journey away.”

**Acts 13:27:** “Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him.”

**Acts 13:42, 44:** “As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people urged them to speak about these things again the next sabbath. . . . The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.”

**Acts 15:21:** “For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

**Acts 16:13:** “On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.”

**Acts 17:2:** “And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures.”

**Acts 18:4:** “Every sabbath he [Paul] would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.”

Most of these scriptures show the apostles beginning to preach the gospel in the Jewish synagogues, both to the Jews and to Gentiles who had assembled there. It would have been natural for Jewish Christians to have remained in the synagogues until they were forced out, perhaps near the end of the first century.

Of interest here is the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 about what was required of Gentile

converts. Sabbath observance is not listed among the requirements for the Gentiles that the Jerusalem conference decided upon (Acts 15:20). The requirements they decided upon are similar to the Noachian laws, which also did not include the sabbath. Josephus wrote in *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.3.8 that after the Flood this is what God required of Noah:

I require you to abstain from shedding the blood of men, and to keep yourselves pure from murder; and to punish those that commit any such thing. I permit you to make use of all the other living creatures at your pleasure, and as your appetites lead you; for I have made you lords of them all, both of those that walk on the land, and those that swim in the waters, and of those that fly in the regions of the air on high—excepting their blood, for therein is the life.

So we see that neither the sabbath nor the food laws applied to people after the Flood, before there were Jews and Gentiles. Later, after God made the Jews his chosen people, the sabbath was for them only.

Jubilees 2:19 says:

I shall separate for myself a people from among all nations. And they shall keep the sabbath. And I will sanctify them for myself, and I will bless them. Just as I have sanctified and shall sanctify the sabbath day for myself thus shall I bless them.

The reference in the Jerusalem decree to fornication may have its basis in the forbidden marriages of Lev. 18:6-18, and the reference to not eating blood has its basis in Lev. 17:10-14.

Gentiles were attracted to Judaism in varying degrees. Conversion to Judaism entailed three elements: belief in God (and denial of pagan gods), circumcision (and immersion/baptism) and integration into the Jewish community.<sup>34</sup> These were known as proselytes. God-fearers (cf. Acts 13:43; 17:4, 17) were linked in a formal way to Judaism and kept some of the commandments, without being proselytes.<sup>35</sup> Some kept the sabbath, festivals and food laws, but they did not see themselves as Jews and were not considered to be Jews by the Jews.<sup>36</sup>

### **Acts 20:7-12**

In this pericope we read that the disciples met on the first day of the week for the purpose of breaking bread (Acts 20:7a). This is the earliest text from which it may be inferred that

Christians came together for worship on that day.<sup>37</sup> It is uncertain whether this was a Saturday evening service (based on Jewish reckoning) or a Sunday evening service (based on Roman usage). Evidence favoring a Sunday evening meeting is that in Gentile circles, time was reckoned according to Roman usage.<sup>38</sup> The only other place Luke uses the phrase “first day of the week” is in Luke 24:1, where the reference is to Sunday.

This paper argues that Sunday worship began as a prolongation and adaptation (in the light of the resurrection) of the Jewish Sabbath, as early Jewish Christians attended Jewish worship services and then met by themselves for Christian worship. If this is so, this meeting in Acts 20 would have been on a Saturday evening. However, if the early church commemorated the post-resurrection Sunday meetings of Christ with his disciples (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-29), this service took place on Sunday evening.

The text says that they “met to break bread.” Luke uses the term “break bread” five times in Acts (2:42, 46; Acts 20:7, 11; and 27:35). “Break bread” is not the typical Jewish expression for eating a meal.<sup>39</sup> The verb for “met” (*sunago*, from the same root that forms the word *synagogue*) describes assembly for worship. Jewett argues that Luke is describing a structured Christian assembly, and that this is the earliest clear witness to Christian assembly for purposes of worship on the first day of the week.<sup>40</sup>

## **Sabbath controversies in John**

### **John 5:1-18**

In this account, Jesus heals a man by the pool of Beth-Zatha who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus heals the man and tells him to take up his mat and walk. When the man tells the religious authorities of the incident, they are angered not at the healing, but at Jesus telling him to take up his mat. This, though not clearly prohibited in the Torah, apparently falls under the 39 classes of work forbidden on the sabbath in m. Shab. 7:2.

Those classes of work are:

sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing crops, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, washing or beating or dyeing it, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying [a knot], loosening [a knot], sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches, hunting a gazelle, slaughtering or flaying or salting it or curing its skin, scraping it or cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing in

order to write two letters, building, pulling down, putting out a fire, lighting a fire, striking with a hammer and taking out aught from one domain to another.<sup>41</sup>

Jesus tells the religious authorities, “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (verse 17). This angered the Jews even more “because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal with God” (verse 18). Here John is confronting the chief Jewish objection to Jesus, that he makes himself equal to God. In verses 19-30 John shows what this equality means, that Jesus is totally dependent on God (not independent, as the Jews took it) and conscious of the Father appointing him to do works that the Father has the right and power to execute.<sup>42</sup>

### **John 9:1-41**

This is the account of when, on a sabbath, Jesus healed the man born blind. “He spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes” (verse 6). Jesus possibly broke several halakic rules by mixing (m. Shab. 24:3), kneading (m. Shab. 7:2) and smearing the clay on his eyes, possibly a prohibited anointing (m. Shab. 14:4).<sup>43</sup> This provoked a controversy between the Pharisees, the man and his parents. Some of the Pharisees said Jesus could not be from God because “he does not observe the sabbath” (verse 16). The Pharisees put the healed man out of the synagogue (verse 34).

### **Conclusions from the Gospel accounts**

The way the Gospel writers portray Jesus begins to show a shift away from sabbath observance. The way they portray Jesus’ attitude toward the sabbath in the sabbath controversies helps us see how his later followers saw the freedom to not keep the sabbath but to meet for worship on the first day of the week.

Though Matthew shows a high regard for the law and the sabbath, there is an anti-Jewish tone to the Gospel, too, and even here we can see a softening of demands for keeping the sabbath. From Mark, with less concern for the Jewish heritage, we see a relaxing of the food laws, a major pillar of Judaism, and the comment that Jesus is Lord of the sabbath. From Luke, we see Jesus performing his ministry regardless of whether it was the sabbath. From John’s account, we see the strongest statements against the sabbath. Jesus goes so far as to tell the religious authorities: “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (5:17). In John’s account alone, Jesus is explicitly accused of “breaking the sabbath” (5:18).

In the Gospel pericopes we studied, we see Jesus being confronted for healing on the sabbath. Though he is seen to break halakic regulations concerning the sabbath, the incident of his disciples plucking heads of grain on the sabbath is the closest thing to work for which Jesus' disciples could be accused of sabbath breaking according to the Torah. In John 5:17-18, Jesus is also possibly admitting to breaking the Torah when he claims that he and his Father are working on the sabbath.

These accounts show the beginnings of a shift away from sabbath observance. Jesus' attitude toward the sabbath helps explain the freedom his followers subsequently showed toward its observance by assembling for worship on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day.<sup>44</sup> The fact that the Christian church no longer keeps the seventh-day sabbath can be traced back to the sabbath conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish leaders as reported in the Gospels. Before his disciples could have thought of worshiping God on any day other than the sabbath, they must have been convinced that Jesus did not require them to observe that day.<sup>45</sup>

The Gospels contain no explicit statements that the sabbath must be kept, and each of the accounts of the sabbath controversies shows Jesus lessening sabbath restrictions. In an even more substantial statement, Jesus' claim to be lord of the sabbath also raises the possibility of a future reinterpretation of the sabbath.<sup>46</sup> Jesus performed his messianic work irrespective of the sabbath, and (though we still see some Jewish Christians keeping the sabbath) this may have contributed to the erosion of commitment to the sabbath in some quarters of the primitive church.<sup>47</sup>

### **How Gospel writers portrayed the first day of week**

Each of the synoptic Gospel writers and John reported that the resurrection of Christ took place on the first day of the week (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). It was significant to them to include the day of the week when the resurrection took place, and this may have reflected the significance their communities attached to the first day of the week.<sup>48</sup>

In Matthew's account, the chief priests and Pharisees refer to Jesus' prediction that Jesus would rise "after three days" (27:63). Matthew refers to the resurrection as taking place "as the first day of the week was dawning" (Matthew 28:1) and that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on that day (verse 9).

In Mark's account, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome visit the tomb "very early on the first day of the week" (16:2). In 16:9, Mark says that Jesus "rose early on the first day of the week" (16:9). However, Mark does not mention the first day of the week when he

refers to Jesus' appearance to the two disciples "walking into the country" (16:12), nor when Jesus appeared to the eleven (16:14).

Luke writes that the women visited the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week (24:1); that Jesus appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus "on that same day" (verse 13); and that Jesus appeared to the eleven that evening (verses 36-49).

In John, Mary Magdalene visits the tomb "early on the first day of the week while it was still dark" (20:1). Jesus appears to the eleven minus Thomas on the evening of the first day (John 20:19); and he appears to the eleven including Thomas one week later, also on the first day of the week (20:26-29).

