

# How Sunday Came In The Church

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## The Seventh Day Sabbath

SUNDAY OBSERVANCE is not mentioned in the Scriptures. Although the day is regarded lightly by millions of professed Christians, there are unnumbered conscientious Christians who reverently observe Sunday as a sacred day of worship. How did Sunday observance come into the church?

The Bible makes mention of the first day of the week just nine times but nowhere instructs Christians to set apart as a day of worship. Yet millions do. Why? How did this custom originate?

In Bible days, God's people observed the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath. This was by the example of the Lord at creation, and His written command in the heart of the Ten Commandments at Sinai in Old Testament times-and in New Testament times by the added example of Jesus Christ in His earthly ministry, and of His disciples and the apostle Paul after the ascension of the Savior.

Today, millions of Christians observe the seventh-day Sabbath, but other millions observe the first day of the week, Sunday. Why the difference? How did this change from Sabbath observance to Sunday observance take place? And does it really make any difference? Millions of devout Christians are convinced that it does make a difference, and some have paid the death penalty for this conviction even in the twentieth century!

Major efforts are now being made to enforce the observance of Sunday laws which have long been on the statute books. These laws find their roots in deep religious convictions concerning the believed sacredness of Sunday. The question becomes a vital one: "is Sunday observance of God? How did it come into the church?"

## The Historical Records

The historical records of the Christian church in the years immediately following New Testament times are fragmentary, but they are sufficient to tell us the story of the change from Sabbath observance to Sunday observance.

These records plainly reveal that the majority of Christians observed the seventh-day Sabbath at least as late as the middle of the fifth century. Socrates, a Greek writer who died shortly after AD 440, wrote a continuation of Eusebius's ecclesiastical history, covering the period from AD 306 to 439. He says, "For whereas everywhere in the world the churches on the Sabbath day, throughout every weekly cycle, celebrate the mysteries, those in Alexandria and those in Rome on account of some old tradition have refused to do this." - Socrates, Ecclesiastical History, book 5, chapter 22; Standard English translation in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, volume 2, page 132.

The records also declare that throughout the Middle Ages and the reign of Roman Catholicism in Europe, Waldenses, Albigenses, and Celts continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath of New Testament times. They did this even though Roman Catholicism had already embraced Sunday observance. They did this at the peril of their lives. Why did it mean so much to them? How did Sunday come to be observed by Roman Catholicism? How did it come to be observed by Christians at all? The story of the change is a gripping one.

## The New Testament Church

Within a few days after the ascension of Jesus into heaven, the disciples, empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, demonstrated a new zeal and earnestness that was to increase the membership of the early Christian church at a phenomenal rate. In less than thirty years Paul was telling the Christians at Rome, "Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world." Romans 1:8.

It has been estimated by the historian Gibbon that during the first one hundred years after Christ's death, there were five million professed Christians in the Roman Empire alone; and he assures us that "the progress of Christianity was not confined to the Roman Empire," but "the new religion, within a century after the death of its Divine Author, had already visited every part of the globe."

## **The Revival of Sun-worship**

At the very time that Christianity was spreading over the world, a great revival of sun-worship was taking place in the heathen world. Sun-worship became so widespread and so popular that even some Roman emperors adopted it. The distinguished historian Henry Hart Milman tells how the Roman records indicated that Emperor Elababalus hoped to fuse religions in sun-worship.

"The Jewish, the Samaritan, even the Christian, were to be fused and recast into one great system, of which the sun was to be the central object of adoration." The History of Christianity, book 2, chapter 8 (volume 2, page 175).

Behind the records of history, can we not see great conflict between Christ and Satan, the enemy of God? Christ had declared that His church would press the triumphs of the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Satan had determined to destroy that church by persecution, but he only scattered them abroad to preach with great vigor (Acts 8:1-4). Failing to stop the onward march of the gospel, Satan gave new impetus to the spread of paganism by this great revival of sun-worship in the heathen world. And this new revival in the heathen world was subtly to make its impact on the rapidly growing Christian church.

The apostles were faithful in their unceasing labors for the infant church, but the problem of firmly grounding such a rapidly growing membership with a small leadership and a threatening paganism was a staggering one. The apostles were fully aware of the impending apostasy of many (Galatians 1:6, 7; 2 Corinthians 1:11; Acts 15:11. In fact, Paul predicted under inspiration that there would come "a falling away" from truth, and the rise of false leaders from within the church to split it (2 Thessalonians 2:3; Acts 20:29, 30). His prophecy was to come true in less than a hundred years. This division of the early Christian church into many conflicting sects such as the Gnostics, Montanists, Ebionites, Novatianists, and others, was the result of the influence of pagan philosophy.

