

Church Fathers on The Sabbath and Sunday

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Abstract

Christians do not share the same view about the seventh day Sabbath and Sunday. A minority of Christians considers the Sabbath as still binding while a large majority dismisses it. For the latter, the cessation of Sabbath observance is traced back to the apostles. They believe that Sunday has replaced the Sabbath on account of Christ's resurrection. However, the New Testament and historical documents reveal that the eclipse of Sunday over the Sabbath did not begin with the apostles. This means that the change must have occurred sometime after the apostles. A group of significant church leaders and theologians called church fathers arose in the second century onward whose theological understanding had profound impact on the Christians. What were their understanding of the Sabbath and Sunday? Should their understanding be accepted as normative for Christians today? This study is based on literary research methodology. The findings clearly indicate that in the understanding of most church fathers, Sunday had eclipsed and replaced Sabbath in importance and practice for Christians.

Keywords: *Church fathers, Sabbath, Sunday, Resurrection, Lord's Day.*

Introduction

Christians since the early centuries have been divided over their understanding of the seventh day Sabbath and Sunday. Some hold the position that the apostles and the New Testament church brought an end to the observance of the Sabbath.¹ Others refute this claim and say that no such changes were made by the apostles but that the changes occurred gradually after the apostolic times.² This later view offers the best explanation as far as biblical and historical sources are concerned. It is not the purpose of this study to investigate when and how the change of the Sabbath to Sunday occurred. Rather, the study aims to ascertain the understanding of the church

¹David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*, ed. Terry Muck, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 123; Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 454; John Piper, "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy," *Sound of Grace*, (October 10, 1985) <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper85/pn85002c.htm> (accessed May 27, 2012); Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Ante-Nicene Christianity*. Vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 201.

²See Samuele Bacchiocchi, "The Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity" chap. in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 132-150; Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 297-314; Koberson Langhu, "Examination of the Baptists understanding of the Sabbath-Sunday Issue from an Adventist Perspective" (Term paper, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 2012), 30-33, 37-38.

fathers on the seventh day Sabbath and Sunday and draw theological implications and conclusions.³

Method

The study employs a literary research methodology as it briefly traces the biography of selected church fathers and critically analyzes their theological understanding based on available literature. As defined by Vyhmeister, a literary research is “research done in materials already written.”⁴ Due to lack of Greek and Latin language skills, this study has only consulted the English translations of the writings of the church fathers. Moreover, only selected church fathers up to the sixth century are included.

Apostolic Fathers

Apostolic fathers were church leaders or Christian writers who lived in the first and second centuries. It is assumed that they were personally acquainted with the apostles. They can be divided into two groups namely primary and secondary.

Primary Fathers

The primary or traditional fathers include Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp. The authorship of their writings and their association with the apostles of Jesus are accepted by most scholars.

Clement of Rome (d. c. 100 AD).

Little is known about Clement. He was one of the early bishops or presbyters of Rome.⁵ Letter *of the Romans to the Corinthians* commonly called *I Clement* is one of the earliest Christian documents outside of the New Testament. It was written around 95-97 AD, the time John wrote the book of Revelation and the author is thought to be Clement.⁶ In the letter the author wrote, “Since, therefore, these things are now clear to us and we have searched into the depths of the divine knowledge, we ought to do, in order, everything that the Master has commanded us to perform at the appointed times. Now he commanded the offerings and services to be performed diligently, and not to be done carelessly or in disorder, but at designated times and seasons.”⁷ This statement has often been cited in support of the view that Sunday observance began early on. Proponents of Sunday keeping have considered the words “appointed times,” and

³Church fathers were church leaders and writers who lived in the early centuries after the apostles. They are usually divided into three categories namely the apostolic fathers, the Ante-Nicene fathers, and the Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers. They are also broadly classified as Greek fathers and Latin fathers depending on which language they wrote their documents some of which were considered for inclusion in the New Testament canon. J. J. Scott Jr., “Apostolic Fathers,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (EDT)*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 1: 88-89.

⁴Nancy Jean Vyhmeister, *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 23.

⁵Michael A. Smith, “Clement of Rome,” *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity (EHHC)*, ed. Tim Dowley (Carmel, New York: Guideposts, 1977), 125.

⁶Michael W. Holmes, ed. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 22-23.

⁷*Ibid.*, 73.

“designated times and seasons,” as referring to Sunday observance. However, it cannot be ascertained beyond doubt that he was referring to Sunday.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-c. 98/107/117 AD)

Ignatius was a theologian and bishop of Antioch. It is said that he was martyred during the reign of emperor Trajan. He is almost exclusively known through the seven letters he wrote to different churches and individuals while on his way from Antioch to Rome as a prisoner. Ignatius represents witnesses to the life of the early church just after the apostles, which makes his writings significant.⁸ He wrote to the Christians in Rome not to prevent his martyrdom and was eventually thrown to the wild beasts and killed.⁹

In the letter to the Roman Christians, Ignatius wrote, “If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord’s Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death.”¹⁰ According to the context, the word “those” refers to the prophets. Some scholars have pointed out that the word “Day” in the “Lord’s Day” does not exist in the original work of Ignatius but that it is an addition in the work of translation. Those who hold this view say that instead of the “Lord’s Day,” it should be the “Lord’s life.”

