When they celebrated Sunday as “the eighth day,” early Christians signaled that God’s new creation had begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. From a rich sabbath tradition of devotion to God, prayer, and Scripture study in the synagogue, their new “Sunday” way of life gradually emerged.

When early Christians celebrated Sunday as “the eighth day,” they signaled a new way of being in the world in the wake of their powerful experiences with the life, death, and new life of Jesus Christ. They announced that God’s creative activity was continuing through Christ. “On the very first day, they believed, God began the creation of the heavens and the earth,” writes Dorothy Bass. “Christ’s rising on another first day, centuries later, meant that God was beginning a new creation…. The seven-day week could not hold the fullness of [God’s creative] time, and so the first day, which embraced eternity as well as its own twenty-four hours, spilled over. The first day, therefore, was also the eighth day.”

What practices shaped the early Christians’ new “Sunday” way of life? How were these practices rooted in their received tradition, with its focus on gatherings and worship on the sabbath? There can be no doubt that the first Christians who gathered to worship on the eighth day had inherited a rich tradition of devotion to God, prayer, and Scripture study from the synagogue.

THE RECEIVED TRADITION

Christian customs developed within the maternal tradition of Second Temple Judaism, the rich form of Jewish religion that emerged from the postexilic rebuilding of the Temple in 520 BC. Thus, Christians already
observed the sabbath day as holy, as a day without commerce, a day of rest. Within the Old Testament story, Moses gives the sabbath command at Mt. Sinai only a few months after God liberates the Hebrew slaves from Egypt (Exodus 20). This mandate not to work must have sounded strange in the ears of those recently liberated chattel. Their lives had been all about work. Now the God who has released the people demands that they remember the seventh day, do no work, and allow no person or animal that is within their care to work. In the future, their lives should follow the pattern established by God in creation: six days you labor, on the seventh you rest (Genesis 1:1-2:4). This commandment, more than any, underscores their liberation and celebrates the fact that in this new covenant with God they will be free men and women.

How challenging the transition to sabbath rest must have been for these beleaguered nomads. Yet by letting go of daily work and embracing sabbath rest, they relinquished their slavery and, more important, received the future, a future that depended not on their own work, but on the gracious and sustaining gifts of God. By letting go of their own labor in favor of God’s new economy, they declared their absolute dependence upon God to provide for their needs. By observing the sabbath, they confessed that people do not live by the work of their hands alone.

We cannot say for certain how faithfully the covenant people, from Sinai through exile, kept sabbath. What is clear, however, is that after the exile, sabbath observance became a true boundary marker, separating Israel from other nations and making the people holy in the world. In a most significant development, the people united sabbath with corporate worship. Sabbath took on a deeper life as not only a day of rest from labor, but also the day to worship Yahweh in temple and synagogue.
Taking seriously their covenant obligation and privilege, the scribes worked out the basic regulations (halakah) whereby Israel would keep sabbath. For the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls, two questions were primary: “When did one cease work?” and “What constitutes work?” You were to cease work on the sixth day before the sun’s orb reached the gate of the horizon (Damascus Document 10.14). This provided a hedge around the sabbath law, because if you ceased on the sixth day, you would not be found working on the seventh. What activities constituted work and should be precluded on the sabbath? This question, of course, was more complicated. The directives included no foolish speech, no fasting, no discussion of future work, no preparation of food, no harvesting, restricted travel, wearing of clean clothes, no cruelty to animals, and no carrying of water, among others (Damascus Document 10.14-11.21). Another stream of Jewish tradition distilled its sabbath regulations into the mishnaic treatise Shabbat. It contains directives on how to welcome the sabbath with the lighting of lamps (2.1-7) and includes thirty-nine classifications of work (7.2ff.). Though we might frown upon these rules as examples of legalism, we can admire the fact that these covenant people had the audacity to believe that God’s Word mattered greatly and the vitality to do everything imaginable to bring their lives into accord with God’s will.

Jesus treasured the sabbath, yet also violated its contemporary practice. His presence in the synagogue on the seventh day demonstrated his endorsement of sabbath worship (Mark 1:21; Mark 3:1ff; Luke 4:16-31). Yet Jesus’ healings, pronouncements, and his disciples’ harvesting (Mark 3:1ff; Luke 13:10-17; John 5:1-18; John 9) created an ongoing conflict with scribes and religious leaders concerning how the sabbath should be observed. When confronted with the allegation that he and his disciples violated the sabbath, Jesus declared “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (Mark 2:28). Jesus meant the sabbath is a good servant, but a bad master. The sabbath, originally an emblem of freedom to the Hebrew slaves, had become, in practice, a return to Egypt and slavery. According to Jesus, sabbath worship and rest are to serve and bless humanity.

Jesus’ statement, “the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath,” surely offended his opponents. With this, Jesus laid claim to authority equal to God. He was the giver and interpreter of the Law (cf. Matthew 5:21-48).

For the earliest disciples, Jesus was indeed “the lord of the sabbath” who modeled sabbath worship, but also taught them to serve the needs of people on the sabbath by extending mercy and healing. They interpreted sabbath law in light of Jesus’ lordship and the entrance of God’s kingdom into the world. This perspective is quite evident in Hebrews 3-4. For the writer of Hebrews, Christ himself embodied the eschatological rest that still awaits the people of God, a people fashioned through faith in Christ.
The earliest disciples continued to observe the sabbath as Jesus did. The women who attended to his burial did not work on the sabbath; instead they planned to finish the task on the first day of the week (Luke 23:34-46). Throughout his mission travels, the Apostle Paul went to the synagogues and places of prayer on the sabbath (Acts 13:13-44; 16:13; 17:1; 18:1-4) with the message of Jesus. Paul made only one negative statement regarding sabbath observance: he admonished the Gentile believers in Colossae not to let others condemn them in matters pertaining to food, drink, festivals, new moons, and sabbaths. These observances, he said, are only shadows of things to come, while the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). We must interpret Paul’s remarks in the context of the Judaizing controversy evident in nearly every Pauline community at one time or another. The Judaizers insisted that Gentiles live Jewishly in order to participate in the new creation community. Paul consistently opposed them. Apparently, he expected Jewish Christians to continue observing the sabbath regulations, but he did not require the same of Gentiles who entered the church. He understood the sabbath rules to be part of God’s contract with Israel at Sinai, but not applicable to nations outside of Israel. Certainly for Jew and Gentile, Christ is the goal of the Law (Romans 10:4), and so now the Law, including sabbath law, must find its referent and fulfillment in the person and work of Christ.