The fact that each Gospel writer mentions that the resurrection was on the first day of the week shows the importance of that day. As we saw a lessening of importance of the seventh-day sabbath in the sabbath controversies, we are seeing the rising importance of the first day of the week in the resurrection narratives.

### **Additional meetings on first day of week**

Although New Testament writings give no direct evidence that Sunday worship originated in the original Judean church, when evidence does appear in later Christian writings, Sunday observance is the universal practice outside of Judea, with no trace of controversy as to whether Christians should meet on Sunday. It would seem that Sunday worship was already a Christian custom before Paul's gentile mission, and that it spread throughout the growing Gentile church with the Gentile mission.

A major split between Jewish Christians and non-Christian Jews took place late in the first century. Christians were included among the heretics referred to in the twelfth of the Eighteen Benedictions that Jews recited daily and in every synagogue service. Since no heretic would pronounce this curse, it effectively banned Christians from the synagogue:

For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, and the [Nazoreans, so Martin] and the *minim* [which at least includes Jewish Christians] perish as in a moment and be blotted out from the book of life and with the righteous may they not be inscribed. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.<sup>49</sup>

The Jerusalem church continued to rest on the sabbath and attend Temple or synagogue services, and they also met as Christians in private homes to hear teaching from the apostles and to break bread together.<sup>50</sup> The reason for Sunday worship would have been a Christian need for a

time of distinctively Christian worship. As Bauckham notes, once we grant that the Jerusalem church had Christian meetings in addition to the Temple or synagogue services, the Jewish Christian observance of the sabbath is not contradictory to Jewish Christian worship on Sunday.<sup>51</sup> After the Christians were removed from the synagogues, only these Sunday meetings would be left. As we see in Acts 20:7 (which pre-dates the Jewish Christians being expelled from the synagogues), Luke writes that the church in Troas was meeting on the first day of the week for the purpose of breaking bread.

In the first firmly datable evidence of Christianity in Bithynia, Pliny writes to the emperor Trajan in A.D. 110 (Pliny, Ep. 10.5-96) that at the end of the first century, Christians were meeting before dawn and again in the evening of the same day. Pliny described the assembly: “The Christians came together before daybreak on a fixed day and bound themselves with a vow not to steal, commit adultery, and the like.”

Jewett argues that Pliny did not name the day of the week because he had no name at his disposal. The planetary week, from which we get the name Sunday, was not current in Pliny’s day, and it is unlikely that Pliny would be accustomed to using the seven-day division of time by which the Jews and Christians designated the day as the “first day of the week.” However, the Jewish sabbath was well known, and if this assembly had been on the Jewish sabbath it would seem that he would have mentioned it as such, since he was presumably familiar with it. The fact that he did not designate the day implies that no specific name for it was in general use (the name “Lord’s Day” would have been used only among Christians.)<sup>52</sup>

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### **Part III: Second-century churches**

In the second century, Sunday worship was the norm, and fewer conflicts over the seventh-day sabbath are evident. The second-century references of Ignatius, Magn. 9:1; Gosp. Peter 35, 50; Barn. 15:9; and Justin, 1 Apol. 67 associate Sunday worship with the resurrection. In Barnabas and Justin, other reasons for the significance of Sunday are given first: Sunday representing the eschatological eighth day in Barnabas, and the day on which God began the creation in Justin.<sup>53</sup>

The second-century church was not a monolithic structure but a variegated group of churches with conflicting beliefs.<sup>54</sup> Legalist Jewish Christians, zealous for the law, believed that the whole law had to be obeyed for a person to be saved. Some Jewish Christians kept the sabbath as a matter of national standards, but did not require Gentiles to do so. Others felt they were free from the law, either citing Paul's writings that the sabbath was a shadow of things to come, or that the law was specifically for the Jews.<sup>55</sup>

#### **Second-century evidence for Sunday worship**

Let us look at what several second-century writers said about Sunday worship.

##### **The Epistle of Barnabas**

The author of the Epistle of Barnabas considers sanctifying the sabbath as an activity of such moral holiness that no one in this present evil age can attain. The following references are in chapter 15.

Barnabas writes that the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and said, "Sanctify ye the Sabbath of the Lord with clean hands and a pure heart." The author then writes about the sabbath in the creation account and says that "this implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years." When the Son returns again he will "destroy the time of the wicked man" and "then shall he truly rest on the seventh day."

He interprets Jesus' eschatological rest not as inactivity, but bringing an end to this world (at the end of six millenia) and bringing into existence the new world at the Parousia. In the eschatological sabbath, Christians will have been fully sanctified, and so will be able to keep holy the sabbath age and share in the eschatological rest of God. According to the author of the Epistle of Barnabas, obedience to the sabbath command has nothing to do with a day of the week or physical rest, but is a matter of holy living in the future sabbath age that God will have made



holy. Jewish sabbaths are therefore unacceptable to God.<sup>56</sup>

In contrasting the Jewish sabbath with the Christian Sunday, Barnabas writes, “Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me.... We keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.”

Barnabas writes:

Further He says to them, “Your new moons and your Sabbaths I cannot endure.” Ye perceive how He speaks: Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, [namely this,] when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. And when he had manifested Himself, He ascended into the heavens.

Bauckham says that Barnabas 15 is an attempt to reinterpret the sabbath command so to disallow its observance, not only by Christians but even by Jews before Christ. He opts for the explanation that the author, probably an Alexandrian Jewish Christian, writes against the observance of Jewish practices to discourage his fellow Christians from adopting them or persisting in them.<sup>57</sup> The epistle must have been written between A.D. 70 (because the author knows of the destruction of the Temple) and 200 (because Clement, who vanishes from the scene shortly after 200, knows Barnabas). He seems concerned to show that the Old Testament Scriptures are Christian Scriptures and that the spiritual meaning is their real meaning.<sup>58</sup>

## **Justin**

Justin (c. 114-165) was a Gentile born in Flavia Neapolis, a city of Samaria, the modern Nablus. His writings, according to Jewett, are the first detailed description of Christian worship written by a Christian. He is the first Christian writer to use the name Sunday.<sup>59</sup> Justin, one of the main apologists of the second century, responded to criticisms from cultured pagans that Christianity was a religion of barbarians who derived their teachings from the Jews, a primitive people whose best teachers never rose to the level of Greek philosophers.<sup>60</sup>

Justin writes in his *First Apology* 67:

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, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen....

But 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 Savior in the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 12, Justin comments on the Jewish sabbath:

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: and if you eat unleavened bread, you say the will of God has been fulfilled. The Lord our God does not take pleasure in such observances: 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. If any one has impure hands, let him wash and be pure.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 19, Justin claims that many righteous men in the Old Testament did not keep the sabbath. After discussing Adam, Abel, Enoch, Lot, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, he writes:

Moreover, all those righteous men already mentioned, though they kept no Sabbaths, were pleasing to God; and after them Abraham with all his descendants until Moses, under whom your nation appeared unrighteous and ungrateful to God.... And you were commanded to keep Sabbaths, that you might retain the

memorial to God.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 21, Justin discusses how the Jewish sabbath originated:

Moreover, that God enjoined you to keep the Sabbath, and impose on you other precepts for a sign, as I have already said, on account of your unrighteousness, and that of your fathers.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 47, Justin talks about the futility of keeping the Jewish sabbath:

But if some, through weak-mindedness, wish to observe such institutions as were given by Moses, from which they expect some virtue, but which we believe were appointed by reason of the hardness of the people's hearts, along with their hope in this Christ, and [wish to perform] the eternal and natural acts of righteousness and piety, yet choose to live with the Christians and the faithful, as I said before, not inducing them either to be circumcised like themselves, or to keep the Sabbath, or to observe any other such ceremonies, then I hold that we ought to join ourselves to such, and associate with them in all things as kinsmen and brethren.

But if, Trypho, I continued, some of your race, who say they believe in this Christ, compel those Gentiles who believe in this Christ to live in all respects according to the law given by Moses, or choose not to associate so intimately with them, I in like manner do not approve of them. But I believe that even those, who have been persuaded by them to observe the legal dispensation along with their confession of God in Christ, shall probably be saved.

