

# The Eighth Day

BY DAVID B. CAPES

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.

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**W**hen 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

## 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 re-

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member 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 within the land they soon would enter. By observing the sabbath, they, in effect, confessed that people do not live by the work of their hands alone, but by the bread and Word that God supplies. Beyond this, sabbath heralded an alternative world in which all persons, both king and peasant, farmer and merchant, resident alien and Israelite, stand equal before God. For six days all labor. For one day all rest. This new covenant with God offered a strange new world to those baptized in the Sea of Reeds. Not only did they leave behind slavery in a land not their own, but they embraced a God who shows no partiality and dared to imagine a society devoid of difference.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

structures, including a particular time set aside to feast on the new life that early Christians found through Jesus. They gathered in homes and at the Temple (Acts 2:46; 5:42) on “the first day of the week” (e.g., Acts 20:7-12; 1 Corinthians 16:2) to break bread, pray and rehearse the Gospel. Yet the phrase “the first day of the week” rests on a Jewish way of reckoning time and soon a uniquely Christian construct emerged: “the Lord’s Day” (e.g., Revelation 1:10; *Didache* 14.1).

Christian gatherings on the Lord’s Day probably began early among Palestinian Jewish Christians and became common practice throughout the church by the mid-second century. *Didache* 14.1-3 instructed the church to gather, break bread, and give thanks on the Lord’s Day. “In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice” (Malachi 1:11 paraphrased) became scriptural warrant for this innovation. Sunday, like Saturday, was ordained by God as a day of worship. In *Barnabas* 15.1-9, the writer distanced himself from the Jewish sabbath in favor of Sunday, “the eighth day,” the beginning of a new world. It is a day for rejoicing because it commemorates Jesus’ resurrection, manifestations, and installation in the heavens. In his *First Apology* (67) Justin described the practice of Christian worship on Sunday: believers from the city and rural areas gathered to hear the Gospels and Prophets read, to pray, and to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Justin explained that Sunday was the day of assembly because it was the first day of God’s creation, the day of Jesus’ resurrection, and the day Jesus appeared to his disciples and taught them.

Jesus’ resurrection on Sunday provided the catalyst for the eighth day innovation in the early church. The key to this new practice did not reside in the resurrection itself, an event without human witnesses, but in the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord. These provided not only the proof of the resurrection (for alternative explanations for the empty tomb already were emerging), but also the lively expectation that the risen Jesus would be present with Christians as they gathered.

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

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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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> On “the first day of the week” the risen Jesus appeared to his gathered followers, ate with them, and explained to them the Scrip-

tures. These events created an expectation that when they gathered on Sunday, the risen Jesus would be in their midst. Indeed, Matthew's record of the Lord's promise to be present where two or three gather in his name (18:20) may reflect this robust expectation. The possibility that Jesus would appear again brought the disciples back week after week on the first day, this day of new creation. The church's gatherings to read Scripture and share a meal commemorated and imitated Jesus' actions when he was with those first believers. From these early practices grew what later became the liturgy of the Word and liturgy of the Eucharist. Sunday worship, in both its form and function, originates from the recollection of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances at meals on the first day.<sup>8</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The first Christians inherited a rich tradition of sabbath observance that involved rest from labor and corporate worship in the synagogue. Their theology of sabbath rest and worship took on a distinctive Christological shape under the influence of Jesus, whom they affirmed as lord of the sabbath. As a result of Jesus' resurrection and manifestations to his disciples on the eighth day, the new community added a day for gathering to worship the risen and exalted Christ. Sunday, however, did not replace sabbath observance in the early church, nor was it a day of rest associated with the fourth command-

ment of the Decalogue. These developments took place gradually through the Middle Ages after Constantine's decree on 7 March 321, which called for judges, city people, and craftsmen to rest on the venerable day of the Sun.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, Christian believers rested on Sunday and referred to the Lord's Day as "the sabbath," attaching to the eighth day the significance which is

given to the seventh day in Jewish Law. In this new paradigm, earthly and servile work was to give way on Sunday to the more important work of God's people, worship (*leitourgia*).<sup>10</sup>

We will do well to reflect on the significance of the eighth day. 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. Regrettably, our vision of ultimate things does

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not extend beyond commerce and material gains. Sabbath and Sunday will stand, for us, as odd and subversive pointers toward a deeper reality.

## NOTES

1 Dorothy Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers), 55.

2 R. F. Buxton, "Sabbath" in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J. G. Davies (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 499-500.

3 Andrew Lincoln, "From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 353.

4 Richard Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church," *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 259-261, describes the dominant trend of the second century as the rejection of sabbath observance. Yet this trend gave way to a rediscovery of sabbath practice by Gentiles consciously and without coercion in the third and fourth centuries.

5 Ignatius (*Magnesian* 8-10; see also *Philadelphians* 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.

6 Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 9-12. See also Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (Oxford: University Press, 1991), 192-3.

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.

9 James White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 19.

10 Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Medieval Church in the West," *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 300-303.



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