

WHEN, WHERE, AND WHY DID THE CHANGE FROM SABBATH TO SUNDAY WORSHIP TAKE PLACE IN THE EARLY CHURCH?

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It is evident that Jesus and his earliest followers all observed the seventh-day Sabbath prescribed in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:8-11) and seen as one of the signs of the covenant between God and his people (e.g., Ezek 20:20). After all, the earliest followers of Jesus were all pious Jews. That Luke observes—almost in passing—that it was Jesus’ custom to attend synagogue on Sabbaths (Luke 4:16) is only to be expected. Yet, today, most Christians observe Sunday as the day of worship, not the Sabbath. This article traces the evidence that has been used to answer the key questions, “When, where and why did the change in the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday take place?”¹ Each of the various time periods in which the change could have taken place will be examined, as will the arguments that are advanced by those who place the change within that period of time. A few writers attempt to trace this change back to the ministry of Jesus, others to the period of the early Church before the writings that make up the New Testament were composed. Yet others look to the early second century, while some look to the time of Emperor Constantine and the church that emerged under his patronage.²

Did Jesus Himself Instigate the Change of the Day of Worship, and Why?

The first possibility that deserves attention is that Jesus himself either changed the day of worship himself or created an attitude towards the Sabbath in his followers that very quickly led to its abandonment in the earliest period of Christian history. Willy Rordorf might serve as a representative of the several scholars who have argued for this or a similar position.³

¹Willy Rordorf has gathered together the primary evidence regarding the issue of Sabbath and Sunday in the earliest church in his *Sabbat und Sonntag in der Alten Kirche* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), where the source materials are cited in their original Latin or Greek, with a German translation; while Robert L. Odom’s book, *Sabbath and Sunday in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1977), provides English translations of most of the relevant source material.

²A useful summary of many of the principal contributions to this debate may be found in Henry Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God: How Jesus Came to Personify the Sabbath* (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), 17-32.

³Others who take this position include Christopher Fung and Paul K. Jewett. Fung argues, “The Old Testament Sabbath cause is a system of mutually reinforcing institutions. . . . Through Jesus’ earthly actions and death and resurrection, the above

Rordorf's book, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church*,⁴ is quite correctly described as a "landmark study on the question of the Christian day of worship," and "a standard work on this question."⁵ Rordorf's position has been summarised thus: "While in the Old Testament the Sabbath came in as a day of rest and in time became a day of worship, in the New Testament Sunday began as a day of worship and in time became a day of rest."⁶ Even from this somewhat oversimplified outline of Rordorf's argument,⁷ it may be observed that Rordorf provides a sophisticated analysis of one possible way to interpret the historical data. He is most aware that the evidence of the Gospels does *not* portray Jesus as abandoning the Sabbath. He argues only that Jesus so diminished the Sabbath that it was natural to replace worship on the Sabbath with worship on Sunday. Here is how Rordorf argues this crucial point:

It is a misunderstanding to hold that Jesus did not attack the Sabbath commandment itself, but only the casuistical refinements of the Pharisees. . . . The people who were healed by Jesus on the Sabbath were suffering from unmistakable protracted illnesses and certainly not from acute ailments or infirmities. . . . If therefore Jesus in accordance with the unanimous testimony of the Gospel traditions purposely healed people on the Sabbath who were clearly not in acute distress, his deeds of healing were an offence and a provocation. . . . All these people who were healed could certainly have waited for their cure until the next day (cf. Mark 1.32ff). Why, then, did Jesus heal them on the sabbath of all days? Surely, not *only* because of his compassionate love, but also with the express intention of showing that for him the sabbath commandment had no binding force.⁸

Old Testament institutions have been transformed into a new set of institutions comprising the Lord's Day [Sunday], the church and the Kingdom of God." "Sabbath—A Biblical Understanding of Creation Care," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36 (2012): 316. Paul K. Jewett states: "Jesus did not reject the institution of the Sabbath as such, but only the tradition of the elders regarding Sabbath-keeping. However, though he did not reject the Sabbath, Jesus' attitude towards it explains the freedom which his followers subsequently showed towards its observance by assembling for worship on the first rather than on the seventh-day of the week." *The Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 35.

⁴Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church* (London: SCM, 1968).

⁵The citations are from Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 3; and Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God*, 18.

⁶Weiss, *Day of Gladness*, 4.

⁷Weiss himself suggests that this "catch phrase . . . while doing an injustice to his [Rordorf's] full study, manages to signal in the right direction" (*ibid.*).

⁸Rordorf, *Sunday*, 63, 65-66. Cf. p. 70, where Rordorf concludes: "The sabbath commandment was not merely pushed into the background by the healing activity of Jesus: It was simply annulled."

As Rordorf reconstructs it, alongside the diminished importance of Sabbath that Jesus established amongst his earliest followers, a pattern of worship on Sunday was very quickly established in the earliest church. While admitting that “Unfortunately we have at our disposal very few sources which can help us by shedding any light on . . . [the] problem [of the origin of the Christian observance of Sunday],” “Everything . . . seems to indicate that the origin of the observance of Sunday is to be traced directly to the Easter event.”⁹ Rordorf traces the observance of Sunday to quite early times, but thinks that it was only over a long period of time, extending as late as Constantine, that the Christian Church also added the concept of rest from work on the Sunday. The reasons that he advances for the change are quite subtle. For Rordorf the change begins with Jesus’ proclamation of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. This brings the believers into a new relationship with the laws of the Old Testament and, in particular, the laws relating to the Sabbath. While Jesus himself did not make a final break with the Sabbath, he so weakened it in the minds of his followers that they found it natural to move from worshipping on the Sabbath—a day of restrictions—to Sunday, a day associated with the joyous freedom brought about by the resurrection of Jesus.

An analysis of Rordorf’s position needs to consider at least two sets of data: the first relates to the Sabbath controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees that are found within the Gospel accounts; the second requires an analysis of references to Sabbath and Sunday that are found in the New Testament writings that come from the period of the early church—something taken up in the next section of this article. First, then, what do the Gospel accounts reveal about the attitude of Jesus to the Sabbath?

Samuele Bacchiocchi argues against Rordorf’s position on Jesus’ attitude to the Sabbath by first citing the Rabbinic Mishnah, which states that “Any case in which there is a possibility that life is in danger, thrust aside the Sabbath law.”¹⁰ While this is written down at a period much later to that of the New Testament, it is not unreasonable to expect the Pharisees confronted by Jesus would have been comfortable with this line of argumentation. This observation, though, appears to support Rordorf, who insists that the type of healing that Jesus performed was often of those whose illnesses were chronic—i.e. they were not immediately life-threatening (e.g. Mark 1:29-31; 3:1-6). By the reasoning of the later Rabbis, Jesus apparently had deliberately broken the Sabbath. But, as Bacchiocchi himself asks,¹¹ although the Pharisees may have considered Jesus to be breaking the Sabbath, did *Jesus* consider himself to be breaking the Sabbath in performing such healing miracles? The answer in the Gospels seems to be a definitive “No.” For example, in Matt 12:10, after observing that his Pharisaic opponents would rescue a sheep that

⁹Rordorf, *Sunday*, 177, 234.