From Justin's time, most Christians gathered on Sunday morning (though various sabbatarian groups met on Saturday), and from then until now is an unbroken historical sequence in the custom of Sunday observance.<sup>61</sup> When Pliny the Younger, who was governor of the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote to the Emperor Trajan in A.D. 110, he tells the emperor that Christians ceased to meet at the time of the evening meal at his command following through with the emperor's edict against all seditious assemblies (Pliny, *Epistolae*, 10:97). Jewett argues that it is possible that the edict was applied widely in the eastern part of the empire. After that time we hear of agape feasts in the evening having a charitable purpose, but with few

exceptions losing their eucharistic character.<sup>62</sup>

### **Clement of Alexandria**

Clement of Alexandria (d. A.D. 215) was the main instructor in Alexandria at the end of the second century. He sought to assure pagans that Christianity was not the absurd superstition some claimed it to be.<sup>63</sup> He wrote that the sabbath rest of the seventh day is merely a preparation for the true sabbath rest of the eighth day, because the eighth day is the first day and the first day is the Christ, the *archē* (beginning) of creation and the light of men.<sup>64</sup>

### **Use of the term Lord's Day in second-century writings**

The term Lord's Day (*kuriakē hēmera*) occurs only once in the New Testament, in Revelation 1:10, but its use there is significant in studying the origins of the weekly day of worship in Christianity.<sup>65</sup>

Bauckham notes thirteen times in first- and second-century writings where *kuriakē hēmera* or *kuriakē* (belonging to the Lord) by itself means the Lord's Day. Only two phrases with *kuriakē* seem to have become stereotyped or technical phrases by the time of Irenaeus (ca. 130-ca. 200) and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215): *kuriakē hēmera* "Lord's day," and *kuriakai graphai* the "Lord's Scriptures."<sup>66</sup>

A Sabbatarian argument is that the phrase *kuriakē hēmera* is interchangeable with *hēmera (tou) kuriou*. However, the terms are not interchangeable, since by long-established usage the latter referred to the eschatological Day of the Lord.<sup>67</sup> For early Christians to use a new term for the eschatological day would cause confusion, and not long after Revelation was written, we see that *kuriakē hēmera* was an already established name for Sunday. The phrase *kuriakē hēmera* came into use because *hēmera (tou) kuriou* already meant something else, and a new term was needed. *Kuriakē hēmera* was so commonly used that *kuriakē* alone sufficed as the name of the day.<sup>68</sup>

### **Ignatius to the Magnesians**

Ignatius was the second bishop of Antioch early in the second century. Of his seven extant letters, one was to Christians in Magnesia, a town 15 miles from Ephesus. His letter is the sole second-century reference to Gentile Christians being tempted to observe the sabbath.<sup>69</sup> Magnesia was in an area of Asia Minor where Paul encountered his Judaizing problems (Gal. 4:8-10; Col.

2:16-17). For Ignatius, the practice of Judaism was incompatible with the practice of Christianity.<sup>70</sup>

In Magn. 8:1, Ignatius wrote: “For if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace.” In Magn. 10 he wrote: “It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize. For Christianity did not embrace Judaism, but Judaism Christianity.”

Combating Judaizers, he wrote in Magn. 9:

For if we still go on observing Judaism, we admit we never received grace.... Those, then, who lived by ancient practices arrived at a new hope. They ceased to keep the Sabbath and lived by the Lord’s Day, on which our life as well as theirs shone forth, thanks to Him and his death, though some deny this.... It is monstrous to take Jesus Christ and to live like a Jew.<sup>71</sup>

Ignatius draws a sharp contrast between keeping the sabbath and living according to the Lord’s Day. Bauckham contends that this is noteworthy because the matter had not been previously explained like this in extant Christian literature. For Ignatius, the sabbath is a badge of a false attitude to Jesus Christ, while worship on the Lord’s Day defines Christianity, as salvation by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This puts Ignatius as an early witness of the dissociation of Christianity from Judaism, which is characteristic of the second century and a wholly negative attitude to sabbath observance.<sup>72</sup>

### **Gospel of Peter**

The following are from the Gospel of Peter, which was written between A.D. 70 and 150. It contains a fragmentary passion and resurrection narrative with parallels to the four canonical Gospels, plus the theme of Christ preaching to the dead found in 1 Peter.

“And in the night in which the Lord’s day was drawing on, as the soldiers kept guard....”

“And at dawn upon the Lord’s day, Mary Magdalene...took her friends with her and came to the sepulchre where he was laid.”

In these verses, *kuriakē* replaces *mia ton sabbaton* (“the first day of the week”) used in the narratives about the resurrection in the Gospels.<sup>73</sup>

### **Later second-century writings**

A passage in the Acts of Peter (Act. Verc. 29) identifies *dies dominica* (“the Lord’s Day”) with “the next day after the sabbath,” and the Acts of Paul has the apostle praying “on the

sabbath as the Lord's Day drew near.”

Some argue that the earlier references are to Easter, not to Sunday, noting that Easter is an annual celebration of the resurrection, which occurred on Sunday, and that the annual celebration of Easter preceded the weekly celebration of Sunday. This reasoning is flawed because, although there is unambiguous evidence that beginning in the second century Sunday was called *kuriakē*, no unambiguous evidence exists that Easter was ever called simply *kuriakē*.<sup>74</sup>

From the later second century onward, the evidence shows that Sunday was the regular day of Christian worship everywhere, and no controversy is recorded about whether worship should take place on Sunday. The universality of the custom argues for an early origin. Would a custom that originated in the time between Ignatius and Justin have spread so rapidly and completely that the only evidence of any group not worshipping on Sunday was an extreme wing of the Ebionites?<sup>75</sup>

Bauckham concludes that in Ignatius and the *Gospel of Peter*, the word *kuriakē* is a technical term in fairly widespread use at least in Syria and Asia Minor, showing the first day of the week as the Christian day of regular corporate worship. Based on this, it also becomes likely that *kuriakē hēmera* in Rev. 1:10 also means Sunday.

## Conclusion

Now that we have demonstrated that the first day of the week was the Christian day of regular corporate worship in the church in Asia at the end of the first century, we can chart a course backward from Revelation 1:10 to see where this practice began.

If we view Acts 20:7 and 1 Cor. 16:1 in the light of second-century writings discussed above, it is likely that they can be viewed as evidence that Sunday worship was the normal practice in the Pauline churches.<sup>76</sup>

We can then take this trajectory back further. Although no early Christian document explicitly identifies the origin of Sunday worship in the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, the Gospel writers considered it important to mention that those appearances took place on the first day of the week and that Jesus met with his disciples on that day.

When the Gospel accounts were written, Sunday was the day of Christian worship and was apparently understood to be a memorial of the resurrection. When Sunday worship was the practice, Christians must have connected it with the Lord's resurrection on a Sunday.<sup>77</sup> This may

have also influenced the way the Gospel writers treated the sabbath controversies as they showed that Jesus was superior to the sabbath and that his actions offended the sabbath-observing Pharisees.

We can then take that trajectory back to the time of the historical Jesus and see that his messianic work superseded the seventh-day sabbath and that as his disciples began to meet on Sunday they could look to the example of Jesus and not feel bound to observe the seventh-day sabbath.

## Endnotes

1 Ralph Martin, *New Testament Foundations* Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 6.

2 D.A. Hagner, "Jewish Christianity," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 580.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 R.N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary: Vol. 41 (Waco: Word, 1982), lxxxviii to xcvi. The various two-front theories of Jewish Christians on one hand and Gentile agnostics on the other is rejected because Paul speaks of his opponents as a homogenous group, and certainly their main contention was that Gentiles be circumcised.

6 Longenecker, 182.

7 P.K. Jewett, *The Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 77.

8 Ibid., 68.

9 Ibid., 68, 77.

10 J. Laansma, "Lord's Day," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 680.

11 Laansma, 680.

12 Dunn, Romans 9-16, 805.

13 17. A. T. Lincoln, "From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective" in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 367. J.D.G. Dunn, *Colossians*, NIGTC, argues for Judaizing opponents, as in Galatia. Whichever way is viewed does not alter the thesis argued in this paper.

14 Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 4.

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- 18 Guelich, 120.
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- 21 Ibid., 127.
- 22 M.D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967), 97-99.
- 23 Jewett, 36-38.
- 24 S. McKnight, "Matthean Community" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1997), 727. See also S. McKnight, "Matthew, Gospel of," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1992), 526-541.
- 25 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 246-247.
- 26 Hagner, 581.
- 27 Arland J. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 112.
- 28 Ibid., 187.
- 29 Hagner, 333.
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- 31 Nolland, 255.
- 32 Nolland, Luke 1-9:20, 258.
- 33 Ibid., 195.
- 34 Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 55.
- 35 P.R. Trebilco, "Diaspora Judaism," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 292.
- 36 Cohen, 55.
- 37 F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 384.



- 38 Jewett, 61.
- 39 Laansma, 681.
- 40 Jewett, 60-61.
- 41 Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 106.
- 42 Beasley- Murray, 74.
- 43 Danby, 106, 113, 120-121.
- 44 Jewett, 35-36.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Carson, 66.
- 47 M.M. B. Turner, "The Sabbath, Sunday and the Law in Luke-Acts" in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 107.
- 48 Paul says that Jesus was raised "on the third day," which agrees with the Gospel traditions that Christ would rise on the third day.
- 49 C.K. Barrett, ed., *The New Testament Background* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 210-211.
- 50 Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1977), 212.
- 51 R.J. Bauckham, "The Lord's Day," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 237.
- 52 Jewett, 70.
- 53 Bauckham, 240.
- 54 Ibid., 255.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid., 263.
- 57 Ibid., 262.
- 58 Maxwell Staniforth, trans., *Early Christian Writings* (Penguin Books: London, 1968), 157.
- 59 Jewett, 71, 114.
- 60 Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Vol. 1: the Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 51.
- 61 Jewett, 69.

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63 Gonzalez, 71.

