Toward a History of Sunday
(1 of 2)

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When I tell my friends that I am working on a history of Sunday, they usually understand that my interest is on whether early Christians gathered for worship on Sunday or on Saturday—on the first or on the seventh day of the week. That certainly is an important question, and I will deal with it. But that is not my main concern. My main concern is rather how Sunday has been understood, observed or celebrated throughout the history of the Christian church. In other words, while the “when” is important, I am more interested in the “how.”

Even so, I find it necessary to deal first with the "when," since this has been the subject of so many controversies that the deck must be cleared before moving to the "how."

In Jewish tradition, the Sabbath had such significance that the rest of the week was counted from that pivotal point: the first day after the Sabbath, the second after the Sabbath, and so forth. Furthermore, the Sabbath had such importance that sometimes the very word was used as a synonym for the entire period from Sabbath to Sabbath. This may be seen in Luke 18.12, where what the NRSV translates as "twice a week" is literally "twice a Sabbath"—*δὶς το ῦ σαββάτον*.

Likewise, there is no doubt that the Sabbath was of great importance for early Christians. Indeed, when the New Testament writers refer to what today we call "Sunday" they actually said something like "the first day [of] from the Sabbath." This is what the NRSV, as well as most other English versions, translate as "the first day of the week." With slight variations, this

terminology is found in all four Gospels. In Matthew 28:1, where we are told that the women went to the grave on the dawn of "the first day of the week"—*μίαν σαββάτων*. With slightly different Greek words, the same reference to the "first day of the week" is found in Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1, John 20: 1—*μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων*, John 20:19—μιᾷ σαββάτων, and Mark 16:9—*πρώτῃ σαββάτου*. While all these are references to the resurrection of Jesus, there are two other places in the New Testament in which the same terminology appears in connection with Christian life and worship. One is Acts 20.7, where the NRSV says: "in the first day of the week" (*μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων*) when we were gathered together to break bread . . ." The other is in I Corinthians 16:2, in which Paul instructs believers that "on the first day of every week—*μίαν σαββάτου,*—each of you is to put something aside . . ."

The passage in Acts 20 is particularly interesting when it comes to the "when" of worship. Paul and a group of believers are gathered in Troas "to break bread"—in other words, to celebrate communion—on "the first day of the week." But this is an evening gathering, for Paul continued speaking "until midnight." Since in Jewish reckoning the new day began with sunset, and not at midnight, it would seem that these Christians were meeting on what we today would call the evening of Saturday but which for them was the beginning of the first day of a new week.

One may well imagine that the early Jewish Christians, after attending worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath, would meet to break bread in the same evening, which to them was the first day of the week. Then the church began growing among those whom the Jews called "God-fearers"—that is, Gentiles

who believed in the God of the Jews and attended services in the synagogue but did not become Jews. This brought tensions with the Jews, as may be seen in the episode in Antioch of Pisidia in Acts 13, where the Jews "were filled with jealousy" upon seeing the multitudes that are willing to listen to the teachings of Paul. The result of such tensions was that Christians were expelled from the synagogues, and Christian worship now had to stand on its own.

This may be the background of Christian worship as we know of it in the second century, when the service was divided into the "Service of the Word," in which Scripture was read and commented as it was done in the synagogue, but with a distinctly Christian interpretation, and the shared meal of the "Service of the Table."

With the growing number of Gentiles in the church, the "first day of the week" came to be reckoned in a different way, for most Gentiles counted the beginning of a new day, not at sunset, but rather at midnight, as we do today. Now "the first day of the week" did not begin on the evening of the seventh but rather at midnight.

The growing number of Gentiles in the church also made it more difficult for Christians to observe the Sabbath. Over generations, Jews had found ways to be able to observe the Sabbath even in the midst of a Gentile society and economy, mostly by working at trades in which they could determine their own schedules—trades such as the tent-making that Paul and Aquila practiced. For Gentile Christians, many of whom were slaves or employees, it was easier to meet in the very early hours before dawn than in the evening when their services might still be required. Thus, by the second century Christians most

often met in the very early hours of the first day of the week, or the day after the Jewish Sabbath, which the Romans called *die solis*—the day of the Sun—but Christians called "the Lord's Day"—the *κυριακά* or *dominica*. Today, in Greek as in most Romance languages, the first day of the week is still called the Day of the Lord—*κυριακά, domingo*, *dimanche*, *dominica*. The main exception among the main languages that emerged within the boundaries of the former Roman Empire is English, in which we still call the first day of the week the Day of the Sun—Sunday.

Soon—as early as the second century—the growing conflicts between Christians and Jews led some Christian writers to demean the Sabbath and to call those who observed it "Judaizers." But still the seventh day of the week retained special significance, as is attested by the fact that its original name remains in the Greek—*σαββάτο*—as well as in Romance languages—*sábado*, *samedi*, *sabato*. Here again English retains the pagan roots of the day of Saturn, "Saturday."

