

# Is the Sabbath a Creation Ordinance?

By Wesley Ringer

Certainly the Seventh-day Baptist, who arose at least by 1650 and the Seventh-day Adventist who began keeping the Sabbath in 1846 have both held firm theological convictions that God was asking them to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. They believed that the Ten Commandments are the eternal Law of God for all men for all time and believe that God wanted them to keep the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment on the seventh-day. This shows that a Christian group, who has a well-developed theology to justify keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, can continue to do so in despite being a minority and suffering some difficulty because of their keeping of the Sabbath for over 350 years.

Both groups hold that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance. This had led seventh-day Sabbath keepers to deny that Paul was speaking of the seventh-day Sabbath when he referred to the festivals, new moons and Sabbaths all being shadows of Christ in Colossians.<sup>1</sup> They have instead insisted that the Sabbath of Colossians 2:16 is a ceremonial Sabbath and quote Leviticus 16:30-31 which refers to the Day of Atonement being a Sabbath of Sabbaths. If this was the case then Paul would have been less open to misunderstanding if he had said, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, or a New Moon celebration." Why would Paul have needed to repeat festival twice or to mention the Sabbath at all, if he did not intend to include the seventh-day Sabbath in what is a shadow of Christ? If Paul taught that Gentile believers in Christ should still be keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, he would have been careful to have avoided any hint that he could be referring to the seventh-day Sabbath.

However, the best contextual evidence of what Paul meant when he used the three terms "festival," "new moon" and "Sabbaths" is found in the eight Old Testament passages that refer to a festival, new moon and Sabbaths together. In each case the context shows that *'festival'* refers to one of the yearly feasts, that *'new moon'* the monthly new moon celebration and that *'Sabbaths'* refer to the weekly seventh-day Sabbath.<sup>2</sup> This logical sequence is shown clearly in 1 Chronicles 23:30-31 where it speaks of the duties of the Levites every evening, morning, every Sabbath, every New Moon festival and every appointed feast.<sup>3</sup> This inclusion of the daily ceremonies in 1 Chronicles adds force to this logical sequence of daily, weekly, monthly and yearly. Therefore, when Paul refers to festivals, new moons and Sabbaths together in Colossians 2, he is referring to all of the holy days of the Jews from the yearly feasts to the seventh-day Sabbath.

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1. Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)
  2. 1 Chronicles 23:30-31, 2 Chronicles 2:4, 2 Chronicles 8:12-13, 2 Chronicles 31:3, Nehemiah 10:33, Isaiah 1:13-14, Ezekiel 45:17, Hosea 2:11
  3. They were also to stand every morning to thank and praise the LORD. They were to do the same in the evening and whenever burnt offerings were presented to the LORD on Sabbaths and at New Moon festivals and at appointed feasts. They were to serve before the LORD regularly in the proper number and in the way prescribed for them. (1 Chronicles 23:30-31)

Sabbatarians will often argue that the Sabbath did not begin at the Exodus but at creation, and, therefore, cannot be a shadow of Christ, since the Sabbath came before sin. However, in the second giving of the Ten Commandments, the reason for keeping the Sabbath was to “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”<sup>4</sup> Certainly God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery foreshadows Christ’s deliverance of believers from their slavery to sin.<sup>5</sup>

I think that it would be good to ask, when did the Jews understand that God first commanded them to keep the Sabbath? Do Jews believe that the Sabbath began at creation or with Moses at the time of the Exodus? Exodus 16 is the first mention of anyone keeping the Sabbath and comes with God giving the Manna to the Israelites for six days and then not giving the Manna every seventh day.<sup>6</sup> When Israel returned from exile they remembered that God gave them the Sabbath in the dessert.<sup>7</sup> God tells Ezekiel that he gave Israel his Sabbaths in the dessert after he led Israel out of Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Moses declared to Israel that God did not make this covenant with their forefathers, and with the second giving of the Ten Commandments states that Israel is to remember that God led Israel out of their slavery in Egypt when they keep the Sabbath.<sup>9</sup> These scriptures lead to the conclusion that God did not give the Sabbath to be kept until the Exodus.