64 Bauckham, 276.

65 Ibid., 222.

66 Ibid., 222, 224.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 225.

69 Ibid., 259.

70 Ibid., 259-260.

71 Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 96-97.

72 Bauckham, 261.

73 Ibid., 229.

74 Ibid., 230-231.

75 Ibid., 231.

76 Ibid., 233.

77 Ibid., 236.

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# **From Sunday to Sabbath: The Puritan Origins of Modern Seventh-day Sabbatarianism**

By Ralph Orr

Sabbatarianism is usually defined as the belief that Christians should observe a particular day of the week as the Sabbath, either the seventh day or the first day of the week. This means more than simply attending church on the weekend. On their Sabbath, Sabbatarians refrain from all customary work, except works of charity, necessity and worship, because they understand the Sabbath to be a law of God. They do so even if it means economic hardship, shunning or persecution.

Church historians generally believe that modern Sabbatarianism, as strict Sunday observance, first flourished among the Puritans. Less understood is the Puritan origin of *seventh-day* Sabbatarianism. This article traces both the historical development of the Puritan doctrine and its fathering of modern *seventh-day* Christianity.

## **Is Sabbatarianism irrelevant?**

While most modern Christians might believe this subject irrelevant to present-day circumstances, concerned observers have thought otherwise. In 1991 Seventh-day Adventist scholar Samuele Bacchiocchi commented:

The survival of both Judaism and Christianity as dynamic religions may well depend on the survival of the observance of their respective “Sabbaths.” In Western European nations, where only 10 percent or less of the Christian population attends church services on the day traditionally regarded as the “Lord’s day,” the survival of Christianity is threatened. Social analysts already speak of the “post-Christian” era in Western Europe. (In Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington and William H. Shea, editors, *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions* [New York: Crossroad, 1991], 69)

## **American Sabbatarianism**

Living in this “post-Christian” world, it is hard to imagine how influential Sabbatarianism once was.

[Robert Baird] wrote in 1855 that there was no subject on which American



Christians were more happily united than that of the proper observance of the Sabbath [i.e., Sunday]. He found that every state in the Union had made laws in favor of proper observance of the Lord's Day, because the whole economy proceeded on the principle that America was a Christian country and because the courts had pronounced Christianity to be "part and parcel of the laws of the Land." He said that he uttered the language of every American Christian when he said: "Woe to America when it ceases to be a Sabbath respecting land." (George M. Stephenson, *The Puritan Heritage* [New York: MacMillan Co., 1952], 181)

Although Christians practiced Sabbatarianism throughout pre-Civil War America, New England Christianity exemplified this tradition more than any other region.

The New England Sabbath always began at sunset on Saturday night and ended at the next sunset.... [Activities] prohibited on Saturday evening... were allowed on Sunday evening. (Ibid., 181-2)

All the New England clergymen were rigid in the prolonged observance of Sunday. From sunset on Saturday until Sunday night they would not shave, have rooms swept, nor beds made, have food prepared, nor cooking utensils and tableware washed. As soon as their Sabbath began they gathered their families and servants around them...and read the Bible and exhorted and prayed and recited the catechism until nine o'clock, usually by the light of one small "dip candle" only.... Sweet to the Pilgrims and to their descendants was the hush of their calm Saturday night, and their still, tranquil Sabbath, — sign and token to them, not only of the weekly rest ordained in the creation, but of the eternal rest to come. (Alice Morse Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England* [New York: Scribner, 1909], 254, 257)

Contrast the Puritan past with modern Christianity's near-total disregard of the Sabbath. A Christian today who observes any day as a Sabbath is increasingly rare.

How was it that this doctrine, now nearly forgotten, once so permeated American church life and thought?<sup>1</sup> The answer lies in the religious principles of many who founded the United States and established its religious institutions. Those founders predominantly came from the more

Bible-centric elements of English Christianity, the Separatist and Puritan branches of English Protestantism.

## **Puritanism**

Puritanism arose within the Anglican church among those dissatisfied with the pace of church reforms. When Henry VIII separated the English church from Rome, the primary question was, Who was the earthly head of the English church, the king or the pope? Many other doctrines and forms of Catholicism remained. Yet Anglicanism quickly came under pressure from other Protestants wishing to further transform the English church. Simultaneously, those loyal to Rome struggled to return England to the Catholic fold.

When the Catholic Mary Tudor became queen, many Protestant teachers fled to Europe to escape martyrdom. In places such as Geneva and Zurich, they studied the Calvinists' Reformed theologies, and they witnessed firsthand an apparently successful attempt to transform whole cities to Calvinistic norms.

Calvinists saw the Old Testament law as pointing sinners to their need for Christ. Once converted, the law also guided Christians in holy living. Furthermore, it assured those living by the law, particularly the Ten Commandments, that they had received God's grace. To put it in other words, "The law became increasingly important to prepare for grace, as a guide for grace, and to achieve assurance of grace."<sup>2</sup>

When Elizabeth I became queen, English Protestant leaders returned to England, bringing with them these Calvinistic views. They expected that God would further reform the English church along Calvinistic lines.

In schools such as Cambridge, the works of European Reformed theologians became a normal part of a theological education. Calvinism increasingly inspired many Christians who wished to return the church to first-century standards. People holding such views were eventually called Puritans, though a strict delineation between Anglicans and Puritans is not always possible.

## **Church government**

Among the suggested reforms was the reorganization of the Anglican church government. The Anglican church had maintained the structure of Catholicism's hierarchical government, only with the king instead of the pope as its head and bishops ruling under him. Many reformers

preferred congregationalism, which emphasized local-church autonomy and congregational self-rule, or presbyterianism, which combined elements of both systems by giving more authority to the pastors. Of the two systems, presbyterianism was the more popular. Those favoring presbyterianism also tended to support Sunday Sabbatarianism.

### **Political overtones**

Presbyterianism, by its nature, challenged the existing church/state relationship. Because of this, Sabbatarianism, with which it was associated, had political overtones. Puritans insisted on the Protestant standard of *sola scriptura*, while Queen Elizabeth and the church hierarchy gave equal (if not greater) weight to church tradition. Therefore, one could not take a stand on Scripture's place in faith without simultaneously taking a political stand.

These two perspectives were heading for a clash. While the Puritans considered themselves loyal subjects seeking reform, the establishment came to consider them seditious, for they challenged the authority of both church and state. This helps to explain some of the severe reactions that later developed against Puritan Sabbatarianism.

### **Sermons and salvation**

Puritan views on the Sabbath were partly shaped by their understanding of the role sermons played in salvation. As John Primus observed, Puritans believed sermons to be the primary means by which God extends his grace to man.<sup>3</sup> They probably came to this conclusion based on their understanding of Romans 10:14: "How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (KJV). Because of this, they agreed with the general Protestant view that the sermon should be the focus of Sunday services. Consequently, Puritans were concerned about the conditions under which sermons were delivered.

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, large segments of the English people ignored worship services. Contemporary reports complain how those who did attend would come and go as they pleased, interrupting the service as they did so. Entertainments, such as the blood sport of bearbaiting, athletic competitions, dancing, gambling, church-ales and fairs were more widely attended than worship services. Often, those who did attend services could not wait for them to be over so they could participate in some form of secular entertainment. This is not surprising, since the English working person labored long hours for six days each week, with little chance

for diversion. Sunday was their only time off.

Many church leaders, not just Puritans, expressed concern for the general disregard of Sunday sanctity. Kenneth Parker has amply shown in his exhaustive work *The English Sabbath* that English Christians had long supported the custom of Sunday services by appealing to the Fourth Commandment.<sup>4</sup> On this basis Parker argues that Sabbatarianism did not originate with Puritans, but had been a well-established belief in the English church. Parker's critics claim he failed to appreciate that in the late 1500s the predominant Anglican argument for a Sunday Sabbath (or at least a semi-Sabbath) lay in church tradition and authority, not in biblical law. The establishment felt the law had no bearing on the subject because the Sabbath had been abolished.

On the other hand, the Puritan doctrine of a Sunday Sabbath appealed primarily to biblical law. While Anglican leaders came to insist that church and state were the final authorities in regulating Sunday activities, Puritans denied them any such authority. True Sabbatarianism, whether advocating Sunday or Saturday, insists both on the divine origin and the continued authority of the commandment. Sabbatarianism is not simply a devout respect for a church tradition. We should ignore a tradition, Sabbatarians believe, if God's law demands it.

### **John Hooper**

The first Reformed Englishman to espouse Sabbatarianism was John Hooper, called the author of English Sabbatarianism.<sup>5</sup> His *Declaration of the Ten Holy Commandments*, published in 1548, was widely known and used. In this book, Hooper taught that God authored the Sabbath from creation and that God, by raising Christ from the dead on the first day of the week, changed the Sabbath to Sunday. "This Sunday that we observe is not the commandment of men," he claimed.<sup>6</sup> So popular were his views that Hooper's book went through several printings over the next four decades.

