

On Sunday Worship, Its Origin and Meaning

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I have been invited to write a brief article summarizing some of the key points of a book I published last year, *A Brief History of Sunday*. I must confess that I find the task difficult, for I meant it when I claimed that the book was a *brief* history, and now I am requested to make it even shorter!

Constantine's Invention?

It is often said that the reason why Christians gather for worship on Sunday is because in the fourth century Emperor Constantine decreed that it should be so. This is simply not true. What Constantine did was to set aside the day of the sun, Sunday, as the day of rest. Practically all economic and legal activity in cities was to cease, while necessary agricultural tasks would be allowed to continue. Quite possibly, Constantine did this because he and his family had long been worshipers of the Unconquered Sun (*Sol Invictus*), and for a long time he wavered between that religion and Christianity, often seeking to combine the two. In any case, there was nothing in his decree about Christian worship. Later Christian writers, seeking to promote the prestige of this emperor who would eventually come to be called "St. Constantine," ascribed a particularly Christian inspiration to his decree.

In truth, Christians had been worshiping on Sunday since time immemorial. They called this day the *kyriaka* or the *dominica*, Greek and Latin words meaning "of the Lord." The earliest references we find to this appear in Acts 20:7 and Revelation 1:10. In the first of these, the narrator says, "On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread..." In the second, John says that his vision took place when he "was in the spirit on the Lord's day." The first day of the week was a day of particular significance when Christians would gather for their central act of worship, breaking bread together.

A Bit of History

The first day of the week was important for Christians for three main reasons, to which I shall return later. However, before we move on to this day itself and its significance, it is important to clarify what was meant by "the first day of the week." Jews did not count days as we do, from midnight to midnight. For them, a day ended and a new one began with the setting of the sun. This is why in Genesis 1, we repeatedly read that "there was evening and there was morning," while we would normally say "morning and evening," in the opposite order. Thus, the Sabbath began with the setting of the sun on the sixth day of the week and ended with the setting of the sun on the seventh.

It is quite likely that at first Christians most often met to celebrate communion on what today we would call Saturday evening, but to them was the beginning of the first day of the week. This would be particularly convenient for early Christians, most of whom were Jews. Through the centuries, Jews had found ways and occupations that would allow them to keep the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week. For Jews who

became Christians, it would be relatively easy to gather for communion immediately after the setting of the sun on the Sabbath, at the beginning of the first day of the week. This is why in Acts 20, we are told that the Christian community gathered on the first day of the week, and that Paul “continued speaking until midnight.” They did not meet early on Sunday and continue until midnight. Rather, they met after sunset on what we today would call Saturday, and Paul was preaching until what today we would call midnight between Saturday and Sunday.

Fairly soon, however, as the church became more Gentile and less Jewish, this brought about changes in Christian worship. On the subject of the Lord’s day, it was easier for Christians to meet in the very early hours of the morning than in the evening. A slave or an employee could not tell the master or the supervisor that he could not work on a Saturday evening, but it was relatively easy for a slave or an employee to rise early to attend worship on the first day of the week. It is clear that by the late second century, the normal time for the church to gather in order first to hear and study the Word and then to partake of the Table was what today we would call the wee hours of Sunday. This was also more in agreement with the Roman way of counting days as beginning at midnight, as we do. Thus, we find most Christian writers of the second century referring to their day of worship sometimes as the “Lord’s day” and sometimes as the “day of the Sun,” depending on whether they were addressing Jews and fellow Christians or pagans.

What Constantine’s decree meant was that Christians did not have to rise in the very early hours of the morning in order to gather for worship. Their day of worship was also a day of rest, and they could gather at a more convenient hour.

Before the time of Constantine, Christians often referred to the Sabbath and its place within Christianity. Some felt that it should still be observed as a day of rest, while the next day was a day of worship; some rejected it altogether as a damnable Jewish practice; and many allowed for much freedom on the matter—which probably reflects a time when in the same church, Jewish Christians would continue observing the Sabbath and many Gentile Christians would not. But when the first day of the week had become a day of rest by imperial decree, things began to change.

