

The Origins of Sunday Worship in the Early Church

Romans 14:5-6
New International Version (NIV)

⁵One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶Whoever regards one day as special **does so to the Lord**. Whoever eats meat **does so to the Lord**, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains **does so to the Lord** and gives thanks to God.

Thesis statement: Although seventh-day Sabbatarians cite evidence that Jesus and the primitive church kept a seventh-day Sabbath, nevertheless first and second-century church writers show that some Christian communities began to meet on the first day of the week after Jesus' resurrection, and that worship began to shift from the seventh day to the first day of the week at that time. The early church gave warrants for making this shift from the Gospels and the Pauline writings.

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Method of analysis and presentation

We begin with a discussion of the main groups that made up first-century Christianity: Jewish Christians from Judea and Galilee, the Hellenistic Jewish Christians represented by Stephen, and the Pauline churches. We will then look at references Paul made to the sabbath and Sunday worship.

Then we will look at how the Gospel writers (including Luke-Acts) referred to the sabbath and the first day of the week. The recurring charge we will see against Jesus is breaking the sabbath. Next, we will move on to post-apostolic writings into the second century to look at the shift from worship on the sabbath to worship on Sunday.

The early Christian communities

The apostolic faith took on many forms of expression in the first decades of its life as it responded to cultural, social, political and religious pressures.¹ We see in Luke's writing of Acts that the first Christians were Jews, and the earliest church is classifiable as a messianic sect within Judaism. The disciples are frequently found in the temple ([Acts 2:46; 3:1-3; 5:21, 25, 42](#)), and since they were held in high regard by the people ([Acts 2:47; 5:13](#)), it can be assumed that they continued to observe the law, circumcision, sabbath worship and the food laws.²

Those who met in Jerusalem for Pentecost were Jews and proselytes ([Acts 2:10](#)). Those Jews and proselytes who became believers were firmly attached to the temple, attending the daily hours of prayer ([Acts 2:46; 3:1](#)). Luke's account of the earliest period of the life of the new community ends with them not having stirred from Jerusalem and still largely focused on the temple ([Acts 5:42](#)).

In [Acts 21:20](#) the Jewish Christian members, led by James, tell Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law." Paul's act of fulfilling the vow in the temple shows the continuing role of the temple in the lives of the conservative Jerusalem Christians.

However, Jewish Christianity was anything but a single, unified phenomenon. It was present in many locations throughout the Mediterranean world, and expressed itself in orthodox and heretical forms.

Following are other examples of Jewish Christianity.

The Judean Christian community in James

Paul calls James one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church ([Gal. 2:9](#)), and he notes that "certain people came from James," by their continued observance of circumcision and ritual purity, undermined the gospel of his Gentile mission in Antioch ([Gal. 2:11-15](#)).³ Acts does not record that any of the Jerusalem church came to help Paul when he was arrested.

James and the elders gave this description of Jewish Christians: "how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law" ([Acts 21:20](#)).

Hellenistic-Jewish community (Stephen's circle and Antioch)

When Stephen, a Hellenist, came on the scene in [Acts 6:1-5](#), the church began to broaden while still within the confines of Judaism. Stephen was accused by what are referred to as “false witnesses” of speaking against the temple and the law ([Acts 6:13](#)). The speech Luke records in Acts 7 shows that this accusation was not entirely untrue. Stephen castigated the ancestors for not obeying Moses (7:39), a charge that they had leveled against him (6:11). Stephen said that the temple had limited importance and that “the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands” ([Acts 7:48](#)).

Stephen’s speech led to his martyrdom and ignited the first persecution of the church, of Jews by Jews. That the twelve apostles were able to remain in Jerusalem while the Hellenist members were forced to flee indicates that the persecution was not directed at the apostles, probably because they dissociated themselves from the views of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians.⁴ As the persecuted Christians fled Jerusalem, they preached the gospel (8:4, 11:19-20), eventually reaching Antioch, the church that launched the Pauline mission to the gentiles ([Acts 13:1-3](#)).

When the church remained in the confines of Judaism, we see no evidence in Acts of sabbath controversies. It is assumed that Jewish Christians kept the sabbath. However, as the church moved out of the confines of Jerusalem and into Gentile areas, the sabbath became a matter of concern, as noted by references made by Paul in his writings.

Part I: Pauline churches—conflicts concerning the sabbath and Judaizers

We will now look at several places in which Paul discussed the sabbath and Jewish holy days.

Gal. 4:10

The Gentile church in Galatia (4:3, 8) was being troubled by Christian Jews who came from the Jerusalem church and demanded the Gentiles⁵ be circumcised and observe the law of Moses. In [Gal. 4:9-10](#) Paul accuses the Galatians of returning to and being enslaved by “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” by “observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years.”

Based on the context of combating Judaizing opponents, we conclude that these terms refer to the Jewish calendar. The context does not indicate that these days would be pagan days. *Days* would refer to the sabbath, or maybe also special festivals of one day’s duration. *Months* would refer to new moons that mark the beginning of months. *Seasons* would refer to Jewish festivals that last more than one day, such as the Passover and Festival of Tabernacles. *Years* would refer to sabbatical years, the year of Jubilee or Rosh Hashanah, the start of the new year.⁶

1 Cor. 16:2

Despite his advice to others in Romans 14, Paul indicates in [1 Cor. 16:2](#) that he did not consider every day alike. Paul appears to regard the first day of the week above the others, as he designated it in [1 Cor. 16:2](#) as the day for the Corinthians to perform what he refers to in [2 Cor. 9:12](#) (which deals with this ministry to the saints, cf. 9:1) as a ministry of service (*leitourgia*).⁷ If regular systematic giving were all that Paul intended, one day would appear as suitable as another for this purpose.⁸ When Paul refers to this collection as ministry of service ([2 Cor. 9:12](#)), the designation of the day points to its religious significance.

