

Chapter 16

Sabbath and Sunday in the early church

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

How did the change in worship day occur? This chapter examines the evidence we have for the first and second centuries.

The first century

To begin our research into first-century Christian worship days, we look first at the New Testament. We have already noted the example of Jesus, the example set in the early church, and what Paul taught about the Sabbath.

The New Testament also 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 not necessarily a 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 normal one. John had a vision on "the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10), but this verse does not say that this was a day on which Christians should meet.

In short, none of the biblical texts give any command for Christians to meet on or to *avoid* meeting on any particular day. Examples of *meeting* on the first day do not change the Old Testament command to *rest* on the seventh day (it is quite possible to do both). The Old Testament law is *obsolete*, not changed to another day. None of the texts can be used to *prove* that

Christians regularly met on any particular day of the week. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that some Jewish Christians, especially in Palestine, continued to observe the Sabbath. This is shown in three ways:

1) Paul was accused of teaching 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 Palestinian Jewish Christians is provided by the curse of the Christians (*Birkath-ha-Minin*), which the rabbinical authorities introduced (a.d. 80-90) in the daily prayer."¹ This curse was supposedly designed to identify Christians in the synagogues. Anyone who refused to pronounce the curse was suspected of being a Christian. The point is that Jewish Christians were still attending synagogues and were probably 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, and their observance of Jewish laws probably goes back to apostolic times.

The above evidence shows that it is unlikely that there was any apostolic authority for a complete transfer of the Sabbath command to Sunday. Early Sunday observers did not claim any such authority. It seems clear that 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 taught Gentiles to ignore the laws of Moses, Jewish believers would not have protested. Verse 25

None of the texts prove that Christians regularly met on any particular day of the week.

¹ Samuele Bacchiocchi, "The Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity," chapter 7 in Kenneth A. Strand, editor, *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), p. 135.

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? As discussed in chapter 9, Jewish rabbis did not think that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath. Although most of the rabbinic evidence comes from the fourth century, the evidence indicates that it reflects first-century attitudes as well.

Second, this says nothing about the possibility of a day in *addition* to the Sabbath. After Christians heard the Scriptures read in the synagogues, they would want to meet separately to discuss the Christian interpretation of what 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. There is no direct evidence for either meeting time, nor is evidence likely to be found, for neither practice would have created controversy. It would be quite possible to observe both Sabbath and Sunday (as some 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,”² but his conclusion is too sweeping. Paul could have (whether he did or not is another question) promoted Sunday observance if it were in addition to rather than a replacement for the Sabbath. And he could have promoted Sunday observance among Gentiles, even to the exclusion of the Sabbath, without objections from orthodox Judaism.

Ignatius

Our earliest evidence from the second century is given by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, in letters he wrote somewhere around the year 115. He warned Christians to reject those who “preach the Jewish law” (*Philadelphians* 6:1). 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.”³

More specifically about the Sabbath, Ignatius praised some who were “no longer observing the Sabbath.”⁴ 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

Ignatius warned Christians to reject those who “preach the Jewish law.”

Barnabas

Our next evidence comes from the Epistle of Barnabas, which was probably written from Alexandria, perhaps as early as A.D. 70 or as late as 132. 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.”⁵

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.” He also mentions our present inability to keep any day holy by being “pure in heart,” and he concludes that we will be unable to keep the Sabbath holy until the end-time new world, after we have been made completely holy. In this passage, Barnabas does 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 prophesied 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

² Ibid., p. 132.

³ Ignatius, *Magnesians* 8, 10. Quotes from the Ante-Nicene Fathers edition.

⁴ *Magnesians* 9.

⁵ *Barnabas* 15.

also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.”

- 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 Rome, about the year 150. His comments probably reflect Christian custom in other cities, too, such as Ephesus, where he lived for a while.

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.⁶

Justin is clear: It was the widespread practice of Christians to observe Sunday. “Perhaps there were some Gentile Christians who kept the Sabbath...but if so, they found no spokesman whose writings survive.”⁷ An Adventist scholar writes,

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.⁸

“The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath.”

But Sunday 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.⁹

A debate with a Jewish teacher

Justin Martyr gives a lengthy explanation of his understanding of the Sabbath in his debate with a (possibly hypothetical) Jewish teacher named 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.¹⁰

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?¹¹

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

⁶ *First Apology*, 67.

⁷ R.J. Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church,” chapter 9 in D.A. Carson, editor, *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), p. 269.

