

FROM SABBATH TO SUNDAY IN THE EARLY  
CHRISTIAN CHURCH:  
A REVIEW OF SOME RECENT LITERATURE  
PART I: WILLY RORDORF'S RECONSTRUCTION

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The past two decades have witnessed an increasing number of scholarly studies on the origin of Sunday observance in the early Christian church. At the time of this writing, the most recent such work to have been published is that of Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977). Its appearance prompts the present review article, which will deal not only with Bacchiocchi's work, but also with that of Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church*, trans. A. A. K. Graham (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), which appeared first in German as *Der Sonntag: Geschichte der Ruhe- und Gottesdiensttages im ältesten Christentum*, *Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 43 (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1962).

These volumes by Rordorf and Bacchiocchi are undoubtedly the most thorough and also widely acclaimed scholarly publications on the subject in recent years. In several important respects Bacchiocchi's work represents a rebuttal of Rordorf (as well as of other recent writers); and this consideration, together with the fact that Rordorf has not hitherto been given review in *AUSS*, makes it especially appropriate to devote the first part of this review article to Rordorf's *Sunday*.

### 1. *Overview of Rordorf's Reconstruction*

In his *Sunday* Rordorf first provides an introductory chapter on "The Seven-Day Week" (pp. 9-42), thus furnishing an appropriate background for treatment of a day of rest and worship that recurs regularly in a seven-day cycle. Next he delves into the twin aspects of his subject itself, dealing with "The Day of Rest" in chaps. 2 and 3 ("The Sabbath Problem," pp. 45-153; and "Sunday as Day of Rest," pp. 154-173) and with "The Day of Worship" in chaps. 4, 5, and 6 ("The Origin of the Christian Observance of Sunday," pp. 177-237; "The Oldest Forms of the Observance of Sunday," pp. 238-273; and "The Names for Sunday and Their Significance," pp. 274-293). His thesis regarding the rise of the Christian Sunday and its displacement of the Sabbath may be summarized as follows:

In the post-resurrection period, although Jewish Christians may have retained the Sabbath, Gentile Christianity from the very outset did not observe it, except that a small amount of Gentile Sabbath-keeping may have gained a foothold in Asia Minor. However, by the third century, and to an even greater degree in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Sabbath came to be rather widely adopted as a day for worship services among Gentile Christians. After that, it once again faded out as Sunday became a rest day and tended to replace the Sabbath in this respect as well as being the chief day for weekly Christian worship services.

As for the Christian Sunday, it originated immediately in post-resurrection Christian circles in a way rather different from that usually assumed. It stemmed from the Lord's Supper celebration of the disciples with the risen Lord on the evening after the resurrection and perhaps on a number of other Sunday evenings until his ascension. In Pauline churches this Sunday-evening Eucharistic celebration was a regular observance. In the earliest period there was, in fact, no mid-morning service on Sunday, for Sunday was a day of *work*, not rest. In the second century, the Lord's Supper was transferred to a very early morning gathering, before

or at dawn. Finally, after Constantine proclaimed Sunday a rest day in A.D. 321, daytime Sunday services did become a practicality. But it should be noted that Constantine's Sunday proclamations were political and social in their orientation, rather than an adaptation to Christianity. Moreover, there is no evidence that the early Christian church either referred to them or based its concept of Sunday rest on them. Rather, Christians were at first placed in a dilemma by imperial prohibition of work on Sunday, this being especially true in monastic circles. Eventually, however, Christians came into line with the new emphasis, finding a rationale for Sunday rest in the Sabbath commandment of the OT.

A detailed analysis of this rather unique reconstruction will not be possible here, nor will there be opportunity for the close examination which Rordorf's exegesis of NT texts deserves. In the scope of this review article, we will rather have to limit ourselves to an overview and sampling of his methodology, with notice given also to implications for his conclusions.

## 2. *Rordorf's Treatment of the Sabbath*

Regarding the Sabbath, Rordorf's chapter on "The Sabbath Problem" deals successively with "The Sabbath in Judaism," "The Attitude of Jesus to the Sabbath," and "The Sabbath in the Early Church." The last section, by far the longest (pp. 80-153), is divided into subsections entitled "Sabbath Theology" (pp. 80-118) and "Sabbath Practice" (pp. 118-153); and with regard to the latter, Rordorf has called attention to the difficulty in grasping "the details of sabbath practice in primitive Christianity," and has pointed out that "we cannot simply refer to the sabbath theology in order to fill the gaps for which evidence is missing . . ." (p. 118).