With all the world about them honoring the day of the sun-Sunday, it is easy to see how a weakening Christianity, rapidly becoming saturated with half-converted pagans, would gradually give more and more prominence to Sunday. And this would be easier still if they could attract Sunday observing pagans to their ranks by adopting Sunday in Christian worship. And, according to a religious encyclopedia whose scholarship is recognized by all religious groups, this is exactly what happened:

"Sunday (dies solis of the Roman calendar, 'day of the sun' because dedicated to the sun) the first day of the week, was adopted by the early Christians as a day of worship. The 'sun' of Latin adoration they interpreted as the 'Sun of Righteousness.' . . . No regulations for its observance are laid down in the New Testament, nor, indeed, is its observance even enjoined." – Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, volume 6, Article "Sunday," page 2259, third edition.

As we have already noted, excepting for the Roman and Alexandrian Christians, the majority of Christians were observing the seventh-day Sabbath at least as late as the middle of the fifth century. The Roman and Alexandrian Christians were among those converted from heathenism. They began observing Sunday as a merry religious festival in honor of the Lord's resurrection about the latter half of the second century after Christ. However, they did not try to teach that the Lord or His apostles commanded it. In fact, no ecclesiastical writer before Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century even suggested that either Christ or His apostles instituted the observance of the first day of the week.

These Gentile Christians of Rome and Alexandria began calling the first day of the week "the Lord's day." This was not difficult for the pagans of the Roman Empire who were steeped in sun-worship to accept, because they referred to their sun-god as their "Lord." The sun-worshipper's prayer addressed the sun-god, "Lord, hail, King of great power, far-ruling, greatest of the gods, Helios, the Lord of the heaven and the earth, god of gods."-A. Dieterich, Eine Mithrasliturgie, page 10, line 31. Indeed, certain historians have felt that sun-worship has really given Sunday the name "Lord's day." Writing on Mithraism (sun-worship), A. Paiva says: "The first day of each week, Sunday, was consecrated to Mithra since times remote, as several authors affirm. Because the Sun was god, the Lord par excellence, Sunday came to be called the Lord's day, as later was done by Christianity."-Agostinho de Aleida Paiva, O Mitraismo, page 3.

## **The Lord's Day**

One thing is certain, and that is that the Scriptures do not give the title "Lord's day" to the first day of the week. Three of the disciples were careful to point out that in a special sense the Son of man is Lord of "the Sabbath day" (Matthew 12:8; Luke 6:5; Mark 2:28). And it is significant that although both the Greek and Latin ecclesiastical literature of the latter part of the second century refers to Sunday by the term Lord's day many times, not once do they cite any Biblical reference as authority for this use of it.

Later, Sylvester, Bishop of Rome (AD 314-335) adopted the name "Lord's day" as the official Roman Catholic designation of the first day of the week. The Sabbath was still being observed as a sacred day, and its Biblical name Sabbath was retained by the Roman bishop. However, "the same pope decreed that the Sabbath rest should be transferred to the Lord's day, in order that on that

day we should rest from earthly works to the praising of God." - Rabanus Maurus, *De Clericorum Institutione*, book 2, chapter 46, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, volume 107, column 361.

## **The First Sunday Law**

This drift into compromise in order to win the pagans was accented by the first civil Sunday law in AD 321, passed by the emperor of the Roman Empire, Constantine. It was one of his first official acts following his nominal acceptance of Christianity, when he put himself under the spiritual direction of the Roman Catholic clergy and "made the priests of God his counselors." Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, book 1, chapter 32, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, volume 1, page 491. Note the pagan label in the opening lines of his first Sunday law: "The venerable day of the sun [that is, Sunday] let the magistrates and people residing in the cities rest, and let all workshops be closed."

This is very different from the Sabbath law of our Lord, which says nothing of the "venerable" sun, but gives worship to the Creator of the sun.

## **Other Sunday Laws**

Constantine issued at least six decrees affecting Sunday observance. From this time forward, both emperors and popes added other laws that strengthened Sunday observance. The Roman Catholic Church cites the Council of Laodicea as the official voice which transferred the "solemnity from Saturday to Sunday," Note the language of one catechism:

"Question. Which is the Sabbath day?

"Answer. Saturday is the Sabbath day.

"Question. Why do we observe Sunday instead of Saturday?

"Answer. We observe Sunday instead of Saturday because the Catholic Church, in the Council of Laodicea (AD 336), transferred the solemnity from Saturday to Sunday." - Reverend Peter Geiermann, C. S. S. R., *The Convert's Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*, page 50, Second edition, 1910.

"In 386, under Gratian, Valentinian and Theodosius, it was decreed that all litigation and business should cease [on Sunday]."

"In 425, under Theodosius the Younger, abstinence from theatricals and the circus (on Sunday) was enjoined."