¹⁰Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian Press, 1977), 32.

¹¹Ibid.

has fallen into a pit, and arguing that humans are of more value than a sheep, Jesus concludes: “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Earlier in that same chapter, Jesus had defended the actions of his disciples against the charge that they were breaking the Sabbath, by declaring them guiltless (ἀναίτιους, Matt 12:7).¹² The conclusion seems inescapable, that while Jesus was attacking the Pharisaic interpretation of the Sabbath laws, he was not attacking the Sabbath itself. Indeed, on the contrary, by his actions and teachings Jesus was freeing the Sabbath from the burdens that had been placed upon it by the Pharisees (e.g., see the conjunction between Matt 11:28-29 and Matt 12:1-14).

This conclusion, or others like it, is a position widely taken by New Testament exegetes who have considered the question of Jesus’ relationship to the Sabbath. For example, in contrast to Willy Rordorf, and after examining the evidence of the four Gospels, Donald Carson says, “There is no hard evidence that Jesus Himself ever contravened any written precept of the Torah [the Law] concerning the Sabbath. . . . Some of the Sabbath controversies became springboards for messianic claims. . . . There is no hint anywhere in the ministry of Jesus that the first day of the week is to take on the character of the Sabbath and replace it.”¹³ James D. G. Dunn reaches a similar conclusion. As he says, “the question under debate” between Jesus and the Pharisees “is not *whether* the Sabbath should be observed, but about *how* it should be observed.”¹⁴

¹²For a more detailed analysis of these and other Matthean verses relating to Jesus’ attitude to the Sabbath, see Robert K. McIver, “The Sabbath in the Gospel of Matthew: A Paradigm for Understanding the Law in Matthew?” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 33, no. 2 (1995): 231-243.

¹³D. A. Carson, “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels,” in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 84-85.

¹⁴James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 568-569. Kurt Queller goes so far as to say that “Mark’s intertextuality articulates a reading of Sabbath law that is in crucial respects more rigorist than that attributed to Jesus’ Pharisaic adversaries. . . . Likewise, Mark’s echoes of Exodus reveal that the healing narrative, far from serving only to illustrate Jesus’ divine authority, provides a context for this same substantive argument about the nature and meaning of the Sabbath.” “‘Stretch Out Your Hand!’ Echo and Metalepsis in Mark’s Sabbath Healing Controversy,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (2010): 756-757. Cf. also Robert K. McIver, *The Four Faces of Jesus* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 39-46; and Walter F. Specht, “The Sabbath in the New Testament,” in Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 92-113. For contrary understandings of the Sabbath miracles—each arguing their case from a different perspective—see Harald Riesenfeld, “The Sabbath and the Lord’s Day in Judaism, the Preaching of Jesus and Early Christianity,” in *The Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 111-137; M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), 17-18; Eduard Lohse, “Σάββατον” *TDNT* 7:22, 27-28. For example, Lohse states, “In this debate [recorded in Mark 2:1-3:5 & parallels] between Jesus and the Pharisees it is not just a single act on the part of the disciples which is being

The views of Bacchiocchi, Carson, and Dunn might be taken as representative of the position taken by most of those who have studied this question since the appearance of Bacchiocchi's book. Though there are exceptions, few today would argue against the view that Jesus was a pious Jew, who intended to bring reformation to Sabbath observance, but who did not intend to discard the practice, although some would argue that this did not prevent the earliest Christians moving from worshipping on Sabbath to worshipping on Sunday.

*Was Sunday Observed as a Special Day of Worship in the Period
During which the New Testament Writings Appeared?*¹⁵

Rordorf is not alone in suggesting that there are traces within the New Testament itself that reveal that Sunday was emerging as a day of worship in the period. Another who argues this position is the Australian scholar, Stephen Llewelyn.¹⁶ Llewelyn bases his argument on three texts in the New Testament: 1 Cor 16:2, Acts 20:7, and Rev 1:10, and his article provides an excellent basis on which to consider whether or not these versus support those who see them as evidence of the very early observance of Sunday as a day of worship.

In 1 Cor 16:1-2, Paul urges his readers to start setting aside some money for a "collection for the saints" that he is organizing, and that they should do it each week. He says, "Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come" (NRSV). Llewelyn argues that the Greek phrase usually translated "each of you" (ἐκαστος ὑμῶν παρ' ἑαυτῶ) need imply no more than an individual offering was to be contributed. At first he concludes, "As it is not a matter of making a collection at home, a collection in the context of Sunday worship in not ruled out."¹⁷ Llewelyn then notes a suggestion from Willy Rordorf, that whereas

defended. The practice of the Christian community, which has freed itself from the Jewish Sabbath, is being supported and vindicated from Scripture" (p. 22). Terrence D. O'Hare offers a slightly different approach to Jesus's relationship to the Sabbath. He states, "For Jesus to 'fulfill all righteousness' He must have kept the ceremonial law perfectly [including the Sabbath laws], even up to the point of His death." But he notes, "Christ's example of obedience to Jewish ceremonial laws was not necessarily to model proper behaviour for Christians." *The Sabbath Complete and the Ascendency of the First-day Worship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 182, 184.

¹⁵An earlier version of this section of the chapter, and some of the paragraphs in the later section dealing with the role of Constantine the Great, may be found in Robert K. McIver, *Beyond the da Vinci Code* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2006), 90-93, 97-99.

¹⁶S. R. Llewelyn, "The Use of Sunday for Meetings of Believers in the New Testament," *Novum Testamentum* 43, no. 3 (2001): 205-223.

¹⁷Llewelyn, "Sunday," 209. Craig Blomberg states his case more strongly than

Sabbath might have marked the seven-day week cycle in Judaism, apparently for Christians, Sunday had taken over this role.¹⁸ Llewelyn then suggests that one might therefore conclude that 1 Cor 16:2 might be taken to “strongly indicate that a Sunday meeting may have been held at Corinth.”¹⁹

By establishing that a Sunday meeting at Corinth is a *possible* reading of 1 Cor 16:1-2, Llewelyn has hardly found evidence that “strongly indicates” a regular Sunday meeting. Indeed, it is more likely that 1 Cor 16:1-2 should be considered evidence against any particular religious significance being attached to Sunday. After all, in 1 Cor 16:1-12 Paul is urging his readers to consider their financial situation from the previous week. This makes sense if, in fact, the Christians at Corinth were observing Sabbath as a day free of work and financial considerations (i.e., were Sabbath-observant). In that case, the first day of the week would be the natural time for them to review their finances from the previous week, a type of business activity that was totally unsuited to a day of worship. Furthermore, there is nothing in the text that suggests that Paul has in mind a meeting of the community.

