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Justin's Inadequate Reason

Why did Christians in the second and third centuries keep Sunday instead of the Sabbath?

The most likely reason seems to be that they did it out of their love for Jesus.

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

Justin Martyr's Reasons

There is no doubt either that Justin preferred Sunday to the seventh-day Sabbath found in the Bible. "Sunday is the day," he wrote, "on which we [Christians] all hold our common assembly." And why was this? Because on that day God "made the world" and Jesus Christ "rose from the dead."²

Justin gave another Christ-centered reason for Sunday. He saw it as the "eighth day" which follows the seventh and, in the cycle of the week, becomes again the first. This "eighth day" idea he associated with biblical circumcision, the rite performed when an Old Testament child of God was eight days old. In the Bible God made many gracious promises to His chosen people who had been dedicated to Him through the religious rite of eighth-day circumcision. Christians felt that by observing the eighth day of the week they became rightful heirs to these promises. Thus to the Christians, Justin said, the eighth day "contained a certain mysterious import"³ which

the seventh-day Sabbath never possessed.

As a matter of fact, the eighth-day concept was quite a common one. The Christian writer Barnabas reported as early as, perhaps, the year 130 that Christians celebrated the eighth day "with gladness."⁴ He added that they did so because "on that day Jesus rose from the dead."

As a whole, the second- and third-century Christians whose writings have been preserved gave beautifully Christ-centered reasons for preferring the first day of the week above the seventh. Christ was the new law, they said. Christ introduced the new covenant. Christ, even though He kept the Sabbath Himself as a Jew, abolished sacrifices, circumcision, and the Sabbath for the Christian church. Christ after His second coming, they added, would provide heavenly rest during an eternal "eighth day" which (they said) would follow the millennium. Of course the most common reason given for emphasizing Sunday was that on that day Jesus rose from the dead.

This is not surprising. When Barnabas and Justin were alive, Christ's resurrection was only a century or so in the past. Abraham Lincoln lived about a century prior to our times today, and many things that he did still stand vividly in our awareness. Suppose that after his assassination and burial President Lincoln had come to life. What an impact this would have had on people all around the world! It is not difficult to imagine the effect that Christ's resurrection had on the people who lived in the days of the early Christians. Think of the impact it still has!

The Gospels repeatedly assert that Jesus rose from the dead on the "first day of the week."⁵ It is understandable that early Christians tended to look on the first day as a sort of weekly "anniversary."

There is something else to be considered. The Gospels make it quite

C. Mervyn Maxwell



Many early Christians who kept Sunday holy loved the Lord so much they willingly died for Him.

plain that by the time Jesus lived on earth the Sabbath had become encrusted with a variety of man-made regulations that obscured the beauty of God's original rest day. Jesus defied these traditions fearlessly. Those Christians who gave up the Sabbath may well have felt that they were abandoning not the Sabbath of God but a legalistic sabbath of human traditionalism. Sunday, with its joyous resurrection memories, must have seemed a superior monument to their Saviour's love.

A moment ago we used the words, "Those Christians who gave up the Sabbath." The truth is that the early Christians did not all give up the seventh-day Sabbath in favor of Sunday. An indeterminate number appear to have continued to observe the Sabbath in some way or other. In the second and third centuries we hear about Sabbath-observing Christians all around the Roman Empire, in areas known today as Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Palestine, Syria, Italy, France, Yugoslavia, and more. We'll come back to these Sabbath Christians in a moment.

Christ's Request

We have thus far suggested that early Christians adopted Sunday because of their love for the Lord. Other historians have suggested other reasons. Many, for example, have said that Sunday was adopted because Jesus Christ specifically changed the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday and asked His followers to worship on that day. Strange as it may seem, however, *no writer of the second and third centuries cites a single Bible verse as authority for the observance of Sunday in the place of Sabbath.* Neither Barnabas, nor Ignatius, nor Justin, nor Irenaeus, nor Tertullian, nor Clement of Rome, nor Clement of Alexandria, nor Origen, nor Cyprian, nor Victorinus, nor any other early author reports any such instruction from Jesus Christ.

Christians of the second and third centuries believed that Jesus was pleased to have them hold Sunday in special regard; but, even though they frequently cited Bible texts for other

Why the early Christians kept Sabbath on Sunday.

doctrinal positions, they never once cited a Bible commandment in favor of observing the first day of the week.

Some historians have concluded that the reasons Christians switched from Sabbath to Sunday were (a) a desire to compromise with Sunday-keeping sun-worshipping pagans and (b) a desire to distinguish themselves from the Jews in order to avoid being persecuted as if they were Jews.

In response to these suggestions, it may be mentioned in brief that Judaism was normally protected, not persecuted, in the Roman Empire.⁶ Justin said that keeping the Sabbath would not get the Christians into any trouble (it "would do us no harm," he said⁷). As for the influence of pagan sun worship, Tertullian specifically

denied that the Christian Sunday had anything to do with it.⁸ Just how prominent Sunday sun worship was in the second century is a mooted question anyway.⁹

Now, what about those early Christians who didn't give up the Sabbath? They're fascinating. Is it possible that they refused to give up the Sabbath because of their love for Christ?