By 1570, people living in the English countryside widely held to Sabbatarianism. Richard Fletcher, future bishop of London, complained in 1573 that it

is said credibly in the country that...it is no greater a sin to steal a horse on Monday then to sell him in fair on the Sunday; that it is as ill to play at games as shooting, bowling on Sunday as to lie with your neighbor's wife on Monday.

(David S. Katz, *Sabbath and Sectarianism in Seventeenth-Century England* [New York: E.J. Brill, 1988], 5)

An increasing number of tracts during that decade spread those views.

### **The Dedham conferences**

Because of such propaganda, many laypersons became more concerned about how to obey the Fourth Commandment. This is evident in the surviving notes of the Dedham conferences. Pastors from the area of Dedham, a village 70 miles northeast of London, organized the conferences in 1582. They had decided to meet regularly to discuss the practical problems faced by the people of their parishes. Their approach showed an increasing presbyterian sentiment among the clergy.

### **The Paris Garden incident**

Over the next several years the Sabbath occupied a significant amount of the conversations at the Dedham meetings. All participating pastors agreed that Christians should mark Sunday with a certain amount of solemnity. They differed over whether Sunday was a Sabbath by divine law or church tradition.

By this time, popular preaching often treated Sunday tragedies as God's judgment on sin, the most famous incident of which occurred at London's Paris Garden.

John Stockwood [had] predicted in his 1578 sermon at St Paul's Cross that God's judgement would fall on Sabbath-breakers and singled out Paris Garden, a venue for blood sports, as an example of these abuses. (Kenneth L. Parker, *The English Sabbath* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 86)

Five years later on Sunday, January 13, 1583, a crowd gathered for a bearbaiting. During the height of combat between the bear and the dogs, the upper gallery collapsed. Seven died and many more were injured. Never mind that the collapse may have been caused by overcrowding and rotten timber. "The immediate effect of the Paris Garden incident was a national clamor for the better observance of the Lord's Day."<sup>7</sup> The clamor soon led to the first of a series of Sabbatarian bills debated in Parliament over the next few decades. Though the first failed, another was introduced. Despite the growing sentiment for Sabbath reform, Elizabeth vetoed the legislation when it reached her the following year.

### **Nicholas Bounde's *The Doctrine of the Sabbath***

Though many clerics in the established church sympathized with the Sabbatarian position, some felt threatened by its insistence on the Ten Commandments, not church tradition, as its

foundation. With the publication in 1595 of Nicholas Bounde's *The Doctrine of the Sabbath*, the establishment felt compelled to respond more vigorously.<sup>8</sup>

Bounde's book contained nothing fundamentally new. It reflected a developing Sabbatarian theology preached at the university at Cambridge.<sup>9</sup> However, *The Doctrine of the Sabbath* treated the subject more extensively than its published predecessors, and its tone was more dogmatic and contentious.

Bounde strongly affirmed that the Sabbath is rooted in God's law, not church tradition. More significantly, he was the first Puritan to deny emphatically any ceremonial aspect of the Fourth Commandment.

This last point is critical in the development of the doctrine. Up to this point, Puritan Sabbatarians argued a dual nature of the Fourth Commandment. That is, they believed the Sabbath commandment as found in the Old Testament was both moral and ceremonial. The need for a specific day of rest and worship, they affirmed, was moral and dated from creation. The setting aside of the *seventh* day of the week they viewed as ceremonial. Bounde, on the other hand, denied there was anything ceremonial in the command.

[Bounde began] the argument by observing that, certainly for the Old Testament Israelites, the Sabbath had to be on the seventh day "and upon none other." In fact, he argues the absoluteness of the seventh day Sabbath so strenuously, that one wonders how he is going to make the shift to the first. It takes fifteen pages of intricate argument. (John H. Primus, *Holy Time: Moderate Puritanism and the Sabbath* [Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1989], 76)

Bounde was also "the first [Puritan] to affirm explicitly a twenty-four-hour Sabbath."<sup>10</sup> While Bounde made the transition from the seventh day to a Sunday Sabbath, one wonders if everyone who accepted the basis of his Sabbatarianism made that same transition.

Bounde's views were popular. In 1606 he published a revised edition titled *Sabbathum Veteris et Novi Testamenti, or The True Doctrine of the Sabbath*, noted for its extensive quotations from Jerome Zanchius, a highly respected theologian from Heidelberg who wrote extensively on the subject.

While Bounde was Calvinistic and quoted from Calvin's sermons, when it came to the Sabbath, he preferred to quote Zanchius. For those familiar with Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the reasons are obvious. For although Calvin preferred a solemn respect for

Sunday tradition, and he taught that the Ten Commandments provided a guide for Christian living, he believed that God abolished the Sabbath at Christ's death. Because of this, anti-Sabbatarian literature often made extensive use of Calvin.

### **The establishment responds**

The establishment's vehement response to Bounde may have begun with a sermon preached by Thomas Rogers on Monday, December 10, 1599.

He declared that it was "anti-christian and unsound" to teach that Christians are bound to keep the Sabbath day. He associated this with Jewish ceremonies.... Asserting that no day was established by scripture, he claimed that the Lord's Day was enjoined by civil and ecclesiastical constitutions and could be called the Queen's Day instead of the Lord's Day, Sabbath or Sunday.... Anyone who objected to his teaching he branded as "sabbatarians and dominicans," and insinuated that their Sabbatarianism grew out of papistry. (Parker, 96-7)

For many years, Rogers led the charge against Sabbatarians. Parker in *The English Sabbath* suggests Rogers was motivated more by political ambitions than religious concerns: that he saw in the Sabbatarian controversy an opportunity to advance himself politically. Perhaps, but it may also be that he expressed his sincerely held religious sentiments after becoming increasingly concerned about the political ramifications of Puritanism.

### **"Sabbatary Christians"**

In 1607, following the second edition of Bounde's book, John Sprint published a less polemic Sabbatarian work titled *Propositions Tending to Prove the Necessary Uses of the Christian Sabbath*. It is beyond the purpose of this article to detail Sprint's position, but one thing is of particular interest. In recounting the different views about the Sabbath, Sprint mentioned the existence of

"Sabbatary Christians" who claimed that the seventh day Sabbath of the Jews was established from creation and remained as binding on Christians as Jews, because of the perpetuity of the law. (Parker, 97, 162 n2)

Sprint clearly distinguished these seventh-day Christians from the more commonly recognized Sunday Sabbatarians. Yet he did not say if he had a specific English group in mind.

## **Anabaptist influence?**

An Anabaptist seventh-day Sabbatarian sect in the German states was once widely known, though never large.<sup>11</sup> Officially expelled from the Holy Roman Empire in the 1590s,<sup>12</sup> the last known reference to the sect dates from 1600.<sup>13</sup>

Robert Cox claimed in his *Literature of the Sabbath Question* that the Sabbatarian Anabaptists founded the English sect of Seventh Day Baptists.<sup>14</sup> Such a claim has an appeal to seventh-day Christians, since it appears to push their verifiable history further back. That is important for those who believe their church organizationally and/or physically descends from the first-century church.

Yet Cox and others have produced no proof confirming any link between English Sabbatarianism and Sabbatarian Anabaptism. In part, the confusion arose because opponents of the earliest English Baptist churches sometimes labeled Baptists as Anabaptists, and thereby erroneously linked the two. Today, Seventh Day Baptist, Baptist and Anabaptist historians, having examined the extensive church records available from the period, reject any claim suggesting that the Baptist churches, including seventh-day Baptists, grew out of the Anabaptist movement. This is especially so in the case of the seventh-day churches.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, another source for seventh-day Sabbatarianism must be found. The most likely source remaining is the Puritan movement. Sprint's mention of "Sabbatary Christians" raises the possibility that Sunday-sabbatarian agitation had by 1607 reached its logical climax — the acceptance of the seventh-day Sabbath by a small number of English Christians.

## **Elizabethan seventh-day observers?**

Some 19th and early 20th-century Sabbatarian histories, based on a comment in the 1881 edition of *Chamber's Encyclopædia*, claimed that English seventh-day observance began earlier than the Sprint quote indicates. In the article "Sabbath," an anonymous author stated:

In the reign of Elizabeth, it occurred to many conscientious and independent thinkers (as it had previously done to some Protestants in Bohemia), that the Fourth Commandment required of them the observance, not of the first, but of the specified *seventh* day of the week, and a strict bodily rest as a service then due to God.... The former class became numerous enough to make a considerable figure for more than a century in England under the title of "Sabbatarians" — a word now exchanged for the less ambiguous appellation of "Seventh-day Baptists." (*Chamber's Encyclopædia*, vol. VIII [London: W. and R. Chambers, 1881], 402)



The author did not name any of these alleged Elizabethan seventh-day observers and provided no proof to support his claims. The article's conclusions may have depended on Cox's previously published book or on assumptions about Sprint's 1607 comment. Later editions of the encyclopedia deleted these claims.

The first verifiable record of English Reformation seventh-day Christians is Sprint's 1607 comment. Their mention follows decades of Sunday Sabbatarian agitation. It is reasonable to believe that English seventh-day Sabbatarianism arose from Puritan Sunday Sabbatarianism — the one naturally and historically following the other. We shall return to seventh-day Sabbatarianism later.