Frequent imperial decrees focused on which activities would be allowed on the first day of the week and which would not. Eusebius tells us that shortly after Constantine’s edict about rest, he ordered that on the day of the sun, soldiers should pray, addressing “our only God and our king,” a phrase which still reflects Constantine’s religious ambiguity. As the fourth century advanced, and particularly during the fifth century, imperial legislation seems to reflect Christian concerns. For instance, there was repeated legislation forbidding certain public spectacles on the first day of the week, legislation whose very repetition indicates that it was not generally obeyed. In 409, Theodosius II seems to have been moved by Christians to decree that on Sundays, judges should inquire about the conditions in which prisoners were kept.

Christian influence on this legislation may be seen also in the naming of the day itself. In the earlier decrees, it is called the “day of the sun,” *dies solis*, but as the years passed, it came increasingly to be known as the “Lord’s day,” *dominica*.

As the Middle Ages progressed, there was ever increasing legislation, both civil and ecclesiastical, regarding Sunday. Soon these laws began imitating and expanding on the Sabbath laws of the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, Sunday became a day of rest

with many of the characteristics of the older Jewish Sabbath.

Languages and Sabbatarianism

This does not mean, however, that Christians immediately declared that Sunday was the Sabbath. On the contrary, medieval Latin still referred to the seventh day of the week as *sabbatum*. The persistence of the Sabbath along the Mediterranean basin is such that even today both in Greek and in most Romance languages, the seventh day of the week is called the Sabbath, *Sábbato* in Greek, *sábado* in Spanish and Portuguese, *sabato* in Italian, *simbata* in Rumanian. In French and some related languages, the name for this day derives from a contraction meaning “the Sabbath day,” *samedi*. Jointly with the Sabbath, the “dominica” or Lord’s day also persisted: *domenica* in Italian, *domingo* in Spanish and Portuguese, *duminica* in Rumanian, and *dimanche* in French. Even in some Slavonic languages the same name persists, although this is mostly the result of Greek and Latin influence. This is interesting because in most Western European languages, the ancient pagan names for the days of the week remain, except for these two, the first and seventh days of the week. In most cases, the second to the other days of the week still retain their ancient pagan names, day of the sun, day of the moon, and so on. The medieval church objected to this. As late as the seventh century, Isidore of Seville was still insisting that the names of the days between Sunday and the *sabbatum* should be simply “second day,” “third day,” etc. But in the long run, this practice was rejected by most languages, while Portuguese and Greek retained it, refusing to use the names of pagan gods.

The first day of the week, now commonly known as the Lord’s day, increasingly took the characteristics of the Jewish Sabbath, even though most of Western Europe retained the name of “Sabbath” for the seventh day of the week. The result is that during the Middle Ages, while there was a sort of Sabbatarianism in that the observation of the Lord’s day, the first day of the week, was patterned to a great extent by the ancient laws of Israel or at least by an emphasis on abstaining from certain activities, and even though several authors saw the connection between the laws regarding the first day of the week and ancient Sabbath laws, they did not call that first day of the week the “Sabbath” or *sabbatum*, for that was already the name of the seventh day.

When we come to modern times, this meant that in areas where the seventh day was not called the Sabbath, it became customary to refer to the first day of the week as the Sabbath. Such was the case in English and similar languages where the name of the seventh day still retains its pagan roots as the day of Saturn, Saturday. In Puritan England, and in much of Protestantism from then on, insistence on “the Sabbath” meant an emphasis on the strict keeping of various practices and regulations to be followed on Sunday. Actually, when someone spoke of “the Sabbath,” what they actually meant was Sunday and its observance in ways similar to the ancient Jewish Sabbath. This was not possible in countries where the Sabbath still retained its ancient name, or some variation thereof, *sábado*, *sabato*, etc., for it would never make sense in Italian, Greek, or Spanish to call Sunday “the Sabbath,” a name that was already taken by the seventh day. But at the same time, it was possible to say in English that “Sunday” was the “Sabbath.” It was therefore in the environment of English and other similar languages that a type of Sabbatarianism arose. This sort of Sabbatarianism insisted that the true Sabbath was Saturday, the seventh day of the week, and that this was the day that Christians should observe.

