

Study Guide #11: The Sabbath and the Lord's Day

Introduction

We have elsewhere examined the issue of the Sabbath from the Biblical perspective—in Explorer II, Study Guides #18 and #19 and Explorer III, Study Guide #10. We have noted that the term “Lord’s Day” had become a common name for Sunday by the late 2nd century A.D., which suggests that Sunday had become a day for Christian worship by then. It’s also very significant that in at least 107 languages in lands that Christians dominated, the word for “Saturday” would be transliterated as “Sabbath.” Surely that evidence alone reveals that early Christians knew that Saturday was the Sabbath. In this Study Guide, we look at Christian history and take a closer look at the evolution of Sunday observance and how Christians in the early centuries viewed the Sabbath and Sunday in relationship to each other.

Question #1: Who were the earliest known Christians outside the New Testament to write about weekly Sunday worship among Christians?

Answer: The 2 earliest who clearly referred to weekly Sunday observance among Christians were Barnabas and Justin Martyr. Barnabas wasn’t the man with the same name in the New Testament, but an unknown person from Alexandria, Egypt who wrote *The Epistle of Barnabas* about 130-138. Justin Martyr was a Christian philosopher and apologist for the faith who wrote a letter to Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius about 150 defending the Christian faith. Note this statement from Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*:



Justin Martyr

And on the day called Sunday [literally, “the day of the sun”], **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...**

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. [*The Fathers of the Church*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers>, “Justin Martyr,” “First Apology,” ch. 67]

By referring to Sunday as “the day of the sun,” rather than as “the first day of the week” (as the New Testament does), it’s an obvious attempt to identify Christians as in harmony with the Empire, the plurality of whose people worshiped the sun. Therefore, we aren’t justified in interpreting his silence regarding the Sabbath as evidence that it was no longer being kept—at least outside of Rome and Alexandria, Egypt.

Chapter 15 of *The Epistle of Barnabas* concerns the Sabbath, which he clearly identified as the 7th day of the week, distinct from Sunday. This chapter is characterized by 2 features: (a) a vehement denunciation of Jews and the Jewish religion; and (b) an allegorical method of interpreting the Old Testament which declares that much of the Jewish religious belief and practice was never intended by God to be literally

observed in this life. Specifically, he declared that no one should keep the 7th-day Sabbath until we are holy enough to do so, during the 7th millennium of human history, which he viewed as the beginning of the perfect reign of Jesus.

Question #2: Did Justin Martyr associate an anti-Semitic sentiment with his anti-Sabbath teaching?

Answer: Yes. We give one example of this below:

For we too would observe the fleshly circumcision, and the Sabbaths, and in short all the feasts, if we did not know for what reason they were enjoined you,--namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts. [*The Fathers of the Church*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers>, “Justin Martyr,” “Dialogue with Trypho,” ch. 18]

So here Justin Martyr tells the Jewish Trypho that God gave the Jewish people several religious practices because of the Jews’ “transgressions” and “the hardness of your [their] hearts.” These concepts are completely foreign to the Old or New Testaments.

Question #3: What do we learn from the writings of these 2 Christian writers?

Answer: We learn at least 2 things from these 2nd-century Christian writers. *First*, the earliest arguments against the 7th-day Sabbath and for Sunday observance—(a) an effort to make Christians harmonize with the pagan Roman Empire via the expression “the day of the sun”; (b) that light was created on the 1st day of Creation Week; and (c) that Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday—represent a tentative, early practice of Sunday observance. Otherwise, their arguments would have been more well-thought out and certain. *Second*, the vehement anti-Semitism reflected in both Barnabas and Justin Martyr for the abandonment of the 7th-day Sabbath is best explained as the result of growing Jewish discontent in the early 2nd century, as illustrated by the Second Jewish Revolt, or Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135), and the Roman Emperor Hadrian’s hostility toward those Jewish practices which made the Jews stand out as a unique people—especially circumcision and Sabbath-keeping, which he banned in the Roman Empire.