"In 538, at a council at Orleans it was ordained that everything previously permitted on Sunday should still be lawful; but that work at the plough or in the vineyard, and cutting, reaping, threshing, tilling, and hedging should be abstained from, that people might more conveniently attend church."

"About 590 Pope Gregory, in a letter to the Roman people, denounced as the prophets of Antichrist those who maintained that work ought not to be done on the seventh day." - James T. Ringgold, *The Law of Sunday*, pages 265-267.

With the Roman Catholic Church in the saddle of political and ecclesiastical power, the practice of Sunday observance which she enforced became deeply entrenched for more than one thousand years. Then the Protestant Reformation came a revolt against the religious rites, traditions, and holy days that had supplanted the Word of God for centuries. But these great reformers were breaking new ground, and the restoration of the Bible Sabbath was to be left to this final generation. The illustrious reformers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries courageously went to the burning stake because their conscience was bound in the Word of God. The Bible, and the Bible only, was to be their rule of faith and practice.

## **Does it Matter Today?**

Does it matter today? Is the setting aside of the seventh-day Sabbath of the Ten Commandments in favor of Sunday a small matter in the eyes of God?

In Daniel 7:25 God forecast that an oppressive religious power would think to change His sacred law: "And he shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws."

The scribes accused Jesus of fulfilling this prophecy when they charged Him with Sabbath-breaking. But Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." Matthew 5:17, 18.

Do we see the great issue involved? The prophecy had warned that an attempt would be made to change God's law. Christ said that He did not come to do this. But history has told us that a great religious power has attempted to do this in changing Sabbath observance to Sunday observance. And millions of conscientious Christians who have been unaware of these things have embraced the change. What shall we do?

The Word teaches that "whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." James 2:10. The point of the change from the seventh-day Sabbath of the Decalogue to the first day of the week, Sunday of church tradition, becomes a question of allegiance—a question of deepest loyalty, loyalty to God and Christ or loyalty to man and the early compromising church.

On the Sunday-keeping side we find many of the ministers of the Christian church and the entire hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. There are millions of good, honest church members who line up with them. But on the Sabbath side we see the great Bible Christians, the twelve apostles, John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, Mary the mother of Jesus, Stephen, and the early Christians; and from the Old Testament we see Adam, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Daniel, Isaiah, and many others.

But wait! Who is this that I see towering above all other? It is the same one who walked the dusty streets of Galilee—Jesus of Nazareth. He made the worlds. He gave the Sabbath that we might remember Him who made the worlds and can remake all who will yield to Him. He raises His nail-pierced hands—those pierced for His broken law—and beckons me to come to Him. I hesitate no longer. I want to stand with Jesus whatever the cost. You can, take the world, but give me Jesus. God helping me, here I stand, I can do no other. My friend, come and stand with me on the side of Jesus.

### **The Change of The Sabbath,**

Doctor Hiscox's SOLEMN QUESTION AND DECLARATION. There was and is a commandment to keep holy the Sabbath day, but that Sabbath day was not Sunday. It will be said, however, and with some show of triumph, that the Sabbath was transferred from the seventh to the first day of the week, with all its duties, privileges, and sanctions.

Earnestly desiring information on this subject, which I have studied for many years, I ask, Where can the record of such a transaction be found? Not in the New Testament, absolutely not. There is no Scriptural evidence of the change of the Sabbath institution from the seventh to the first day of the week.

I wish to say that this Sabbath question, in this aspect of it, is the gravest and most perplexing question connected with Christian institutions which at present claims attention from Christian people; and the only reason that it is not a more disturbing element in Christian thought and in religious discussions, is because the Christian world has settled down content on the conviction, that somehow a transference has taken place at the beginning of Christian history.

To me it seems unaccountable that Jesus, during three years' intercourse with his disciples, often conversing with them upon the Sabbath question, discussing it in some of its various aspects, freeing it from its false glosses, never alluded to any transference of the day; also, that during forty days of his resurrection life, no such thing was intimated. Nor, so far as we know, did the Spirit, which was given to bring to their remembrance all things whatsoever that he had said unto them, deal with this question. Nor yet did the inspired apostles, in preaching the gospel, founding churches, counseling and instructing those founded, discuss or approach this subject.

Of course, I quite well know that Sunday did come into use in early Christian history as a religious day, as we learn from the Christian Fathers and other sources. But what a pity that it comes branded with the mark of paganism, and christened with the name of the sun god, when adopted and sanctioned by the papal apostasy, and bequeathed as a sacred legacy to Protestantism! -Dr. Edward T. Hiscox, author of "The Baptist Manual," in a paper read before a New York Ministers' Conference, held November 13, 1893.

NOTE. The New York Examiner (Baptist) of November 16, 1893, tells of the interest in discussing this paper, but does not print it.

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