What theology of the Sabbath did Christians hold, who lived within a 160 years of the death of Christ? Justin Martyr A.D. 110-165 was a Gentile Christian who was martyred for his faith in Christ. He lived closer to the time of Christ and the apostles than Seventh-day Adventist do to 1846 when their Adventist pioneers first began to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. If the apostles taught the Gentiles who came to have faith in Christ to keep the Sabbath in the first century, one would expect that they would have had strong theological reasons for keeping the Sabbath, similar to those held by Seventh-day Adventist today. We should see evidence that Gentile believers would have continued to express these theological convictions even 130 years after Christ’s death. So did Justin Martyr have a well-developed theology of the Sabbath, and if so what was it?

Justin Martyr wrote a number of letters or books in defense of his Christian faith and to explain Christianity. In his *First Apology of Justin*, he wrote to the Roman Emperor to explain who Christians were and what they believed. He explained it was the universal practice of Christians on Sunday to gather “...together to one place and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read.”<sup>10</sup> As to the reason why they gathered on that day he says the following:

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 Savior on the same day rose from

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4. Deuteronomy 5:15

5. John 8:31-36

6. Exodus 16:13-30

7. Nehemiah 9:13-14

8. Ezekiel 20:10-12

9. Deuteronomy 5:3,15

10. Justin Martyr, *First Apology of Justin*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 185. Edited by Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson in 1884.

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.<sup>11</sup>

It may be disappointing to first-day Sabbath keepers that Justin never says that Christians are keeping the Sabbath or uses the fourth commanded of the Ten Commandments as a reason for Christians gathering to worship their risen Lord on Sunday. Neither does he argue that the fourth commandment is still to be kept, nor that the day on which it is to be kept has now been changed from the seventh to the first day of the week. In fact as we shall see Justin Martyr held that the Sabbath and festivals both came to end in Christ. As a result it would be contrary to his understanding of the purpose of the Law of Moses to argue that Christians should worship and rest on the first day of the week in order to keep the seventh-day Sabbath commanded in Exodus.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho* he clearly anticipated that his faith in Christ would cost him his life. In this book he was seeking to convince Trypho, who was a Jew, that Jesus is the Christ. Likewise, Trypho was trying to convince Justin that he must become circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Trypho said to Justin, “If, then, you are willing to listen to me (for I have already considered you a friend), first be circumcised, then observe what ordinances have been enacted with respect to the Sabbath, and the feasts, and the new moons of God; and, in a word, do all things which have been written in the law: and then perhaps you shall obtain mercy from God.”<sup>12</sup> Justin argued that Trypho still needed to receive the spiritual circumcision that comes from believing in Christ in order to be saved. “Even you, who are the circumcised according to the flesh, have need of our circumcision; but we having the latter, do not require the former.”<sup>13</sup> Justin made it clear that he did not keep the law or the Sabbath. “Is there any other matter, my friends, in which we are blamed, than this, that we live not after the law, and are not circumcised in the flesh as your forefathers were, and do not observe Sabbaths as you do?”<sup>14</sup> Trypho indicated that the teachings of Jesus Christ had deeply impressed him in his answer to Justin,

“Moreover, I am aware that your precepts in the so-called Gospel are so wonderful and so great, that I suspect no one can keep them; for I have carefully read them. But this is what we are most at a loss about: that you, professing to be pious, and supposing yourselves better than others, are not in any particular separated from them, and do not alter your mode of living from the nations, in that you observe no festivals or sabbaths, and do not have the rite of circumcision ; and further, resting your hopes on a man that was crucified, you yet expect to obtain some good thing from God, while you do not obey His commandments. Have you not read, that that soul shall be cut off from his

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11. Justin Martyr, First Apology of Justin, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 185.

12. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 198-99

13. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 203.

14. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 199.

people who shall not have been circumcised on the eighth day? And this has been ordained for strangers and for slaves equally.”<sup>15</sup>

In his *Dialogue with Trypho* it is clear that Justin has a thorough grounding in the Old Testament and a well-thought-out theological reason for not being circumcised, or keeping the Law of Moses, Sabbaths and the festivals. He sees that Jesus has brought a new law and covenant that have replaced the law and the covenant given to Moses.