⁸ C. Mervyn Maxwell and P. Gerard Damsteegt, eds., *Source*

Book for the History of Sabbath and Sunday (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1992), pp. 136, 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 139.

¹⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho* 8, 46.

¹¹ *Trypho* 10.

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?¹²

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.¹³

In Justin's view, the Sabbath command was a command for 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."¹⁴

Justin argued that, since Sabbaths and sacrifices and feasts began with Moses, then they ended with Christ, who was the new covenant.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Trypho asked, Could a Christian keep the Sabbath if he wished to? Justin knew of some Jewish Christians who kept the Sabbath and replied,

Christians were in perpetual obedience to the purpose of the Sabbath.

¹² Trypho 18.

¹³ Trypho 10-12.

¹⁴ Trypho 19, 23.

¹⁵ Trypho 43.

¹⁶ Trypho 26.

Yes, as long as he doesn't try to force other Christians to keep the Law of Moses.¹⁷

Justin explained some typology between Old Testament rituals and Christian realities. Among these were a connection between circumcision and Sunday. His argument assumes that Trypho knew that Christians met on Sundays:

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.¹⁸

Irenaeus

Irenaeus, leader of the church in Lyons (modern-day France) 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 of 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 [Matthew 12:5]. For David had been appointed a priest by God, although Saul still persecuted him. For all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank. And all the apostles of the Lord are priests.¹⁹

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

¹⁷ Trypho 47.

¹⁸ Trypho 41.

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.8.2-3.

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.²⁰

Irenaeus, like Justin, said that the patriarchs before Moses did not keep the Sabbath. But he also said that they kept the Ten Commandments and that Christians also had to!²¹ His discrepancy can be explained in two ways. Bauckham suggests that Irenaeus used the term "Ten Commandments" loosely, as synonymous with the natural law, as suggested in 4.16.3.²² 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."²³

Tertullian

In the late second century and early third century, Tertullian also rejected the literal Sabbath, said that the patriarchs did not observe it, interpreted it in terms of morals, and worshipped on Sunday.²⁴ He gives yet more evidence that second-century Christians had, as far as we can tell, abandoned the Sabbath and observed Sunday as the day for Christian worship.

The written evidence is clear: Almost all second-century Christians observed Sunday as a day of worship (not a day of required rest), rather than the Sabbath. 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. 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.

²⁰ *Against Heresies* 4.16.1.

²¹ *Against Heresies* 4.16.2; 4.15.1.

²² Bauckham, pp. 267-69.

²³ Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 96; see also 89 and 95.

²⁴ Tertullian, *Apology* 21; *Against Marcion* 1:20; 5.19; *An Answer to the Jews* 2, 4; *Apology* 16; and *On Idolatry* 14.

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*]." 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.

Even in the early second century, Sunday-keeping was the norm throughout Christendom (except for Jewish groups) — 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.

How the church changed

Sunday-keeping was the norm throughout Christianity, with no trace of controversy.

Modern Sunday-keeping Christians often conclude that the apostles authorized or even commanded Gentiles to meet on Sundays instead of Sabbaths. Of course, this conclusion must be rejected by anyone who thinks that

Christians should observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Therefore, Seventh-day Adventists have proposed ways in which the vast majority of professing Christians could have become deceived about the Sabbath. Some claim that the change from Sabbath to Sunday was introduced at Rome in the middle of the second century.

Bacchiocchi's theory

In support of that position, Samuele Bacchiocchi argues that Sunday-keeping was a Roman Catholic innovation that became widespread because of the authority of the Roman church.²⁵ Anti-Jewish sentiments were strong in Rome, and Gentiles became prominent in the church there. Since Hadrian fought against the Jews, his reign would be a likely candidate for the beginning of Sunday observance. The idea is that Christians wanted to be different than the Jews. Bacchiocchi argues that only a powerful church (i.e., Rome) could effectively switch the day of worship throughout the empire.

However, Bacchiocchi's theory has serious weaknesses, as noted by another Adventist scholar. The Roman church simply did not have that kind of power

²⁵ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1987).

in the second century. As evidence, we note the following: 1) When Ignatius wrote to the Roman church, he did not greet a bishop of Rome. 2) Irenaeus was willing to disagree with the bishop of Rome regarding their policy toward the Quartodecimans. 3) Polycarp and Polycrates acted as equals with the bishop of Rome. 4) It was only with difficulty and controversy that Rome pressured a change in the date of Easter for one area in Asia Minor. 5) Even in later centuries, Rome was unable to force other cities to observe the seventh day as a fast day. 6) In the fourth century, when many Eastern Christians began to observe the Sabbath as well as Sunday, Rome was unable or unwilling to stop the practice.²⁶

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. 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. 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."²⁷

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

²⁶ Kenneth A. Strand, "From Sabbath to Sunday in the Early Christian Church: A Review of Some Recent Literature. Part II: Samuele Bacchiocchi's Reconstruction," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 17 (1979), pp. 96-99.