In his response to Llewelyn’s article, also published in *Novum Testamentum*, Norman H. Young not only points this out, but asks a further question that arises from the observation that there were Christians of both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds at Corinth (e.g., 1 Cor 1:22), and that it appears likely that all the Christians were able to meet together in the one place (1 Cor 11:20). Given that, if they met weekly, on what day is it likely that that would meet? Young says,

Bauckham reminds us that all forms of early Christianity were Jewish. Given this continuity with Judaism and the way in which communities tenaciously adhere to their holy days, it seems inconceivable that Jewish Christians shifted their worship over to meet with their fellow Gentile Christians on Sunday without so much as a murmur of protest. On what theological or rational grounds would Paul have advocated a practice of worship that would have split the community . . . ?²⁰

Llewelyn. While he acknowledges that it is “theoretically possible that Paul is referring simply to weekly individual savings,” he thinks it “Far more probable . . . that this is the oldest existing reference to a regular offering as part of the weekly Christian worship service.” “The Sabbath as Fulfilled in Christ,” in Christopher John Donato, ed., *Perspectives on the Sabbath: 4 Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2011), 308.

¹⁸Rordorf, *Sunday*, 195 states, “The use of this passage of the Jewish designation of Sunday (‘first day of the week’) presupposes the observance of the seven-day Jewish week in the Gentile Christian churches, but these Gentile Christian churches no longer observed the Sabbath with which the Jewish week stood or fell. We did, therefore, earlier ask the question whether Sunday, instead of the Sabbath, had not perhaps become the pivotal point of the seven-day chronology.”

¹⁹Llewelyn, “Sunday,” 210.

²⁰Norman H. Young, “The Use of Sunday for Meetings of Believers in the New Testament: A Response,” *Novum Testamentum* 45, no. 2 (2003): 116.

In other words, the strong supposition is that the Corinthian Christians were meeting together to worship on Sabbath, not Sunday. In sum, rather than providing evidence of early regular early Christian meetings held on a Sunday, it is more likely that 1 Cor 16:1-2 provides evidence of the continual observance of the seventh-day Sabbath at Corinth.

The next text which Llewelyn examines is Acts 20:7, which reads, “On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight.” Llewelyn says, “It suffices for the purpose of this article to show that a meeting of believers occurred on the first day of the week.”²¹ The issue is a bit complicated, Llewelyn points out, because according to Jewish custom, a day was measured between sunset and sunset. So, the seventh day (or Sabbath by Jewish reckoning) would have been counted from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. Thus if Luke was using Jewish reckoning, the meeting would have begun in the evening of the Saturday, and continued past midnight.

But, as Llewelyn goes on to say, sunset-to-sunset was not the only way to work out when a day began and ended. According to Roman reckoning, a day began at midnight. If Luke were reckoning time according to the Roman system, then the meeting described in Acts 20:7 would have extended into what moderns would describe as Sunday evening. Just to complicate things further, Llewelyn also mentions the possibility that the Babylonian and Egyptian practice of reckoning days from sunrise to sunrise might need to be considered to be a possibility. In the end Llewelyn says that which system of time was meant by Luke, or understood by his readers was not important.²² What was important “was the author’s clear intention that his reader believe that the meeting occurred on the first day of the week.”²³

But does this advance Llewelyn’s case? He has shown that a meeting took place on the first day of the week, but there is nothing in Acts 20 to imply that this was a regular occurrence. In fact, considering the short time that Paul had been with them (seven days; Acts 20:6), and that he was leaving them the next day, Acts 20 may well have been describing an exceptional one-off meeting that took place outside of their regular times of worship. Acts records the meetings because the young man Eutychus fell asleep and fell from the window, and Paul then miraculously restored him to life (Acts 20:9-10). The mention of “breaking bread” in Acts 20:7 & 11, is likely to have been a reference to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, but this hardly indicates a

²¹Llewelyn, “Sunday,” 210.

²²Given that right up to contemporary times, “In the Orthodox Church, the liturgical day is reckoned from one sunset to the next” [Alkiviadis C. Calivas, in “The Lord’s Day in Orthodox Liturgical Practice and Spirituality,” in Edward O’Flaherty and Rodney L. Petersen, eds., *Sunday, Sabbath, and the Weekend: Managing Time in a Global Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 67], a sunset-to-sunset reckoning is the more likely of the three possibilities mentioned by Llewelyn.

²³Llewelyn, “Sunday,” 219.

weekly meeting, as at the time, it was not unknown for the early believers to “break bread” together daily (e.g., Acts 2:46).

In his article, Young adds a further point. “Luke refers to the Sabbath twenty-six times in his writings . . . and not once does he provide a negative comment. . . . Luke’s references to Jesus’ custom of worshipping on the Sabbath and healing on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16; 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6), inform largely Gentile Christian communities some 40 or 60 years after Jesus death *how*, not *whether*, to keep the Sabbath.”²⁴ It must be concluded, then, that Acts 20:7 cannot really be used as evidence of a *regular* weekly meeting of early Christians that took place on the first day of the week.

Llewelyn admits that his third text, Rev 1:10, is ambiguous. Revelation 1:10 reads, “I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day . . .,” and Llewelyn concedes that the first unambiguous use of the expression, “the Lord’s day,” to identify Sunday is to be dated about A.D. 150, but then says, “it would be overly pedantic to insist that it did not mean the same for this author also.”²⁵

That the term “Lord’s day” meant Sunday in later times, does not necessarily mean that it had this meaning in the first century. After all, Jesus had proclaimed himself “lord of the Sabbath,” (Matt 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5), so it is likely, or perhaps more likely, that John the revelator intended the Sabbath when he spoke of the “Lord’s day.”²⁶ Some other scholars have

²⁴Young, “Response,” 119.

²⁵Llewelyn, “Sunday,” 220. Richard J. Bauckham comes to a similar conclusion in his chapter, “The Lord’s Day.” He states that “Sunday worship appears, when the evidence becomes available in the second century, as the universal Christian practice outside Palestine. . . . The conclusion seems irresistible that all of the early missionaries simply exported the practice of the Palestinian churches” (p. 236). He thus argues that in Rev 1:10, John is stating that he “receives his visions on the day when the churches meet for corporate worship and on the same day his prophecy will be read aloud (1:3) in the church meeting” (pp. 240-41). Cf. also comments by Calivas, in “The Lord’s Day in Orthodox Liturgical Practice and Spirituality,” 72-73, which identifies Sunday as the Lord’s day in Rev 1:10, and cites Acts 20:7-12 and 1 Cor 16:2 as further examples of the primacy of the Lord’s Day.