However, in other parts of his writings, Ignatius made a clear distinction between the Sabbath and Sunday. He called Sunday, the Lord’s Day, “the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week] . . . the eighth day.”¹¹ He urged the Christians to keep the Lord’s Day after observing the Sabbath saying that it is on this day that their lives “both sprang up again, and the victory over death was obtained in Christ, whom the children of perdition, the enemies of the Saviour deny.”¹² Yet, he also asserted that one should not keep the Sabbath in the Jewish but in a spiritual manner.¹³

Ignatius not only seems to have an anti-Jewish attitude but even expressed the ending of Judaism. He argued that both Judaism and Christianity cannot exist together.¹⁴ It is apparent that the Christians of his days kept both Sabbath and Sunday. However, it is not clear whether they were to observe Sunday every week although this seems to be more likely. Again, since he expressed the ending of Judaism, it seems that the Christians did not want to have anything to do with the Sabbath because of Sunday. Most likely, Ignatius used the term “Lord’s Day,” to refer to Sunday, the day of Christ’s resurrection.

Polycarp (c. 69/70-155/160 AD)

Polycarp was the disciple of John, the beloved disciple. He was bishop of Smyrna. He

⁸Jerald C. Brauer, ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History (WDCH)*, (1971), s.v. “Ignatius.”; D. F. Wright, “Ignatius,” *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church (NIDCC)*, revised edition, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 1:498-499; F. X. Murphy, “St. Ignatius of Antioch,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia (NCE)*, (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1967), 7:353, 354.

⁹Pope Benedict XVI, *The Fathers of the Church: From Clement of Rome to Augustine of Hippo*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 168.

¹⁰Ignatius *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 9 (ANF, 1:62, trans. Roberts and Donaldson); Ignatius *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians* (1:98-99, trans. Glimm, Marique, and Walsh, vol. 1, 98-99).

¹¹Ignatius *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 9 (ANF, 1:62, 63).

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

suffered martyrdom at the age of eighty-seven.¹⁵ In the Smyrnaean letter known as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it is recorded that Polycarp was arrested and killed on the “Great Sabbath,” i.e., the Sabbath before the Passover or between the celebration of the death and the resurrection of Christ.¹⁶ Based on this, some believe that the Smyrnaeans under Polycarp observed the Saturday Sabbath.¹⁷ This Great Sabbath was probably on February 22 or 23 of 155/6 AD.¹⁸

Secondary Fathers

The secondary writings include the *Epistle of Barnabas*, *the Didache*, *the Shepherd of Hermas*, and others. Their authorship and association with the apostles is less known and agreed among scholars.¹⁹ Only two fathers are discussed.

The Epistle of Barnabas (1st Century AD)

It is not known whether the author is really Barnabas. How it came to be called as the Epistle of Barnabas is also unknown. Due to its reference to Vespasian, it is believed that it was probably written between AD 70-79 and cannot be later than 150 AD.²⁰ The author wrote, “He says to them, ‘Your new moons and your Sabbaths I cannot endure.’ Ye perceive how He speaks: Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, [namely this,] when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. And when He had manifested Himself, He ascended into the heavens.”²¹ Here, it is obvious that the author considers Sunday as the eighth day and also seems to teach the end of the Sabbath observance though the statement is not so explicit.

The Didache (2nd Century AD)

The Didache²² was discovered by Philotheus Bryennios, a Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Nicomedia in 1873 at Constantinople. It was considered as the “most important literary discovery in patrology” in the nineteenth century and the “oldest Christian document” outside of the New Testament. It is dated between 120 and 180 AD.²³ It is written, “But every Lord’s Day do ye gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure.”²⁴ The identity of the Lord’s Day is not identified.

¹⁵Wright, “Polycarp,” *NIDCC*, 1:791-792.

¹⁶Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. II, 208.

¹⁷*The Letter of the Smyrnaeans or the Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Translated by J.B. Lightfoot, 1990, *CARM* (Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry), <http://carm.org/letter-smyrnaeans-or-martyrdom-polycarp> (accessed September 10, 2012).

¹⁸“Polycarp,” Catholic Online: *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <https://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=9461> (accessed September 12, 2012).

¹⁹Scott, “Apostolic Fathers,” *EDT*, 1:88-89.

²⁰Ignatius *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians* (The Fathers of the Church, 1:188).

²¹Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 315-317; Ignatius *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians* (The Fathers of the Church, 1:147).

²²Brauer, ed. *WDCH*, s.v. “Didache,” 1:264-265.