### **Virginia's death penalty**

Not long after Sprint's book appeared, Puritan Sabbatarianism spread to the New World. When Lord De La Warr became governor of Virginia in 1610, he established strict Sabbatarianism in the colony.

All were required to attend divine service, preaching, and catechizing on Sunday, and were forbidden to "violate or break the Sabbath by any gaming, public or private abroad or at home." Transgressors suffered the loss of provisions for a whole week. Second offenders lost their allowance and were whipped. Death was the penalty for third time offenders. (Parker, 115)

Though the death penalty was never used, the law illustrates how seriously Virginia's early colonial administration regarded the Sabbath. Forced two decades later by Charles I to lessen these penalties, Virginia never became identified with Sabbatarianism the way Puritan New England would.

We will return to New England shortly, but before we do, we need to review the stories of John Traske and the *Book of Sports*.

### ***The Book of Sports***

When James I ascended the English throne, everyone concerned about the proper observance of Sunday thought they had a king who would restore some respect for church practice. James gave every indication that he was concerned about the need to reform the English people's Sunday habits. Thus, in 1603 and 1604, he decreed reforms to restrict some forms of

Sunday entertainments.

The Puritans were heartened. Yet the Puritans would eventually learn that his views were more in line with the established church's position than with theirs, for he appealed to church and state tradition rather than Scripture.

In August 1617, as James traveled through Lancashire, a group of workers petitioned him. They complained that the local authorities had denied them their lawful participation in Sunday recreations. In their defense, James issued his "Declaration of Lawful Sports." Dancing, archery, athletic events and Whitsun-ales were not to be prohibited after the time of church services. Note that the king did not encourage these activities at just any time on Sunday. He permitted them only after church services. He believed that everyone should be in church on Sunday. But he felt would be unnecessary and harmful to require more than this.

The following year, in 1618, he issued the same decree for the entire nation in his *Book of Sports*. In essence, James repudiated strict Sunday observance for a more recreation-oriented day. His view was the law of the land.

The Puritans were dismayed. They complained that the *Book of Sports* abrogated the progress made with James' previous decrees, and they felt he had usurped authority reserved for local magistrates. To the Puritans, the nation had taken a dangerous step backward into immorality and a harmful expansion of royal authority.

### **John Traske**

Perhaps a significant factor in James' reversal was the preaching of John Traske. Though Traske lacked a university education, the Anglican bishop James Mountagu ordained him in September 1611. Traske gained notoriety as a traveling preacher who held to extreme Sunday Sabbatarianism. He had disciples throughout the country, including London. In 1615 the authorities arrested "him for going up and down as a wandering minister."<sup>16</sup>

Hamlet Jackson, one of Traske's disciples, through his study of Scripture, became concerned that they were observing the wrong day. While traveling on a Saturday, Jackson was struck by a blinding light, an event he felt confirmed his views. Jackson then convinced Traske and his followers to begin to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. Traske probably contributed to his persecution by insisting on Sunday work, the observance of other Jewish festivals<sup>17</sup> and by practicing the dietary restrictions of Leviticus.<sup>18</sup>

Traske was arrested in early 1618. The authorities charged him with making "the people of

God, his majesty's subjects, little better than Jews" because he taught people to observe the Sabbath.<sup>19</sup> He was whipped on his way to a pillory, to which he was nailed by an ear. While so restrained, he was branded with an I, for Jew.<sup>20</sup> From there he was whipped on his way to another pillory, where his other ear was nailed. The court ordered him to pay the impossible fine of 1,000 pounds and then to be imprisoned for the rest of his life.<sup>21</sup> In prison he recanted, wrote a refutation of his beliefs and was released.

The severity of his punishment suggests the degree to which his views appeared to threaten the established order. Perhaps James also used him to express his displeasure toward the Puritan Sunday Sabbatarians. He could not treat the Puritans that way, as they were too popular, but by abusing Traske he may have hoped to intimidate the Puritans, too.

Other members of Traske's congregation were imprisoned, and two of them died in prison. Returne Hebdon died in 1625, becoming the first English seventh-day martyr. Traske's wife, Dorothy, proved more enduring than he had. She died after living her last 25 years in prison, never wavering from her seventh-day belief. During that whole time, she refused the Levitically prohibited foods offered her, surviving instead on bread, water, herbs and roots. Late in life, the state moved her to a better prison, where she tried some clean meats and wine. Some ascribe her death to her change in diet.<sup>22</sup>

For some reason the authorities released Hamlet Jackson without his recanting. He and several others went to Amsterdam, and there are no further surviving records.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Baptist Henry Jessey**

Traske eventually became a member of what has become known as the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church (a Sunday-observing group whose name, given it by historians, comes from its series of pastors). This group was originally a congregational fellowship until its third pastor, Henry Jessey, became a Baptist. (Jessey has been described as "the most influential founder of the English Baptists."<sup>24</sup>) Before his death, Jessey became a seventh-day Baptist, though he usually kept his opinions to himself. He continued to preach on Sunday, while gathering a small group of seventh-day observers around him on Saturday.<sup>25</sup>

There is no evidence that Traske directly influenced Jessey to observe the seventh day. Traske died in 1636, well before Jessey joined the congregation. And Jessey apparently did not accept the seventh-day Sabbath until well after he joined the congregation.<sup>26</sup> While the influence may not be direct, I cannot imagine members of a congregation not discussing why one of their

members had a branded forehead. Even after his death, the story of the branded man probably would have been told more than once. The Sabbath had to come up in such discussions.

The order of events was as follows: Traske preached the seventh-day Sabbath and was arrested. Traske recanted. Traske ended up in the Jacob-Lathrop church. Traske died. Henry Jessey joined the congregation and became its pastor. Jessey accepted adult baptism. The congregation became Baptist. Jessey accepted the seventh-day Sabbath and thereby the seventh-day Sabbath entered the most influential of the earliest English Baptist churches.

So although Traske did not proselyte for the seventh-day Sabbath while in the congregation, his presence may have motivated others to investigate the question. One should not discount his influence, even posthumously.

But I am getting ahead of the story, for the conversion of Jessey to the seventh day did not take place until the early 1650s. In any case, it was not long after Traske's arrest and punishment in 1618 that James issued his *Book of Sports*.

The 1620s saw growing stress between King James and the Anglican hierarchy on the one hand, and an increasingly presbyterian-minded Parliament on the other. Where local magistrates could impose Sabbatarianism, they did. Attempts to impose the looser standards of *The Book of Sports* usually failed.

### **Theophilus Brabourne**

As the 1620s came to a close, Theophilus Brabourne wrote and published *A Discourse on the Sabbath Day*. He followed this in 1632 with *A Defense of the Most Ancient and Sacred Ordinance of God's, The Sabbath Day*. This second book got him imprisoned. Both books advocated the seventh day.

Brabourne was an unusual seventh-day advocate. To his death he remained a loyal member of the Church of England. His books were written in a vain attempt to reform the church he chose to remain within. Brabourne himself never kept the seventh-day Sabbath. He argued that until the church reformed, he was not bound to do what he believed to be God's will. His opinions received wide enough attention to move the authorities to silence him. Yet his example of not living by his convictions probably did little to advance his cause. Nevertheless, his writings kept the idea of the seventh-day Sabbath before the public.<sup>27</sup>

When Charles I became king, he tried to crush Puritanism. Throughout the 1630s he tried to rule England without Parliament. To strengthen his rule over the church, he appointed in 1636

the staunchly anti-Puritan William Laud as the Archbishop of Canterbury.

### **Heylyn's misrepresentations**

This is the decade in which Peter Heylyn published his influential *History of the Sabbath*. In that book, Heylyn argued that Sunday Sabbatarianism was a Puritan innovation. Heylyn misrepresented Sabbatarianism's history when he ignored the older voices in the English church that had long held similar views. Yet as Kenneth Parker pointed out in his book *The English Sabbath*, church historians have echoed Heylyn's erroneous view for several centuries. Puritans, in promoting a Sunday Sabbath, revived a long-held English belief instead of originating one.

William Laud was instrumental in the 1633 reissuance of *The Book of Sports*. If he thought it would be more warmly received than before, he was sorely mistaken. Opposition was vocal and strong. Consequently, the government suppressed Sabbatarian books of all stripes. The anti-Puritan party appeared in control. However, events would eventually lead to a resurrection of presbyterian fortunes.

### **Civil war and the Westminster Confession**

A Scottish rebellion forced Charles I to recall Parliament, since he could not raise taxes without Parliament. This time the presbyterians were firmly in control of Parliament. Sunday Sabbatarianism became a test of one's political correctness. Thus began a civil war that pitched the Puritan Parliament's supporters against the king and his Anglican supporters.

In 1646, in the midst of the civil war, presbyterians gathered at Westminster Abbey to shape a doctrinal confession. This confession later became the standard of faith for most Presbyterians around the world. About the Sabbath it declares:

As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their

hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts, about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy. (John H. Leith, editor, *Creeds of the Churches* [Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1982], 218)

In later centuries, Presbyterians spread Sunday Sabbatarianism worldwide. In their fellowship, the word *Sabbath* became synonymous with Sunday, not Saturday.