²⁶In his article, “‘The Lord’s Day’ of Revelation 1:10 in the Current Debate,” *AUSS* 49, no. 2 (2011): 261-284, Ranko Stefanovic canvasses the various possibilities that have been advanced to interpret the phrase “The Lord’s Day” in Rev 1:10. He considers Sunday, Easter Sunday, Emperor’s Day, Sabbath, and the Eschatological Day of the Lord. Of these, he concludes that “The strongest biblical and historical evidence favors the seventh-day Sabbath. On the other hand, the eschatological character of the book as a whole also supports the eschatological ἡμέρα κυρίου (‘The day of the Lord,’ cf. 1:7), while the figurative meaning of the expression fits neatly into the symbolic context of the whole book.” That the Lord’s Day might be Sunday appears one of the less likely readings to Stefanovic. Larry L. Lichtenwalter, “The Seventh-day Sabbath and Sabbath Theology in the Book of Revelation: Creation, Covenant, Sign,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 49, no. 2 (2011): 316-176, interprets the “Lord’s day” of Rev 1:10 as a reference to the seventh-day Sabbath.

advanced a different suggestion, that Easter Sunday—a once-a-year event—might have been intended.²⁷

Other early uses of the expression “the Lord’s day,” are also ambiguous. For example, there is a probable reference to the “Lord’s day” in Didache XIV, which is usually translated as “On the Lord’s own day gather together and break bread and give thanks. . . .”²⁸ The phrase, “the Lord’s own day” is translated from the words Κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ Κυρίου. Literally these words read, “Each Lord’s of the Lord,” which requires the translator into English to answer the question “Lord’s what?” That Lord’s day is intended is highly likely and usually adopted by translators. But it must be noted that even so, no information is given about which particular day is intended by the phrase; nor, let it be said, whether a weekly occurrence is meant, although that appears the likely meaning.²⁹ So while it is indeed possible that Rev 1:10

²⁷See, e.g. C. W. Dugmore, “Lord’s Day and Easter,” in *Neotestamentica et Patristica* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 273-281; Kenneth A. Strand, “Another Look at ‘Lord’s Day’ in the Early Church and in Rev. I. 10,” *New Testament Studies* 13, no. 2 (1966-67): 174-181.

²⁸Κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου συναχθέντες κλάσατε ἄρτον καὶ εὐχαριστήσατε. The translation is that of Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3d ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 365. Kirsopp Lake, *Apostolic Fathers Vol 1* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 331, translates these words as “On the Lord’s Day of the Lord come together, break bread and hold Eucharist. . . .” In other words, he translates εὐχαριστήσατε as “hold Eucharist,” a possibility placed in square brackets by Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 439, who translates εὐχαριστήσατε as “give thanks” in his main text.

²⁹Another ambiguous reference found in Ignatius’ letter to the Magnesians [9], is translated by Michael Holmes in the following manner: “If, then, those who had lived according to ancient practices came to the newness of hope, no longer keeping the Sabbath but living in accordance with the Lord’s day. . . .” By this reading, Ignatius may be indicating that the community to which he writes has made the move from worshipping on Sabbath to worshipping on Sunday. If so, this would be one of the very early evidences for such a shift. But a closer look at both the original Greek text, and some manuscript evidence, shows that while this is a possible reading, in fact it is not the most likely reading. Literally, the crucial phrase in the Greek text reads, “no longer sabbatizing, but living according to the Lord’s life” (μηκέτι σαββατίζοντες, ἀλλὰ κατὰ κυριακὴν ζῶντες). The only existing Greek text had the phrase “Lord’s life,” but most translators, including Kirsopp Lake [and, it should be noted, Bart Ehrman and Michael Holmes], follow the Latin text, which omits “life,” and adds the word “day.” So R. J. Bauckham, “The Lord’s Day,” in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 228; see also Fritz Guy, “‘The Lord’s Day’ in the Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 2, no. 1 (1964): 1-17. Bauckham (p. 224) lists no fewer than 24 separate nouns that follow after “Lord’s” in one of the second century writers (Clement of Alexandria), who speaks of the Lord’s teachings, power, commandments, head, people, word, words, house, voice, etc. While “Lord’s day” might balance the reference to “sabbatizing,” it is not the only possibility. Indeed,

is a reference to Sunday, it might equally be a reference to Sabbath, or Easter. If one wishes to establish the earliest occurrence of a shift from the day of worship of early Christians from Sabbath to Sunday, then one would look for unambiguous evidence, and Rev 1:10 is anything but unambiguous. Nor are any of the other possible evidences that Llewelyn advances.

One has to conclude, then, that a crucial part of the second element of the thesis advanced by Willy Rorforf has proven unfounded. There is no hard, or even probable, evidence that the practice of regular Sunday observance was widespread in the early church during the time that the New Testament works were written. But what of texts such as Col 2:16, Gal 4:10 and Rom 14:5 cited by Rorforf and others to indicate that Paul's writings de-emphasize or even discard the Sabbath?

The reference to sabbaths in Col 2:16 is tied up intimately with the question of the nature of the heresy Paul was facing in Colossae. While some have attempted to make a case for linking this heresy with Judaizing elements within Christianity, the mixture of elements of philosophy, wisdom, and human tradition (Col 2:8, 23) with matters of food, drink, festivals, new moons, sabbaths (Col 2:15), self-abasement, the worship of angels and elemental spirits (Col 2:18, 20), self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body (Col 2:23), makes it quite clear that if any type of Judaism had influenced Paul's opponents, it was of a type not recognizable to us in either the Gospel accounts or later rabbinic literature.³⁰ Thus the issue of sabbaths in Colossians is so far entangled with other matters that it is quite difficult to discern how this evidence might be brought to bear on the issue of Sabbath observance amongst those who were the intended recipients of the original letter to the Colossians.³¹

as the Greek manuscript says "Lord's life," this has to be the preferable translation. If that is the case, "Sabbatizing" might be a reference to living too rigidly according to the Jewish laws, rather as Paul asks, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile, and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" [literally: how can you compel Gentiles to "Judaize"? (ἵ Ἰουδαῖζειν; Gal 2:14).

³⁰On the heresy at Colossae see Fred O. Francis and Wayne A. Meeks, eds., *Conflict at Colossae* (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1975); Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), xxx-xxxviii; and James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 23-35. The wide variety of suggestions regarding the identity of this heresy can be noted in the long list of suggestions summarized in John J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and their Background*, NovTSup 35 (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 3-4.