²³Ignatius *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians* (The Fathers of the Church, 1:167, 168).

²⁴*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (ANF, 7:381, trans. Roberts and Donaldson).

Ante-Nicene Fathers

The Ante-Nicene Fathers lived before the historic Council of Nicea in 325 AD. These fathers did not have any contact with the apostles of Jesus. They include Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and others.

Justin Martyr (c.100-165 AD)

Justin was born into a pagan family in Palestine but became a Christian after his quest for answers in philosophy failed to satisfy his thirst. He is known for his Christian apologetical works the *First Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. Justin was beheaded for his faith in Rome, probably in 165 AD.²⁵

About the early church, Justin wrote, "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles, or the writings of the prophets, are read, as long as time permits."²⁶ He called Sunday as the day on which the Christians held their common assembly, "the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration."²⁷

Justin also mentioned certain Old Testament individuals such as Adam, Abel, Enoch, Lot, and Melchizedek who he said were considered righteous, just, and saved although they were not circumcised nor kept the "Sabbaths." Both circumcision and the Sabbath were practices meant only for the Jews.²⁸ On the other hand, Christians have been given "not one particular Sabbath, but a perpetual Sabbath."²⁹

Tertullian (c. 160/170-215/220 AD)

Tertullian was born in Carthage, North Africa. Educated in rhetoric and law, a master in Greek language, he was the first Christian to write extensively in Latin. A polemicist, he wrote on apologetics, dogmas, and Christian ascetism. Some of his best works include *Apology* and *Against Marcion*. In 207, he left the Catholic Church. However, his writings remain influential even within Catholicism.³⁰

Tertullian said that God hates the holy days of the Jews including the Sabbaths and new moons which are "strange" to Christians who have "a festive day every eighth day."³¹ He viewed both circumcision and the Sabbath as temporary practices which have already been abolished. Christians are not to observe only the seventh day, a "Sabbath temporal" but a "Sabbath eternal" "through all time" because Christ, the eternal Sabbath has already arrived. He saw the former as human and the

²⁵Benedict XVI, *The Fathers of the Church*, 170; Carey, "Justin Martyr," *NIDCC*, 558.

²⁶Justin Martyr *The First Apology*, 6 (6:106, 107, The Fathers of the Church, trans. Falls).

²⁷Justin *The First Apology*, 6 (6:106, 107).

²⁸Justin *Dialogue with Trypho*, 6 (6:176, 178, 186, The Fathers of the Church, trans. Falls).

²⁹Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol II, 203.

³⁰Benedict XVI, *The Fathers of the Church*, 172.

³¹Tertullian *On Idolatry* 14 (ANF, 3:70, trans. S. Thelwall).

latter as divine.³²

Clearly defending the Christian faith against the Jews, Tertullian argued, “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.”³³ He further wrote that though the Jews accuse the Christians with “the sun and Sunday” they are not “far off from your Saturn and your days of rest.”³⁴ Tertullian noted that the Christians considered fasting and kneeling on the Lord’s day as unlawful.³⁵ He considered abstaining from secular work on Sunday as a Christian duty which Schaff points out is the “first express evidence of cessation from labor on Sunday among Christians.”³⁶

From these statements of Tertullian, one can conclude that he believed that the Sabbath was a Jewish institution and that Christians need not observe it. The Christians should rather observe Sunday which is superior, a day of rejoicing.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 155-c.215/220 AD)

Clement of Alexandria, the first known Christian scholar was born in Athens. In his lifetime, he often engaged in debate with the Gnostics. The mainspring of his whole system of theology was the doctrine of the Logos. It is in *Stromateis (Miscellanies)* where we find Clement’s views on the Sabbath.³⁷ Clement is considered as the first man to unequivocally use the expression “Lord’s Day” for the first day of the week. He said that Plato spoke of the Lord’s Day as the eighth day. He quoted Plato who wrote in the tenth book of his *Republic*, “And when seven days have passed to each of them in the meadow, on the eighth they are to set out and arrive in four days.”³⁸ He further pointed out that the seventh day is recognized as sacred by both the Hebrews and the Greeks “according to which the whole world of all animals and plants revolve.”³⁹ He seems to say that the Lord’s day is kept in honor of Christ’s resurrection.⁴⁰ It is obvious that Clement identified the term “Lord’s Day,” with the eighth day, Sunday.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 175-c.195/200 AD)

Irenaeus was born in Smyrna where as a boy he listened to Polycarp. He became the bishop of Lyons. One could almost place him alongside the Apostolic Fathers because “through Polycarp he claimed contact with the apostolic generation and the tradition of the Elders.”⁴¹ One of his famous works is *Against the Heresies*, aimed at Gnosticism.⁴² Irenaeus regarded the Jewish Sabbath as merely a symbolical, typical, and temporary

³²Tertullian *An Answer to the Jews* 7 (ANF, 3:155); Johannes Quasten. *Patrology: The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus*. Vol II (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1990), 269.