“There will be no other God, O Trypho, nor was there from eternity any other existing” (I thus addressed him), “but He who made and disposed all this universe. Nor do we think that there is one God for us, another for you, but that He alone is God who led your fathers out from Egypt with a strong hand and a high arm. Nor have we trusted in any other (for there is no other), but in Him in whom you also have trusted, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. But we do not trust through Moses or through the law; for then we would do the same as yourselves. But now—for I have read that there shall be a final law, and a covenant, the chiefest of all, which it is now incumbent on all men to observe as many as are seeking after the inheritance of God. For the law promulgated on Horeb is now old and belongs to yourselves alone; but this is for all universally. Now law placed against law has abrogated that which is before it, and a covenant which comes after in like manner has put an end to the previous one; and an eternal and final law—namely, Christ—has been given to us, and covenant is trustworthy, after which there shall be no law, no commandment, no ordinance.”<sup>16</sup>

Justin makes clear that he, as a Christian, was not seeking an easier way, and his reason for not keeping the law, Sabbaths and festivals was not to avoid doing something that is difficult to do. Rather he said that Christians would keep all of the law including Sabbaths and feasts, “...if we did not know for what reason they were enjoined you—namely, on account of your transgressions and hardness of your hearts.”<sup>17</sup> Christianity in Justin’s day was not a legal religion in the Roman Empire, as was Judaism, so Christians were repeatedly subject to persecutions and even death for following their Lord. Regarding this Justin says the following:

For if we patiently endure all things contrived against us by wicked men and demons, so that even amid cruelties unutterable, death and torments, we pray for mercy to those who inflict such things upon us, and do not wish to give the least retort to anyone, even as the new Lawgiver commanded us: how is it, Trypho, that we would not observe those rites which do not harm us,—I speak of fleshly circumcision, and Sabbaths, and feasts?<sup>18</sup>

Justin argued that the patriarchs who lived before Abraham were seen as being righteous before God, although they kept no circumcision, and that the Sabbath was not known or kept before Moses. Justin now quotes to Trypho the words that he heard from the Christian who first led him to believe that Jesus was the Christ.

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15. Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 199.

16. Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 200.

17. Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 203.

18. Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 203.

“Wherefore, Trypho, I will proclaim to you, and to those who wish to become proselytes, the divine message which I heard from that man. Do you see that the elements are not idle, and keep no Sabbaths? Remain as you were born. For if there was no need of circumcision before Abraham, or of the observance of Sabbaths, of feasts and sacrifices, before Moses; no more need is there of them now, after that, according to the will of God, Jesus Christ the son of God has been born without sin, of a virgin sprung from the stock of Abraham.<sup>19</sup>

Although Justin never mentioned Paul by name he went on to use the very argument that Paul used in Romans 4 concerning the reason why Abraham was circumcised:

For when Abraham himself was in uncircumcision, he was justified and blessed by reason of the faith which he reposed in God, as the scripture tells. Moreover, the Scriptures and the facts themselves compel us to admit that he received circumcision for a sign, and not for righteousness.<sup>20</sup>

Since Justin repeatedly argued that the Sabbaths did not begin until the giving of the law, one would expect that if Trypho had believed the Sabbath was a creation ordinance he would have objected on the grounds that the Sabbath had been given first to Adam and Eve, long before the giving of the law. But, in page after page, Trypho remains silent in the face of Justin’s argument in which he affirms:

As, then, circumcision began with Abraham, and the Sabbath and sacrifices and offerings and feasts with Moses, and it has been proved they were enjoined on account of the hardness of your people’s heart, so it was necessary, in accordance with the Father’s will, that they should have an end in Him who was born of a virgin, of the family of Abraham and tribe of Judah, and of David; in Christ the Son of God, who was proclaimed as about to come to all the world, to be the everlasting law and the everlasting covenant, even as the fore mentioned prophecies show.<sup>21</sup>

Finally Justin directly asks Trypho to confirm or deny what he is saying regarding circumcision and the keeping of the Sabbath. He was giving Trypho’s opportunity to object and state that the Sabbath was not given to Moses but to Adam. Instead we find Trypho agreeing with Justin that the patriarchs who lived before Moses kept none of those ordinances.

“...Trypho, answer me: Are those righteous patriarchs who lived before Moses, who observed none of those [ordinances] which, the Scripture shows, received the commencement of [their] institution from Moses, Saved; [and have they attained to] the inheritance of the blessed?”

And Trypho said, “The Scriptures compel me to admit it.”<sup>22</sup>

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19. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 206.

20. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 206.

21. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 216.

22. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 231.

From the context it is clear that ordinances here refer to circumcision, Sabbaths and festivals.

During the discussion Trypho asked whether those who believe in Jesus as the Christ yet also wish to keep the institutions of Moses can still be saved.<sup>23</sup> Justin replied that in his opinion such a person could be saved as long as he did not seek to force Gentile believers in Christ to keep all of the law. As the discussion continued Justin outlined four different positions held by Christians in his day. The first group, were Jewish Christians, who sought to impose circumcision, the Sabbath and keeping all of the law on Gentile believers. Justin noted, “But if Trypho, I continued, ‘some of your race, who say they believe in this Christ, compel those Gentiles who believe in this Christ to live in all respects according to the law given by Moses, or choose not to associate so intimately with them, I in like manner do not approve of them.’”<sup>24</sup> Here we see that some Jewish believers continued to keep the Sabbath and sought to compel Gentile believers to keep the Sabbath. They had a well-developed theology in which they taught that all people should become circumcised and should then keep all of the Law of Moses. But it is important to note that circumcision and keeping all of the Law of Moses, rather than the Sabbath, was the issue that they held to be important. The Sabbath was simply one part of the Law that Gentiles would keep if they submitted to circumcision.

Many of the Pharisees’ who came to faith in Christ taught, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses.”<sup>25</sup> It was this very issue that caused Paul to write his letter to the Galatians and to come to Jerusalem for the Jerusalem Council, mentioned in Acts 15. During this council, in which the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem gathered, Peter asked why Jewish believers should place the burden of the Law on Gentiles, which was too heavy for even Jews to bear. He saw that the Gentiles of Cornelius’ house were accepted by the out pouring of the Holy Spirit while yet uncircumcised, just as the Jews had been accepted at Pentecost. He went on to say:

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” (Acts 15:8-11)

Justin went on to note a second group of Jewish believers who were circumcised and kept the Law of Moses, but did not seek to compel other Gentile believers to be circumcised or keep the Law. He noted that these Jewish believers lived in fellowship with Gentile believers:

“But if some, through weak-mindedness, wish to observe such institutions as were given by Moses, from which they expect some virtue, but which we believe were appointed by reasons of the hardness of the people’s hearts, along with their hope in this Christ, and [wish to perform] the eternal and natural acts of righteousness and piety, yet choose to live with the Christians and the

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23. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 217.

24. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 218.

25. Acts 15:5

faithful, as I said before, not inducing them either to be circumcised like themselves, or to keep the Sabbath or to observe any other such ceremonies, I hold that we ought to join ourselves to such, and associate with them in all things as kinsmen and brethren.”<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, we find Jewish believers in Acts 21, who held the same view as this second group of Jewish believers. While they continued to circumcise their children and keep all of the Law of Moses, they did not require Gentiles to be circumcised or to keep the Law. Paul had just returned to Jerusalem from Corinth, and the elders from the church in Jerusalem met him and express their concern that Jewish members of the church in Jerusalem had heard that he did not keep the Law of Moses and was teaching others Jews in the dispersion that they did not need to circumcise their children or keep the Law. The elders were concerned that Paul should, likewise, kept all of the Law, because he was a Jew. They asked that he perform the necessary rituals in order to become ceremonially clean and then join in fellowship with Jewish believers who had already taken a Nazarite vow and to pay their expenses when they ended their vow. According to the Law, when the Nazarite vow ended, a person’s head was shaved and his hair was burnt with a burnt offering in the temple.<sup>27</sup>

These elders of the church in Jerusalem made it clear that they did not expect Gentile believers to keep all of the Law of Moses, by reaffirming the decision made in the Jerusalem Council concerning the Gentiles.

Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. (Acts 21:24-25)

Justin sees himself as belonging to the third group of Gentile believers who do not keep circumcision, Sabbaths or the other feasts in the Law of Moses, but who have fellowship with Jewish believers who do so, as long as they do not seek to compel Gentile believers, likewise, to circumcise themselves and keep Sabbaths and other festivals of the Law. Finally, Justin acknowledges that there is a fourth group of Gentile believers who have reacted to the first group of Jewish Christians who sought to command Gentiles to be circumcised and keep all of the Law. This fourth group did not believe that those who still held to keeping the circumcision and keeping all of the Law, but who also profess faith in Christ, would be saved.