If merely systematic giving were all Paul asked for, he would not have specified the day of the week. This verse indicates that Paul not only knew that Christians distinguished that day from others by using it for religious worship (the Galatian churches were also told to make this collection on the first day of the week, [1 Cor. 16:1](#)), but

that he also approved of that distinction by making it himself.⁹ The reference to the first day of the week would have no significance unless Paul is assuming that this day was already a special day for the church.¹⁰

[1 Cor. 16:2](#) and [Acts 20:7](#) are the only places in the New Testament outside of the resurrection narratives ([Mark 16:2](#); [Matthew 28:1](#); [Luke 24:1](#); [John 20:1, 19](#)) where the term “the first day of the week” is used. The Corinthian church was aware ([1 Cor. 15:1-8](#)) that the resurrection occurred on the third day and the first day of the week.¹¹

Romans 14:5-6

In Romans 14, Paul refers to the weak as those who eat only vegetables, and the strong (with whom Paul identifies himself) as those who eat anything. How does Paul relate these two groups to the question of observing days? Paul says in [Rom. 14:5-6](#): “Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.”

The problem is set in the context of tensions between the Jewish minority and Gentile majority in Rome (cf. [Rom. 11](#)). A sabbatarian argument is that these days refer to pagan days, but the problem appears to have arisen because many Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians influenced by Jewish tradition regarded the continued observance of the Jewish sabbath and festival days as of continued importance because they viewed the new movement they were a part of as a fulfilled form of Judaism.¹² Here, though, Paul speaks both of the freedom to keep or not to keep the sabbath.

Col. 2:16-17

It can be argued that most of the Colossian members were Gentile converts because of 1) allusions to the pagan past of the letter’s recipients (see comments in the next paragraph), 2) a scarcity of OT allusions, 3) distinctive Gentile vices mentioned in 3:5-7 (“these are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life”), and 4) and a near lack of references to reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles.

Evidence of the recipients’ pagan past is shown in the first chapter: the recipients are referred to as outsiders brought inside: 1:12: “who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints”; 1:21: “you who were once estranged and hostile in mind”; 1:27: “to them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery.” Further, they were said to be once “dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh” (2:13).

Paul tells the Colossians in [Col. 2:16](#): “Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.” The Colossian Christians had syncretistic practices that included ascetic regulations drawn from Judaism performed to appease the elemental spirits (*stoicheia*) of the universe (2:8, 20).¹³ Paul’s use of “do not let anyone condemn you” about observing these days shows that Paul did not lay down any regulations over the use of the festivals; in other words, it was not required to keep the seventh-day sabbath or the other festival days.

Conclusions about Paul and the sabbath

In these passages Paul is contending with the dangers of some obligations being placed on his converts. The harshest of his responses is in Galatians, where these requirements were not only linked with a return to the “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (*stoicheia*), but were being required for acceptance into the church. In Rome and Colossae, such requirements were used as a basis for judging fellow Christians ([Rom. 14:4](#), “Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another?”; [Col. 2:16](#), “Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths”).

Paul opposes any attempt to require the observance of festivals. In Paul's view a person may keep the sabbath or not. In general, Paul would assume that a Jewish Christian would keep the sabbath and a Gentile convert would not (cf. [1 Cor. 9:19-23](#)). It would seem unlikely that Paul pioneered in the observance of Sunday, because he is the only New Testament writer who warns his converts against the observance of days ([Col. 2:17](#); [Gal. 4:10](#); [Rom. 14:6](#)).

Had Paul introduced Sunday worship, he may have been accused of this in [Acts 21:21](#), when he was accused of teaching against circumcision and against observing Jewish customs. However, Paul was not specifically accused of teaching against sabbath observance or promoting observance of the first day of the week at the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15. It can be argued that Paul found the custom already established among Christians when he began his Gentile mission, which would indicate that the custom originated among Jewish Christians.

Part II: The Sabbath in the Gospels and Acts

Next, we will look at the sabbath controversies in the Gospels to see how the Gospel writers portrayed Jesus in reference to the sabbath. We will examine these texts to see whether Jesus is shown to have broken the sabbath command as given in the Torah or whether he simply broke the halakic interpretations of the sabbath.

The Halakah was developed to guide the Jews in areas where the scriptural text was not explicit. The Halakah began to be developed after the Exile in the closing days of the prophetic movement (*m. 'Abot* claims that it goes back to Moses). With the lack of an authoritative word from God, the Jews could not always determine God's will on the basis of scriptural text alone. Thus, a need existed to interpret and apply the past revelation of God's will in various situations that confronted the Jewish community. As the process continued, the oral decisions of generations of Jewish teachers were codified in the Mishnah.¹⁴

The Torah was not explicit in many areas, especially when dealing with sabbath observance. Scripture gave little detailed guidance of how to keep the sabbath, and a substantial body of tradition developed that showed the Jews what they could do and could not do on the sabbath.¹⁵

Sabbath controversies in Mark

Mark 2:23-28

This pericope along with the two preceding ones (2:15-17, 18-22) belongs to a complex of three conflict stories that involve Jesus, his disciples and the Pharisees.¹⁶ The sabbath controversy involves the disciples plucking grain as they were going through the grainfields, and each of the synoptic Gospel writers includes the account.

This pericope is viewed as an apologetic for the early church's sabbath practices because the Pharisees question the behavior of the disciples, not Jesus. In other words, the disciples represent the reader, the church.¹⁷ The church is seen to ascribe the justification of its sabbath customs to Jesus, and the church defends itself by appealing to its Master. This incident can also be seen with a Christological focus, that the Son of Man is greater than the sabbath.¹⁸

The Pharisees ask Jesus, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" (verse 24). The disciples' behavior on the sabbath was illegal. The Mishnah (*m. Sabb. 7:2*) classifies proscribed work on the sabbath, which would include plucking heads of grain. [Exodus 16:27](#) also says that those who gathered manna on the sabbath were refusing God's commandments and instructions.