In regard to Sabbath theology, Rordorf finds three basic elements as accruing or conjoining:

With messianic authority Jesus had broken the sabbath without, however, formally annulling the sabbath commandment. The Church took over this tradition. Beside it there stood the

Jewish expectation of the eschatological sabbath. The Church took this expectation and adapted it [Heb 3:7-4:11 is an illustration of this aspect of sabbath theology for Rordorf]. . . .

A further advance made by the theology of the primitive Church was the penetrating, new interpretation of the sabbath commandment, which went far beyond anything which we find in Judaism. It harked back to Jesus' manner of interpreting the law in the Sermon on the Mount . . . (pp. 117-118).

Especially the third basic element just mentioned is supposed to have led the early Christian writers to an interpretation of the Sabbath commandment that "had the effect of abolishing the literal sense and of replacing it by a new commandment dependent upon the reality which was present in Christ" (p. 102); and, of course, the other two elements are also considered by Rordorf as having had an impact on removing emphasis on a *specific day* for rest and worship (see pp. 80-100). In his treatment of Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath (pp. 54-79), Rordorf fails to do justice to the Jewish background against which that attitude was cast. More than forty years ago Paul Cotton saw the need for illustration and discussion of the rabbinic requirements that existed in NT times, a matter to which Rordorf has barely paid lip service.<sup>1</sup> Also Rordorf's analysis of the specific texts is superficial from the standpoint of the issues involved and the historical and contextual settings, and therefore should be read in light of the correctives by Bacchiocchi.<sup>2</sup>

In his section on "Sabbath Practice," Rordorf not only treats such texts as Matt 24:20 (which he feels indicates the high regard for the Sabbath among Jewish Christians, p. 120) and Luke 23:56b (which he dismisses as not resting "on an historical reminiscence" nor shedding "any light on the attitude of the primitive Church towards the sabbath," p. 121), but also draws upon Gal 4:8-11, Col 2:8-23, and Rom 14:5 (see pp. 130-138), whose general theological perspective is more discernible than whatever prac-

<sup>1</sup> Paul Cotton, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Study in Early Christianity* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Times Publishing Co., 1933), pp. 14-29.

<sup>2</sup> See Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp. 26-63. This work mentioned above will be reviewed in Part II.

tices may have been involved. (However, he appears to have missed the real point with respect to both theology and practice because of his failure to ascertain precisely what the problems were that lay behind the polemics in these passages.<sup>3</sup>) He also refers to the early patristic source Ign. *Magn.* 9, where some sort of practice may indeed be involved too, but where again the theology is not for us a clear indication of what Sabbath/Sunday practices, if any, were reflected. His discussion (pp. 139-141) should be contrasted with, and counterbalanced by, the more detailed and complete treatments given by Fritz Guy and by Richard B. Lewis, as well as the perceptive remarks of Robert A. Kraft.<sup>4</sup>

Rordorf's other "evidence" for Gentile Christianity's repudiation of the Sabbath in NT times includes the Council in Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 15. "The sabbath was not explicitly mentioned in connection with the Apostolic Council," Rordorf concedes, "but we may suppose that the Gentiles were granted freedom from the sabbath commandment together with their freedom from the other regulations of the Mosaic law" (p. 130). Such a conclusion is, of course, precisely what Rordorf admits it to be—*supposition*. Strangely, while devoting rather extensive attention to such speculative items, he bypasses a discussion of the various NT texts that do specifically refer to actual Sabbath practice among the apostles, such as Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 16:13; etc.

As Rordorf moves to the early third century and notices evidence from Tertullian and Hippolytus relating to respect for the Sabbath, and then takes note also of the vast array of references in the fourth and fifth centuries to the Sabbath's being a Christian worship day, he concludes that the Sabbath

<sup>3</sup> Bacchiocchi deals with these passages in an extensive Appendix, "Paul and the Sabbath," pp. 339-369. On Rom 14:5, see also Raoul Dederen, "On Esteeming One Day Better Than Another," *AUSS* 9 (1971): 16-35.

<sup>4</sup> Fritz Guy, "'The Lord's Day' in the Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians," *AUSS* 2 (1964): 1-17; Richard B. Lewis, "Ignatius and the 'Lord's Day,'" *AUSS* 6 (1968): 46-59; Robert A. Kraft, "Some Notes on Sabbath Observance in Early Christianity," *AUSS* 3 (1965): 18-33, esp. pp. 27-28.

was now being adopted by the Gentile Christians.<sup>5</sup> But why this inauguration of Sabbath-keeping at this time? More was involved, Rordorf feels, than a spread from Asia Minor, where the practice was somewhat different, in any event. A "further factor which might have led to the sabbath observance of the third and fourth centuries" might, e.g., "be some sort of connection between this sabbath observance and the spiritual interpretation of the sabbath commandment which had developed since the middle of the second century" (p. 151).

