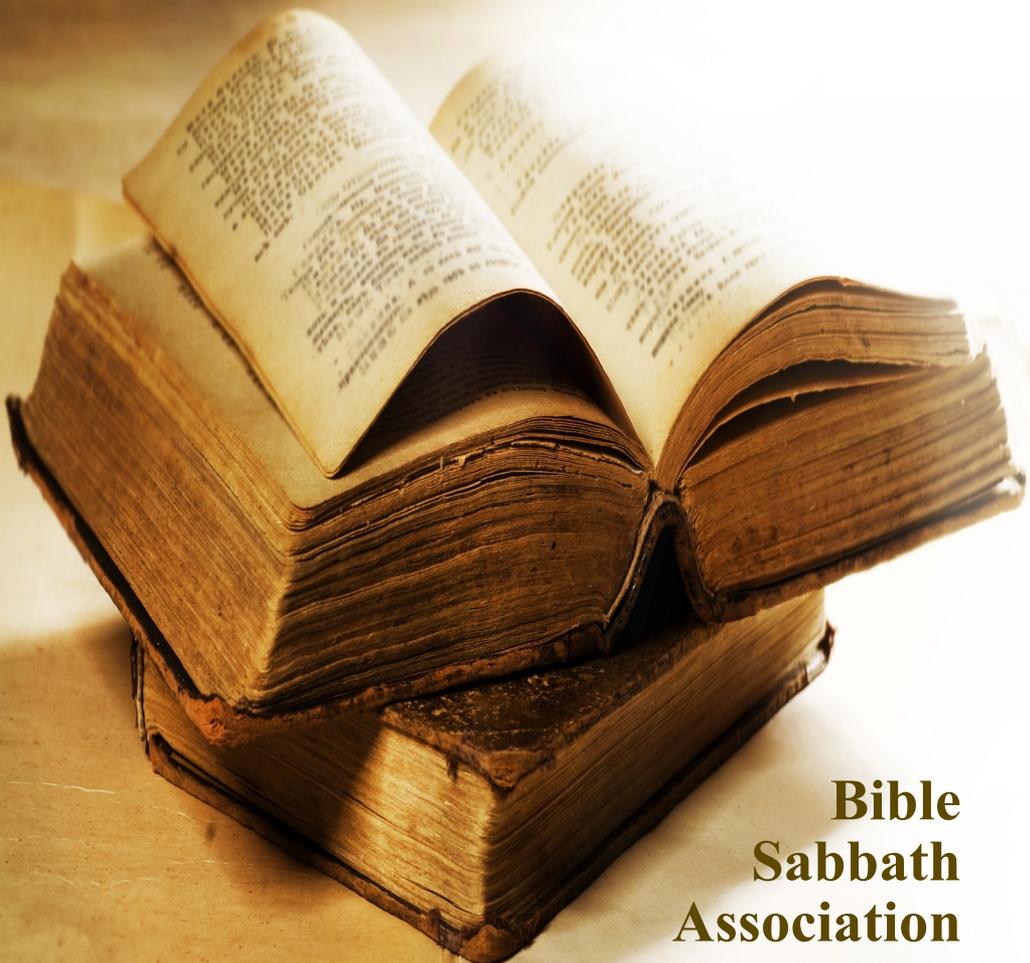


# **A Brief History of the Sabbath in Early Christianity**



**Bible  
Sabbath  
Association**



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Written by Kelly McDonald, Jr. for the  
benefit of the Bible Sabbath Association.

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All language references come from Strong's Concordance. Strong, James.

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## Introduction

Most people who attend church in today's world do so on Sundays. In contrast, the earliest followers of Christ honored the seventh-day Sabbath and continued meeting on that day, according to the New Testament.

To explain this discrepancy, the following arguments are commonly used:

- The Sabbath was given to Jewish people, not to Christians
- Jesus resurrected on Sunday, therefore the Sabbath was changed
- The early church changed Sabbath to Sunday as the gospel went to Gentiles

What is the truth about this matter, and how can we find it?

John Laux, an author of textbooks for Catholic schools, wrote: "If we consulted the Bible only, we should still have to keep holy the Sabbath Day, that is, Saturday, with the Jews, instead of Sunday..." (*A Course in Religion for Catholic High Schools and Academies*, p 51).

John Gibbons, a Catholic Church Cardinal, wrote: "But you may read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and you will not find a single line authorizing the sanctification of Sunday. The Scriptures enforce the religious observance of Saturday, a day which we never sanctify" (*The Faith of our Fathers*, pp 72-73).

So what happened to the Sabbath? Why don't more people who follow Jesus Christ observe it today? To answer this, we must go back to the first few centuries of the Christian faith. Several factors in that era made a long-term impact on Christianity and its view of the seventh-day Sabbath.

# Chapter 1

## A Brief Overview of the New Testament

The New Testament is vital to our understanding of early Sabbath history. In it, we learn about the practices and teachings of our Savior Jesus Christ. He passed on these teachings and His way of life to the apostles and other early disciples, who then spread them abroad.

What do these teachings and practices contribute to the discussion of the Sabbath? We begin our examination of this question by reviewing the life of Christ.

“14 And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and a fame went out concerning him through all the region round about. 15 And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all. 16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and he entered, as his custom was, into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up to read.” (Luke 4:14-16).

When Jesus Christ came to earth, it was His custom or routine practice to honor the Sabbath. Several more examples of His Sabbath observance are also found in the Gospel accounts (see Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 3:1-5, 6:1-6; Luke 13:10-17, 14:1-35; John 5:5-18).

In Mark 2:27, 28, Jesus also declared Himself Lord of this special day: “27 And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: 28 so that the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath.”

Christ is Lord of the Sabbath – the only day of the week given this special designation. In this statement, Christ also affirmed that the Sabbath was made for all mankind – not solely for Jews or Israelites. It was established in Genesis 2:1-3, long before God called Abraham’s seed as a distinct nation to Himself.