Jesus gives scriptural proof for breaking the sabbath when he replies by asking whether they have read what David did when he and his companions were hungry ([1 Sam. 21:6](#)) and ate the bread of the Presence, “which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat” (cf. [Lev. 24:8-9](#)). This also can be seen as a Christological statement about Jesus and his ministry rather than an apology for the disciples’ (or later, the church’s) sabbath conduct. Just as David had the right to eat the bread of the Presence illegally, and to give those with him to eat it illegally, so Jesus had the right to permit his disciples to eat food gathered illegally on the sabbath.¹⁹

If taken as an apology for sabbath conduct, the disciples were clearly breaking the Torah. Jesus says that if David could break the Torah and eat the bread of the Presence, the disciples of Jesus could break the Torah and pluck grain and eat.

Then Jesus says: “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath”; and then he follows with a Christological statement: “The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (2:28), which declares the Son of Man’s authority over the sabbath.

Jesus is hardly universalizing the sabbath to all humanity from Israel (contra the sabbatarian argument), which saw itself as specially gifted of God with the sabbath.²⁰ To universalize the sabbath would have created another sabbath controversy because the Pharisees did not view the sabbath as binding on all humanity. Jesus’ statement can be viewed as compatible with, and not a departure from, Judaism.

In Jubilees 2, the sabbath is viewed as a gift from God to his people for their enjoyment. Jubilees 2:19: “I shall separate for myself a people from among all the nations. And they will also keep the sabbath. And I will sanctify them for myself, and I will bless them. And they will be my people and I will be their God.”

Taking 2:27 and 28 together answers the Pharisees’ question and explains the disciples’ conduct not on the principle of freedom in 2:27 but on the authority of the Son of Man in 2:28.²¹

M.D. Hooker points out that Jesus’ comments about David show how regulations made to safeguard something holy were set aside for David, who enjoyed a special position, and for those who were with him. In a similar way, regulations safeguarding the sabbath were here set aside for Jesus, in a special position, and those who were with him.²²

Some argue that Jesus’ statement that “the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” gives universal scope for the sabbath. However, to do this is to see something alien to the context. Jesus is here restricting the sabbath command, not broadening it. The context deals not with the universal scope of the sabbath, but the purpose of the sabbath rest.²³ The sabbath was created for the benefit of humans, and here Jesus is speaking against the burdensome requirements that the Jews had added to the original command. Jesus was not saying that the sabbath was made for all people—Jews and Gentiles. The Pharisees believed that the sabbath was for the Jews only. Had Jesus said that the sabbath was made for Gentiles, this would have created another controversy, but none is indicated here. The Pharisees were only concerned about Jewish conduct on the sabbath.

Though the Gospels do not show Jesus and his disciples generally violating sabbath law, the use of this passage by the early church to defend itself against the Pharisees shows that the early church continued to loosen the restraint of the sabbath and cited the example of Jesus to do so.

Mark 3:1-5

In this account, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the sabbath. He precipitates a sabbath controversy by calling the man forward to perform the miracle. The controversy was whether it was lawful to heal

a non-urgent malady on the sabbath. The Torah says nothing about healing on the sabbath, but the rabbis considered healing prohibited work based on [Exodus 31:14](#) (“whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people”). The rabbis modified this rule to allow exceptions to save someone’s life (m. Shab. 18:3; m. Yoma 8:6). However, Jesus did not do any work here, and the man’s life was not in danger. Jesus simply spoke, and the man was healed. It is difficult to see how the Pharisees saw any wrong in this, and Mark records Jesus’ anger (3:5): “He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart.”

Sabbath conflicts in Matthew

Matthew’s community is predominantly Jewish, as evidenced by its interest in Old Testament fulfillment, in the Pharisees and in the general Jewish flavor of the Gospel.²⁴ Matthew is said to show the Jewish Christians’ regard for the sabbath, as he alone says to “pray that your flight may not be...on a sabbath” (24:20).

Matthew’s view of the law can be seen especially in his redaction of Mark concerning Jesus’ comments about clean and unclean meats ([Matthew 15:17-20/Mark 7:18-23](#)). Mark reads (but Matthew does not include the italicized words in the following): “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside *cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?*’ (*Thus he declared all foods clean*)” (verses 18-20). Whatever Matthew means by Jesus saying he fulfilled the law, it is not to be understood as superseding it or leaving it behind.²⁵

On the other hand, there is a striking anti-Judaism in Matthew, as he refers to “*theirsynagogues*” ([Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 10:17](#)); the reference to Jews in 28:15 concocting a story to explain the resurrection of Jesus (“And this story is still told among the Jews to this day”); and worst of all (because it is used to incite anti-Semitism): “His blood be on us and on our children” ([Matthew 27:15](#)).²⁶

Matthew 12:1-8

Matthew highlights the Christological significance to the story about the disciples plucking grain on the sabbath by adding the following to Mark’s account:

Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless. I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless. ([Matthew 12:5-7](#))

The above is an argument from minor to major: if the priests in the temple profane the sabbath and are guiltless, how much more so the disciples of Jesus, because “something greater than the temple is here.” Matthew alone has Jesus telling the disciples to pray that their flight not be on the sabbath ([Matthew 24:20](#)). Also to help justify the disciples’ actions to his possibly sabbath-keeping community, Matthew adds that the disciples plucked grain because they “were hungry” ([Matthew 12:1](#)). Matthew’s addition of “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (12:7) is from [Hosea 6:6](#). The sabbath command must be interpreted in terms of mercy, not strict unbending demand. However, this is not a relaxing of the sabbath law, but applying it in terms of love (22:34-40) and doing good on the sabbath in the following pericope (12:12).²⁷

Matthew 12:9-14

Matthew adds the following:

He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." ([Matthew 12:11-12](#))

Here Jesus is shown as an interpreter of the law for the church, which in Matthew's community still kept the sabbath ([Matthew 24:20](#)).²⁸ In Matthew's account, the sabbath law is superseded by concern for the life of an animal. If kindness can be shown to an animal on the sabbath, how much more so to a human being. In Matthew, Jesus does not challenge the sabbath law, but the interpretation of it, showing that the determining factor is love.²⁹

Matthew 24:20

Matthew alone records this saying of Jesus: "Pray that your flight not be in winter or on a sabbath." Matthew was writing to a mostly Jewish audience still keeping the sabbath, and this statement should not be taken to mean that Jesus taught his disciples that any kind of travel, including escape, on the sabbath day was wrong. Jesus does not suggest that they refrain from fleeing on the sabbath, but if they were forced to flee, he tells them to pray that it would be on another day. Several things could slow them down when they fled: pregnant women or nursing mothers (verse 19); winter rains or cold weather (verse 20); or sabbath regulations, which included the shutting of gates and closing of shops.³⁰ Mark, writing to a Gentile audience, says merely, "Pray that it may not be in winter" ([Mark 13:18](#)).

Sabbath controversies in Luke's writings

Luke 6:1-5

Luke omits Jesus' reply in [Mark 2:27](#): "Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.'" The final verse is an explicit comment from Jesus: "Then he said to them, 'The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath'" (6:5).

Luke adds to Mark's account that Jesus' disciples plucked the heads of grain "and ate them," thus apparently reassuring his readers that the disciples were not guilty of what was proscribed in [Deut. 23:24-25](#). However, the plucking (reaping) and rubbing (threshing) are both against Pharisaic regulations.³¹

Luke also adds the word "took" to the comment in this phrase: David "entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence" (6:4). This suggests that David assumed this authority; it was not given to him by the priests. So also the Son of Man, whom Luke shows is the Son of David (1:27, 32, 69; 2:4; 3:31; 18:38-39), is lord of the sabbath.

Commenting on Luke's account, Nolland notes that lordship here is the right to authoritatively represent the divine intention for the sabbath and a possible criticism of the Pharisees for making themselves lords of the sabbath.³²

Luke 4:16-30

This incident of Jesus speaking in the synagogue in Nazareth on the sabbath ended in confrontation. The anger of those in attendance had to do with comments made by Jesus about how God in two Old Testament cases took care of Gentiles while ignoring the plight of Jews. The crowd is angered to the point of almost committing murder on the sabbath.

Of interest to this study is Luke's statement that Jesus went into the synagogue on the sabbath day "as was his custom" ([Luke 4:16](#)). This is a reference to Jesus' synagogue teaching habits. It refers back to verse 15, where Luke writes that in Galilee, Jesus "began to teach in their synagogues."³³ Luke uses this expression in [Acts 17:2](#), where he says that "Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures." The custom then is both Jesus ([Luke 4:15](#)) and Paul entering the synagogues to teach.

Luke 13:10-17; Luke 14:1-6

In these tandem accounts, Jesus heals a woman in a synagogue on the sabbath day who had "a spirit that crippled her for eighteen years" (13:11), and he heals a man of dropsy while on his way to a sabbath meal at the home of the leader of the Pharisees (14:1-6). Jesus initiated the healing of the woman with the spirit that had crippled her. This and the fact that she had the infirmity for eighteen years shows that this was not an emergency case. The leader of the synagogue was indignant and "kept saying to the crowd" that there are six days in which work is to be done and to come on one of those days, not the sabbath, to be healed.

Jesus responds in similar ways to the Jews who reacted negatively to both healings. He reminds them that they give water to oxen and donkeys on the sabbath, and asks what is wrong with freeing a daughter of Abraham bound by Satan for eighteen years (13:15-16) and implicitly asks what is wrong with healing the man of dropsy on the sabbath. It is difficult to see how Jesus is guilty of breaking any precept in the Torah. Jesus does not claim that these are emergency cases, and therefore rejects the framework of the Halakah that forbade non-emergency healings on the sabbath.

Luke 23:52-56

On the preparation day, Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for the body of Jesus, wraps it in a linen cloth, and lays it in a tomb. The women who had come with him from Galilee prepared ointments and "on the sabbath they rested according to the commandment" (verse 56). It would seem odd for these Jewish women to have done anything differently in a pre-resurrection setting.

Acts

Now we turn our attention to how the sabbath is mentioned in the book of Acts. The sabbath is referred to in the following places in Acts.

[Acts 1:12](#): "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, a sabbath day's journey away."

[Acts 13:27](#): "Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him."

[Acts 13:42, 44](#): "As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people urged them to speak about these things again the next sabbath.... The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord."

[Acts 15:21](#): "For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues."

[Acts 16:13](#): "On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there."

[Acts 17:2](#): "And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures."

[Acts 18:4](#): “Every sabbath he [Paul] would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.”

Most of these scriptures show the apostles beginning to preach the gospel in the Jewish synagogues, both to the Jews and to Gentiles who had assembled there. It would have been natural for Jewish Christians to have remained in the synagogues until they were forced out, perhaps near the end of the first century.

Of interest here is the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 about what was required of Gentile converts. Sabbath observance is not listed among the requirements for the Gentiles that the Jerusalem conference decided upon ([Acts 15:20](#)). The requirements they decided upon are similar to the Noachian laws, which also did not include the sabbath. Josephus wrote in *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.3.8 that after the Flood this is what God required of Noah:

I require you to abstain from shedding the blood of men, and to keep yourselves pure from murder; and to punish those that commit any such thing. I permit you to make use of all the other living creatures at your pleasure, and as your appetites lead you; for I have made you lords of them all, both of those that walk on the land, and those that swim in the waters, and of those that fly in the regions of the air on high—excepting their blood, for therein is the life.