### **Seventh-day observance rare**

Seventh-day observance during the 1630s and '40s, where it was alive at all, existed underground or in prison. According to some accounts, Dorothy Traske died about 1644. Oscar Burdick has discovered a handful of other seventh-day observers during these two decades.

In 1636 John Ley reported in his *Sunday a Sabbath* that a Margaret Former had begun to observe Saturday. About 1641, John Taylor wrote in *A Swarm of Sectaries* that the non-Conformist widow Constable of Brentford had become “a Jew.” Since no practicing Jews lived in England at the time, perhaps Taylor meant she had started to keep the Sabbath. In 1644, Thomas Adams, who was English but living in Amsterdam, was excommunicated from his church for observing the seventh day. There is also the report made by Thomas Edwards in *Gangraena* for July 1645 that many people, including some magistrates, in an unnamed town had openly stated their intention to start keeping the “Jewish Sabbath.” The next year Edwards also reported that the preacher Philip Tandy also held to the Jewish Sabbath.<sup>28</sup>

### **Baptist gains**

During the civil war, the army that fought in the name of the presbyterian-controlled Parliament became dominated by more independently minded Christians, including many Baptists. When the rebels executed Charles I and established Oliver Cromwell’s Commonwealth, Baptists found themselves free to promote their faith.

Though Cromwell was of Puritan persuasion and would have preferred ruling with a tight hand, the post-civil-war Parliament restricted his powers. Among its more important laws was one granting liberty in Christian worship, with the limitation that it “not be extended to Popery and Prelacy, nor such as, under the profession of Christ, hold forth and practice blasphemy and licentiousness” (Don A. Sanford, *A Choosing People: The History of Seventh Day Baptists*

[Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992], 55).

Because of this freedom, the decade of the 1650s became a time of Baptist expansion. It also was the decade in which Sunday Sabbatarianism gained a centuries-long foothold in English culture and law. Yet, after becoming culturally established and socially acceptable, Sabbatarians lost much of their zeal. The Sabbatarian war had been won.

Seventh-day Sabbatarianism never became established. Though supposedly protected by the newly legalized religious freedom, old social prejudices remained. The English still looked on Jews with suspicion and bigotry, even though under Cromwell Jews eventually could legally return to England for the first time in centuries.<sup>29</sup>

### **The first Sabbath-keeping Baptist congregations**

Because of these prejudices and the recent history of anti-seventh day persecution, those holding seventh-day views tested the waters carefully. On at least one occasion, church records were kept in code, while seventh-day publications were released anonymously or with only the author's initials. Therefore, one cannot speak with absolute certainty as to the exact year the earliest seventh-day congregations originated. Based on their own writings and other evidence, it appears that most of them arose during the decade of the 1650s.

In every case, those individuals whose backgrounds historians have uncovered lived first as Baptists before becoming seventh-day Sabbatarians. This may explain why seventh-day Christians felt an affinity for Baptists. They viewed Sunday-observing Baptists as their spiritual siblings, accepting their conversions and often worshiping with them.

It is not clear how many congregations the seventh-day observers established during the 1650s. By the 1660s we know of at least 10, but some scholars believe the evidence suggests that the movement was more widespread than that number indicates. Because of the distribution of seventh-day literature, isolated individuals or small, weak, pastorless groups may have been present in many locales.

### **The execution of John James**

The overthrow of the Commonwealth and the restoration of the monarchy in late 1660 placed nonconformists in more difficult circumstances. Charles II, suspected of being a secret Catholic, sought the overthrow of all nonconformist privileges and freedoms. His plan was inadvertently aided by a Fifth-Monarchist revolt in January 1661.

Fifth Monarchists were a diverse group of Christians who looked for the soon-coming kingdom of God on earth (the fifth monarchy of Daniel 2). The more radical Fifth Monarchists sought to set up Christ's rule through violence. After their London revolt was crushed, intolerance ruled England.

As under James I, Charles II found a seventh-day Sabbatarian a convenient target for his wrath. The pastor of London's seventh-day Mill Yard congregation was John James, a poor silk weaver by trade. A Fifth Monarchist, though not a revolutionary, his favorite scripture was Revelation 11:15, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever" (KJV). His martyrdom is one of the most thoroughly documented of that decade.

On the Sabbath of October 19, 1661, while preaching before his flock, the king's officers dragged him from his pulpit. They accused him of treason, not of being a Jew or keeping the Sabbath. This was a political trial, though it had clear religious overtones.

No credible evidence was submitted to substantiate the charges against him. Witnesses against him contradicted each other. Brave souls testified for him that they had heard the witnesses talk among themselves of how the state had bribed or threatened them into testifying. Others stepped forward on his behalf, denying he ever spoke treason. Still, he was found guilty. His sentence read:

John James, thou art to be carried from hence to the prison, and from thence to the place of execution and there to be hanged by the neck, and being yet alive, thy bowels to be taken out (a fire having been prepared before hand) and to be burned before thy face. Thy head to be severed from thy body and thy body quartered, thy head and body to be disposed according to the king's pleasure. (W.E. Mellone, "Seventh-Day Christians," *Jewish Quarterly Review* [1898], 404-29)

The king's pleasure was to have James' head placed on a stake outside the congregation's meeting hall.

In speaking of his beliefs, he acknowledged that he was a baptized believer who accepted the principles in Hebrews 6:1-2 and such doctrines as faith in God, repentance from dead works, baptism, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the



dead, and eternal judgment, ending with the affirmation that he owned the Commandments of God, the Ten Commandments as expressed in Exodus 20, and did not dare willingly to break the least of those to save his life. He also declared, “I do own the Lord’s holy Sabbath, the seventh day of the week to be the Lord’s Sabbath.” (Sanford, 69)

Before being executed, James stated he was prepared to die, denied the charges and asked for God’s mercy on the executioner. The hangman, who had not received the expected bribes to reduce James’ agonies, had promised to multiply James’ torments. So moved was the hangman by John James’ speech that he mercifully waited until James died before drawing and quartering him.

### **The Great Expulsion**

In 1662 Parliament passed the Fourth Act of Conformity. Its framers designed the law to expel all nonconforming pastors from Anglican pulpits by requiring all ministers to agree to the *Prayer Book* of 1662. It worked. One fifth of the English clergy, 2,000 ministers, refused to sign. The state kicked them out of their pulpits in what has become known as the Great Expulsion.

Two years later, in 1664, Parliament passed the Conventicle Act, which forbade nonconformists from holding religious meetings of more than five persons not living in the same household. This increasingly ugly picture was probably the main reason many nonconformists, such as Stephen Mumford and his wife, sailed for Rhode Island and other American colonies.

### **The Mumfords**

The Mumfords were seventh-day Baptists. In the past much has been written about them that is not true — that Stephen Mumford was a minister, that he was a missionary sent by the London seventh-day Baptists, that he was a member of a London seventh-day church. Mumford sailed from London in 1664, but he was not a member of any London church. Nor was he ever ordained. He and his wife probably sailed to Rhode Island simply to have a better, freer life.

Stephen Mumford and his wife had been members of the Tewkesbury Baptist congregation (later called the Natton Baptist church). In 1986 Oscar Burdick discovered that the coded record book of this church had been deposited in the Gloucestershire County Record Office. Among the members listed in code were the Mumfords. Tewkesbury was a mixed Baptist congregation, containing recent converts to the seventh-day as well as Sunday observers.<sup>30</sup>

The Mumfords came to Newport, Rhode Island, in large part for the religious freedom available to them there. Baptists were welcome in Rhode Island when other colonies persecuted them. Finding no other seventh-day observers with whom they could worship, the Mumfords did as they had done in England — they worshiped with Sunday-observing Baptists, believers whom the Mumfords considered to be of the same basic Christian faith. It was not long before other Baptists in Newport converted to seventh-day Sabbatarianism.

Others have told the story of how these events led in 1672 to the founding of the first seventh-day congregation in the Americas. Although the seventh-day Baptist faith nearly vanished from the British Isles by 1800, it flourished in the colonies. (The Seventh Day Baptist Church organized its General Conference in the early 1800s). In large part this can be explained by the enduring respect throughout Puritan New England for the Ten Commandments.

### **The 20th century**

American Sunday-Sabbatarianism exercised considerable influence well into the 20th century. Yet as the United States has become less Protestant and therefore less Puritan in its heritage, laws that restricted Sunday commerce and activities have been gradually overturned or ignored. Even in religiously conservative sections of the country, few Christians seem bothered by attending Sunday morning services and a football game in the afternoon.

Yet ironically, the number of seventh-day observers continues to grow (though they probably are not as strictly observant as their spiritual ancestors were). In the United States, the Seventh Day Baptists have suffered numeric setbacks from the time of their greatest strength in the mid-1800s, but this does not tell the whole story. Through their missions, more Seventh Day Baptists now exist outside the United States than in it.