³¹See the discussion in Weisse, *Day of Gladness*, 132-146; Ron du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can't Be Found in Colossians 2:16* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2008), *passim*; and Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 257-277. Cf. also the contribution of Troy Martin, "Pagan and Judeo-Christian Time-Keeping Schemes in Gal 4.10 and Col 2.16," *New Testament Studies* 42, no. 1 (1996): 105-199, and the response of H. Ross Cole, "The Christian and Time-Keeping in Colossians 2:16

Similar arguments could be advanced for the obscure references to “days” in Gal 4:10 and Rom 14:5, which again are tied into a point of view advanced by Paul’s opponents. For example, Henry Sturcke pays considerable attention to Gal 4:8-11, where Paul asks his readers, “how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits [τὰ ἀσθεινῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα], whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days, and months, and seasons and years!” Sturcke links the terms “days, months, and years” with the “feasts, new moons and Sabbaths” of Col 2:16, and concludes that Paul agrees that while “Jews do not need to stop being Jews to be saved, but believe in Jesus as their promised Messiah,” at the same time, “Gentiles did not need to become Jews, specifically as expressed by the adoption of markers of Jewish identity such as circumcision, nor the observance of days such as the Sabbath.”³² He suggests that “There is no indication that Paul substituted Sunday for the Sabbath. Days were a matter of indifference since time itself had taken on a new quality with the coming of Christ.”³³ Sturcke further follows references to Sabbath and Sunday in such texts as *Barnabus* 15 and the *Gospel of Thomas* 27. His overall conclusion is that “Christians continued to gather on the Sabbath in addition to the Lord’s Day, especially in the East and in Africa, though we find no teaching that it was wrong to meet on the first day or that one should only meet on the Sabbath. Worship on the first day of the week seems to be widespread at the close of the era under investigation, but not universal.”³⁴ From what has already been said about the references to Sunday in the New Testament, it might be concluded that Sturcke’s statement that “Worship on the first day of the week seems widespread,” goes beyond the evidence for the period during which the New Testament writings were produced, although, as will emerge later in this chapter, it is probably correct for later times.

In sum, Sturcke is correct in drawing attention to Col 2:16 and Gal 4:8-11 as of potential relevance to early Christian conceptions of the role the

and Galatians 4:10,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 39, no. 2 (2001): 273-282. Ian D. Campbell concludes, “It does not seem to me, however, that there is anything in Colossians 2 that requires the belief that the Sabbath principle is abolished. Indeed, Paul’s argument is not that there should not be a Sabbath-keeping, but that there should be no judging regarding Sabbath-keeping.” *On the First Day of the Week: God, the Christian and the Sabbath* (Leominster, UK: Day One Publications, 2005), 149. Because he considers that “Paul uses the term ‘Sabbath days’ to include the seventh-day Sabbath,” Joseph A. Pipa Jr. reaches a slightly different conclusion regarding Col 2:16-17 than that of Campbell: “Paul abrogates the observance of the *seventh* day, but not the moral principle involved in the Sabbath command.” *The Lord’s Day* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 1997), 98, 95.

³²Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God*, 136. Christopher D. Ringwald also reads Gal 4:10-11 as evidence that Paul was urging his readers to turn away from the observance of Sabbath. *A Day Apart* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 82.

³³Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God*, 328.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 337-338.

Sabbath might play in the life of a Christian. Yet not everybody is as confident as he that these texts refer directly to the weekly seventh-day Sabbath. Even if they did, in both Colossae and Galatia the Sabbath was apparently being incorporated into a wider complex of ideas developed by Paul's various opponents. It is not always clear exactly what was being proposed by these opponents, and whether or not there was any communality between those addressed in Galatians and those in Colossians. In both, though, their concern for the calendar appears to be tied into broader cosmic interests. In Colossians these appear to incorporate some concept of the cosmic Christ. All in all, it is difficult to see such references as providing much information on the issue of the practices of early Christianity, particularly for those areas outside of the specific cities addressed by the letters.

In fact, given the arguments advanced by Norman Young—that because of their backgrounds, early Christians naturally kept Sabbath as their day of worship—it appears highly unlikely that any real move of the day of worship had started to take place in the time period from which the New Testament documents derive. Indeed, what little evidence there is tends to support the conclusion that early Christians continued to observe Sabbath, just as Jesus and his disciples had. This supposition is supported by the incidental references to Paul's practice of attending a Sabbath-day meeting of the synagogue of the city which he was visiting as long as he was welcome to attend (Acts 13:14, 42-44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4).

Given what has been discovered, it appears unlikely that the shift from the worship on Sabbath to worshipping on Sunday took place in the time of Jesus's ministry, nor during the period during which the New Testament documents were produced. The next logical period of time to examine is that of the second and third centuries. The writer who has been most influential in arguing that the change of the day of worship is to be traced to this time period is Samuele Bacchiocchi.

*Samuele Bacchiocchi's Thesis That Second-Century Christians at Rome
Adopted Sunday Worship to Distinguish Themselves from Jews*

Bacchiocchi argues that the shift of the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday is the end product of a prolonged process that took place after the New Testament period, and that Christians at Rome contributed to this process at several crucial points. His thesis depends on a number of interlocking observations.

First, Bacchiocchi is unmoved by Rordorf's assertion that the healing miracles of Jesus indicate any diminishing or even annulment of the Sabbath. Rather, he finds in both the Gospel accounts and Heb 4 indications "that the primitive Church understood Jesus' Messianic pronouncements (Mark 2:28; Matt 12:6; John 5:17) and His healing activities, not as the suppression of the Sabbath by a new day of worship, but as the true revelation of the meaning of its observance: a time to experience God's salvation accomplished through

Jesus Christ.”³⁵ Nor does he find evidence in the New Testament that Sunday had begun to be observed as a day of worship.³⁶

Second, Bacchiocchi notes a strong anti-Judaic political and social climate at Rome, which, combined with the fact that the Christian community at Rome was likely to be largely Gentile in its makeup, combined to create a climate in which Roman Christians differentiated themselves from Jews by de-emphasizing the Jewish day of worship (the Sabbath), and emphasizing instead Sunday as a day of worship. As evidence for the largely Gentile character of the Roman Church, Bacchiocchi cites the report of the historian Suetonius that the emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome (Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4; cf. Acts 18:2). This was but one of several moves against the Jews that took place under different emperors, including the imposition of a rather onerous tax, the so-called temple tax. Thus, Gentile Christians at Rome would have every incentive to distinguish themselves as much as they could from Jews.³⁷ One way they could do so is to worship on a day other than the Sabbath.

Bacchiocchi finds evidence that they, in fact, choose to do this in the following two historical notes that come from the mid-fifth century (i.e., approximately a century after the time of Constantine the Great). In his *Ecclesiastical History* (VII 19), the historian Sozomen says, “The people of Constantinople, and almost everywhere, assembled together on the sabbath, as well as on the first day of the week, which custom is never observed at Rome or at Alexandria.” One might compare the comment of another historian of the Church, Socrates Scholasticus, in his *Ecclesiastical History* (V 22), “Almost all churches throughout the world celebrate sacred mysteries of the sabbath of every week, yet the Christians at Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, do not do this.”³⁸

Third, Bacchiocchi notes that the earliest surviving evidence of Sunday worship is associated with either Rome or Alexandria, and dates to the second or third centuries. Prominent amongst these writings are the Epistle of Barnabas, and the writings of Justin Martyr. Barnabas, a pseudonymous work, is usually said to have its origin in Alexandria in the early second century. Chapter 15 of this work deals with the Sabbath. It is preceded by chapters dealing with fasting and the scapegoat (VII), the sacrifice of the heifer (VIII), circumcision (IX), the food laws of the Jews (X), baptism (XI), the cross (XII), and the covenant (XIII & XIV), each of them providing an allegorical treatment of features of the Old Testament deemed by the writer to be of significance to Christians. For example, the scapegoat is “a type of Jesus

³⁵Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day*, 73.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 74-131.