Emperor Hadrian

Question #4: Did any actual official Church leaders say similar things?

Answer: Yes. Note the following statements from 2 different bishops of the Church. The 1st is from Pope Sylvester (314-335), bishop of Rome, and the 2nd is from an Austrian bishop named Victorinus (ca. 304), 2nd-century statements by Church leaders:

If every Sunday is to be observed joyfully by the Christians on account of the resurrection, then every Sabbath on account of the burial is to be regarded in execration of the Jews. In fact all the disciples of the Lord had a lamentation on the Sabbath, bewailing the buried Lord, and gladness prevailed for the exulting Jews. But sadness reigned for the fasting apostles. In like manner we are sad with the saddened by the burial of the Lord, if we want to rejoice with them in the day of the Lord’s resurrection. In fact, it is not proper to observe, because of

Jewish customs, the consumption of food and the ceremonies of the Jews. [S. R. E. Humbert, *Adversus Graecorum calumnias* 6, *Patrologie cursus completus, Series Latina*, ed. by J. P. Migne, Paris: Garnier Freres et J. P. Migne, 1844ff, 143, 933 as trans. by Samuele Bacchiocchi in his *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity*, Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977, p. 194]

On the seventh day...we are accustomed to fast rigorously, that on the Lord's day we may go forth to our bread with giving of thanks. And let the parasceve [Friday] become a rigorous fast, lest we should appear to observe any Sabbath with the Jews. [*The Fathers of the Church*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers>, "Victorinus," "On the Creation of the World"]

First, note that Pope Sylvester clearly knew that the Sabbath and Sunday were 2 different days of the week. This makes it clear that the majority-Protestant idea that Sunday is the Sabbath came much later in Christian history. *Second*, from other historical sources, we know that the Church at Rome championed the idea of fasting on the Sabbath (Saturday)—and on Friday, the day commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus. Note that this was intended to make Christians all the more joyous for the feasting on Sunday. *Finally*, note the tinge of anti-Semitism in both statements here—even from Church leaders.

Question #5: Does this mean that Christians everywhere abandoned the 7th-day Sabbath in favor of Sunday observance at least by the 4th century?

Answer: No. Even as late as the 5th century, a Church historian tells us the following: **"The people of Constantinople, and almost everywhere, assemble together on the Sabbath, as well as on the first day of the week, which custom is never observed at Rome or at Alexandria"** (*The Fathers of the Church*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers>, "Sozomen," *Ecclesiastical History*, bk. 7, ch. 19).

Question #6: What changed in the 4th century to move more Christians away from actually keeping the 7th-day Sabbath (as a holy day)?

Answer: From about the middle of the 2nd century to the early 4th century, Christians outside of Rome and Alexandria, Egypt observed the 7th-day Sabbath (Saturday), went to services on Sunday morning, and then spent the rest of Sunday as an ordinary day. However, when Roman Emperor Constantine "converted" to Christianity in 312 and legalized it in 313, Christianity suddenly became popular throughout the Empire, resulting in half-converted people flooding the Church and bringing with them some of their pagan beliefs and practices. Many others in the Empire were worshiping the sun. The Roman Empire was showing signs of internal weaknesses, which invited military attacks from various European tribes. In order to keep the Empire united *politically*, Constantine sought unity among the 2 largest *religious* groups in the empire: (a) Christians (who worshiped the Son) and (b) Mithraites (who worshiped the sun). So in 321, he issued world history's 1st Sunday Law, forbidding unnecessary labor on Sunday. It was largely a civil law, however, because it referred to Sunday as "the day of the sun." Subsequent emperors in the 4th century strengthened laws restricting labor on Sundays.



Mithras, Roman
god of Mithraism

Question #7: How did Christian leaders outside Rome and Alexandria respond to the growing Sunday civil laws in the Roman Empire?