³³Tertullian *AD Nationes*, 7 (ANF, 3:123).

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Tertullian *Prayer*, 40.23 (40:182, *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Joseph Daly).

³⁶Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. II, 204.

³⁷Carey, “Clement of Alexandria,” *NDCC*, 234-235; Benedict, *The Fathers of the Church*, 162.

³⁸Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, 2 (ANF, 2:469, trans. Roberts and Donaldson).

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 2:545.

⁴¹Wright, “Irenaeus,” *NIDCC*, 516-517.

⁴²Benedict XVI, *The Fathers of the Church*, 168.

ordinance.⁴³ Yet, he did not believe that Jesus had broken the Sabbath commandment when He healed the sick on the Sabbath nor did the disciples when they plucked grains on the Sabbath. He pointed out that circumcision was carried out on the Sabbath and that David and his men ate the holy bread from the sanctuary. These were not guilty of breaking the Sabbath. Then Irenaeus pointed out that what actually was prohibited were activities that were meant to earn wealth by trading and other worldly business.⁴⁴ Finally, Irenaeus said that the priests performed work on the Sabbath in the sanctuary but were not guilty of breaking it because they were not doing any servile work but were engaged in the service of the Lord.⁴⁵ Without the questionable statements of Irenaeus, it is obvious that he only wrote about the true and false keeping of the Sabbath.

The Didascalia (3rd Century AD)

The Didascalia or Didascalia Apostolorum or “The Catholic Teaching of the Twelve Holy Apostles and Disciples of the Savior,” was written in the early third century for a Jewish-Christian church in northern Syria by its bishop.⁴⁶ It is written: “The apostles further appointed: On the first day of the week let there be service, and the reading of the holy scriptures, and the oblation [sacrifice of the mass], because on the first day of the week [i.e., Sunday] our Lord rose from the place of the dead, and on the first day of the week he arose upon the world, and on the first day of the week he ascended up to heaven, and on the first day of the week he will appear at last with the angels of heaven.”⁴⁷ The importance of Sunday due to the resurrection of Christ is expressed in this statement.

Constitution of the Holy Apostles (4th Century AD)

Also known as “Apostolic Constitutions,” the Constitution of the Holy Apostles is “a fourth-century pseudo-Apostolic collection, in eight books, of independent, though closely related, treatises on Christian discipline, worship, and doctrine, intended to serve as a manual of guidance for the clergy, and to some extent for the laity.”⁴⁸ The Lord’s Day is called as the day of the resurrection, a day of rejoicing and not mourning and one who fasts on it is guilty of sin. It further goes on to emphatically declare, “But keep the Sabbath, and the Lord’s Day festival; because the former is the memorial of the creation, and the latter of the resurrection.”⁴⁹ A dual observance of the Sabbath and Sunday are encouraged in this document.

Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers

Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers came on the scene during and after the Council of Nicea. They include Eusebius, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Gregory the Great.

⁴³Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. II, 204.

⁴⁴Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, 4.8.2 (ANF, 1:471, trans. Roberts and Donaldson).

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Bruaer, ed. *WDCH*, s.v. “Didascalia Apostolorum,” 1:265-266.

⁴⁷“What the Early Church Believed: Sabbath or Sunday?” *Catholic Answers* (August 10, 2004) <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/sabbath-or-sunday> (accessed September 12, 2012).

⁴⁸“Apostolic Constitutions,” *Catholic Online: Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=944> (accessed September 23, 2012).

⁴⁹*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 7.2.23 (ANF, 7:469, Roberts and Donaldson).

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263-c. 339 AD)

Eusebius was born in Palestine. He was the first to write church history in an extensive and comprehensive manner setting the stage for future church historians. He also served as a typical court-bishop of Caesarea and became a close friend of emperor Constantine. Through his political ideas, he helped established the Byzantium Empire. Two of his famous works are *Chronicles* and *Ecclesiastical History* and it is in the latter where he recorded the events surrounding the Sabbath.⁵⁰

Eusebius does not seem to present a positive view of the Sabbath. He said that God through Moses handed down the seeds of true religion to the Jews who were “still corrupted by their ancient ways, images and symbols of a certain mystical Sabbath and of circumcision and instructions in other spiritual principles.”⁵¹ Then he explained that Christians do not practice circumcision nor observe the Sabbath and other regulations such as the dietary law enjoined by Moses.⁵²

Eusebius described the role emperor Constantine played in regard to the observance of a special occasion for prayer on a particular day. He called this day, the “first and chief of all, the day of our Lord and Saviour,” “the Lord’s Day,” and “a day of rest.” Constantine enjoined upon all his subjects to observe the day and even the Christian soldiers in his army were granted leave to attend the church services. Those who were not Christians were asked to appear on every Lord’s Day in an open plain near the city. At a given signal, all of them were to offer prayer before God.⁵³