Christ practiced and taught only those things He learned from His Father (John 5:18-19, 8:28). Thus, His life is the model of perfection. Peter, one of the first disciples, said of Him: “Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth” (I Peter 2:22). Jesus never transgressed any of God’s commandments or taught others to break them.

During His earthly ministry, Christ instructed His disciples to follow His example. “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). He set the example for us in teachings and practice.

After His resurrection, Christ exhorted the disciples to continue in His teachings and share them with others. “19 Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: 20 teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” (Matthew 28:19-20, emphasis mine).

The book of Acts is another chief resource for us to learn the activities of the first disciples. In this precious book, we learn their trials and triumphs as they spread the message of Christ to different regions. As we read of their travels, another major question regarding this subject will be answered: Did the resurrection of Jesus change the Bible’s view of the Sabbath? Their example and teachings will indicate their views on the Sabbath after the resurrection. We begin our brief examination in Acts chapter 13.

“13 Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos, and came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem. 14 But they, passing through from Perga, came to Antioch of Pisidia; and they went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and sat down. 15 And after the reading of the law and the prophets the rulers of the synagogue sent unto them, saying, Brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on. 16 And Paul stood up, and beckoning with the hand said, Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, hearken” (Acts 13:13-16).

In this passage the Apostle Paul and the believers with him arrived at Pisidian Antioch in a region called Galatia. Paul later

wrote his letter of Galatians to the churches in this region. The verses above clearly show that Paul met on the Sabbath day. When asked by the leader of the synagogue to teach, Paul's message comes to focus in these verses.

“28 And though they found no cause of death in him, yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain. 29 And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulchre. 30 But God raised him from the dead: 31 And he was seen many days of them which came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are his witnesses unto the people” (Acts 13:28-31).

The central theme of Paul's message was the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. In this message Paul did not mention the resurrection as having any influence on Sabbath observance. What about the people who heard the message? Did they interpret his sermon on the resurrection in such a way that would affect their view of the seventh day?

“42 And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath. 43 Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. 44 And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming...48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:42-45, 48).

After hearing the message of Jesus' resurrection, the Gentiles besought or begged to hear more about Jesus on the next Sabbath. They didn't ask for a Sunday service; no reference to Sunday was made. Their response clearly demonstrates that no connection exists between the resurrection message and Sabbath being changed. Thus, verse 42 refutes another commonly held myth that the Sabbath was altered for Gentiles. Other details can be gleaned from these verses, however.

In verse 43, Paul taught them to continue in the grace of God. In verse 44, he taught both Jews and Gentiles on the Sabbath. He taught them about grace and it reinforced their Sabbath observance. This supports the view that grace and the Sabbath are not contradictory concepts, but mutually supportive ones instead. Gentiles were present and believed in Christ.

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: 2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, 3 Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. 4 And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few” (Acts 17:1-4).

These verses tell us that Paul preached in the city of Thessalonica, in Greece. Here again we learn that Paul’s custom was to explain the Scriptures to gathered groups on the Sabbath. Among his audience in the synagogue were Jews and Greeks. A larger number of Greeks believed in Jesus that day than the Jewish people. The resurrection of Jesus was the main content of Paul’s message; the Sabbath remained unchanged.

The early disciples often met in synagogues because they were known to be about the only place that God-fearing Gentiles could hear the written Word of God in the first century. Written copies of the Old Testament were expensive and the New Testament was not yet written and available.

If the resurrection of Jesus had the impact of changing the Sabbath of Creation and of Christ to Sunday, then why wouldn’t the early Christian church receive and spread that aspect of the message? Keep in mind – not a single verse in the New Testament links the resurrection of our Lord to a change in the Sabbath. Since this content was not addressed at all in the New Testament, then the authors never intended to convey any change to Sabbath observance.

When we hear the reasons why people think the Sabbath has been changed or is no longer relevant, none of these reasons are found

in the New Testament. Many of these arguments are not new; they were first formed in the first few centuries after Christ. As we study, we will gain a better grasp on Sabbath history and how to defeat arguments against God's holy seventh day.

## Chapter 2

### Seven Factors that Influenced the Sabbath in the Early Church

The ancient world moved much slower than modern times. Today, a legislative body, such as Congress, can pass a law and within one year it can be enforced with millions of people. In the ancient world, you did not have phones, internet, television, and many other modern conveniences.

Consider laws in the Roman Empire, which could take years to promulgate. Messengers had to take these decrees by foot or horseback throughout an Empire that stretched thousands of miles. Some messengers may not survive the journey. Others may get lost. It could take years to enforce compliance through local magistrates (if they chose to enforce it at all). This is why some laws in the ancient world had to be periodically repeated.

Therefore, we must understand that there is no single date upon which Sabbath fades from the majority practice and Sunday becomes commonplace. Rather, we must view a series of developments which contributed to the gradual decline in Sabbath observance and gradual rise of Sunday observance.

The historical record will help us understand the factors that influenced the Sabbath in early Christianity. There are at least seven of them that I have identified. While these items are certainly interrelated, they can also be viewed individually. These factors are listed below:

- 1) Persecution of Christians
- 2) Destruction of Jerusalem (twice)
- 3) Quartodeciman Controversy
- 4) Anti-Semitism
- 5) Syncretism

## 6) Allegorizing of Scripture

## 7) The Joining of the Roman Church and Roman Empire.

The first factor is persecution. A series of persecutions affected the Sabbath in the early Church. From 64 AD to 324 AD, certain Roman Emperors or their magistrates initiated persecutions against Christians. Believers had their property confiscated; they were tortured and even killed. Many church leaders were targeted in these attacks. In a few cases, the goal was the complete extermination of the Christian faith.

In 64 AD, Nero became the first Emperor to lead such a persecution. Some background information will help us understand how it came about. He desired to build a new city called Neronia (named after himself). Before he could start this project, part of the old city of Rome had to be destroyed. Sometime after he expressed this desire, a massive fire destroyed part of the old city. Some sources record that he purposefully set fire to the city to make room for his new project.