Despite this teaching, many Gentile Christians continued to observe the sabbath. Around A.D. 205 in his treatise On Prayer (23), Tertullian discussed the practice of some who kneel to pray on the sabbath as if corporate prayer on the sabbath were commonplace. In the late fourth century, the Apostolic Constitutions (7.23) mentioned that both sabbath and Sunday should be kept as festivals to the Lord: the first in honor of creation, the second in honor of the resurrection. One exception, it noted, is the sabbath before Easter, which should be observed by fasting as a commemoration of that day when the Creator was under the earth. In other words, sabbath joy is not to eclipse the church’s commemoration of the darkness of Jesus’ grave. This sabbath, indeed, every sabbath, found its true referent in God’s creative work established and sustained through the Messiah.

Not all Christians observed sabbath. A growing anti-Judaism in the second century and beyond meant that some distanced themselves from Jews and their practices. Regardless, through the fourth century there is ample evidence that some Christians, even Gentile Christians, continued to observe sabbath. Those Christians who maintained this practice took their cue from the Lord of the Sabbath, to whom the substance of the new creation belongs.

**Innovation**

The energy at the center of the resurrection community demanded new
The Eighth Day

Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances on Sunday were the catalyst for the eighth day innovation in the early church. These provided not only the proof of his resurrection, but also the lively expectation that the risen Jesus would be present with Christians as they gathered for worship.

With little exception, the Gospels indicate that the resurrection appearances of Jesus took place on “the first day of the week.” On that day, Mary Magdalene and others encountered an angel of the Lord who rolled back
The stone and revealed to them the glorious truth of his resurrection. Gripped with a joyful fear, they rushed to tell the other disciples; suddenly, Jesus met and greeted them. Matthew says that these women recognized and worshiped him on “the first day of the week” (28:1-10; cf. Luke 24:1-11 and John 20:1-10). Later on the first day, Jesus appeared to the gathered disciples behind locked doors; he showed to them his wounds, commissioned them, breathed upon them the Holy Spirit, and instructed them in matters pertaining to forgiveness (John 20:19-23). On the following Sunday, Jesus appeared again to the disciples in order to prove to Thomas he had in fact conquered death. Thomas responded to the presence of the risen Jesus in confession and worship, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:26-29).

The Christian dedication of Sunday as a day of gathering and worship, Oscar Cullmann suggests, arose from those post-resurrection appearances when Jesus broke bread with his disciples. When two disciples journeyed to Emmaus from Jerusalem, Jesus approached them and traveled with them on their way. Initially, these deeply troubled souls were not able to recognize him. He asked what they had been discussing, and they related the shocking news of Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, and the initial reports of the empty tomb and angelic visitors. Still hidden to their eyes, the risen Jesus chastised them for their slowness to believe and he interpreted the Scriptures, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, about the suffering Messiah. He joined them at the table where he took bread, broke it, blessed it, and distributed it. Finally, in the breaking of bread, they recognized the true identity of their guest. Later that same day (the first day of the week), the two disciples returned to Jerusalem to share their story only to hear first that the Lord had appeared to Simon (Luke 24:13-35). As they were celebrating the good news, Jesus appeared again to this larger company of disciples, greeting them with “peace” and showing them the marks of his suffering. With disbelieving joy they watched as Jesus took fish and ate it in their presence. Once again the Lord opened their minds to the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. He showed them how the events of that fateful week fulfilled what was written. He commissioned them to preach his message of repentance and forgiveness to all nations and directed them to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of power from on high (Luke 24:36-49). There can be little doubt that these events, and the first Christians’ reflection on them, restructured their lives, placing Christ at the center of their devotion and establishing Sunday as the Lord’s Day, the eighth day.

The addition of Sunday worship to the weekly practice of sabbath observance resulted from the generative power of the first Christians’ experiences of Jesus. On “the first day of the week” the risen Jesus appeared to his gathered followers, ate with them, and explained to them the Scrip-
The fatigue we experience in the modern world results from leaving behind the God of Moses and Jesus to embrace our own deities: materialism, consumerism, and individualism. For us, sabbath and Sunday stand as odd and subversive pointers toward a deeper reality.
not extend beyond commerce and material gains. Sabbath and Sunday will stand, for us, as odd and subversive pointers toward a deeper reality.

NOTES


5 Ignatius (Magnesians 8-10; see also Philadelphias 6.1) both reflected and promoted this growing tendency. He rejected as outmoded sabbath observance and just about every other aspect of Jewish religion. Marcion attempted to discredit the sabbath by making it a day of fasting. See Bauckham, 266-68.


7 Bauckham, 269ff. The Ebionites’ practice of both sabbath and Sunday was likely normative for the Palestinian churches. See Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 3.27.

8 The post-resurrection appearance of Jesus at the Sea of Tiberias in John 21 contains no time reference. However, the text perhaps has trained its readers to understand this third manifestation as occurring on Sunday since the two previous appearances have taken place on the first day of the week.


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