Historical records concerning Constantine point to Sunday being the honored day. Talking about the Ebionites, he said that they observed the Sabbath and other things as practiced by the Jews and the “Lord days” in commemoration of Christ’s resurrection like the Christians.⁵⁴ Another statement of Eusebius concerning the importance of the Lord’s Day is this: “The churches throughout the rest of the world observe the practice that has prevailed from apostolic tradition until the present time, so that it would not be proper to terminate our fast on any other but the day of the resurrection of our Savior. Hence there were synods and convocations of the bishops on this question; and all unanimously drew up the ecclesiastical decree, which they communicated to all the churches in all places, that the mystery of our Lords resurrection should be celebrated on no other day than the Lords Day.”⁵⁵

Eusebius also taught the superiority of the day of Christ’s resurrection, the Lord’s day and the one and only truly holy day declaring that it is better than any “number of days as we ordinarily understand them, and better than the days set apart by the Mosaic law for feasts, new moons, and Sabbaths, which the apostle [Paul] teaches are the shadows of days and not days in reality.”⁵⁶ It has not been possible though to trace this particular statement from the writings of Eusebius.

Athanasius (c. 296-373 AD)

⁵⁰Michael A. Smith, “Eusebius,” *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 17.

⁵¹Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 1.44 (The Fathers of the Church, Edited by Roy Joseph Deferrari, Rudolph Arbesmann, Bernard M. Peebles, 19:44).

⁵²Rolaant McKenzie, “The Early Church Fathers and the Sabbath,” *UK Apologetics*, <http://www.ukapologetics.net/early.htm> (accessed September 10, 2012); Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 1.4.87 (NPN, 1:87, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert).

⁵³Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 1.4.87 (NPN, 1:544, 545).

⁵⁴Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 1.5.23 (NPN, 1:159, 160).

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 1:241.

⁵⁶“What the Early Church Believed: Sabbath or Sunday.” <http://www.catholic.com/tract/sabbath-or-sunday> (accessed September 12, 2012).

Athanasius was bishop of Alexandria. He is famously known for his defense of the Nicene Creed which upheld the position that Christ was of the same substance with God and vigorously rejected Arianism. He was one of those giants of Christianity due to his role in defining and defending the doctrine of Trinity against the Arians.⁵⁷

Athanasius' mention of the Sabbath and Sunday comes from his letter to Serapion. In the letter, he narrated that at the invitation of Constantine, Eusebius and others were ready to take Arius to the Church at Constantinople where Bishop Alexander served. The bishop had excommunicated Arius. He felt that to bring Arius the heretic into the church would be like bringing heresy into the church. Eusebius threatened Alexander that he would definitely bring Arius into the church as it was according to the emperor's order. According to the record of Athanasius, this conversation between Eusebius and Alexander took place on the Sabbath and that Eusebius was to take Arius to the church the following day "to-morrow"⁵⁸ which clearly has to be Sunday. This tells us that church services were already held on Sunday in those days.

In the work *On Sabbath and Circumcision 3*, it is written, "The Sabbath was the end of the first creation, the Lord's Day was the beginning of the second, in which he renewed and restored the old in the same way as he prescribed that they should formerly observe the Sabbath as a memorial of the new creation."⁵⁹ This shows that Athanasius had a high regard for "the Lord's Day, as the perpetual memorial of the resurrection," and assumed that the Sabbath had been abolished. However, this is among the doubtful works⁶⁰ of Athanasius and it has not been possible to trace this statement.

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 310-386 AD)

Cyril was the bishop of Jerusalem for forty-eight years although he was deposed and exiled three times. He defended the true Christian faith against Arianism and took part in the Council of Constantinople in 381. He wrote twenty-four Catecheses and it is in these that we find his views on the Sabbath.⁶¹ Cyril wrote, "Fall not into the sect of the Samaritans or into Judaism; for henceforth Jesus Christ has redeemed you. Stand aloof from all observation of Sabbaths and speak not of any of the indifferent meats as common or unclean."⁶² He also called God as the "Lord of Sabaoth,"⁶³ without giving any explanation. Clearly, Cyril seems to believe in the end of the Sabbath observance.

St. Ambrose (339-397 AD)

Ambrose was an excellent preacher, church administrator, and a politician. In 374, while yet unbaptized, he was elected as bishop of Milan by popular vote. He fought against Arianism and made sure that it was overthrown in the West. He had considerable influence on Augustine and baptized him in Milan. He was the first person to introduce hymn-singing

⁵⁷Ferguson, "Athanasius," *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 136.

⁵⁸Athanasius *Letter LIV* (NPN, 4:565, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson).

⁵⁹"What the Early Church Believed: Sabbath or Sunday: Sabbath or Sunday?"

<http://www.catholic.com/tracts/sabbath-or-sunday> (accessed September 12, 2012).