After the fire, the Roman people demanded that the implementer of this crime be revealed. In their minds, someone had to pay the price. To divert the people's suspicion from himself, Nero blamed Christians. Believers were tortured in awful ways to appease the blood lust of the Roman people. Tacitus, a Roman historian who lived near this event, wrote about their awful treatment:

“...Consequently, to get rid of the report [that he started the fire], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate... Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted... Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed by the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.... Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and

exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed" (Tacitus, *The Annals*, 15:44).

This account by Tacitus is among the first historical documents outside of the Bible to reference Christianity. Great harm was done to believers, but they pressed on to the high calling of the faith.

Oppressions continued in different locations and for different reasons. Two classes of people began to emerge in Christianity. The first class was composed of loyal and faithful believers who held firmly to the faith no matter the threats levied against them. The second class publicly professed Christ but denied Him when threatened with punishment. This second class even sacrificed to the pagan gods of Rome.

One eyewitness of this development was Pliny the Younger. He was a magistrate during the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan, who ruled from 98-117 AD. Pliny wrote a letter to the Emperor where he described the result of the persecutions that occurred in his province. A quote from him is found below:

"...An anonymous information was laid before me containing a charge against several persons, who upon examination denied they were Christians, or had ever been so. They repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered religious rites with wine and incense before your statue (which for that purpose I had ordered to be brought, together with those of the gods), and even reviled [cursing] the name of Christ: **whereas there is no forcing, it is said, those who are really Christians into any of these compliances:** I thought it proper, therefore, to discharge them... **Some among those who were accused by a witness in person at first confessed themselves Christians, but immediately after denied it;** the rest owned indeed that they had been of that number formerly, but had now (some above three, others more, and a few above twenty years ago) renounced that error. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, uttering imprecations at the same time against the name of Christ... They affirmed the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that **they met on a stated (fixed) day before it was light, and addressed a form of**

**prayer to Christ...I forbade the meeting of any assemblies.... For it appears to be a matter highly deserving your consideration, more especially as great numbers must be involved in the danger of these prosecutions...**In fact, this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread its infection among the neighbouring villages and country. Nevertheless, it still seems possible to restrain its progress. **The temples, at least, which were once almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred rites, after a long intermission, are again revived...**From all this it is easy to conjecture what numbers might be reclaimed if a general pardon were granted to those who shall repent of their error..." (Letter 97; emphasis mine throughout).

This primary source illustrates the long-term effect of persecution that we previously described. Some people were accused of being a Christian, and at first they admitted the charge against them. When confronted further, they denounced their profession of faith. Pliny also noted that the pagan temples were almost empty, but the persecutions caused them to be full again. In other words, a significant number of people who attended Christian meetings later turned back to pagan worship. This behavior was repeated in subsequent persecutions, such as Decius in 250 and Diocletian in 303 AD.

In the quote from Pliny, accused Christians were observed to meet on a stated or fixed day; this would have been the Sabbath (as we discussed in the last chapter). Such assemblies were forbidden by Pliny. Those who refused to worship the gods of Rome suffered greatly. Many of the strongest leaders and believers were martyred in these persecutions.

A second influence on the Sabbath in early Church history was the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred twice. In the book of Acts, we learn that Jerusalem was the primary center of Christianity. The book of Acts mentions this city third-most of all books in the Bible. Within the city of Jerusalem, councils were held, ministers reported to the Apostles, and ministers were sent out to help believers. For some examples of this, see the following verses: Acts 1:4-8, 11:1-2, 11:19-22, 11:26-27, 12:24-25, 13:13, 15:2, 16:4, and Gal. 2:1-2.

In 70 AD, the Romans besieged Jerusalem. The city was ran-

sacked, and the Second Temple was toppled. This was a tragedy for the Jewish people; it also scattered a significant number of Christians. About forty years before, Jesus warned the first believers to flee to the mountains when the city was surrounded by armies (Luke 21:20-21).

Historical accounts record that the early believers in Jerusalem listened to Jesus. They fled to a place named Pella and were protected. Epiphanaus (380s AD) and Jerome (early 400s AD) are two ancient writers that describe this migration. Of them, Epiphanaus wrote that these early Christians still existed in his day and continued to observe the Sabbath (*Panarion*, Sec. 29; Encyclopedia Brit. 11<sup>th</sup> edition: Nazarenes).

While many people today may be familiar with this destruction of Jerusalem, they are usually not familiar with the second siege that occurred less than 70 years later.

A controversy arose during the reign of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (sometimes called Adrian), who ruled from 117-138 AD. According to the Roman historian Cassius Dio, Hadrian attempted to build a temple dedicated to Jupiter on top of the ruins of the Second Temple (*Roman History*, 69.12-14). The Temple was and is the holiest site in Judaism. Hadrian's decree caused a major war with the Jewish people. As many as 585,000 Jewish people may have died in the fighting alone.

Amid this conflict, Hadrian banned the celebration of the Sabbath and any other practice that appeared to be Jewish (Jewish Encyclopedia: Hadrian). After the Romans conquered Jerusalem, all the Jewish people were banned from city. This caused many Christians (who were Jewish by natural birth) to be removed as well.

Eusebius [early 300s AD] wrote: "...until the siege of the Jews, which took place under Adrian, there were fifteen bishops in succession there, all of whom are said to have been of Hebrew descent, **and to have received the knowledge of Christ in purity**, so that they were approved by those who were able to judge of such matters..." (Eus, *History*, bk 4, 5:2, [NPNF: 176]).

Up to the reign of Hadrian, all the bishops of Jerusalem were of

Hebrew descent. Eusebius adds that they all held the knowledge of Christ in purity. When Jerusalem was destroyed a second time, the headquarters of Christianity was now in question. Over the next few centuries, other cities competed to be the successor of apostolic authority and doctrine. These cities included, but are not limited to: Rome, Alexandria, Carthage, and later Constantinople.