Answer: Generally speaking, the historical evidence suggests that the early abandonment of the Sabbath in Rome (and Alexandria) and the growing influence of the Bishop of Rome (Pope) influenced other churches in the Western Roman Empire to do the same at a faster rate during the 4th century. But even in the East, a regional conference of bishops known as the Council of Laodicea (ca. 364), urged Christians to work on the Sabbath, apparently in part to highlight the extra prominence of Sunday in the Empire. Note the anti-Semitic flavor of the Council's pronouncements:

Christians must not judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honouring the Lord's Day; and, if they can, resting then as Christians. But if any shall be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ. [*The Fathers of the Church*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers>, "Councils," "Laodicea," Canon 29]

The fact that this was the very 1st Church council of bishops to deal with the relationship of Sabbath and Sunday, and that Christians were being urged to work on the Saturday-Sabbath, strongly implies that Sabbath-keeping was an old custom among most Christians which was being challenged by Church leaders. At the same time, note that the Council of Laodicea still honored the Sabbath, albeit no longer keeping it holy as per the Sabbath Commandment, because it provided for special Scripture readings for corporate worship on the Sabbath (Canon 16). In other words, it was not a complete abandonment of the Sabbath as had been the case in Rome and Alexandria, Egypt back in the 1st half of the 2nd century.



Question #8: What was the effect of the Council of Laodicea on Christians?

Answer: Both the Saturday-Sabbath and Sunday were at least days for public worship among Christians after the decision of the Council of Laodicea, and many believers continued to treat Sabbath as 24 hours of holy time in harmony with the Sabbath Commandment. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, usually dated to no later than ca. 400, and written as an instructional manual by an unknown person(s), encouraged Christians to **"...keep the Sabbath, and the Lord's day festival; because the former is the memorial of the creation, and the latter of the resurrection"** (*The Fathers of the Church*, <http://wwwnewadvent.org/fathers>, "Miscellaneous," "Apostolic Constitutions," bk. 7, ch. 23). In the same document, people who possessed slaves were encouraged to give them both the Saturday-Sabbath and Sunday off for religious instruction reasons:

Let the slaves work five days; but on the Sabbath-day and the Lord's day let them have leisure to go to church for instruction in piety. We have said that the Sabbath is on account of the creation, and the Lord's day of the resurrection. [*The Fathers of the Church*, <http://wwwnewadvent.org/fathers>, "Miscellaneous," "Apostolic Constitutions," bk. 8, ch. 33]

Please note that this document was written about the time, or perhaps a little later, than the Council of Laodicea.

Question #9: How long did the practice of having two days for public worship continue among Christians?

Answer: This practice of public worship on both Sabbath and Sunday outside of Rome and Alexandria continued *at least* into the 5th century because Church historian Socrates Scholasticus, from Constantinople, testified to this fact:

For although almost all churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this. [*The Fathers of the Church*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers>, “Socrates Scholasticus,” “Ecclesiastical History,” bk. 5, ch. 22]

Question #10: Would you summarize the essential facts about the Sabbath and Sunday that we learned in this Study Guide?

Answer: Here is a summary of the essential facts from Christian history about the Sabbath and Sunday as follows:

- Complete abandonment of the Saturday-Sabbath occurred relatively early in the 2nd century A.D. among Christians in Rome and in Alexandria, Egypt, and was replaced by corporate worship on Sunday mornings (although Sunday was not treated as a Christian Sabbath).
- By about the middle of the 2nd century, Christians outside of Rome and Alexandria added Sunday morning as a day for additional public worship while continuing to keep the Saturday-Sabbath.
- The origins of abandoning the Sabbath in Rome and Alexandria appear to have been motivated by anti-Semitism, which in turn was probably prompted by the Roman Empire’s crackdown against circumcision and Sabbath-keeping by the Jews because of increasing political rebellion among them—especially the Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135). [NOTE: Rome was then the capital of the Roman Empire, and Alexandria, Egypt had a major Jewish population.]
- From about the middle of the 2nd century until at least the early 4th century, the vast majority of Christians observed the Saturday-Sabbath as a holy day per the Sabbath Commandment while also holding public worship services on Sunday.
- The “conversion” of Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 312 and its legalization in 313 led to the religion’s popularity, resulting in a great influx of half-converted people, who brought some of their pagan beliefs and practices with them—including a strong tradition of sun worship.
- The 1st Sunday law (in 321) forbade unnecessary labor on Sundays, which elevated that 1st day of the week to a higher status.
- Probably in a desire to keep their reputation as loyal subjects in the Empire, Church officials began to also elevate the importance of Sunday worship and to denigrate the 7th-day Sabbath. Even in the East, which was less influenced by the church in Rome, the Council of Laodicea (ca. 364) used anti-Semitic language to urge Christians to work on the Sabbath and thus avoid looking Jewish.



- The same Council of Laodicea provided for public worship to continue on the Sabbath as well as on Sunday, even though it no longer considered the Sabbath a holy day per se.
- Resistance in the East to the leaders' push for Sabbath-breaking persisted for some time, at least well into the next (5th) century. Eventually, the competition of the 2 days, and great pressure from Church leaders, led to the gradual abandonment of the Sabbath altogether by the large majority.

Question #11: How should I respond to this historical information?

Answer: *First*, the history of Sabbath and Sunday in the Christian Church during the early centuries plainly reveals that the push for abandoning the Sabbath and/or adding Sunday as a day for public worship was motivated largely by anti-Semitism and pressure from political events within the Roman Empire. *Second*, we noted that the only *Biblical* defense of this pro-Sunday, anti-Sabbath movement was based on the application of an allegorical method of interpreting Scripture—a method, by the way, that was largely rejected by the Church. In other words, no Christian leader appears to have offered any objective textual analysis as evidence for the pro-Sunday, anti-Sabbath movement (until the Catholic scholar Thomas Aquinas did so in the 13th century). *Finally*, the only reasonable conclusion from all this evidence is that (1) the New Testament does not provide any tangible support for this movement; and (2) the Church made this move on her own authority apart from Scripture.

The only options for defending an anti-Sabbath, pro-Sunday position are one of these 2: (1) the New Testament teaches that the Ten Commandments as a single code of Law was nailed to the cross, so that since (allegedly) the Sabbath Commandment is the only 1 of them not repeated in the New Testament, God is *not* concerned about which day the Christian chooses to observe; or (2) the Church has the authority to change or abolish one of the Ten Commandments and has exercised its authority to do so. But *first*, in Explorer II, Study Guide #16, we saw that the only thing abolished at the cross was the Ceremonial Law and our debt of sins (IOU), and that the Ten Commandments is still considered to be 1 single, unified code of Law. *Finally*, in Explorer I, Study Guide #14, we discovered that the Church is subject to the authority of the Scriptures, and it does not have the authority to change anything.

We acknowledge the emotional difficulty in making the decision to abandon what is now centuries of Christian tradition in order to keep a day holy that others will ridicule you for doing. Unpopular change is particularly a very difficult thing. But here we're talking about your relationship with the God of the universe, a God in the Person of Jesus who declared in Matthew 10:34-37: **“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me”** (NKJV).

We invite you to read all of the pertinent Study Guides in all 3 Explorer series on the topics of the Ten Commandments and the Sabbath, and then pray earnestly about it. Ultimately, God holds us accountable for what we know to be true. Millions will undoubtedly live eternally with God who never knew about the Sabbath truth in their lifetimes. But with knowledge and conviction comes spiritual responsibility. May the Lord richly bless you as you walk with Him! And may you find the courage to step out in faith in order to discover the beautiful experience of walking with God in observing His holy Sabbath from week to week!