⁶⁰Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, vol. III (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 384.

⁶¹Toon, "Cyril of Jerusalem," *NIDCC*, 278; Benedict XVI, *The Fathers of the Church*, 164.

⁶²Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechesis IV* (The Fathers of the Church, 61:137, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson); Cyril of Jerusalem, *The Catechetical Lectures* (NPN, trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford).

⁶³Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechesis IV* (NPN, 49, trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford).

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in the church.⁶⁴ Ambrose wrote about the basilica of which he was in charge. He said that it was on Sunday that he was teaching some candidates inside the basilica when the officials of the Emperor came and declared the basilica as property of the government.⁶⁵ He used to fast every day except on Sabbath and Sunday.⁶⁶ He encouraged the believers to gather “the fruits on the Sabbath day, the great Sabbath day, on which there is great rest.”⁶⁷ He also frequently mentioned “Sunday as an evangelical festival, and contrasts it with the defunct legal Sabbath.”⁶⁸ All these indicate that during the days of Ambrose, the Christians worshipped both on the Sabbath and Sunday. His mention of “defunct legal Sabbath” indicates the status of the Sabbath in his days.

Jerome (c. 345-420 AD)

Jerome was the leading scholar during his time in the Western church. He was born in a small town in north-east Italy. He was ordained minister and secretary to Pope Damasus in Rome. The Pope commissioned him to make an improved Latin translation of the Bible which he completed after 23 years. The new Latin Bible became known as the Vulgate Bible, accepted as the official and authorized Latin version of the Western church which was reaffirmed by Trent. He was an outstanding exegetical-biblical scholar and wrote commentaries on most of the books of the Bible. Along with Origen and Augustine, Jerome ranks as an “early biblical interpreter of the first order.” He spent the rest of his life in monasticism in the town of Bethlehem.⁶⁹

Jerome wrote about the Cenobites who he said spent the entire Lord’s day in prayer and reading.⁷⁰ He differentiated the Sabbath from the Lord’s Day⁷¹ and believed in the superiority of Sunday to all other days saying that it is “brighter beyond all other days.”⁷² Further he explained, “Just as the Virgin Mary, the Mother of the Lord, holds the first place among all women, even so, this day is the mother of days among all days . . . this day is both one from seven and one beyond seven. This is the day that is called the octave and is the reason why certain psalms are entitled, ‘for the octave.’ This is the day on which the synagogue comes to an end and the Church is born. This is the day in the number of which eight souls were preserved in the Ark of Noe, and: ‘Its counterpart, the Church,’ says Peter, ‘now saves you.’”⁷³ Again, describing the superiority of Sunday, he commented that some days may belong to everybody including the Jews, the heretics and the heathens. However, the Lord’s Day, the day of the Resurrection belongs to the Christians. He even did not mind the heathens calling it the day of the sun saying “for today has risen: ‘the sun of justice with its healing wings.’”⁷⁴ He also claimed that the solemnity of Sunday has replaced the obligation of the Sabbath.⁷⁵ After speaking gloriously of Sunday, Jerome

⁶⁴Michael A. Smith, “Ambrose of Milan,” *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 140.

⁶⁵Ambrose *Letter XX* (NPN, 423).

⁶⁶Ambrose NPN, 1:300, 301.

⁶⁷Ambrose *Seven Exegetical Works* (The Fathers of the Church, 65:46, trans. Michael P. McHugh).

⁶⁸Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III, 384.

⁶⁹Bruce A. Demarest, “Jerome,” *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 188, 189.

⁷⁰Jerome *To Eustochium* (NPN, 6:38, trans. W. H. Fremantle).

⁷¹Jerome *To Lucinius* (NPN, 57:248, trans. Marie Liguori Ewald).

⁷²Jerome *The Homilies of Saint John* (The Fathers of the Church, 57:247).

⁷³*Ibid.*, 57:247-248.

⁷⁴Jerome *The Homilies of Saint John* (The Fathers of the Church, 57:253).

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 57:248.

talked about the necessity of the Sabbath. He called upon the believers to stop all servile work, all worldly pursuits and do what the things that pertain to God.⁷⁶ These statements of Jerome indicate that in those days Christians observed both the Sabbath and Sunday although the latter was gradually eclipsing the former.

John Chrysostom (c. 350-407 AD)

Chrysostom was born in about 350 AD at Antioch. He was made bishop of Constantinople against his will. He became known as the “Golden mouth,” for his extraordinary preaching ability.⁷⁷ He wrote, “On the Preparation, on the Sabbath, on the Lord’s day, and on the day of Martyrs, it is the same Sacrifice that is performed.”⁷⁸ He also wrote to the believers asking them to read ahead the section of the Gospels which would be publicly read on the “first day of the week, or even on the Sabbath.”⁷⁹ Thus, he clearly differentiated the Saturday Sabbath from the Lord’s Day (Sunday).