Justin spoke of the moral law as the eternal acts of righteousness. He saw that even the Gentile nations had a good understanding of God’s moral law.

“For [God] sets before every race of mankind that which is always and universally just, as well as all righteousness ; and every race know that adultery, and fornication, and homicide, and such like, are sinful ; and though they all

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26. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 218.

27. Numbers 6:13-21

commit such practices, yet they do not escape from the knowledge that they act unrighteously whenever they so do,...”<sup>28</sup>

He certainly would have acknowledged that the Law of Moses contained God’s moral laws, but saw that the Law of Moses was given especially for people of Israel while the law of Christ is given to all peoples. To Trypho he contrasted the Law of Moses with the Law of Christ by saying, “For the law promulgated on Horeb is now old and belongs to yourselves alone; but this is for all universally.”<sup>29</sup> Later in his discussion with Trypho, Justin speaks about how the New Covenant with the new Law that Christ brings differs from the Law of Moses.

“God promised that there would be another covenant, not like that old one, and said that it would be laid on them without fear, and trembling, and lightning’s, and that it would be such as to show what kind of commands and deeds God knows to be eternal and suited to every nation, and what commandments He has given, suiting them to the hardness of your people’s hearts, as He exclaims also by the Prophets.<sup>30</sup>

While we see some Christians continuing to keep the Sabbath 130 years after the resurrection of Christ, they do so for different theological reasons than do Seventh-day Adventist today. Most were Jewish believers, who felt that the Gentiles should be circumcised and keep all the Law of Moses. Therefore, if Gentiles were circumcised they would keep the Sabbath because they were keeping all of the Law. Others were Jewish believers who, while keeping the Law, continued to have fellowship with Gentile believers who did not. Paul certainly never criticized his fellow Jewish believers because of their devotion to the Law of Moses, and himself was willing to keep the Law of Moses so as not to give them offense.<sup>31</sup> However, he refused to allow Gentiles who believed in Christ to submit to circumcision or to see that in addition to their faith in Christ they needed to keep the Law. In Galatians, he noted that for a Gentile who has believed in Christ to feel that he now needed to be circumcised would mean that Christ was of no value to him and that he was then obligated to keep the whole law.<sup>32</sup>

Paul spoke of the Law beginning 430 years after the promise that God gave to Abraham and lasting until the coming of Christ. He uses the illustration of the Law being like a slave who is placed in charge of a son by the father. Paul speaks of this trusted slave, who was called a *‘paidagogos’* in Greek and shows that his authority over the son was limited by time. Once the time set by the father came the son received his full rights as a son and the *paidagogos* now has no authority over the son.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. (Galatians 3:23-24)

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28. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p.246.

29. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 200.

30. Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 232.

31. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

32. Galatians 5:2-3

Since we in modern times have no one who acts as slave for a limited time over a son until he comes of age, the *paidagogos* has sometimes has been translated teacher. But the term 'teacher' fails to carry this idea that the authority of this slave was limited by time. Paul goes on show that with the coming of Christ we are received our full rights as sons and then repeats this illustration in Galatians 4. Paul clearly desires Gentile believers to live holy lives and to follow the Law of Christ in their daily lives. At times he quotes even from the Decalogue to show that his teachings do not contradict what the moral law says.<sup>33</sup> But Paul never commands Sabbath keeping on the Gentiles and links the Sabbath with the festivals and new moons and calls them shadows of Christ.

In conclusion, I see that Justin understands well Paul's teaching on how the Gentile believers were to relate to circumcision, the Law of Moses and the Sabbath as well as to the Law of Christ. If the Gentile believers were never taught that they should keep the Sabbath, then one can understand why we find the consensus among Christians in the second century that they do not need to keep the Sabbath. If, on the other hand, the Gentiles in the first century universally kept the Sabbath because of the teaching of the apostles, including Paul, then it is hard to understand such a complete change of view in such a short time. Certainly, we should find some Gentile believers remembering the teachings of the apostles and opposing this change. Yet in my reading through the first volume of the church fathers from Clement writing in 85 AD to Irenaeus writing around 190 AD I find none of the church fathers defending the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath.<sup>34</sup>

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33. Romans 13:8-10

34. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1.