³⁷“Such circumstances invited Christians to develop a new identity, not only characterized by a negative attitude toward Jews, but also by the substitution of characteristic Jewish religious customs for new ones. . . .” Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 183.

³⁸These two quotations are most conveniently found in *ibid.*, 196–197.

destined to suffer” (VII.10), the ashes and wool of the sacrifice of the heifer are a “type of the cross” (VIII.1), the fact that Abraham first circumcised 18 men, and then 300 is a type of Jesus (18 = 10 + 8; or Iota + eta—the first two letters of the name Jesus), avoiding unclean food means that you should avoid men who are like swine (X.3), etc. Thus it should be no surprise that the Sabbath is treated allegorically. For the author of *Barnabas*, the Sabbath points not to itself, but to the eighth day, the day of resurrection: “The present sabbaths are not acceptable to me, but that which I have made, in which I will give rest to all things and make the beginning of an eighth day, that is the beginning of another world. Wherefore we also celebrate with gladness the eighth day in which Jesus also rose from the dead, and was made manifest, and ascended into Heaven” (XV.8-9).³⁹ Almost all commentators would agree with Bacchiocchi that the combination of the disparagement of the Sabbath and the promotion of the day on which the Lord was resurrected in *Barnabas* XV is clear evidence that a move from the worship on Sabbath to the worship on Sunday is being advocated.⁴⁰ Many would also add that *Barnabas* 15 is the very first unambiguous reference to Sunday observance.

The Roman martyr Justin wrote his first apology in the reign of Antoninus Pius (138–160), and thus this work can be dated firmly in the middle of the second century. In Chapter 67 of the *First Apology of Justin*, he describes the weekly Christian worship in the following terms:

And on the day called Sunday [Καὶ τῇ τοῦ ἡλίου λεγομένη ἡμέρᾳ], 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.⁴¹

Here, then, is a clear description of a weekly meeting that took place on Sunday that has all the trappings one might expect of a worship service: the reading of Scripture, a homily, and the giving of bread and wine. Thus, by the middle of the second century, Christians in Rome were clearly meeting each

³⁹The translation is that of Kirsopp Lake in the Loeb edition of the *Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), I:395, 397.

⁴⁰Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 218-223; cf. William H. Shea, “The Sabbath in the Epistle of Barnabas,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 4, no. 2 (1966): 149-175. On the other hand, Aecio E. Cairus, “Sabbath and Covenant in the Epistle of Barnabas,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 39, no. 1 (2001): 117-123, argues that the eighth day in *Barnabas* 15 could well refer to the high day of the paschal festival, and “It is, therefore, not clear whether *Barn.* 15 refers to Sunday observance at all.”

⁴¹The translation is that found in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 186. The Greek original may be found in Rordorf, *Sabbat und Sonntag*, 136.

Sunday for a worship experience. No mention is made of any such meeting on Sabbath. Thus, by this time, at least in Rome, the change of the day of worship appears to have taken place. In the same passage, Justin gives the following reason for meeting on Sunday: “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.”

From these and other strands of evidence Bacchiocchi concludes, “The traditional claim that the Church of Rome has been primarily responsible for the institution of Sunday observance, though widely challenged by recent Catholic (and Protestant) scholarship, has been amply substantiated by our present investigation.”⁴² Bacchiocchi thus traces the change of the day of worship to Rome in the second century, or perhaps even earlier. He hypothesizes that the principal reason for the change of the day of worship is that the predominantly Gentile Christian community at Rome was at pains to distinguish itself from Jews in its religious practices. Thus they eschewed worship on Sabbath, but instead emphasized worshipping on Sunday.

While Bacchiocchi’s study draws on a few sources that came from periods after the time of Constantine, he effectively confines his study to the pre-Nicene period. Yet the time of Constantine will soon be shown to be an important period in the establishment of the widespread adoption of Sunday observance.

*Was the Day of Worship Changed by Constantine, or the [Very Early]
Roman Catholic Church, or a Combination of the Two?*

Some argue that the day of worship is something that was changed by Emperor Constantine,⁴³ or that it was changed by the Church at Rome.⁴⁴ It

⁴²Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 311.

⁴³A number of significant historical figures carry the name Constantine, yet there is little confusion who is usually meant by Emperor Constantine in this context: Constantine I (Feb. 27, 272 – May 22, 337), sometimes called Constantine the Great.

⁴⁴For example, Skip MacCarty identifies the persecuting “little horn” of Dan 7 as “The Roman Catholic Church,” and suggests that “the change of the Sabbath commandment” should be attributed to the Catholic Church. “The Seventh-day Sabbath,” in Christopher John Donato, ed., *Perspectives on the Sabbath: 4 Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2011), 44-46. The following claim that the Roman Catholic Church is responsible for the change of worship from Sabbath to Sunday might be cited as typical of a strand of pre-Vatican II Catholic-Protestant rhetoric: “The Jews’ Sabbath Day was Saturday; we Christians keep Sunday holy. The Church, by the power our Lord gave her, changed the observance of Saturday to Sunday. A word about Sunday. God said, ‘Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath Day.’ The Sabbath was Saturday, not Sunday; why, then, do we keep Sunday holy instead of Saturday? The Church altered the observance of the Sabbath to the observance of Sunday in commemoration of our Lord having risen from the dead on Easter Sunday, and of the Holy Ghost having descended upon the apostles on Whit Sunday. Protestants who say that they go by the Bible and the Bible only, and that they do not believe

is even suggested that Constantine made the change of the day of worship because it fitted well with sun worship.⁴⁵

There is, in fact, evidence that can be put forward to support the claim that Constantine was a crucial player in the shift of the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday. There is even evidence to support the claim that Constantine had a long association with sun worship.

Constantine's rise to power is a fascinating study of itself.⁴⁶ Perhaps a suitable place to start tracing this rise is an administrative innovation put in place by the Emperor Diocletian. To enable him to meet the multiple dangers to the Roman Empire that threatened in many different places, Diocletian created four positions of power, two called Augustus, two called Caesar. He appointed himself Augustus for the eastern part of the Roman Empire, and appointed an Augustus for the western part. He appointed a Caesar under each Augustus—essentially establishing four powerful rulers of the Empire,

anything that is not in the Bible, must be rather puzzled by the keeping of Sunday when God distinctly said, 'Keep holy the Sabbath Day.' The word Sunday does not come anywhere in the Bible, so, without knowing it, they are obeying the authority of the Catholic Church." Canon Cafferata, *The Catechism Simply Explained* (London: Burns & Oates, 1947), 89. Some idea of the significance of this catechism might be gained by observing that while it was first published in 1922, it was either reprinted or revised in 1924, 1927, 1930, 1932, 1933, 1937, 1938, 1940, 1942, 1943, 1946, and 1947. The later 1957 edition takes a more conciliatory approach to this matter, and Catechisms written since Vatican Council II omit this kind of rhetoric altogether.