The first two factors discussed thus far destabilized and decentralized Christianity. This resulted in fragmentation in practice and doctrine. Leaders and teachers who were strong in the faith were killed. Each city argued that the rest of Christianity should follow their attempts to guide doctrine and practice. The Christian community became vulnerable to false teachings that contradicted the first Apostles.

During this epoch, heresies infiltrated Christianity. Hegessipus, who wrote about 150 AD, stated that the church was a virgin until the reign of Trajan (*Fragments*, ANF: 764). Clement of Alexandria, who wrote about 180 AD, asserted that heresies arose in the time of Hadrian (*Stromata*, 7.17). Sulpicius Severus (400 AD) said that until the reign of Hadrian most Christians believed in Christ while obeying the Law of God (*Sacred History*, 2.31).

From these historical testimonies, we can deduce that during this general time period – the reigns of Trajan through Hadrian – Christianity began to change, but not for the better.

Another immediate consequence of the second destruction of Jerusalem was confusion as to when Passover should be celebrated. This is the third factor that had an influence on the Sabbath in the early Church. It is also called the Quartodeciman Controversy. Quartodeciman is a Latin word meaning fourteenthers.

The writer Epiphanius documented that that the quarrel about Passover started during the reign of Hadrian (*Panarion*, 70). Up to his reign, there was no confusion about it. Many Christians celebrated Passover on the fourteenth of Nissan, as Jesus and the early disciples commemorated it in this manner.

In about 155 AD, a controversy about Passover caused a stir within the Christian world. Polycarp, who was taught and trained by the first Apostles, was still alive. He celebrated Passover on the

fourteenth of Nisan. Anicetus, the Bishop of Rome, refused to follow the same practice. Polycarp visited Rome to persuade Anicetus to return to the Biblical practice. The early church historian Eusebius wrote about this visit.

“At this time, while Anicetus was at the head of the church of Rome, Irenæus relates that Polycarp, who was still alive, was at Rome, and that he had a conference with Anicetus on a question concerning the day of the paschal feast...” (Eusebius, *Church History*, 4.14.1- 7).

“For neither could Anicetus persuade **Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated**; neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it...” (ibid, 5.24.16-17).

The meeting between the two leaders came to a standstill. Polycarp held to the practice of Passover as he received it from the early Apostles. Anicetus decided not to celebrate Passover. The Bishop of Rome wanted to celebrate Passover on the Sunday after the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. They later claimed that this practice was necessary because they believed the resurrection of Jesus occurred on Sunday. This issue would persist for hundreds of years.

How did the Quartodeciman controversy affect the Sabbath? From the position of an annual Sunday celebration to honor the resurrection, the Roman Church drifted towards the view that **every** Sunday should be celebrated by Christians as a replacement of the seventh-day Sabbath (see Eusebius, *Exposition on Psalm 92* in Odom, p 292). The resurrection became their justification for this practice – even though such a justification is not found in the New Testament.

As reviewed in the last chapter, the earliest disciples met on the Sabbath and taught about the resurrection. The message of the resurrection never influenced when the Sabbath was honored in the New Testament. This means no justification to replace Passover or the Sabbath with Sunday can be considered apostolic teaching.

The fourth factor that influenced the Sabbath in the early Church

was anti-Semitism. It was tightly bound up with the previous three factors.

In the first and second centuries AD, anti-Semitism was prevalent in Roman culture. Some Roman writers called the Jewish people a cursed race. They were accused of following mere superstitions; sometimes these attacks specifically targeted the seventh-day Sabbath (For a few examples, see Jewish Encyclopedia 1905 article: Seneca, Lucius Annaeus; Tacitus, *Histories*, book 5:4-5; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, bk 3, sec 7:21). The Anti-Semitism grew significantly worse during Hadrian's reign and was likely influenced by the war between Rome and the Jewish people.

Unfortunately, anti-Semitism penetrated Christianity. During Hadrian's reign, a man named Aristides made a defense of the Christian faith to the Emperor. His goal was to curtail regional persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire. In his speech called *The Apology*, he claimed that there were four classes of men: barbarians, Greeks, Jews, and Christians. Moreover, he claimed that Christians were the highest of the four classes and had the most truth. He claimed that the Jewish people worshiped angels and derived their practices from them. Among the practices he derided was the Sabbath. We have a quote from his work below:

“Nevertheless they too erred from true knowledge. And in their imagination they conceive that it is God they serve; whereas by their mode of observance it is to the angels and not to God that their service is rendered:— as when they celebrate Sabbaths...” (*The Apology*, 14).

To my knowledge, this is the first historical reference of a Christian who attempted to separate himself from the practices held in common with Jewish people. But it was the beginning of others who would follow with similar arguments.

Towards the end of Hadrian's reign and just after it, several anti-Semitic teachers spread heresy throughout the Christian world. Marcion is considered the most influential of them; he began teaching around 144 AD. He taught that the God of the Old Testament was a separate God from that of the New Testament. According to Irenaeus, a contemporary of the time, this heretical teacher flourished under the Roman Bishop Anicetus; this is the

same Anicetus from the Quartodeciman controversy (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.4.3).

Marcion convinced many people to believe in his heresy (Justin, *First Apology*, 26). He had a special hatred for the seventh-day Sabbath. He taught that: “Since that day is the rest of the God of the Jews, who made the world and rested on the Sabbath-day; we therefore fast on that day, that we may not do anything in compliance with the God of the Jews” (Epiphanius, *Panarion*, Sec. 42; quoted from Bingham, p 52). He advocated fasting on the Sabbath to dishonor the “God of the Jews.”

Marcion was declared a heretic by the Roman Church, but they later adopted some of his teachings. For instance, fasting on the Sabbath became a normal practice for the Roman Church by the third and fourth centuries (see Augustine, *Letters* 36 and 82).