So we see that neither the sabbath nor the food laws applied to people after the Flood, before there were Jews and Gentiles. Later, after God made the Jews his chosen people, the sabbath was for them only.

Jubilees 2:19 says:

I shall separate for myself a people from among all nations. And they shall keep the sabbath. And I will sanctify them for myself, and I will bless them. Just as I have sanctified and shall sanctify the sabbath day for myself thus shall I bless them.

The reference in the Jerusalem decree to fornication may have its basis in the forbidden marriages of [Lev. 18:6-18](#), and the reference to not eating blood has its basis in [Lev. 17:10-14](#).

Gentiles were attracted to Judaism in varying degrees. Conversion to Judaism entailed three elements: belief in God (and denial of pagan gods), circumcision (and immersion/baptism) and integration into the Jewish community.³⁴ These were known as proselytes. God-fearers (cf. [Acts 13:43](#); [17:4](#), [17](#)) were linked in a formal way to Judaism and kept some of the commandments, without being proselytes.³⁵ Some kept the sabbath, festivals and food laws, but they did not see themselves as Jews and were not considered to be Jews by the Jews.³⁶

Acts 20:7-12

In this pericope we read that the disciples met on the first day of the week for the purpose of breaking bread ([Acts 20:7a](#)). This is the earliest text from which it may be inferred that Christians came together for worship on that day.³⁷ It is uncertain whether this was a Saturday evening service (based on Jewish reckoning) or a Sunday evening service (based on Roman usage). Evidence favoring a Sunday evening meeting is that in Gentile circles, time was reckoned according to Roman usage.³⁸ The only other place Luke uses the phrase “first day of the week” is in [Luke 24:1](#), where the reference is to Sunday.

This paper argues that Sunday worship began as a prolongation and adaptation (in the light of the resurrection) of the Jewish Sabbath, as early Jewish Christians attended Jewish worship services and then met by themselves for Christian worship. If this is so, this meeting in Acts 20 would have been on a Saturday evening. However, if the early church commemorated the post-resurrection Sunday meetings of Christ with his disciples ([Luke 24:36-43](#); [John 20:19-29](#)), this service took place on Sunday evening.

The text says that they “met to break bread.” Luke uses the term “break bread” five times in Acts (2:42, 46; [Acts 20:7, 11](#); and [27:35](#)). “Break bread” is not the typical Jewish expression for eating a meal.³⁹ The verb for “met” (*sunago*, from the same root that forms the word *synagogue*) describes assembly for worship. Jewett argues that Luke is describing a structured Christian assembly, and that this is the earliest clear witness to Christian assembly for purposes of worship on the first day of the week.⁴⁰

Sabbath controversies in John

John 5:1-18

In this account, Jesus heals a man by the pool of Beth-Zatha who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus heals the man and tells him to take up his mat and walk. When the man tells the religious authorities of the incident, they are angered not at the healing, but at Jesus telling him to take up his mat. This, though not clearly prohibited in the Torah, apparently falls under the 39 classes of work forbidden on the sabbath in m. Shab. 7:2.

Those classes of work are:

sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing crops, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, washing or beating or dyeing it, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying [a knot], loosening [a knot], sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches, hunting a gazelle, slaughtering or flaying or salting it or curing its skin, scraping it or cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing in order to write two letters, building, pulling down, putting out a fire, lighting a fire, striking with a hammer and taking out aught from one domain to another.⁴¹

Jesus tells the religious authorities, “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (verse 17). This angered the Jews even more “because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal with God” (verse 18). Here John is confronting the chief Jewish objection to Jesus, that he makes himself equal to God. In verses 19-30 John shows what this equality means, that Jesus is totally dependent on God (not independent, as the Jews took it) and conscious of the Father appointing him to do works that the Father has the right and power to execute.⁴²

John 9:1-41

This is the account of when, on a sabbath, Jesus healed the man born blind. “He spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes” (verse 6). Jesus possibly broke several halakic rules by mixing (m. Shab. 24:3), kneading (m. Shab. 7:2) and smearing the clay on his eyes, possibly a prohibited anointing (m. Shab. 14:4).⁴³ This provoked a controversy between the Pharisees, the man and his parents. Some of the Pharisees said Jesus could not be from God because “he does not observe the sabbath” (verse 16). The Pharisees put the healed man out of the synagogue (verse 34).

Conclusions from the Gospel accounts

The way the Gospel writers portray Jesus begins to show a shift away from sabbath observance. The way they portray Jesus’ attitude toward the sabbath in the sabbath controversies helps us see how his later followers saw the freedom to not keep the sabbath but to meet for worship on the first day of the week.

Though Matthew shows a high regard for the law and the sabbath, there is an anti-Jewish tone to the Gospel, too, and even here we can see a softening of demands for keeping the sabbath. From Mark, with less concern for the Jewish heritage, we see a relaxing of the food laws, a major pillar of Judaism, and the comment that Jesus is Lord

of the sabbath. From Luke, we see Jesus performing his ministry regardless of whether it was the sabbath. From John's account, we see the strongest statements against the sabbath. Jesus goes so far as to tell the religious authorities: "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (5:17). In John's account alone, Jesus is explicitly accused of "breaking the sabbath" (5:18).

In the Gospel pericopes we studied, we see Jesus being confronted for healing on the sabbath. Though he is seen to break halakic regulations concerning the sabbath, the incident of his disciples plucking heads of grain on the sabbath is the closest thing to work for which Jesus' disciples could be accused of sabbath breaking according to the Torah. In [John 5:17-18](#), Jesus is also possibly admitting to breaking the Torah when he claims that he and his Father are working on the sabbath.