During their time of strength, Seventh Day Baptists contributed to the founding of several universities, though these universities are no longer under denominational control. Their greatest legacy is the influence they had on spreading seventh-day Sabbatarianism within the early Adventist movement. Both the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Church of God (Seventh Day) owe a significant part of their Sabbath understanding to Seventh Day Baptist influences. From these newer seventh-day churches have arisen dozens of other seventh-day sects and denominations.<sup>31</sup>

There are Sunday-observing groups that have grown more rapidly than seventh-day fellowships, but they have tended to move away from the Puritan view of the Sabbath. It is only

among the seventh-day churches that this legacy is growing.

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## Endnotes

1 One should not assume that because Puritans dominated the New England governments, at least in the settled areas, that average New Englanders practiced Sabbatarianism. They probably did so only as the government forced it on them. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have demonstrated that the traditional view of a pious New England is not true.

There never were all that many Puritans, even in New England, and non-Puritan behavior abounded. From 1761 through 1800 a third (33.7 percent) of all first births in New England occurred after less than nine months of marriage...despite harsh laws against fornication. Granted, some of these early births were simply premature and do not necessarily show that premarital intercourse had occurred, but offsetting this is the likelihood that not all women who engaged in premarital intercourse would have become pregnant. In any case, single women in New England during the colonial period were more likely to be sexually active than to belong to a church — in 1776 only about one out of five New Englanders had a religious affiliation. (Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: 1776-1990* [New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993], 22)

2 John H. Primus, *Holy Time: Moderate Puritanism and the Sabbath* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1989), 117

3 Primus, 161.

4 Kenneth L. Parker, *The English Sabbath* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

5 Primus, 18.

6 Primus, 20.

7 James T. Dennison, Jr., *The Market Day of the Soul: The Puritan Doctrine of the Sabbath in England, 1532-1700* (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 28.

8 Bounde is sometimes spelled Bownde.

9 Primus, 57-73.

10 Primus, 78.

11 Daniel Liechty, *Andreas Fischer and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1988).

12 Claus-Peter Clasen, "Anabaptist Sects in the Sixteenth Century," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol. 46 (July 1972), 256-79.

13 *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 396.

14 Robert Cox, *Literature of the Sabbath Question* (London: F.S.A. Scot, 1865), 158. Some confusion arises as the spelling of the names of different seventh-day churches. The Seventh Day Baptists and the Church of God (Seventh Day) do not hyphenate their name, unlike the Seventh-day Adventists.

15 There is an early link between the first English Baptist church and some Anabaptists, but not in the direction that some had formerly claimed. Instead of Anabaptists becoming Baptists, we find that a few Baptists became members of the Anabaptist sect of Mennonites.

The first English Baptist church arose in Amsterdam from among the Separatists and centered about John Smyth...a graduate of Cambridge. It held what are usually termed Arminian views [emphasizing man's free will as opposed to the strict predestination views of the Calvinists] and was the spiritual ancestor of the General Baptists of Britain. Some of Smyth's followers united with the Mennonites. Thomas Helwys, one of Smyth's intimates who later broke with him but remained "Arminian," founded (1612) what seems to have been the first Baptist church on English soil, outside the walls of London, and took pains to disassociate himself from the Mennonites. A few years later, in the next reign [that of Charles I], what were known as Particular Baptists arose, so designated because they held to a restricted or particular atonement which was only for the elect. They began as a secession from the (Congregational) Separatists. (Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity; Volume II: ad 1500-ad 1975* [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975], 818)

The earliest seventh-day Baptist church records show that the vast majority of their number identified with the Particular Baptist movement.

16 Parker, 163.

17 One of the jailers during Traske's Sabbatarian imprisonment claimed that he overheard Traske argue with others over whether they should eat a lamb and unleavened bread at the time of the Passover. Another account by John Falconer, a Roman controversialist, perhaps based on the same testimony, claimed that Traske read Eusebius' Church History and concluded from

early church custom that Christians should observe “the Jewish date for Easter” as well as observe the Days of Unleavened Bread. Of course Christians can observe “the Jewish date for Easter” without any recourse to a lamb. For Falconer’s account see B.R. White, “John Traske (1586-1636) and London Puritanism,” *Congregational Historical Society Transactions*, vol. xx (1965-1970), 223-33.

18 Don A. Sanford, *A Choosing People: The History of Seventh Day Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 50-1. Traske refused the Levitically unclean foods prior to keeping the seventh-day Sabbath (White, 225).

19 *Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America*, vol. 1 (Plainfield, New Jersey: American Sabbath Tract Society, 1910), 108. Care should be taken before using this older work, as more recent scholarship has corrected a number of errors. The research of Oscar Burdick and Don Sanford’s *A Choosing People* provides a healthy corrective of earlier histories.

20 At that time the English alphabet did not contain the letter J, so Jew was spelled Iew.

21 Henry E.I. Phillips, “An Early Stuart Judaizing Sect,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, vol xv, 66. Before using this source as authoritative, I would recommend confirming its conclusions from other sources first. For example, he alleges that Traske and Jackson disagreed on the day of worship; that it was Jackson alone who advocated the seventh-day Sabbath. Actually, Jackson came to this position first and then persuaded Traske.

22 White, 229.

23 It has been claimed that Hamlet Jackson and his followers converted to Judaism while in Amsterdam. This is possible, though attempts to identify the time and place of this conversion have been disputed (Cecil Roth, “The Middle Period of Anglo-Jewish History [1290-1655] Reconsidered,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 1955, 9, n. 5. Also see White, 228). We know that as late as 1680, English seventh-day churches corresponded with their counterparts in Holland (*Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America*, vol. 1, 65). However, we do not know the history of the Dutch seventh-day observers. Were they descendants of Jackson’s flock? Or were they more recent immigrants to that country, perhaps refugees from the persecutions under Charles II? I suspect the latter to be more probable.

24 Katz, 21.

25 Oscar Burdick, “Act I: The Great Decade, 1650-60,” an unpublished manuscript, 4-5.

26 Burdick to Ralph Orr, 29 November 1988.

27 Sanford, 51-3.

28 Burdick, "Seventh Day Baptist Origins in England, 1650-1683: A Bibliography" (Berkeley, California: Graduate Theological Union Library, 1984), an unpublished manuscript, 6.

29 "The English Jews were only in the spring of 1656 making their first tentative excursions into English life as they left their self-imposed Spanish and Portuguese Roman Catholic disguises" (Katz, 156).

30 Burdick, "From Whence Did Stephen Mumford Come?" a draft of an item for the 1987 Seventh Day Baptist Historical Society report, a copy of which was sent by him to me.

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**Table Illustrating Doctrinal Differences and Similarities Between Religious Groups\***

Doctrinal Question	Anglicans	Puritans	Seventh-day Sabbatarians
Is the Sabbath a creation ordinance?	No	Yes	Yes
Is the Saturday-Sabbath commanded by the Decalogue?	Yes	No	Yes
Is the Lord's Day the New Testament Sabbath?	No	Yes	No
Is the Lord's Day God's law?	No	Yes	No
Should the Lord's Day be passed in rest from all corporal labor and the suspension of all recreation?	No	Yes	No

\* This table is adapted from Dennison, 147.

## List of 17th-Century English Seventh-day Churches with their earliest known dates

1607 “Sabbatary Christians,” site unknown  
1617 Traskites, London  
1650 Burton-on-Trent, Derbyshire  
1650 Leominster, Herefordshire  
1652 Dorchester, Dorsetshire  
1653 Henry Jessey’s group, London  
1653 Mill Yard, London  
pre-1657 Colchester, Essex  
circa 1660 Tewkesbury [Natton], Gloucestershire  
1662 Bell Lane, London  
pre-1668 Chertsey, Surrey  
1668 Wallingford, Berkshire  
pre-1669 Northwalsham, Norfolk  
pre-1669 Watleton, Oxfordshire  
pre-1669 Worborough, Oxfordshire  
1676 Pinner’s Hall, London  
1680 Gloucestershire\*\*  
1680 Hampshire  
1680 Sherbourne, Dorsetshire  
pre-1690 Belmister, Dorsetshire  
pre-1690 Bledlow, Buckinghamshire  
pre-1690 Boston, Lincolnshire  
pre-1690 Dorsetor, Dorsetshire  
pre-1690 Harwich, Essex  
pre-1690 Ingham, Norfolk  
pre-1690 Melton, Suffolk  
pre-1690 Nottingham, Lincolnshire  
pre-1690 Salisbury, Wiltshire  
pre-1690 Sherbon, Dorsetshire  
pre-1690 Sturminster, Dorsetshire  
pre-1690 Woodbridge, Suffolk  
pre-1690 Yarmouth, Norfolk

\* This list is based primarily on information found in *The Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America*, volumes 1 and 2, and Ernest A. Payne’s “More About the Sabbatarian Baptists,” *The Baptist Quarterly* (London), vol. 14, no. 4, October 1951. Additional information is supplied by Oscar Burdick, “SDB Churches,” an unpublished manuscript.

\*\* Is this the same, or the remnant of the Natton congregation, which started around 1660, or is it a separate congregation? Payne’s list includes two seventh-day churches in this shire in December 1690.

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*What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?*

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