

THE ORIGIN OF SUNDAY OBSERVANCE
IN CHRISTIANITY:
A BRIEF PROPOSAL

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Disagreement over the appropriate day upon which to celebrate Pascha (i.e., Christian Passover, or “Easter”) sparked the Quartodeciman controversy, the greatest liturgical dispute of the ante-Nicene Church. Eusebius, the fourth century Church historian, details its origins during the papacy of Victor I (c. 190 CE):

A question of no small importance arose at that time. The dioceses of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should always be observed as the feast of the life-giving Pasch, contending that the fast ought to end on that day, whatever day of the week it might happen to be. However it was not the custom of the churches in the rest of the world to end it at this point, as they observed the practice, which from Apostolic tradition has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other [weekday] than on that of the Resurrection of our Saviour [Sunday].

Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account, and all with one consent through mutual correspondence drew up an ecclesiastical decree that the mystery of the Resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other day but the Sunday and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on that day only.¹

Eusebius then cites Irenaeus, who enumerates bishops in Rome who strictly observed the Pascha on Sunday: “Anicetus [155-166 CE], and Plus [140-155], and Hyginus [136-140], and Telesphorus [125-136], and Xystus [(Sixtus) 115-125].”² This list evinces the antiquity of this practice, at least in the Church of Rome.

1. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, V, xxiii, 1-2.

2. *Ibid.*, V, xxiv, 14.

A strict insistence that Christians observe Pascha on the Sunday of a Friday-Sabbath-Sunday sequence suggests the significance of these days to the original Paschal story. That is, the attribution of certain events to certain days in the gospel accounts reflects or reveals some integral aspect of those days. For instance, Adventists themselves find it hardly coincidental that Christ rested in the tomb on the very “day of rest,” that is, the Sabbath (Matt 28:1; Mark 15:4; 16:1; Luke 23:54; John 19:31). This suggests an intimate connection between the events of that week, and the days themselves upon which they occurred. Indeed, the fact the gospels so consistently identify these specific days is unusual, and likely, significant.³

The fact that all four gospels indicate that the resurrection occurred on “the first day of the week” also suggested a design to early Christians (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). Against Gen 1:3-5, the gospel’s references to “the first day of the week” imply the beginning of a new creation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15), and the appearance of light, in the resurrection of Christ.⁴ Sunday indicates, typifies, and embodies the dawn of this new order: the Messianic age.⁵ The day had acquired new meaning through the Paschal experience.

In light of these facts, it seemed inappropriate to celebrate the resurrection (i.e., Pascha) on any day except Sunday, and Christ’s rest in the tomb on any day except the Sabbath. The emphasis on specific days in the gospel story urged the commemoration of each event on its original weekday.

Naturally, any such commemoration elevates Sunday at the expense of the Sabbath. Sabbath was the day of the disciples’ sorrow, when they mourned Jesus’ death. By contrast, Sunday was the day of their rejoicing at his reappearance (Matt 28:8; Luke 24:41; Jn 20:20). Whenever one attempts to engage the experience of each day of the week in the context of Pascha, the appropriate disposition on Sabbath is sadness, and the appropriate disposition on Sunday is rejoicing. A Christian anticipates and

3. The only other places where the gospels name a specific weekday are in pericopes describing a Sabbath controversy (e.g., Matt 12), where the nature of the seventh day in particular is clearly at issue.

4. The creation connection is intimated in Justin Martyr, First Apology, 67: “But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is 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.”

5. Cf. Epistle of Barnabas, 15:8-9: “I shall make a beginning of the eighth day [i.e., Sunday], 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.”

favors the latter day; it becomes preeminent on the calendar. This realization had a profound impact on the Christian psyche. Christians began to understand themselves as a Sunday people.

The implicit acknowledgement of a relation between the events of the Paschal week and the days upon which they occurred suggested a reverse relation as well.⁶ For early Christians, every Friday-Sabbath-Sunday sequence contained Paschal significance.⁷ Thus, what could be predicated of the Paschal Sunday itself, could be predicated of every Sunday. Evidence of this idea exists in the early and universal avoidance of fasting or kneeling on Sundays in view of the resurrection,⁸ and the practice of fasting every Friday, associated with mourning over Christ's death.⁹ Early Christians altered their behavior on each day according to the new meaning that day acquired through the Paschal experience.

Conclusion

The meaningful correspondence of certain events in the Paschal story to the days upon which they occurred suggested the preeminent significance of Sunday. Annual and weekly patterns of Sunday observance in ancient Christianity represented early responses to this Paschal reflection on the meaning of the "first day of the week." This model for the rise of Sunday observance better conforms to the patristic data than alternatives ascribing the same to other factors.¹⁰

6. A rough approximation to a reverse relation is Adventism's claim that Christians should rest on Sabbath in imitation of their Master, who rested in the tomb on that day.

7. Typical understandings of the Sabbath (as a foreshadowing of Christ's rest in the tomb)

8. Tertullian, *De Corona*, 3: "We count fasting or kneeling in worship on the Lord's day to be unlawful" (cf. Peter of Alexandria, *Rudder*, canon XV; *Apostolic Constitutions*, II:59; Council of Nicaea, canon XX).

9. *Didache* 8; Peter of Alexandria, *Rudder*, canon XV. Similarly, Roman and Alexandrine Christians fasted on Sabbath in view of Christ's entombment.

10. For instance, some historians (e.g., Bacchiocchi) consider Sunday observance an emulation of contemporary pagan practices. Early Christians themselves dismissed similar, contemporary views as misconceptions: "we devote Sun-day to rejoicing, from a far different reason than Sun-worship" (Tertullian, *Apology*, 16). The explicit considerations of the church fathers assist our authentic reconstruction of the original rationale for Sunday observance in Christianity.

It is possible that the exclusive celebration of Pascha on Sunday represents the first permanent rhythm of Sunday observance. However, the resistance of the Asian churches to the Sunday Pascha, but lack of resistance to weekly Sabbath worship, may indicate a parallel development of the two observances. Ultimately, both would triumph in the Church.

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