These accounts show the beginnings of a shift away from sabbath observance. Jesus' attitude toward the sabbath helps explain the freedom his followers subsequently showed toward its observance by assembling for worship on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day.⁴⁴ The fact that the Christian church no longer keeps the seventh-day sabbath can be traced back to the sabbath conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish leaders as reported in the Gospels. Before his disciples could have thought of worshiping God on any day other than the sabbath, they must have been convinced that Jesus did not require them to observe that day.⁴⁵

The Gospels contain no explicit statements that the sabbath must be kept, and each of the accounts of the sabbath controversies shows Jesus lessening sabbath restrictions. In an even more substantial statement, Jesus' claim to be lord of the sabbath also raises the possibility of a future reinterpretation of the sabbath.⁴⁶ Jesus performed his messianic work irrespective of the sabbath, and (though we still see some Jewish Christians keeping the sabbath) this may have contributed to the erosion of commitment to the sabbath in some quarters of the primitive church.⁴⁷

How Gospel writers portrayed the first day of week

Each of the synoptic Gospel writers and John reported that the resurrection of Christ took place on the first day of the week ([Matthew 28:1](#); [Mark 16:2](#); [Luke 24:1](#); [John 20:1](#)). It was significant to them to include the day of the week when the resurrection took place, and this may have reflected the significance their communities attached to the first day of the week.⁴⁸

In Matthew's account, the chief priests and Pharisees refer to Jesus' prediction that Jesus would rise "after three days" (27:63). Matthew refers to the resurrection as taking place "as the first day of the week was dawning" ([Matthew 28:1](#)) and that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on that day (verse 9).

In Mark's account, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome visit the tomb "very early on the first day of the week" (16:2). In 16:9, Mark says that Jesus "rose early on the first day of the week" (16:9). However, Mark does not mention the first day of the week when he refers to Jesus' appearance to the two disciples "walking into the country" (16:12), nor when Jesus appeared to the eleven (16:14).

Luke writes that the women visited the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week (24:1); that Jesus appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus "on that same day" (verse 13); and that Jesus appeared to the eleven that evening (verses 36-49).

In John, Mary Magdalene visits the tomb "early on the first day of the week while it was still dark" (20:1). Jesus appears to the eleven minus Thomas on the evening of the first day ([John 20:19](#)); and he appears to the eleven including Thomas one week later, also on the first day of the week (20:26-29).

The fact that each Gospel writer mentions that the resurrection was on the first day of the week shows the importance of that day. As we saw a lessening of importance of the seventh-day sabbath in the sabbath controversies, we are seeing the rising importance of the first day of the week in the resurrection narratives.

Additional meetings on first day of week

Although New Testament writings give no direct evidence that Sunday worship originated in the original Judean church, when evidence does appear in later Christian writings, Sunday observance is the universal practice outside of Judea, with no trace of controversy as to whether Christians should meet on Sunday. It would seem that Sunday worship was already a Christian custom before Paul's gentile mission, and that it spread throughout the growing Gentile church with the Gentile mission.

A major split between Jewish Christians and non-Christian Jews took place late in the first century. Christians were included among the heretics referred to in the twelfth of the Eighteen Benedictions that Jews recited daily and in every synagogue service. Since no heretic would pronounce this curse, it effectively banned Christians from the synagogue:

For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, and the [Nazoreans, so Martin] and the *minim* [which at least includes Jewish Christians] perish as in a moment and be blotted out from the book of life and with the righteous may they not be inscribed. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.⁴⁹

The Jerusalem church continued to rest on the sabbath and attend Temple or synagogue services, and they also met as Christians in private homes to hear teaching from the apostles and to break bread together.⁵⁰ The reason for Sunday worship would have been a Christian need for a time of distinctively Christian worship. As Bauckham notes, once we grant that the Jerusalem church had Christian meetings in addition to the Temple or synagogue services, the Jewish Christian observance of the sabbath is not contradictory to Jewish Christian worship on Sunday.⁵¹ After the Christians were removed from the synagogues, only these Sunday meetings would be left. As we see in [Acts 20:7](#) (which pre-dates the Jewish Christians being expelled from the synagogues), Luke writes that the church in Troas was meeting on the first day of the week for the purpose of breaking bread.

In the first firmly datable evidence of Christianity in Bithynia, Pliny writes to the emperor Trajan in A.D. 110 (Pliny, [Ep. 10.5-96](#)) that at the end of the first century, Christians were meeting before dawn and again in the evening of the same day. Pliny described the assembly: "The Christians came together before daybreak on a fixed day and bound themselves with a vow not to steal, commit adultery, and the like."

Jewett argues that Pliny did not name the day of the week because he had no name at his disposal. The planetary week, from which we get the name Sunday, was not current in Pliny's day, and it is unlikely that Pliny would be accustomed to using the seven-day division of time by which the Jews and Christians designated the day as the "first day of the week." However, the Jewish sabbath was well known, and if this assembly had been on the Jewish sabbath it would seem that he would have mentioned it as such, since he was presumably familiar with it. The fact that he did not designate the day implies that no specific name for it was in general use (the name "Lord's Day" would have been used only among Christians.)⁵²

Part III: Second-century churches

In the second century, Sunday worship was the norm, and fewer conflicts over the seventh-day sabbath are evident. The second-century references of Ignatius, Magn. 9:1; Gosp. Peter 35, 50; Barn. 15:9; and Justin, 1 Apol.

67 associate Sunday worship with the resurrection. In Barnabas and Justin, other reasons for the significance of Sunday are given first: Sunday representing the eschatological eighth day in Barnabas, and the day on which God began the creation in Justin.⁵³

The second-century church was not a monolithic structure but a variegated group of churches with conflicting beliefs.⁵⁴ Legalist Jewish Christians, zealous for the law, believed that the whole law had to be obeyed for a person to be saved. Some Jewish Christians kept the sabbath as a matter of national standards, but did not require Gentiles to do so. Others felt they were free from the law, either citing Paul's writings that the sabbath was a shadow of things to come, or that the law was specifically for the Jews.⁵⁵

Second-century evidence for Sunday worship

Let us look at what several second-century writers said about Sunday worship.