Justin the Martyr was another anti-Semitic writer of this period (150s-160s AD). He claimed that the Sabbath was given to the Jewish people due to their transgressions and hardness of hearts (*Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter 18). These words are in direct contradiction to the words of Christ. Our Lord said that the Sabbath was given for all mankind, not just the Jewish people (Mark 2:27-28). It was also established in Genesis, which was long before the Israelites became a nation. Justin claimed that Christians who observed practices such as the Sabbath would “probably be saved” (ibid, 47).

The anti-Semitism that penetrated Christianity during the second century increased over time. At times, it specifically targeted the Sabbath. Roman Catholic attempted to denigrate the Sabbath by labeling it as a Jewish institution. In the late 300s AD, Augustine called people who honored the Sabbath “sons of the bondwoman” (Letter 36, chapter 2). Around 600 AD, Pope Gregory called Sabbath keepers preachers of the anti-Christ (*Registrum Epistolarum*, 13.1). This demeaning attitude towards Sabbath observance hindered people from it.

Amid these events, a fifth factor gradually developed: syncretism. Syncretism occurs when someone takes practices from the Holy Bible and mixes them with practices from other religions.

As some early Christians sought to avoid observances that appeared Jewish, they embraced practices from other religions. Sunday worship was one of them. Clement of Alexandria was an influential writer of the late second century. In his writings, we find the first indisputable reference to Sunday being called the Lord's Day. His justification for this view comes from Plato and the number eight (*Stromata*, 5.14). Plato was a Greek philosopher. Why would anyone use his writings to explain any Christian practice?

As anti-Semitism increased in Christianity, the Old Testament became devalued as the chief background source to the New Testament. Greek philosophy was one belief system syncretized with the New Testament to fill this void.

The theology of Clement was sometimes confusing and not always consistent. He was a self-proclaimed Gnostic. In general, Gnosticism was a religious perspective which viewed the grasp of special knowledge as the key to saving one's soul from this evil, material world. The Apostle Paul warned us about this kind of philosophy in the New Testament (I Tim. 6:20).

Clement claimed that the true gnostic does not honor specific days (ibid, 6.15, 7.7). Among his other questionable statements, he proposed that philosophy was given to the Greeks to guide them towards righteousness (ibid, 1.5). He believed that we should pray with our faces towards the east to face the rising sun (ibid, 7.7). Lastly, he believed that the sun was created as an object of worship. "And he gave the sun, and the moon, and the stars to be worshipped..." (ibid, 6.14).

Another author to review with this subject is Tertullian. He wrote in the late second and early third centuries. He was an avowed enemy of Marcionites, but he still advocated Sunday gatherings. I have included some of his quotes below.

"Others with a greater show of reason take us for worshippers of the sun... This suspicion took its rise from hence, because it was observed that Christians prayed with their faces towards the east [towards the sun] but **if we, like them** [the pagans], **celebrate Sunday as a festival and day of rejoicing**, it is for a reason vastly distant from that of worshipping the sun; for we solemnize the

day after **Saturday in contradistinction to those who call this day their Sabbath**, and devote it to ease and eating, deviating from the old Jewish customs, which they are now very ignorant of” (*Apology*, 16; emphasis mine throughout).

Tertullian admitted that the Sunday celebrations were conducted “like them” – meaning like the pagans. He discussed this subject similarly in another work called *Against the Nations*.

“Others, with greater regard to good manners, it must be confessed, suppose that the sun is the god of the Christians, because it is a well-known fact that we pray towards the east or because we make Sunday a day of festivity. What then? Do you do less than this?...It is you [the pagans], at all events, who have even admitted the sun into the calendar of the week; and you have selected its day, in preference to the preceding day...For the Jewish feasts are the Sabbath and “the Purification”...all which institutions and practices are of course foreign from your [pagan] gods” (*idem*, 1.13).

In this quote, Tertullian addressed pagans who worshiped many gods. He admitted a second time that some Christians made Sunday a festivity in the same way as pagans. Additionally, he confessed that some Christians pray towards the sun in the manner similar to pagans. He then confessed that the Sabbath observed by the Jewish people was foreign to other gods. It is a holy celebrations not shared by other religions.

Tertullian was the first person (to my knowledge) to defend Christianity against accusations of sun worship. In the New Testament, Christians never had to shield themselves against such allegations. Syncretism caused this situation to change – the outside world was confused by the Sunday festivity. Tertullian also confessed that Sunday observance was a tradition with no Scriptural authority. This is consistent with the Catholic writers we quoted in the introduction.

“We count fasting or kneeling in worship on the Lord's day to be unlawful.... If, for these and other such rules, you insist upon having positive Scripture injunction, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth to you as the originator of them” (*De Corona*, 3, 4).

Syncretism had a significant impact on the Sabbath in early Christianity. Some wanted to retain pagan practices, such as adoration of the sun, but still hold Christian principles. We are instructed in the Bible not to pray to the sun or adore its rising (see Deut. 4:19, Ezekiel 8:14-17). The phrase “Lord’s Day” became gradually attached to the first day of the week.

The sixth factor that influenced the Sabbath was the allegorizing of Scripture. This is a unique method of interpreting the Bible which does not fully consider the literal meaning of verses. Instead, details in the Bible are treated as symbols. These symbols are then reapplied in a way that is subjective to the interpreter. Those using this method usually come to conclusions that negate the literal meaning of verses, but fit the desired interpretation of the individual. We will review some examples to illustrate.

Among the first writers to use this interpretation method was Justin the Martyr. He especially used allegory in his discussion of the Sabbath. We have two excerpts below:

“The command of circumcision, again, bidding [them] always circumcise the children on the eighth day, was a type of the true circumcision, by which we are circumcised from deceit and iniquity through Him who rose from the dead on the first day after the Sabbath, [namely through] our Lord Jesus Christ. For the first day after the Sabbath, remaining the first of all the days, is called, however, the eighth, according to the number of all the days of the cycle, and [yet] remains the first” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 41).