²⁷ Maxwell, p. 138.

times in history it would have been to the Christians' advantage to be seen as a branch of Judaism, since Judaism was a legal religion and Christianity was not. The complexity of the Christians' attitude toward Judaism makes it highly unlikely that Rome could have convinced all Christians in all parts of the empire to change their day of worship. Many Christians would have had reasons to resist such a change.

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

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?²⁸

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

Other theories

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.²⁹

The Roman church did not have that kind of power in the second century.

The early church resisted pagan practices; they would rather die than adopt a pagan custom.

²⁸ Strand, p. 90.

²⁹ Maxwell, p. 161C.

Maxwell, an Adventist, is not arguing for Sunday-keeping, but for honest use of the second- and third-century evidence. He gives an excellent summary of the evidence:

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.³⁰

I suggest that these writers, even though they were from various parts of the empire, have a “common hermeneutic” because that same hermeneutic was used in the Gentile mission ever since Acts 15: a mission that did not require Gentiles to keep the laws of Moses, including the Sabbath. It is unlikely that

churches throughout the empire would, without controversy, develop the same practice unless that practice had been present from the beginning. It is also unlikely that people throughout the empire would give the same reasons for their practice unless those reasons had also been present from the beginning. Their “common hermeneutic” is evidence of antiquity.

A practical need

I would also like to note that Jewish Christians had a practical need for meeting times that did not conflict with synagogue observance. The second-century writers show that the vast majority of Christians met on Sunday and did not keep the Sabbath. They give no clues to 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 require a particular day of worship without generating disagreement and controversy. Therefore it is likely that Sunday observance began before or during the early stages of the Gentile mission.

It is possible that Sunday observance even began in Jerusalem. Thousands of law-observant Jews came into the church. They attended temple and synagogue functions, yet they also wished to have more private meetings for believers only. They wished to discuss Scriptures, share meals, pray and sing Christian hymns. Initially, they met daily (Acts 2:46). Sabbath restrictions, however, might have made it difficult to prepare meals and gather large groups on Saturday evenings.

Sundays would provide opportunities for large Christian gatherings. Scriptures that had been read the previous day would be discussed, especially if they had messianic significance. Sermons would be given; Christians would celebrate their faith in Jesus the Messiah. As Christianity spread to Jewish communities in Antioch, Alexandria and Rome, similar situations would foster the development of post-Sabbath Christian meetings.

When Gentiles first began to be added to the church, they were God-fearing Gentiles who attended synagogue meetings and would also need an after-Sabbath meeting time for Christian worship. Eventually Gentiles from pagan backgrounds were also added, in Alexandria, Ephesus and Rome. These converts were not in the habit of attending synagogue, but they would nevertheless meet with the others after

³⁰ Maxwell, pages 154-156.

the Sabbath. Thus there were two groups of Christians: those who kept Sabbath and met after the Sabbath, and those who ignored the Sabbath and met only after the Sabbath. This dual development would have been common throughout the empire, since Jews lived in many cities, and evangelists preached to the Jews first. But the need for dual worship meetings would have ceased in most cities as Gentiles became the large majority. Anti-Jewish sentiment could have accelerated this development.

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

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.

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 obligations (Galatians 4:10). The writer of Hebrews explained that the Sabbath typologically prefigured a spiritual rest, and it is that latter rest that Christians should strive to enter (Hebrews 4:1-10).

These New Testament 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 with the conclusion that the Sabbath is not a Christian requirement.

Review

- The earliest Jewish Christians observed the Sabbath; Gentiles did not.
- Writings of the second century unanimously report Christians meeting on Sundays.
- No church had the power to enforce a change in day in both west and east; this suggests that Sunday had been observed from the beginning.
- Many Sunday-keeping Christians would rather die than compromise with paganism.
- Question: Is this evidence that Christianity went astray as soon as the apostles died, or evidence that the church understood Paul correctly?
- Why was there no controversy about the change?

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