Chrysostom pointed out that the Jews esteemed circumcision more than the Sabbath. To perform circumcision, the Sabbath was broken but to keep the Sabbath, circumcision was never broken. Since circumcision has been done away with, more so the Sabbath.⁸⁰ He argued that the Sabbath is no longer to be observed once a person becomes a Christian that one cannot keep the Sabbath and fast with the Jews.⁸¹ To Chrysostom, the Law had been abolished. He said that if the Law is still needed, it must be observed in whole and not in part. If one observes the Sabbath, one must also observe circumcision and if one observes circumcision, one must also offer sacrifices. But the Law is no more required because Christ annulled it.⁸² Further, Chrysostom explained about the creation of man and his conscience. When God created man, He gave him conscience through which man can know what is good and evil. And when He gave man the law, he did not give any reason because through his conscience man can know why killing is prohibited. But when God gave the Sabbath commandment, it needed no conscience. He not only prohibited but also gave reasons why it should be kept holy. He did so because it was “not one of the leading ones. It was not one of those which were accurately defined of our conscience, but a kind of partial and temporary one; and for this reason, it was abolished afterwards.”⁸³

Finally, Chrysostom talked about three types of rest—the Sabbath rest in which God rested after His creation, the Palestine rest into which the Jew entered when their hardships and labors ended, and the Rest of the Kingdom of heaven. The Sabbath rest is “an image and type” of the heavenly rest.⁸⁴

St. Augustine (354-430 AD)

Augustine was born in 354 AD in Tagaste, modern Algeria and served as bishop of

⁷⁶Ibid., 57:164.

⁷⁷Ferguson, “John Chrysostom,” *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 191.

⁷⁸Chrysostom *Homilies on Timothy* (The Fathers of the Church, 48:425, trans. Marie Liguori Ewald).

⁷⁹Chrysostom *Homilies on St. John* (NPN, 14:38).

⁸⁰Chrysostom *Homilies on Philippians* (NPN, 12:230); Chrysostom *Homilies on St. John* (NPN, 14:179); Chrysostom *the Fathers of the Church*, 41:21.

⁸¹Chrysostom *Homilies on Galatians* (NPN, 21).

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Chrysostom *Twenty-one Homilies on the Statutes* (NPN, 9:422).

⁸⁴Chrysostom *Homilies on St. John and Hebrews* (NPN, 14:393-394).

Hippo all his life. He was a prolific writer and wrote several masterpieces including the *Confessions*, an autobiography and the *City of God*.⁸⁵ Much of Catholic theology has been founded on the theological works of Augustine.

Augustine wrote much about the issue of the Sabbath and Sunday. He believed that Jesus not only broke but also abolished the Sabbath when He healed the sick on the Sabbath because it was only a shadow of Christ, the shadow that is mentioned in Colossians 2:16-17.⁸⁶ He also taught that Christ broke the Sabbath by asking the children of Israel to march around the walls of Jericho with trumpets and declare war against the aliens on the Sabbath.⁸⁷

Augustine pointed out that Christians do not practice the Jewish circumcision, eat the flesh of unclean animals, observe the Sabbath, new moons and their festival days, or offer sacrifices of animals or observe any other ancient sacraments of the Jews which are classified as shadows of things to come by Paul.⁸⁸ He called the Jewish observance of the Sabbath as a servile work, a work of sin and the Christian observance of the Sabbath as that of a spiritual and not carnal nature.⁸⁹ The Christian Sabbath is the eighth day, the Lord's day because on it Jesus rose from the death.⁹⁰ Clearly, to Augustine Sunday was the Lord's Day.⁹¹

Augustine expressed an interesting thought when he said that circumcision was performed on the eighth day and with stone knives signifying Christ, the Rock; that circumcision typifies the stripping away of the carnal life on the eighth day. When Christ rose from the death on the eighth day, He circumcised us spiritually.⁹² He also called this a reborn into eternal life,⁹³ a true rest in Christ.⁹⁴

Augustine identified the Sabbath rest of creation account and the Sabbath commandment as the heavenly rest. He expressed this concept in the following words: "This 'seventh day' will be our Sabbath and that it will end in no evening, but only in the Lord's Day—that eighth and eternal day which dawned when Christ's resurrection heralded an eternal rest both for the spirit and for the body. On that day we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise—for this is to be the end without the end of all our living, that Kingdom without end, the real goal of our present life."⁹⁵

Again, he described this heavenly rest in a profound language when he made a comparison of the seven days of creation to the periods of human history. He equated

⁸⁵David F. Wright, "Augustine of Hippo," *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 198-199.

⁸⁶Augustine *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament* (NPN, 515-516).

⁸⁷*Ibid.*

⁸⁸Augustine *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects* (The Fathers of the Church, 27:393-394).