The Epistle of Barnabas

The author of the Epistle of Barnabas considers sanctifying the sabbath as an activity of such moral holiness that no one in this present evil age can attain. The following references are in chapter 15.

Barnabas writes that the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and said, "Sanctify ye the Sabbath of the Lord with clean hands and a pure heart." The author then writes about the sabbath in the creation account and says that "this implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years." When the Son returns again he will "destroy the time of the wicked man" and "then shall he truly rest on the seventh day."

He interprets Jesus' eschatological rest not as inactivity, but bringing an end to this world (at the end of six millenia) and bringing into existence the new world at the Parousia. In the eschatological sabbath, Christians will have been fully sanctified, and so will be able to keep holy the sabbath age and share in the eschatological rest of God. According to the author of the Epistle of Barnabas, obedience to the sabbath command has nothing to do with a day of the week or physical rest, but is a matter of holy living in the future sabbath age that God will have made holy. Jewish sabbaths are therefore unacceptable to God.⁵⁶

In contrasting the Jewish sabbath with the Christian Sunday, Barnabas writes, "Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me.... We keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead."

Barnabas writes:

Further He says to them, "Your new moons and your Sabbaths I cannot endure." Ye perceive how He speaks: Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, [namely this,] when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. And when he had manifested Himself, He ascended into the heavens.

Bauckham says that Barnabas 15 is an attempt to reinterpret the sabbath command so to disallow its observance, not only by Christians but even by Jews before Christ. He opts for the explanation that the author, probably an Alexandrian Jewish Christian, writes against the observance of Jewish practices to discourage his fellow Christians from adopting them or persisting in them.⁵⁷ The epistle must have been written between A.D. 70 (because the author knows of the destruction of the Temple) and 200 (because Clement, who vanishes from the scene shortly

after 200, knows Barnabas). He seems concerned to show that the Old Testament Scriptures are Christian Scriptures and that the spiritual meaning is their real meaning.⁵⁸

Justin

Justin (c. 114-165) was a Gentile born in Flavia Neapolis, a city of Samaria, the modern Nablus. His writings, according to Jewett, are the first detailed description of Christian worship written by a Christian. He is the first Christian writer to use the name Sunday.⁵⁹ Justin, one of the main apologists of the second century, responded to criticisms from cultured pagans that Christianity was a religion of barbarians who derived their teachings from the Jews, a primitive people whose best teachers never rose to the level of Greek philosophers.⁶⁰

Justin writes in his *First Apology* 67:

On the day called Sunday 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; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen....

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 Savior in the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 12, Justin comments on the Jewish sabbath:

The new law requires you to keep perpetual sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you: and if you eat unleavened bread, you say the will of God has been fulfilled. The Lord our God does not take pleasure in such observances: if there is any perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so; if any adulterer, let him repent; then he has kept the sweet and true sabbaths of God. If any one has impure hands, let him wash and be pure.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 19, Justin claims that many righteous men in the Old Testament did not keep the sabbath. After discussing Adam, Abel, Enoch, Lot, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, he writes:

Moreover, all those righteous men already mentioned, though they kept no Sabbaths, were pleasing to God; and after them Abraham with all his descendants until Moses, under whom your nation appeared unrighteous and ungrateful to God.... And you were commanded to keep Sabbaths, that you might retain the memorial to God.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 21, Justin discusses how the Jewish sabbath originated:

Moreover, that God enjoined you to keep the Sabbath, and impose on you other precepts for a sign, as I have already said, on account of your unrighteousness, and that of your fathers.

In *Dialogue With Trypho* 47, Justin talks about the futility of keeping the Jewish sabbath:

But if some, through weak-mindedness, wish to observe such institutions as were given by Moses, from which they expect some virtue, but which we believe were appointed by reason of the hardness of the people's hearts, along with their hope in this Christ, and [wish to perform] the eternal and natural acts of righteousness and piety, yet

choose to live with the Christians and the faithful, as I said before, not inducing them either to be circumcised like themselves, or to keep the Sabbath, or to observe any other such ceremonies, then I hold that we ought to join ourselves to such, and associate with them in all things as kinsmen and brethren.

But if, Trypho, I continued, some of your race, who say they believe in this Christ, compel those Gentiles who believe in this Christ to live in all respects according to the law given by Moses, or choose not to associate so intimately with them, I in like manner do not approve of them. But I believe that even those, who have been persuaded by them to observe the legal dispensation along with their confession of God in Christ, shall probably be saved.

From Justin's time, most Christians gathered on Sunday morning (though various sabbatarian groups met on Saturday), and from then until now is an unbroken historical sequence in the custom of Sunday observance.⁶¹ When Pliny the Younger, who was governor of the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote to the Emperor Trajan in A.D. 110, he tells the emperor that Christians ceased to meet at the time of the evening meal at his command following through with the emperor's edict against all seditious assemblies (Pliny, *Epistolae*, 10:97). Jewett argues that it is possible that the edict was applied widely in the eastern part of the empire. After that time we hear of agape feasts in the evening having a charitable purpose, but with few exceptions losing their eucharistic character.⁶²

Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria (d. A.D. 215) was the main instructor in Alexandria at the end of the second century. He sought to assure pagans that Christianity was not the absurd superstition some claimed it to be.⁶³ He wrote that the sabbath rest of the seventh day is merely a preparation for the true sabbath rest of the eighth day, because the eighth day is the first day and the first day is the Christ, the *archē* (beginning) of creation and the light of men.⁶⁴

Use of the term Lord's Day in second-century writings

The term Lord's Day (*kuriakē hēmera*) occurs only once in the New Testament, in [Revelation 1:10](#), but its use there is significant in studying the origins of the weekly day of worship in Christianity.⁶⁵