⁴⁵One might cite another example of pre-Vatican II rhetoric, Protestant this time, as an illustration of this point: "There is no scriptural evidence of the change of the Sabbath institution from the seventh to the first day of the week. . . . What a pity that it [Sunday] comes branded with the mark of paganism, and christened with the name of the sun-god, then adopted and sanctified by the papal apostasy, and bequeathed as a sacred legacy to Protestantism." Edward T. Hiscox, Sermon at Baptist Ministers' Convention, Saratoga, NY, August 20, 1893, as cited by Charlene R. Fortsch, *Daniel: Understanding the Dreams and Visions* (British Columbia: Prophecy Song, 2006), 363. In more recent times, most of the millions who avidly read Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi, 2003) found the reconstruction of early Christianity in it plausible. Indeed, for many of them, it is the only full-scale reconstruction of early Christian history they have considered carefully. Thus, if only for the impact this book has had on the wider public, the following claims are worth noting: ". . . by fusing pagan symbols, dates and rituals into the growing Christian tradition, he [Constantine] created a kind of hybrid religion that was acceptable to both parties" (p. 314); and ". . . Christianity honoured the Jewish Sabbath of Saturday, but Constantine shifted it to coincide with the pagan's veneration day of the sun" (pp. 314-315).

⁴⁶See McIver, *Beyond the da Vinci Code*, 18-24, for this history of Constantine's rise to power in overview, or the two books, Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), and T. G. Elliott, *The Christianity of Constantine the Great* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1996), for a more detailed, and very helpful introduction to many of the historical and other issues surrounding Constantine the Great.

each able to vigorously wage war on its internal and external enemies. Constantine's father was first Caesar and then Augustus of the Western part of the Roman Empire. During the time period that his father held these important roles, Constantine spent time proving himself a leader in the army, and afterwards was assigned to the court of Diocletian. While at court, as well as being a hostage to ensure his father's good behavior, Constantine was able to learn how a court functions at first hand, and to become known to all the major players in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. What makes Constantine's time with Diocletian interesting for this investigation is that Diocletian made a serious effort to eliminate Christianity altogether. Given Constantine's later patronage of Christianity, how to position himself with regard to the significant persecution of Christians that was taking place around him must have presented some interesting challenges. Diocletian died, and soon after, Constantine escaped from the court (probably just ahead of assassins), and joined his father in the west. On his father's death, he was proclaimed Augustus by his troops.

On assuming power, Constantine immediately provided relief for Christians in the territories under his control. His father, Constantius, had already pursued a policy that mitigated the effects of Diocletian's persecuting edicts against Christians, but Constantine openly rejected the anti-Christian legal provisions still officially in force. He very quickly passed laws that enabled Christians and Christian church groups to reclaim property that had been confiscated from them during the persecution, and over time adopted an increasingly pro-Christian stance, proclaiming many laws that favored Christians. Skipping ahead in time slightly, one can observe that Christianity became closely linked with the politics of the empire when Constantine first chose to become a patron of Christians on achieving power in the west. His patronage of Christianity contrasted with the continuing persecution of Christians in the eastern part of the empire, and when it came, most Christians in the eastern empire welcomed Constantine's eventual control over that part of the empire as well.

On March 7, A.D. 321, while solidly established in power in the western Roman Empire, and three years before he added the eastern empire to his control, Constantine proclaimed the first of a series of laws which facilitated Christian worship. It reads:

Let all judges and townspeople and occupations of all trades rest on the venerable day of the Sun; nevertheless, let those who are situated in the rural districts freely and with full liberty attend to the cultivation of the fields, because it frequently happens that no other day may be so fitting for ploughing grain and trenching vineyards, lest at the time the advantage of the moment granted by the provision of heaven be lost. Given on the Nones of March, Crispus and Constantine being consuls, each of them for the second time.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Constantine's laws allowing Christians to worship are most easily accessible in Odom, *Sabbath and Sunday in Early Christianity*; the citation is found on p. 255. A second law, promulgated on July 3, 321, allowed the manumission (freeing) of slaves on a

Long periods of Constantine's later career were focused in the eastern empire, particularly his new capital which came to be known as Constantinople (and is today known as Istanbul), but he was based at Rome at the time he was making these laws allowing worship on Sundays. No doubt he took his lead from the Christians at Rome when he decreed Sunday as the day on which Christians were allowed to abstain from work so that they could attend worship services. Did Constantine actually change the day of worship? Not really. The Christian community at Rome had in all likelihood been worshipping only on Sunday for at least 150 years. But Constantine's laws did much to assist the spread of Sunday worship at the expense of worship on the Sabbath. Furthermore, the large numbers of converts who came into the Christian church at this time, came into a situation in which it was natural to meet on a Sunday, rather than on a Saturday.

Constantine's laws did not immediately end the practice of many Christians of meeting on both Sabbath and Sunday. Indeed, as late as the middle of the eleventh century, one of the issues of controversy between the Latin-speaking church based at Rome and the Greek-speaking eastern church that eventually resulted in the schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church that exists to this day, was a dispute whether fasting should be encouraged on the Sabbath day. The eastern church vigorously protested the idea of fasting on Sabbath. In one reply, the easterners were asked, "However, you [Greeks], if you do not judaize, tell (us) why you have something in common with the Jews in a similar observance of the Sabbath?"⁴⁸ An accusation made in the heat of theological conflict, true, but one that must have had some basis in the practice of the Greek-speaking churches. Apparently they were still observing the Sabbath in some form.

But over time, the net result of the official support of Sunday observance has been that nearly all vestigial practices of Sabbath observance have died. Contemporary Christian denominations, such as the Seventh-day Adventists, and Seventh Day Baptists, who choose Saturday as their weekly day of meeting, tend to have developed the tradition on the basis of their reading of the Bible and understanding of early Christian history, rather than any continuous denominational link to earlier Sabbath-keeping practices.⁴⁹

Sunday.

⁴⁸Radiša Antic, "The Controversy over Fasting on Saturday between Constantinople and Rome," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 49, no. 2 (2011): 337-352; R. L. Odom, "The Sabbath in the Great Schism of A.D. 1054," *Andrews Seminary Studies* 1, no. 1 (1963): 74-80. The citation, part of Cardinal Hubert's treatise, *Adversus Calumnias Graecorum* [*Against the Calumnies of the Greeks*], is found on p. 78 of Odom, "The Great Schism."

⁴⁹Accounts of how Sabbath observance was adopted by the ex-Millerites who formed the nucleus of the later Seventh-day Adventist Church may be found in P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 135-146; and Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, rev. ed. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 56-58, 65-66.

