

Is Anything Wrong with Worshipping on Sundays?



Prepared by Rev. Orlando Gayle (2015)
for The Diocese of Jamaica & The Cayman Islands.

NON- BIBLICAL REFERENCES TO CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION AND WORSHIPPING ON SUNDAYS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Pliny's letter to the Emperor, Trajan (extracts)

Pliny was a civil servant who served as governor of Bithynia, in the north of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), from 111-113 AD.

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never before participated in trials of Christians, so I do not know what offenses are to be punished or investigated, or to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age, or no difference recognized between the very young and the more mature. Is pardon to be granted for repentance, or if a man has once been a Christian is it irrelevant whether he has ceased to be one? Is the name itself to be punished, even without offenses, or only the offenses perpetrated in connection with the name?

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have followed the following procedure: I interrogated them as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Reference link:

<https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/pliny/>

Justin Martyr (extracts) - 100—165AD

On the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a given city or rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases, the president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers.

When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent, saying the "Amen." A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons.

Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, gives what he wills, and what is collected is deposited with the president. He provides for the orphans and widows, those who are in need on account of sickness or some other cause, those who are in bonds, strangers who are sojourning, and in a word he becomes the protector of all who are in need.

We all make our assembly in common on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God changed the darkness and matter and made the world, and Jesus Christ our Savior arose from the dead on the same day. For they crucified him on the day before Saturn's day, and on the day after (which is the day of the Sun) he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught these things, which we have offered for your consideration.

Reference link:

<https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/how-we-christians-worship/>

The Priestly Material and Sabbath Keeping

The issue of worshipping on the Sabbath came out of the priestly writings. According to (McSweeney, 2015), The Priestly Writer wrote in the late exilic or early restoration period, and “was concerned with supplementing the old traditions with materials that would underscore the institutional and ritual constitution of Israel as a unique community separated from other people” . She also added that there is not much information available on worship during the period of the exile (606-536 BCE); however, there is some belief that synagogues originated during this time (the exilic period), but there is no firm evidence to support this.

In the absence of other religious observances, institutions such as the Sabbath and rites such as circumcision became prominent (Kraus, 1966). As a result, it is claimed that since the “holy place” was lost, (when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed prior to the exile), the “holy time” became more important. Consequently, McSweeney (2015) suggested that the Israelites “...developed the ritual features of observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, dietary provisions, treatment of diseases,” as well as “instructions on the priesthood and sacrifices.”

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE SABBATH?

“The historical and theological foundation of the Sabbath is tied up with the socially determined purpose of a day of rest” (Carson, 1999). In Genesis 2:2, when God created the Heaven and the earth, we see it being declared as a day of rest, which belongs to the Lord.

N.B. *The Hebrew for rested here, means ceased.*

According to Reid (2014), “The entire Sabbath legislation, (including the seventh day, the seventh year, The Jubilee, and The Land of Promise) was originally a festival of freedom celebrating the Exodus from Egypt.” As a result, Reid (2014) suggested that: “Deuteronomy 5:12-15 interprets the seventh day from this point of view and no other. The priestly version in Exodus 20: 8-11 deviates from all other Sabbath laws, in that it is the only one of the Ten Commandments, that can be interpreted in a ceremonial sense.”

In the commandment, Exodus 20:8-11, it is said that we should, “Remember the Sabbath to keep it Holy. Six days shall you labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a day of rest, which belongs to me (God).” Two things are of great interest here,

- (1) It is a day of rest, and this we should be doing to the honour and glory of God. Therefore, no work is to be done by anyone, and this include not only people, but even the animals owned by the Jews.
- (2) There is nothing in this passage that says anything about worship. The day is kept holy by not doing anything. Just relaxing and taking a break from all the busyness of life.

There is also a Sabbath year, in which the soil should not be tilled for an entire year, thus giving the land time to replenish itself (Leviticus 25:1-7).

HISTORY OF WORSHIPPING ON THE SABBATH

This changed however in 606 BCE, when the children of Israel were taken into captivity in Babylon. No longer could they worship in their temple as they were accustomed, (as it was destroyed by the Babylonians), and they were also in a strange land (Psalm 137), so they had to reorganize their lives in order to facilitate their worship of Yahweh. It was out of this that the Sabbath came. After the exile which lasted

for approximately 70 years, the Israelites build synagogues (which faces Jerusalem), so as to recall their association with the temple that was in Jerusalem, and it was from this point onward that Sabbath worship became a part of the culture. Therefore, it was not something mandated by God.

Consequently, Jesus himself was born and raised as a Jew. He also worshipped on the Sabbath in synagogues, and he even went into the temple (which was rebuilt under the instruction of King Cyrus, of Persia, who allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it, as seen in Ezra 1:1-2). Jesus himself told no one that they must worship on the seventh day of the week, as this commandment was more one of human design/law, and not one mandated by God. In other words, seventh day worship evolved out of their cultural experience, and it became a way of life for them.

THE CHRISTIANITY MOVEMENT

With Jesus dying on a cross and overcoming the sting of sin and death, came a new movement known as Christianity. When Christianity began, it, like the Sadducees and Pharisees, began as a sect of Judaism. As a result, the then converts to Christianity still would go to worship at the temple everyday (Acts 5:42), and on the first day of the week, they would come together and break bread (Acts 20:7).

In Acts 5: 42, one can see that Christians sought to worship everyday of the week. No day was considered more important than the other, which is what Paul in his letter to the Romans was alluding to in Romans 14: 5, which will be dealt with in greater details at a later stage.

PERSECUTION OF THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

As their numbers increase, the Jewish leaders felt jealous/threatened, and as a result, a persecution broke out against the Christians in Acts 5:17-42. It is here that we see Gamaliel (a

Pharisee) rising to the defence of the apostles, who were placed in a public prison, but were set free by an angel in the night (15:17-19). At the council which was held to convict the apostles for teaching in the name of Jesus, Gamaliel came to their defence, (5:34-39), as he challenged the council to “Consider carefully what they do to these people... because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail, but if it is of God, you would not be able to overthrow them. As a result, you would only be fighting against God.” Being convinced they ordered them to not teach in the name of Jesus, had them flogged, and then released.

In approximately 64 AD, a great persecution broke out against the Christians under Emperor Nero, he had built an image of himself and ordered everyone in the land to worship it. The Christians however refused, and this caused them to become severely persecuted by the Roman Authorities. To aid his drive to persecute the Christians, Nero started a fire in Rome and blame it one the Christians. If this was not enough, he further established his authority by destroying the temple - all with a view of deterring them from their worship of God. Bear in mind that the temple was really designed for Jewish worship, so even they were affected. The Roman emperors, viewed themselves as gods, and so the image Nero had made of himself was to support this claim, as one who has “ultimate power and authority”.

Therefore, no longer could Christianity be viewed as a sect which was protected under Judaism, and at this point, they went into hiding. They hide and have their worship services, and the picture of a fish was placed on doors, all because Christianity had become illegal and it was a persecuted religion. The symbol of the fish (placed on such buildings) is the Greek spelling *IXOYE* (pronounced: ICHTHUS), which was an abbreviation, which when translated meant I = Jesus, X (C) = Christ, O(TH) = God's, Y(U) = Son, E(S) = Savior. In spite of the persecution, Christians continue to meet in hiding to share a common/fellowship meal of bread and wine,