It is this history that takes us back to the need to distinguish between the Lord's day and the Sabbath. Claiming that Sunday is the Sabbath, as is common in the English language, is only possible in English and similar languages. In the practice and understanding of the early church, the Lord's day had little to do with the Sabbath. This in turn leads us back to the manner in which the early church understood the Lord's day and the significance of the first day of the week. In early Christian writings, this significance revolves around three main points.

Back to Sunday and Its Meaning: (1) The Day of Resurrection

The first and probably the most ancient reason for gathering for worship on Sunday was that this is the day of the Resurrection of Jesus, as the Gospels make clear. Long before a Christian year was established, Christians followed a weekly cycle in which the last days of the week were particularly important. This may be seen in the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* or *Didache*, a document that seems to date from the late first century and certainly not later than the second. There one finds instructions regarding two particular days of fasting, of which the second is called "the day of preparation," which in our present-day language would be Friday. The New Testament repeatedly refers to "the day of preparation" as the day of the crucifixion. Therefore, it was a proper day for fasting. Then after the Sabbath on the seventh day came the Lord's day, the day of Resurrection, the first day of the week. It was on this day that, as we have seen in Acts 20, Christians gathered for their own form of worship, which centered on the breaking of bread. On this day one would not fast not only because worship itself included eating, but also because fasting was a sign of mourning, and this was inappropriate for the day of the Resurrection of the Lord.

The great moment in the life of Jesus that Christians most celebrated was the Resurrection. While the cross was always important, for without it there would never have been a resurrection, it was in rising from among the dead that Jesus had conquered the powers of death and destruction, and thus opened the way for the final victory of those who were joined to him as part of his body. (Very rapidly, particularly in the West and after the fourth century, Christian faith became increasingly focused on the cross and less on the Resurrection. An interesting note is that the church building in Jerusalem that the Eastern church called the church of the Resurrection, the Western church came to call the Holy Sepulcher.)

Thus, when the early Christians broke bread, they were not primarily commemorating the death of Jesus, but rather celebrating his resurrection and victory. Sunday worship was originally a joyful event which in later centuries became increasingly somber and funereal.

In a way, this meant that every Sunday was a day of Resurrection—perhaps one could say, a little Easter. Eventually, a particular Sunday became the great day of Resurrection, which we now call Easter, and which became one of the main anchors of the Christian calendar. But this would take us far beyond the limits of this brief essay.

Sunday and Its Meaning: (2) The Day of the New Creation

As we read the very first chapter of the Bible, we become aware that the first day of the week is also the first day of creation. Christians understood that in Christ "there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become

new!” (2 Co 5.17). As the beginning of the Gospel of John shows, Christians were also convinced that this one they had seen in the flesh and who for their sake had been crucified and had risen was also at the beginning of the first creation. Thus, the new creation would destroy what was evil in the first, and this too was celebrated on Sunday, the beginning of both the first creation and the new.

We see this understanding already in the mid-second century, when Justin, addressing pagans and therefore referring to the first day as “the day of the Sun,” said, “We hold this general gathering on the day of the Sun, because it is the first day in which God made the world, moving darkness and matter. It is also the day in which are Savior Jesus Christ rose from among the dead” (1 *Apol.* 67.7).

Once again, this has important implications. One of them was that, contrary to what Marcion and the Gnostics claimed, there is no radical discontinuity between the first creation and the second, or between the physical world and the spiritual. But, also once again, this would take us far beyond the scope of our purpose here.

Sunday and Its Meaning: (3) The Eighth Day

Calendars are generally based on repetitive cycles. If we look for instance at the Hebrew Scriptures, we see a calendar based on a cycle of weeks, then a week of weeks leading to Pentecost ($7 \times 7 = 49$), then a week of years, and finally a week of weeks of years—the Jubilee on the 50th year. Something similar is true in any other calendar. In order to measure time, we understand it in terms of cycles, not only the days in a week, but even hours in a day, minutes in an hour, and seconds in a minute. While this repetition of cycles makes it possible to plan for the future, it also seems to be a never-ending rut from which we cannot escape.