“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...” (ibid, chapter 12).

In the first quote, Justin discussed the circumcision of male babies, which occurred on the eighth day (Lev. 12:3). He took the number eight and used it as an allegory to foreshadow the resurrection of Christ on the day after Sabbath, which is Sunday. He called it eighth day of the week even though it is the first. The goal of this tactic was to present Sunday as a better day than Sab-

bath. In another chapter of the same work, he presented similar concepts regarding the eight people on Noah's Ark and the resurrection (*ibid*, 138 138).

This allegorical interpretation has obvious problems with the literal meaning of the Scriptures. First, God never described the week as having eight days. Sunday is the first day in the seven-day weekly cycle. Once the Sabbath ends, the week resets. Secondly, Jesus did not resurrect on Sunday. Third, no Bible writer ever connected circumcision or Noah to the Sabbath.

In the second quote above, Justin portrayed a sinless life as the true way to honor the Sabbath. Again, this allegory is a problematic interpretation. The Sabbath is the weekly day of rest. Keeping other commandments cannot replace its absolute requirements. When someone abstains from stealing, then they have done well and honored that specific commandment. However, if the same person works on Sabbath then he or she has violated the fourth commandment. If we use Justin's logic, we could use allegory to justify breaking any of the commandments.

Two other authors that contributed to allegorizing Scripture were Clement of Alexandria and his pupil Origen. They studied at the Alexandrian school of theology, which taught this method of interpretation. In their writings, they often decried honoring any specific day as special. We have two quotes below:

“Whence not in a specified place, or selected temple, or at certain festivals and on appointed days, but during his whole life, the Gnostic in every place, even if he be alone by himself, and wherever he has any of those who have exercised the like faith, honours God, that is, acknowledges his gratitude for the knowledge of the way to live” (Clement, *Stromata*, 7, 7).

“If it be objected to us on this subject that we ourselves are accustomed to observe certain days, as for example the Lord's day, the Preparation, the Passover, or Pentecost, I have to answer, that to the perfect Christian, who is ever in his thoughts, words, and deeds serving his natural Lord, God the Word, all his days are the Lord's, and he is always keeping the Lord's day. He also who is unceasingly preparing himself for the true life, and abstaining from the pleasures of this life which lead astray so many — who

is not indulging the lust of the flesh, but keeping under his body, and bringing it into subjection,— such a one is always keeping Preparation-day” (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 8:22).

Origen used allegory to remove special significance from any day; he ranked them all the same. He thus contradicted the example of Christ and the early Apostles, who clearly made distinctions between days that were holy and those that were not.

Allegorizing Scriptures would contribute to misunderstanding the Sabbath for centuries to come. A substantial number of Christians were influenced by schools such as that in Alexandria, which taught this method. It has existed in some form down to the present.

The seventh factor that influenced the Sabbath was the joining of Roman Empire and the Roman Church (which we commonly call the Roman Catholic Church). Beginning with the time of Constantine, the Roman Church became intertwined with the Roman Empire. Constantine *de facto* made the Roman Church an institution of the state. In return for their support, Roman Emperors starting with Constantine codified Roman Church practices as protected and enforceable law.

In 321 AD, Constantine decreed that people could leave property to the Roman Church upon death (CT: 16.2.4). This allowed the wealth of the church to substantially increase. In 326, he passed a law that granted the Roman Church special privileges. All other Christian groups were not allowed these privileges; they were bound to public service (CT: 16.5.1). He regulated the number of clergy in Christianity (CT: 16.2.6 [326 AD]). Secular judges were required to enforce the decisions of Christian Bishops (CS: 1 [333 AD]).

The first national Sunday law in history was passed in 321 by Constantine. Translated into English, this law reads: “All Judges and city people and the craftsmen shall rest upon the venerable Day of the Sun. Country people, however, may freely attend to the cultivation of the fields, because it frequently happens that no other days are better adapted for planting the grain in the furrows or the vines in trenches. So that the advantage given by heavenly providence may not for the occasion of a short time perish” —

March 7, 321 (CJ: 3.12.2; English: Ayers, pp 284-285; Latin: Krueger, p 127).

In the Latin manuscript, the phrase translated as “venerable day of the sun” is *venerabili die solis*. Constantine’s decree was based upon his admiration for the celestial body we call the sun. Constantine was a known worshiper for the sun god Sol Invictus, who he honored on monuments and coins.

There are some very interesting details in this law. People in the country (farmers) were still required to work on the day. Notice that no Christian worship is mentioned in the law. The decree did not honor the Hebrew God or Jesus Christ; instead it honored the sun. He passed another law just a few months later. These laws mirror the rules governing pagan Roman celebrations.

The relationship between Roman Church and Roman Empire grew even closer as time passed. This would eventually result in Sunday laws which were passed with supposed Christian meaning.

In 379, Theodosius became the Eastern Roman Emperor. After hearing the perspectives of different Christian groups, he sided with the Roman Church. All houses of prayer under his dominion were eventually given over to their control. The next year he passed a law which forced all peoples under his rule to follow the Roman Catholic religion. We have an excerpt from this decree below:

“To the residents of Constantinople: It is our will that all the peoples whom the government of our clemency rules shall follow that religion which a pious belief from Peter to the present declares the holy Peter delivered to the Romans, and which it is evident the Pontiff Damascus and Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic sanctity, follow; that is, that according to the apostolic discipline and evangelical doctrine we believe in the deity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit of equal majesty in a holy trinity. Those who follow this law we command shall be comprised under the name of Catholic Christians; but others, indeed, we require, as insane and raving, to bear the infamy of heretical teaching; their gatherings shall not receive the name of churches; they are to be smitten first with the divine punishment

and after that by the vengeance of our indignation, which has divine approval” (CT: 16.1.2; quoted from Ayers, pp 367-368 ).