But is this solution reasonable? Was it not, according to Rordorf's thesis, precisely this very same spiritual interpretation that made the Gentile Christians of the first century feel that they need not keep the Sabbath? Why now should this spiritual interpretation have the opposite effect of making Gentile Christians begin keeping the Sabbath?

Would not a more logical solution to accommodate the evidence regarding widespread Sabbath-keeping in the third through fifth centuries be simply to allow that the Sabbath had not fallen into disuse among Gentile Christians in NT times and that what the third through fifth centuries witnessed was an increase in emphasis on the Sabbath because of certain efforts at that time to debase the day? Indeed, such an interpretation of the evidence would be implied by the earliest third-century references which Rordorf cites, Tertullian and Hippolytus. These references are polemic against the Sabbath fast, a practice negative to Sabbath-keeping.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. *Rordorf's Treatment of Sunday*

Rordorf's reconstruction regarding the Sabbath practice in the first and second centuries is thus based on assumption rather than

<sup>5</sup> Sources he specifically mentions are Epiphanius, Socrates, the Council of Laodicea, Cassian, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, and Pseudo-Ign. *Magn.* 9:1 (pp. 147-148).

<sup>6</sup> On the Sabbath fast and its effect on Sabbath observance, see Bacchiocchi, pp. 187-194, and Kenneth A. Strand, "Some Notes on the Sabbath Fast in Early Christianity," *AUSS* 3 (1965): 167-174.

fact, and his thesis on the rise of Sunday as a Christian institution is likewise mainly conjecture. Regarding NT Sunday observance, he finds Acts 20:7-12 to be a basic and central text, indicative of a regular Eucharistic celebration on Sunday evenings in Pauline churches, even though this is the *only* text in the book of Acts mentioning a Sunday meeting of any sort (pp. 196-205). The meeting he describes was an evening meeting at Troas "on the first day of the week"; it began when the disciples came together "to break bread"; and it lasted all night, with Paul departing the next day.

Rordorf takes the expression "to break bread" as being already a set formula for the Eucharist, and he feels that a regular Sunday evening Eucharistic celebration is in view. However, many commentators believe that Jewish reckoning of evening-to-evening was being followed, and therefore the meeting was on a *Saturday night*, not a Sunday night. Indeed, the NEB even goes so far as to translate the text as "the Saturday night."

But for Rordorf it *must* be a Sunday evening meeting, and he endeavors to support this conviction by two lines of evidence. First, a letter of Pliny, governor of Bithynia, to Emperor Trajan, written ca. A.D. 112, reports that certain ex-Christians, when interrogated, declared that "the whole of their guilt, or their error" had been that "they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day [*stato die*] before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds," but to honest ones (several are enumerated)—"after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind" (pp. 202-203).<sup>7</sup>

Although this text does not specify the day, Rordorf takes for granted that the *stato die* was the weekly Sunday (but could it have been Easter instead, e.g., as certain other scholars contend<sup>28</sup>). He further assumes that the reassembling was in the

<sup>7</sup> Pliny, *Letters*, x.96, in LCL trans.; given in part by Rordorf, p. 254.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., C. W. Dugmore, "Lord's Day and Easter," in Oscar Cullmann

evening (because Sunday was a work day), although the text does not indicate the time of day.<sup>9</sup> But aside from Rordorf's conjectures about the meaning of the text itself, one would have to question the validity of using this document from Bithynia in A.D. 112 as evidence for what was happening in Troas some fifty years earlier!

Rordorf's second evidence that Acts 20:7 refers to a *Sunday night*, not to a Saturday night, is the Sunday-evening Eucharistic celebrations which he supposes Christ to have held with his disciples after his resurrection—on the very evening of the resurrection day and probably on further Sunday evenings thereafter until his ascension (see pp. 205, 236). The problem with this particular "evidence" is twofold: First, it is devoid of support in the gospel records.<sup>10</sup> And second, Rordorf's contention that it is supported by the regular practice of the Pauline churches (see

Festschrift volume *Neotestamentica et Patristica*, NTSup 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1962): 272-281; Lawrence T. Geraty, "The Pascha and the Origin of Sunday Observance," *AUSS* 3 (1965): 85-96. Some authors have suggested that the *stato die* was the Sabbath, because Sabbath observance had continued as a weekly celebration among Christians. See, e.g., J. N. Andrews and L. R. Conradi, *History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1912), pp. 265-268, where further sources with a similar view are also quoted. The description of the pre-dawn meeting hardly fits the regular Sabbath service, however. Moreover, as Geraty, p. 88, points out, the keeping of a weekly Sabbath would not necessarily have involved guilt in Roman eyes, inasmuch as at this time the Romans were accustomed to, and allowed, the weekly Sabbath rites of the Jews. (He points out as well [pp. 88-89] that weekly Sunday observance would likewise have hardly involved the imputation of guilt.)