Thus, while Constantine did contribute significantly to this process, it is hardly fair to say that he actually deliberately changed the day of worship. But what of his connection with sun worship? In the early stages of his rise to power, Constantine had indeed been associated with the worship of the sun, and the cult of *Sol Invictus*. Several of his early coins even bear an inscription proclaiming this. Even after becoming a patron of Christianity, he remained the head priest of Rome's official religion of sun worship—the cult of *Sol Invictus*. Further evidence for Constantine's pagan status could be cited. For example, until he symbolically relinquished his imperial power on his deathbed, Constantine kept the then-pagan title of *pontifex maximus* that had fallen to him when he was promoted from Caesar to Augustus. Public subsidies of the ancient cults of Rome continued under Constantine, and in fact, long after his death. As *pontifex maximus* he even appointed new members to the Roman (pagan) priestly colleges. Under his rule, pagan temples in the western half of the empire retained their treasures and endowments, and openly celebrated traditional rites.⁵⁰ Yet it is more than likely that in fulfilling these roles, Constantine was doing no more than being a good ruler over the people he governed, who for all of his reign consisted of more pagans than Christians. That Christians at Rome were already worshipping on Sunday, the same day held important by the cult of sun worship, may have been a happy coincidence. The eventual incorporation of some of the elements of sun-worship into Christian worship is of a similar nature to many other practices and holy places taken over by Christians in what they saw as their victory over pagan forces. Christians took over many of the pagan places of worship as theirs, and many a yearly festival that had pagan roots was given a Christian meaning.

Given all this, what is to be made of the claim that Constantine changed the day of worship? While he was significant in the process, one cannot say that he changed it on his own authority. After all, the practice of Sunday worship had been established within the Christian church at Rome for a very long time. What Constantine did was to facilitate its wider adoption across the empire. Did he promote Sunday because of its link with sun worship? Probably not, although such a link would fit his political needs well in making his promotion of Sunday rest more acceptable to at least some of his pagan constituents.

What of the claim that the Christian church at Rome is responsible for the change of the day of worship?⁵¹ That the Christians at Rome were likely to have been amongst the first to adopt the practice of worshipping on Sunday in preference to worshipping on Sabbath appears likely. That they influenced Constantine in the choice of the day of worship to promote by his laws is also highly likely. Even so, the bold claim that “The [Roman] Church, by the power our Lord gave her, changed the observance of Saturday to Sunday,”⁵²

⁵⁰Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 245-246.

⁵¹Skip MacCarty, “The Seventh-day Sabbath,” 44-46; Cafferata, *Catechism*, 89.

⁵²Cafferata, *ibid.*

appears unlikely. The process was much more complex than envisaged by this statement.

*When, Where, and Why did the Day of Worship
Change from Sabbath to Sunday?*

Several of the explanations that have been put forward to explain the change in the day of worship have now been considered, each of which locates the change in a specific time period. Willy Rordorf had suggested that the actions and teaching of Jesus lie at the root of the change, and thus he dates the change very early. Others have suggested that the process was a longer one. Lawrence Geraty has floated the suggestion that the weekly Sunday service may have its origins in an early annual Sunday observance associated with Easter.⁵³ Bacchiocchi has suggested that the explanation is rather to be found at Rome, where in their endeavor to distinguish themselves from Jews, the Christians had abandoned the worship of Sabbath and emphasized the worship of Sunday. Others have suggested that Constantine made the change for his own political purposes.

Which of these reconstructions is likely to be correct? Our response can be divided into two sections, the first dealing with conclusions that are relatively firm, the second dealing with conclusions that are tentative at best.

First, then, much can be said with confidence about *when* and even *where* the change of the day of worship took place within early Christianity. From the foregoing, it is clear that the change did *not* take place during the ministry of Jesus, and that it is highly unlikely to have taken place during the period in which the New Testament documents emerged. Furthermore, in answer to the question of *where* the change is first visible, the evidence for the early adoption of Sunday observance is focused on Alexandria and Rome. In other centers, Sabbath observance was widespread until quite late amongst Christians, and frequently existed alongside of some type of Sunday meetings. These observations rule out any reconstruction that traces the change of the day of worship into the time of Jesus, or the time of the early apostles. They also rule out the suggestion that Constantine made the change for his own political purposes.

Thus, the evidence reveals that the change of the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday was a gradual process that began first in Alexandria and Rome, places for which documentary evidence exists from the second century. For most of the Christian world, the practice of Sabbath worship existed alongside of Sunday worship for many years.⁵⁴ In fact, in most of the

⁵³Lawrence T. Geraty, "The Pascha and the Origin of Sunday Observance," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 3, no. 2 (1965): 85-96; cf. Dugmore, "Lord's Day and Easter."

⁵⁴In addition to the conclusion of Sturcke cited above, one might also mention C. W. Dugmore, who writes "The importance of the two Sabbaths in the Christian week, and their festal nature, were marked by celebrations of the Eucharist every Saturday and Sunday at an early date. How early the custom of a Saturday Eucharist

ancient world, rather than a change of the day of worship, it is probably more appropriate to describe it as a process of the rise of Sunday observance and the decline of Sabbath observance. It was only with the active patronage of Constantine that trends began that eventually led to the triumph of Sunday worship over Sabbath worship in most of the Christian world.

These are secure conclusions. On the other hand, it must be admitted that the actual *reason* for the growth of Sunday worship in early Christianity cannot be clearly discerned from the available evidence.⁵⁵ The amount of influence the yearly celebrations of the resurrection Sunday at Easter might have had on the weekly celebration of Sunday is impossible to say. It is plausible that it had some or even much influence. But definitive evidence is lacking. It is likewise plausible that Christians in Rome would have been encouraged to abandon Sabbath for Sunday worship if by doing so they could distinguish themselves from the Jews in the eyes of the Roman authorities. But how strong an influence this factor played in the development of the practice of Sunday observance in Rome is impossible to say on the available evidence.

What can be said with confidence, though, is that the process that saw the rise of Sunday observance and the decline of Sabbath observance was a gradual one that began *after* the time period in which the New Testament writings were produced, that likely originated at Rome and Alexandria, and that was accelerated considerably under the patronage of Constantine the Great.

may be it is impossible to say from the documents we possess.” *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), 33. Dugmore traces the beginning of the decline of Sabbath observance to the middle of the fourth century, although he does note that “The two days were still regarded with almost equal veneration in the fourth century in Asia Minor” (p. 36). Cf. the comment by Roger T. Beckwith and Wilfrid Stott, that “the sabbath was kept side by side with the Lord’s day.” *This is the Day: The Biblical Doctrine of the Christian Sunday in Its Jewish and Early Church Settings* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1978), 31. Beckwith and Stott argue for an early date for the addition of Sunday worship in the early Jewish Christian part of the early church.

⁵⁵Craig Harline has summarized the situation well: “The early Christian portion of the long-flowing Sunday river is perhaps murkier than any other. Scholars can quite happily agree on Sun Day’s origins in the ancient planetary week, on the changes to that week made by Romans, and on the ultimate preeminence of Sun Day amongst both Roman pagans and Christians. But they have never been able to agree on this: just exactly when, where, and why did the ‘Lord’s day’ *first* emerge among Roman Christians?” *Sunday: A History of the First Day from Babylonia to the Super Bowl* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 6-7.