The biggest issue that separated the Roman Catholic Church from other groups was not Sunday versus Sabbath. Instead, it was one’s view of the nature of God. The Roman Catholic Church taught the Trinity, whereas non-Roman Christian groups had other views. As discussed in Appendix A, most Christians still honored the Sabbath at the time this law was enacted (and years beyond it).

Theodosian laws relating to religion were fanatical. People were not allowed to discuss religious matters in public (CT: 16.4.1 [388 AD]). If they violated this, they would be punished. Anyone caught disturbing the “Catholic faith” was to be exiled (CT: 16.4.3 [392 AD]). Non-Roman Catholic groups were forbidden from owning church buildings or assembling.

Socrates, a Christian contemporary in that time, wrote that many of these laws were not fully implemented (*Church History*, 7.12). Theodosius wanted to intimidate everyone into conformity.

The merger between Roman Empire and Roman Church was made complete during Theodosius’ reign. It would pave the way for celebrations of the Roman Church, including Sunday, to be enshrined as enforced Roman law.

In 386, Theodosius passed the first Sunday law in history which attached Christian meaning (CT: 2.8.18). From 386 to 469, there were a total of eleven laws decreed that specifically regulated some aspect of Sunday rest and/or worship. The spiritual meaning ascribed to that day by Roman Emperors was derived from Roman Church teachings.

This seventh factor allowed Sunday to be established as the favored day of rest in the Roman Empire. This set up an imitation day of rest beside God’s day of rest; it diverted the attention of Roman citizens away from the spiritual meaning of the True Sabbath. Sunday rest became popularized through civil law. This precedent would last for centuries to come and also influence other European monarchies that used Roman law (such as the Frankish peoples under Charlemagne).

In the conclusion, we will explain how these factors worked together to influence people's perception of the Sabbath.

## Conclusion

As discussed earlier in this work, change advanced much slower in the ancient world. Religious influences had to traverse thousands of miles, which meant that it took time for them to be promulgated. This is why we must study this subject according to certain factors that developed over time.

The first factor, persecution, started in the first century, but intensified in later centuries (such as the third and early fourth). This issue, along with the second factor (the destruction of Jerusalem), de-stabilized and decentralized Christianity. It led to various cities vying to be the lead city of the faith.

The next four factors—Quartodeciman Controversy, Anti-Semitism, Syncretism, and Allegorizing Scripture—started sometime in the mid-second century. The results of these influences intensified over time and become normalized by the fourth and fifth centuries. Together, they formed a culture by which the Roman Church would develop writings and practices to undermine the Sabbath.

The seventh factor was the merger of Roman Empire with the Roman Church. This solidified Rome as having more authority than the other cities in the Christian world. Emperors enshrined Roman Catholic rules as civil law. This development preserved their dogma for centuries. It allowed their teachings to be reinforced over time; they spread farther and faster than the Roman Church could do on its own. Furthermore, this merger facilitated their opinions to eventually become the mainstream/majority view. Those who taught Sunday observance as more important than Sabbath observance had greater authority in the eyes of civil government. Sunday was given greater emphasis than Sabbath in that it was reinforced through various laws which imposed the observance and gatherings on that day.

Despite various factors, especially Sunday laws enacted by multiple Emperors, Sabbath observance remained strong. The merger

of State and Church resulted in a gradual decline in Sabbath observance. In the East, it took longer for Sunday to supersede the Sabbath. One issue that contributed to the longevity of the Sabbath in the Eastern Empire was that they did not emphasize fasting on Sabbath as did the Western Church. We will likely review this in future literature.

As you ponder these details, consider that some of these same factors are used in arguments today to denigrate the seventh-day Sabbath. Now you know their origin. As Solomon wrote, “There is nothing new under the sun.” We will give some examples.

Example #1 – The Quartodeciman Controversy still affects people’s view of the Sabbath today. People often use the argument that the resurrection occurred on Sunday morning to justify changing the Sabbath to Sunday. This argument was never used by the first Apostles. It wasn’t used by anyone until over 100 years after Christ was on earth.

Example #2 – Anti-Semitic arguments influence people’s view of the Sabbath. When you mention the seventh-day Sabbath, many will say “That’s just for the Jews”; “You mean the Jewish Sabbath?”; or “We do not live like Jewish people”. Yet not a single time in the Bible is the Sabbath ever called Jewish, Israelite or Hebrew; it is called the Sabbath of the Lord our God (see Exodus 20:8-11 as an example). People who use these arguments may not be anti-Semitic; but they are using an anti-Semitic argument. Jesus said the Sabbath was made for man, not just for Jewish people (Mark 2:27-28).

Example #3 – Allegorizing the Scriptures. Some today still allegorize when discussing the Sabbath. For instance, some people say “Jesus is my Sabbath” or “Rest is not a day; it is salvation in Christ” – yet none of these arguments are found in the Bible.

### **Consider this!**

Despite these seven factors, most Christians still honored the Sabbath into the fifth century (400s AD). This completely negates the argument that the Sabbath was abandoned by the early Church! We have some quotes in the Appendix, which starts after this conclusion.

## Appendix A

### Quotes from the 300s/400s AD

Despite the influence from the factors we discussed in this booklet, most Christians (especially in the Eastern Roman Empire) still honored the Sabbath into the 300s and 400s AD! We have quotes from people who lived in this time period to prove this point.

#### **380s AD – John Chrysostom**

**“There are many among us now, who fast on the same day as the Jews, and keep the Sabbaths in the same manner...And why do I speak of Jews seeing that many Gentile customs are observed by some among us; omens, auguries, presages, distinctions of days, attention to the circumstances of their children’s birth, and as soon as they are born, tablets with impious inscriptions are placed upon their unhappy heads, thereby teaching them from the first to lay aside virtuous endeavors, and drawing part of them at least under the false domination of fate”** (*Commentary on Galatians 1:7*).