<sup>9</sup> The "food," Rordorf feels, refers to an evening meal. Perhaps the "meal" was in the evening, though the text does not say so. In any event, the significance of the terminology "food of an ordinary and innocent kind" appears to be a denial of the charge of cannibalism, a charge which stemmed from a pagan misconception as to what went on when Christians "ate the body" and "drank the blood" of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Rordorf's suggestion that the supposed evening meeting, rather than the food, is what was described as "harmless" and "innocent" is not convincing (pp. 203-204).

<sup>10</sup> The appearance of Jesus to his disciples on the evening of his resurrection (with Thomas absent) and again "eight days" later (with Thomas present) is, of course, attested in John 20:19-29 (cf. Mark 16:14; Luke 24:33-43); but there is not the slightest hint that the Lord's Supper was celebrated. Cf. also Bacchiocchi, pp. 85-89.



pp. 205, 221, 233) leads him into circular reasoning: If the evening mentioned in Acts 20:7 is determined to be Sunday evening on the basis of the supposed Sunday-evening Eucharistic celebrations of the Lord with the disciples, how then can Acts 20:7 (the text supposedly indicating practice in the Pauline churches) be proof of the existence of these particular Eucharistic celebrations?

But Rordorf's line of assumptions goes further. Acts 2:45-46 is amended to follow the Western text, with the word "daily" transposed from vs. 46 to vs. 45, thus eliminating the concept that the worship and breaking of bread mentioned in vs. 46 was a daily practice (pp. 225-226). Rordorf's thesis calls for the "breaking of bread" to be restricted to Sunday evenings. His effort to draw support from 1 Cor 11:20-26 is also questionable (see, e.g., pp. 221, 232). This text does indeed indicate Paul's concern regarding the *importance* of proper observance of the Lord's Supper, but it nowhere states the precise time for the observance (the phrase used is "as often as"). And strangely, if Rordorf is correct in assuming that the supposed "Easter meal was decidedly more important for the tradition of the primitive community than the memory of Jesus' last meal" (p. 233), this text certainly misses that point too. The only historical allusion in this passage to a time when Christ celebrated the Lord's Supper with his disciples is the "night when he was betrayed" (vs. 23).<sup>11</sup>

Apparently Rordorf is aware of the difficulty of simply beginning Sunday observance in the context of NT Sunday morning worship services, for the NT gives no evidence for such. However, question may be raised as to whether the evidence is any stronger

<sup>11</sup> Bacchiocchi, p. 76, provides an interesting and pertinent observation that it is "not Christ's resurrection but rather His sacrifice and *parousia* which the Lord's supper is explicitly designed to commemorate." He also suggests, p. 98, that the "prevailing suspicion that the Christians' religious meals were a kind of illegal assemblies, coupled with the accusation that these were Thyestean banquets, could explain the reason for Paul's indefinite references to the time of the gatherings. To avoid giving rise to such suspicions, the Christians in Corinth may well have changed from week to week both the day and the place of their evening Lord's supper meals."

that the NT Christians observed the Lord's Supper regularly on Sunday evenings and that such a supposed Sunday-evening Eucharistic celebration was the origin of the Sunday observance we know from later centuries.

Rordorf's greatest weakness regarding the rise of the Christian Sunday lies right here at the point of origins. And his evidence is basically a chain of suppositions and speculations linked together. Though he feels he has made a plausible case (this reviewer would disagree), he does conclude his chapter on "Christian Observance of Sunday" with some degree of caution that the question is "open" and that the "present state of our knowledge does not enable us to discover *for certain* the origin of the observance of Sunday" (p. 237).

Fortunately, Rordorf's treatment of Sunday's later becoming a Christian rest day in post-Constantinian times holds more credibility (pp. 162-173). Moreover, throughout the volume his wide reference to the major relevant primary and secondary materials (as called to attention in multitudinous footnotes) is helpful. Also, the discussion he provides regarding "The Names for Sunday and Their Significance" (chap. 6, pp. 274-293) is interesting and informational. And one other line of thought that he brings forward certainly merits careful consideration; namely, the suggestion that the second-century Sunday morning worship service as described by Justin took place "*before daybreak*" (pp. 264-265).

*(To be continued)*