Bauckham notes thirteen times in first- and second-century writings where *kuriakē hēmera* or *kuriakē* (belonging to the Lord) by itself means the Lord's Day. Only two phrases with *kuriakē* seem to have become stereotyped or technical phrases by the time of Irenaeus (ca. 130-ca. 200) and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215): *kuriakē hēmera* "Lord's day," and *kuriakai graphai* the "Lord's Scriptures."⁶⁶

A Sabbatarian argument is that the phrase *kuriakē hēmera* is interchangeable with *hēmera (tou) kuriou*. However, the terms are not interchangeable, since by long-established usage the latter referred to the eschatological Day of the Lord.⁶⁷ For early Christians to use a new term for the eschatological day would cause confusion, and not long after Revelation was written, we see that *kuriakē hēmera* was an already established name for Sunday. The phrase *kuriakē hēmera* came into use because *hēmera (tou) kuriou* already meant something else, and a new term was needed. *Kuriakē hēmera* was so commonly used that *kuriakē* alone sufficed as the name of the day.⁶⁸

Ignatius to the Magnesians

Ignatius was the second bishop of Antioch early in the second century. Of his seven extant letters, one was to Christians in Magnesia, a town 15 miles from Ephesus. His letter is the sole second-century reference to Gentile Christians being tempted to observe the sabbath.⁶⁹ Magnesia was in an area of Asia Minor where Paul

encountered his Judaizing problems ([Gal. 4:8-10](#); [Col. 2:16-17](#)). For Ignatius, the practice of Judaism was incompatible with the practice of Christianity.⁷⁰

In Magn. 8:1, Ignatius wrote: "For if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace." In Magn. 10 he wrote: "It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize. For Christianity did not embrace Judaism, but Judaism Christianity."

Combating Judaizers, he wrote in Magn. 9:

For if we still go on observing Judaism, we admit we never received grace.... Those, then, who lived by ancient practices arrived at a new hope. They ceased to keep the Sabbath and lived by the Lord's Day, on which our life as well as theirs shone forth, thanks to Him and his death, though some deny this.... It is monstrous to take Jesus Christ and to live like a Jew.⁷¹

Ignatius draws a sharp contrast between keeping the sabbath and living according to the Lord's Day. Bauckham contends that this is noteworthy because the matter had not been previously explained like this in extant Christian literature. For Ignatius, the sabbath is a badge of a false attitude to Jesus Christ, while worship on the Lord's Day defines Christianity, as salvation by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This puts Ignatius as an early witness of the dissociation of Christianity from Judaism, which is characteristic of the second century and a wholly negative attitude to sabbath observance.⁷²

Gospel of Peter

The following are from the Gospel of Peter, which was written between A.D. 70 and 150. It contains a fragmentary passion and resurrection narrative with parallels to the four canonical Gospels, plus the theme of Christ preaching to the dead found in 1 Peter.

"And in the night in which the Lord's day was drawing on, as the soldiers kept guard...."

"And at dawn upon the Lord's day, Mary Magdalene...took her friends with her and came to the sepulchre where he was laid."

In these verses, *kuriakē* replaces *mia ton sabbaton* ("the first day of the week") used in the narratives about the resurrection in the Gospels.⁷³

Later second-century writings

A passage in the Acts of Peter (Act. Verc. 29) identifies *dies dominica* ("the Lord's Day") with "the next day after the sabbath," and the Acts of Paul has the apostle praying "on the sabbath as the Lord's Day drew near."

Some argue that the earlier references are to Easter, not to Sunday, noting that Easter is an annual celebration of the resurrection, which occurred on Sunday, and that the annual celebration of Easter preceded the weekly celebration of Sunday. This reasoning is flawed because, although there is unambiguous evidence that beginning in the second century Sunday was called *kuriakē*, no unambiguous evidence exists that Easter was ever called simply *kuriakē*.⁷⁴

From the later second century onward, the evidence shows that Sunday was the regular day of Christian worship everywhere, and no controversy is recorded about whether worship should take place on Sunday. The universality of the custom argues for an early origin. Would a custom that originated in the time between Ignatius and Justin

have spread so rapidly and completely that the only evidence of any group not worshipping on Sunday was an extreme wing of the Ebionites?⁷⁵

Bauckham concludes that in Ignatius and the *Gospel of Peter*, the word *kuriakē* is a technical term in fairly widespread use at least in Syria and Asia Minor, showing the first day of the week as the Christian day of regular corporate worship. Based on this, it also becomes likely that *kuriakē hēmera* in [Rev. 1:10](#) also means Sunday.

Conclusion

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This article was written by Thomas C. Hanson.

Now that we have demonstrated that the first day of the week was the Christian day of regular corporate worship in the church in Asia at the end of the first century, we can chart a course backward from [Revelation 1:10](#) to see where this practice began.

If we view [Acts 20:7](#) and [1 Cor. 16:1](#) in the light of second-century writings discussed above, it is likely that they can be viewed as evidence that Sunday worship was the normal practice in the Pauline churches.⁷⁶

We can then take this trajectory back further. Although no early Christian document explicitly identifies the origin of Sunday worship in the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, the Gospel writers considered it important to mention that those appearances took place on the first day of the week and that Jesus met with his disciples on that day.

When the Gospel accounts were written, Sunday was the day of Christian worship and was apparently understood to be a memorial of the resurrection. When Sunday worship was the practice, Christians must have connected it with the Lord's resurrection on a Sunday.⁷⁷ This may have also influenced the way the Gospel writers treated the sabbath controversies as they showed that Jesus was superior to the sabbath and that his actions offended the sabbath-observing Pharisees.

We can then take that trajectory back to the time of the historical Jesus and see that his messianic work superseded the seventh-day sabbath and that as his disciples began to meet on Sunday they could look to the example of Jesus and not feel bound to observe the seventh-day sabbath.