Since so much has been made of it, allow me to say a word about the famous edict of Constantine in the year 321, declaring Sunday a day of rest. Constantine's ancestors were devotees of the *Sol invictus*—the Unconquered Sun—and so was Constantine, even while he favored Christians. Thus, honoring the *Sol invictus*—the Unconquered Sun—Constantine ordered that the day of the Sun—*die solis*—would be a day of rest in all the cities. He did not order that Christians should meet on this day. They had been doing that for a long time before Constantine. But in ordering that Sunday would be a day of rest, he did facilitate Christian worship, and he also set the stage for the later notion that the Christian day of worship was to be a day of rest, much like the Jewish Sabbath.

Much more could be said about all this. But, leaving aside the "when," allow me to turn to the "how." How was the first day of the week understood and observed by early Christians, and how has that evolved through the ages? Obviously, all I can offer here is a very brief outline.

In the early church, the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, the *dominica* or *κυριακά*, had special significance for three reasons. The first and most important was that this way it was the day of the resurrection of the Lord. Long before there was a Christian year, there was a Christian week. Its high point was the Lord's Day, celebrating his resurrection. The day before, the Sabbath, continued having special significance. On that day, Christians would prepare through fasting and meditation for the celebration of the Resurrection on the next day. Then, on the first day of the week, Christians would gather to break bread in remembrance and celebration of the Lord who had arisen on that day and who had made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread.

Secondly, the first day of the week had special significance because it was also the first of the six days of creation. In the resurrection of Jesus, a new creation had begun—a creation that was at once new and a restoration of the first creation. There are abundant references in early Christian writers to this connection between the day when the first creation began and the day when God began making all things new.

Thirdly, the first day of the week was important because it was also the eighth day of the week. The seven-day week was patterned after the story of creation in Genesis. But the cycle of week after week would not be endless. At some point, after the seventh day of the week would come not another first

day but an endless eighth day, the day of the eternal Sabbath. This was another dimension of what Christians celebrated when they gathered for breaking bread. On the day of Resurrection, a new age had dawned. Those who had been baptized in Christ were baptized into this new age—which is the reason why many ancient baptistries were octagonal. The bread they broke was a foretaste of the heavenly banquet—which is why the most ancient Eucharistic prayers are eschatological in nature. Significantly, the prophets of old had spoken about a coming "Day of the Lord," and this was precisely what Christians now called the first day of the week: the *dominica*, the *κυριακά*, the Lord's Day.

None of this was Constantine's doing. It had been going on for generations before his decree. But his decree did bring about one important change: Now the day that Constantine called the “Day of the Sun,” and Christians the “Day of the Lord,” became a day of rest. Gentile Christians—by then the vast majority of the church—had long given up the effort to rest on the Sabbath. They had done this in part as a result of anti-Jewish polemics but also because it was practically impossible for them, given their social and economic circumstances, to keep a day of rest. But now Constantine made it possible. The result was extensive legislation, enacted throughout the Middle Ages, as to what could and what could not be done on the *dominica*.

This did not mean, however, that all memory of the Sabbath was erased. On the contrary, the seventh day of the week still had special significance, as is attested by its name to this day in Greek as well as in Romance languages—while in those languages that developed as the edges of the Roman Empire, such as English, Dutch, and German, it retains its pagan name as the Day of Saturn. In medieval Latin, *sabbatum* normally refers to the seventh day of the week. But the verb *sabbatizare*, to "Sabbathize,"

often a pejorative way to refer to Jewish customs, is sometimes used in a positive way, meaning keeping the observances of rest on the *dominica*.

A hundred years after Constantine, the Western Roman Empire had collapsed. There followed a time of fear and disorder joined with a growing emphasis on communion as the unbloody re-sacrifice of Christ. The result was that communion, rather than a celebration of creation, of resurrection, and of the new creation, became a ceremony of doom and gloom—a reenactment of Good Friday rather than of the day of Resurrection.

Still, given the laws of rest that were enacted throughout the Middle Ages, once one left the actual ceremonies of the church, Sunday was a glad day, a day of celebration. This in turn contributed to a widening gulf between the life of the church and of ritual and the daily life of most people and at various times provoked a reaction on the part of those who sought to make daily life more consonant with the life of worship. They did not do this, however, by making communion more joyful but rather by making the rest of the day more somber.

Such efforts did not end with the Reformation but became particularly marked in Puritan England. While there are many reasons for this, it would be well to note that declaring Sunday to be the "Sabbath," as the Puritans did, would have been impossible in most Romance languages, where the seventh day of the week was still called the Sabbath—*sábado*, *sabato*. If time allowed, it would be interesting to consider how this linguistic matter may have affected the rise of Sabbatarianism in English-speaking countries.

Time is short, and I cannot follow this story all the way through. But in ending allow me to point out that what we are witnessing today, with the movement of liturgical renewal, is in many ways an attempt to recover the emphasis of worship in general—and particularly of baptism and communion—on the three elements I listed earlier as part of the ancient meaning of the Lord's Day: the first creation as good, the second creation as inaugurated in the Resurrection of Jesus, and the eschatological announcement of the eternal Sabbath.