⁸⁹Augustine *Homilies on the Gospel of John and First Epistle of John* (NPN, 7:24, 132, 187, 247, trans. John Gibb and James Innes); Augustine *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons* (The Fathers of the Church, 38:303, 315, trans. Mary Sarah Muldowney).

⁹⁰Augustine *Homilies on the Gospel of John and First Epistle of John* (NPN, 7:187).

⁹¹Augustine *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons* (The Fathers of the Church, 38: 178, 219, 297); Augustine *The Work of Monks* (The Fathers of the Church, 16:365, trans. Mary Sarah Muldowney).

⁹²Augustine *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons* (The Fathers of the Church, 38:205).

⁹³*Ibid.*

⁹⁴Augustine *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects* (The Fathers of the Church, 27:393-394).

⁹⁵Augustine *The City of God* (The Fathers of the Church, 24: 510-511, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan).

the first day with the time from Adam to Noah; the second day from Noah to Abraham; the third day, from Abraham to David; the fourth day, from David to Babylonian Captivity; the fifth day, from the Captivity to the coming of Jesus; and the sixth day from the first coming of the Lord until now and that one enters the sixth day at baptism. The righteous people of God will celebrate their Sabbath. Augustine then described the greatness of the eighth day by stating that it becomes the first [of a new week], so after the seven periods of this transitory world have been spent and completed, we shall return to that immortal blessedness from which man fell.⁹⁶

Gregory the Great (540-604 AD)

Gregory the Great was one of the most important bishops between Constantine and the Reformation. He was from a Roman aristocratic family but became a monk, the first pope to become a monk. He claimed universal jurisdiction over Christendom. He “confirmed the authority and hierarchy of the papacy and the church, and he proclaimed the ‘Christian Commonwealth’ in which the pope and the clergy were to be responsible for ordering society.”⁹⁷ Gregory saw Christ, the Redeemer as the true Sabbath rest. He pointed out that on the Lord’s Day all earthly human work should cease and “attention given in every way to prayers, so that if anything is done negligently during the six days, it may be expiated by supplications on the day of the Lord’s resurrection.”⁹⁸

Summary and Conclusion

Summary

The writings of the church fathers reveal that the early Christians from the second century worshipped both on the seventh day Sabbath and Sunday. As Christianity became older, the doctrine of Sunday also became more defined as it became more and more widely accepted by the Christian communities. In this way, the later church fathers, especially the Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers have much more to write about Sunday than the apostolic fathers.

Many church fathers make a clear distinction between the Sabbath and Sunday, identifying the latter as a distinct Christian institution. They point to the resurrection of Christ as the basis of Sunday observance. Schaff correctly observes their thoughts when he stated, “The fathers did not regard the Christian Sunday as a continuation of, but as a substitute for, the Jewish Sabbath, and based it not so much on the fourth commandment, and the primitive rest of God in creation, to which the commandment expressly refers, as upon the resurrection of Christ and the apostolic tradition.”⁹⁹

Much of the writings of the church fathers express the belief that with the rejection of Christ as the Messiah, Judaism with its religious system had come to an end. Their desire was to place Christianity as a unique and peculiar religion, completely distinct from Judaism. In the process, they ended up holding the view that

⁹⁶Augustine *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons* (The Fathers of the Church, 38:370).

⁹⁷Harry Rosenberg, “Gregory the Great,” *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 220.

⁹⁸Gregory the Great *Epistles* (NPN, 13:92, trans. James Barmby).

⁹⁹Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. II, 202.

Christ had abolished the various practices including circumcision and the Sabbath. Many of them eventually replaced the seventh day Sabbath with Sunday. Most of the church fathers who mention the term “Lord’s Day,” identify it with Sunday. They call the first day of the week the “Lord’s Day,” because Christ resurrected from the dead on this day. It is a victorious and joyous day for Christ and His people.

Conclusion

The writings of the church fathers are significant as they bring to light the various issues that confronted the early church. However, with the existence of several fraudulent documents, the scholars’ complete lack of trust on some of the questionable documents, and additions of words to the original writings by translators, the church fathers have to be read with caution. With the progress of Christianity through the centuries, Sunday began to increasingly take precedence over the Sabbath until the latter is almost totally eclipsed. In this regard, it is safe to state that the church fathers who had significant influence over the Christians in the early formative years of Christianity played vital role in drawing the Christians away from the observance of the seventh day Sabbath which they considered Jewish toward Sunday, the day of Christ’s resurrection.

For Christians including Seventh-day Adventists who base their belief system on sola Scriptura, must continue to do so. They cannot depend on other sources irrespective of their authenticity including the church fathers. Although for most of the church fathers, Sunday had eclipsed the Sabbath in importance and practice, such Christians must continue to build their foundation on the Scripture alone. It is written in Scripture that by the time of the apostles, there were already many false teachers who taught various doctrines contrary to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. In the same way, the church fathers can be and must be read, but always through the eyes of the Scriptures. Their writings must be tested by Scripture.

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