Unfortunately, none of their writings—if they even produced any—have come down to us. Happily much more is known about Sabbath-keeping Christians in the time of Luther and later. It is evident that these more modern Christian Sabbath keepers did refuse to keep Sunday because they loved the Lord.

Here is a dilemma. Some Christians have abandoned the Sabbath and adopted Sunday because they loved Christ, and other Christians have abandoned Sunday and adopted the Sabbath because they loved Christ. Who has been right?

Let us look a little longer at the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Sabbath keepers. There is no doubt that they loved the Lord—as much, apparently, as Justin Martyr did. Oswald Glait, Mr. and Mrs. Andreas Fischer, and John James are known to have accepted martyrdom for the Christ of the Sabbath. Mr. and Mrs. John Traske, John Bampfield, and others accepted jail terms.

There was, however, a significant difference between these later Christian Sabbath keepers and the early Christian Sunday keepers: The Sabbath keepers cited specific Scripture passages in direct support of their position.

Amazing Discovery

Luther, as a Catholic teaching-priest, startled Europe and started the Reformation by championing "the Bible and the Bible only." Many devout Catholics, deeply stirred, followed his lead, and in doing so some of them were amazed to discover that the Christian-Sunday tradition has no clear roots in Scripture. Oswald Glait and Andreas Fischer, erstwhile priests, quickly committed themselves to the Bible Sabbath.

Disturbed to have his followers reach this conclusion, Luther commissioned theologians to visit Glait and Fischer in the hope of changing their minds. The scholars told the Sabbath keepers that, along with circumcision and sacrifice, the Sabbath belonged only to the Old Testament law of ceremonies and was not a part of the moral law of the Ten Commandments. When Jesus died as the lamb of God, they said, the law of sacrifice, circumcision, and Sabbath came to an end.

The theologians' position was remarkably close to that of the early Christian Sunday keepers.

The Priests' Reply

In reply Glait and Fischer asked how the Sabbath could be confined to the ceremonial law. The Sabbath, they pointed out, was created at the very beginning of the world (Genesis 2:1-3) before man sinned, before human beings needed any ceremonies to point their way to a coming Saviour. The Sabbath was contained, too, in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), Fischer and Glait went on, and the Ten Commandments constitute the ultimate moral law of right and wrong, quite distinct from the ceremonial law of types and symbols.

And Jesus did not nail the Sabbath to His cross, Glait and Fischer insisted. Jesus Himself said (in Matthew 5:17, 18, R.S.V.), "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

Neither did the apostles change the day from Sabbath to Sunday, continued Fischer and Glait. Paul said that faith establishes the law (Romans 3:31), and James said that breaking even one part of the moral law leaves a man guilty of breaking it all (James 2:10-12).

When asked by the theologians to explain why the Christian church adopted Sunday, the Sabbath keepers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries pointed sadly to such passages as Daniel 7 and Second Thessalonians 2. The prophecy in Daniel 7 predicted

the emergence of a powerful religious movement that would "think to change times and laws." Paul, in Second Thessalonians, warned that even in the first century the "mystery of lawlessness" (R.S.V.) was already at work.

The phrase "mystery of lawlessness" is thought-provoking. A mystery is something that requires special insight in order to be adequately understood. There is no doubt that good men like Justin and Tertullian and Barnabas and countless other early Christians loved their Lord even while they misinterpreted the Bible and disobeyed the Ten Commandments. This is a mystery indeed.

Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." John 14:15. With deep pathos He inquired, "Why do ye . . . transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?" Matthew 15:3.

We may never solve the mystery as to why early Christians became confused and gave up the Sabbath of God in favor of Sunday.

But if today we love Jesus and want to be Bible Christians, the conclusion seems inescapable that we should follow the example of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christian Sabbath keepers rather than that of the early Christian Sunday keepers.

FOOTNOTES

1. "The Second Apology of Justin," chapter XIII; *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), vol. 1, pp. 192, 193.
2. "The First Apology of Justin," LXVII; ANF, I, 186.
3. "Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, With Trypho, a Jew," XXIV; ANF, I, 206.
4. "The Epistle of Barnabas," XV, compare the translation here with ANF, I, 147.
5. Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19.
6. See for example Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* ("Ancient Times," part II, vol. II; 2d ed., rev. and enl., Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1952), pp. 102-128.
7. "Dialogue With Trypho," XVIII; ANF, I, 203.
8. Tertullian, *Apology* XXI; ANF, III, 34.
9. Franz Cumont's *The Mysteries of Mithra*, is the most popular source for the assertion that Mithraic sun worshipers directly influenced Christian Sunday keeping. But Cumont provides no evidence that Mithraists did in fact treat Sunday in a special way. In any case, Mithraism rose to prominence too late to explain Christian Sunday observance.
10. See Gerhard Hasel, "Sabbatarian Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century," two parts, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* V (July, 1967), 101-121, and VI (January, 1968), 19-28.

Is it all right
to disobey
Jesus
because you
love Him?