This statement from Chrysostom is fascinating. He chided Gentile Christians who honored the Sabbath (which he labels as Jewish). He claimed that there were “many among us” who practiced it. This part of his quote affirms the widespread prevalence of Sabbath keeping.

In the second part of this quote, he rebuked a separate group for honoring pagan Gentile customs. Why should we be surprised? As mentioned in chapter two, Theodosius forced everyone to follow Roman Catholicism.

Another ancient witness about Sabbath keeping comes from a man named Augustine. He is venerated by the Catholic Church as a saint; he lived in North Africa. Two of his letters, one written in 396 AD and the other written in 405 AD, inform us that the Sabbath was still honored during this time. We have a quote from one of them below:

#### **396 AD - From Augustine to Casulanus**

“This question I would wish to see him investigate, and resolve in

such a manner as would not involve him in the guilt of openly speaking against **the whole Church diffused throughout the world, with the exception of the Roman Christians, and hitherto a few of the Western communities.** Is it, I ask, to be endured among the entire Eastern Christian communities, and many of those in the West, that this man should say of so many and so eminent servants of Christ, **who on the seventh day of the week refresh themselves soberly and moderately with food,** that they are in the flesh, and cannot please God; and that of them it is written, “Let the wicked depart from me, I will not know their way; and that they make their belly their god”, that they prefer Jewish rites to those of the Church, and are sons of the bondwoman; that they are governed not by the righteous law of God, but by their own good pleasure, consulting their own appetites instead of submitting to salutary restraint; also that they are carnal, and savour of death, and other such charges, which if he had uttered against even one servant of God, who would listen to him, who would not be bound to turn away from him?” (Letter 36, Chapter 2, Sec. 4)

The greater part of the Christian world still considered the Sabbath a day of rest and enjoyment, whereas some of the Western Churches, especially in Rome, considered it a fast day. Recall from chapter two that Marcion was the first one to propose fasting on the Sabbath in order to desecrate the day and “the God of the Jews.” While he was considered a heretic in his day, some of his practices became the norm by the 400s AD.

The anti-Semitic slant to the Sabbath is evident from Augustine’s writings. Those who honored the seventh day were accused of being “in the flesh” and “sons of the bondwoman.” Fasting on the Sabbath was a special way that the Roman Church sought to desecrate the holy Sabbath day.

The next writer we will look at is Socrates Scholasticus. He composed a work on Christian history in the 400s AD.

### **Socrates Scholasticus (early 400s AD)**

“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 Egyptians in the neighborhood of Alexandria, and the inhabitants of Thebais, hold

their religious assemblies on the Sabbath, but do not participate of the mysteries in the manner usual among Christians in general: for after having eaten and satisfied themselves with food of all kinds, in the evening making their offerings..." (*ibid*, 5.22)

Pay close attention to the words of this historian. He recorded that Rome and Alexandria were the only two cities that **ceased** to honor the Sabbath; this means at one time they did honor it. He also noted that they did not stop honoring the Sabbath because of any scripture, but because of a tradition. Remember that Rome had been overtly defecting from Biblical practices as far back as the time of Anicetus (and perhaps before then). Once again, the claims of Catholic writers in the introduction agree with this statement. Jesus warned us about the traditions of man that contradict the commandments of God (Matthew 15:1-20). Let us leave such traditions and cling to the precious example of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The last example we will look at is John Cassian, who wrote in the early fifth century.

### **John Cassian (420-429 AD)**

**“And throughout the whole of the East it has been settled, ever since the time of the preaching of the Apostles, when the Christian faith and religion was founded, that these Vigils should be celebrated as the Sabbath dawns... And so, after the exertion of the Vigil, a dispensation from fasting, appointed in like manner for the Sabbath by apostolic men, is not without reason enjoined in all the churches of the East...”** (Institutes, 3:9)

The Sabbath still retained great influence in the East. Some degree of Sabbath keeping would remain the majority practice there for hundreds of years into the future. In Western Europe, Sabbath keeping gradually became a minority practice among Christians.

### **Want to Learn More?**

To learn more about this subject, turn to the next page, entitled “More Resources”.

## More Resources

Below are listed more short books available for FREE download on [www.sabbath.blog](http://www.sabbath.blog). Look at the Free Resources page.

### **Sabbath and Sunday Laws in the Roman Empire** **By Kelly McDonald, Jr.**

In the early Roman Empire, a series of laws were enacted to protect Sabbath observance. Hundreds of years later, Sunday laws were also enacted. These laws help us to understand the protection of Sabbath observance in broader Christianity and the development of Sunday as a day of rest in the Roman Church.

### **Prevalence of the Sabbath in the Roman Empire** **By Kelly McDonald, Jr.**

When Gentiles heard the gospel message, how did they respond as it relates to the Sabbath? Were Gentile converts persuaded to keep the Sabbath like their Jewish counterparts? Did they seek to abandon it? In this work, the author reviews two Jewish, two Christian, and fifteen Roman primary sources to examine the prevalence of the Sabbath in the early Roman Empire. These sources also help us bring the New Testament to life.

### **How Did Sunday Become the First Day of the Week?** **By Kelly McDonald, Jr.**

There were two seven-day weeks in the first century Mediterranean world. The first was that of the Bible. In it, all days were unnamed except the seventh day, which was called Sabbath. The second weekly cycle was developed by astrology; it named the days of the week after other gods. All early Christians kept the Sabbath. However, in the mid to late second century, some Christians began to meet on the first day of the week; they

named it Sunday. This day was known to most pagans as the second day of the week. How did Sunday come to be known as the first day of the week in Christianity? In this work, you will learn about the history of the seven-day weekly cycle in the Roman Empire. This study will also reveal insight into other subjects from early Church history.

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The majority of people who attend Church today meet on Sunday. In the New Testament, the early Church met on Sabbath, which is from Friday sunset through Saturday sunset. Did you know that most Christians at least four hundred years after Jesus still honored the Sabbath? In this informative booklet, you will learn the major factors that affected the Sabbath in the early Church.

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