However, both Jewish and Christian faiths affirmed that at some point in the future, this cycle would be broken. In early Christian literature, this was signified by pointing out that the first day of the week is also the eighth day of the previous week. This was seen as a sign and a promise that a time will come when, upon awakening after the seventh day of the week expecting once again another first day, we will discover that we are now no longer in the never-ending cycle of weeks and time, but in the new order of eternity. As far as I can tell, the earliest extant Christian author to speak of the first day of the week as also the eighth is Pseudo-Barnabas, early in the second century. A few decades later, Justin Martyr employed the same language, and later so did Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian as well as Cyprian. But probably the clearest example of the connection between the eighth day and the eschatological hope is found in St. Augustine. After a long review of human history organized into six ages reflecting the six days of creation, Augustine said, “The seventh age will be our Sabbath, which will have no sunset, which will come on the Lord’s day, the eighth day, the eternal day, consecrated by the resurrection of Christ, and which prefigures the eternal rest not only of the spirit, but also of the body. There we shall rest and see; see and love; love and praise. Behold the essence of the endless day!” (*City of God* 22.30.5).

Sunday and Its Meaning: Manifestations in Worship

All of this was expressed not only in teaching and in writing, but also in worship itself. Indeed probably for most Christians, this was best understood not in terms of words, but rather in terms of ritual and experience. Too often we think that it is our

theology and our teachings that are expressed in worship, when it is at least equally true that what is done in worship shapes the faith and theology of believers. Thus, while we can trace elements of the significance of Sunday in early Christian writings, we come to understand it better as we see it manifested in worship practices.

Modern readers are often surprised to learn that in the early church, one was not expected to kneel in prayer on Sundays. The Council of Nicaea reaffirmed the notion that not to kneel in church on Sundays was proper behavior and ruled that all churches should follow it. Kneeling is an act of obeisance that is quite appropriate when unworthy petitioners approach a king. It is therefore appropriate in prayer when one is repenting for one's sins and asking for forgiveness. But Sunday is the day of our adoption as children of God. On this day we approach God not as the petitioner approaches a king, but rather as his children do. By virtue of our baptism and our adoption as children of God, we are heirs of the Great King, and therefore on this first day of the week, we proclaim our adoption by looking at God no longer as petitioners, but now as children and heirs.

A similar understanding of adoption and of the meaning of baptism may be seen in what we know of the practices and rites of Christian baptism at least by the late second century. Upon coming out of the water (sometimes in an octagonal baptistry, signifying that one had now entered the eighth day of creation), a neophyte was dressed in a white robe. This did not mean, as it would today, that the neophyte was now pure, for at that time white was not a sign of purity, but rather of victory. Conquering generals returned to their cities dressed in white and riding white horses. Now this person coming out of the water, a slave, an artisan, or a fishmonger, was dressed in the same color that was used to honor victorious generals. And not only that, but the neophyte was also anointed with oil, as were the ancient kings and priests of Israel. The neophyte was now not only a victor, but also a king and a priest, part of a "royal priesthood" (1 P 2.9). And then, to show this as clearly as possible, this neophyte, now dressed in a victor's white and anointed as a priest and king, for the first time joined the royal priesthood in prayer not only for the church, but also for the rest of the world, including the emperor who thought he was lord, but could not appeal to the high throne of the true Lord of all. The neophyte and the Royal priesthood could.

A Look at the Future

What does all this mean as far as today's church is concerned? Although I do not know what the future will bring, I do hope that at a time when most Christians live in the bonds of poverty and oppression, Sunday will repeatedly remind us that the one whose resurrection we celebrate is also the one who was at the beginning when all things were made and the one who will be at the end when all of creation comes to fruition, on that eighth day when, as Augustine would say, "We shall rest and see; see and love; love and praise."