

A Further Response to Samuele Bacchiocchi's Arguments for the Rise of Sunday Observance in the Second Century Church

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Introduction

Samuele Bacchiocchi's initial thesis for a post-apostolic and second century origin for Christian observance of Sunday was presented in his work *From Sabbath to Sunday* (1977). Response to the book was widespread. An important critique of his work was presented by fellow Seventh Day Adventist scholar Kenneth Strand of Andrews University in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* entitled, "From Sabbath to Sunday in the Early Christian Church: A Review of Some Recent Literature; Part II: Samuele Bacchiocchi's Reconstruction" (17:1, Spring 1979, pgs. 85-104).

Bacchiocchi had occasion to briefly respond to the criticisms leveled at him from Strand in his book *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness* (1981; pgs. 245-250). He responds to Strand in two key areas: the primacy of the Roman Church in the second century, and pagan sun worship and the origin of Sunday. Following is a response to Bacchiocchi's criticisms of Strand's work. They will focus on the two areas of Roman primacy and pagan origins to Christian Sunday observance.

Primacy of the Church of Rome in the Second Century

Bacchiocchi writes:

"The documents available leave no doubt as to the considerable authority and influence exerted at this time (second century AD) by the Roman Church" (*Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*, 245).

He offers support for this statement by citing the following sources from the second century.

- The early Church Father Ignatius gives more "honorific epithets" to the Roman Church than to any other church he addresses at the beginning of his letters (*Divine Rest*. . . , 245). Bacchiocchi writes, "The Roman Church, writes Ignatius, 'presides in the chief place of the Roman territory. . .'" (245)

The manner in which he introduces the quotation beginning "presides. . ." conveys a meaning not found when reading directly from Ignatius' letter. Rather, the letter states: "Ignatius. . . , to the Church which has obtained mercy. . . , the Church which is sanctified and enlightened. . . , the Church which presides in the place of the region of the Romans, and which is worthy of God. . ." (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:73).

No where does Ignatius refer to the “Roman Church”, but to the Church that “presides in the place of the region of the Romans.” The significance here is that Ignatius was addressing the Church that was located in the territory surrounding Rome itself, not merely the believers located in the city of Rome. In other words, his salutation’s emphasis was on the **Church**, not **Rome**. It was a general salutation to believers located in the territory surrounding Rome, not given in recognition of the authority of the Church in Rome.

Bacchiocchi’s construction of Ignatius’ statement conveys the thought that the church located in the city of Rome itself “presides in the chief place of the Roman territory.” However, we have seen that Ignatius merely addresses “the Church which presides **in** (not “over”) the place of the region of the Romans.”

- The phrase of Ignatius, “presiding in (over) love,” signifies that Rome had a “leading concern for the welfare of other churches” (*Divine Rest. . .*, 245).

Bacchiocchi cleverly inserts the term “presidency” in the place of “presiding” to put attention on the authority of the Roman Church as demonstrating a “**leading** concern for the welfare of other churches” (245). In other words, just as the Roman Church carried authoritative weight over other churches in the Empire, so it demonstrates this authority by being the most loving church in the Empire.

Bacchiocchi supports this by citing Ignatius’ request that Roman believers remember in prayer the believers in Syria that had no leadership at that time due to his absence. Ignatius faithfully states that “Jesus Christ alone will oversee it, together with your love” (9:1). Bacchiocchi asks, “Is it not remarkable that Ignatius should entrust his Church of Antioch into the loving care of the distant and (to him) unknown Church of Rome, rather than to one of the near and known churches of Asia?” (246).

There is no indication that Ignatius is entrusting anything to the care of the Roman Church. Indeed, he rests in the assurance that the church in Syria will be under the care of Jesus alone. Ignatius is requesting prayer for the Syrian church in his absence, not “entrusting” a church to Roman care. Finally, Ignatius is not indicating Roman oversight of his church(s) by the reference to “together with your love” as if it is a co-overseer with the Lord. Rather, he is seeking additional blessing for a difficult situation by seeking prayer and love from Roman believers.

What Bacchiocchi has done is to take specific words such as “preside” and twisted them to carry the meaning of authority or preeminence. Such is not warranted and demonstrates his attempt to support an early date for Roman Church authority in the second century.

- Bacchiocchi cites evidence from the second century Church Father Irenaeus. He writes, “Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, in his book *Against Heresies* (composed about 175-189), refutes heretics by appealing to the apostolic tradition preserved in a special way by the Church of Rome which he describes as ‘the greatest, the most ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul. . . For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolic tradition has been preserved continuously by those who exist everywhere’” (*Divine Rest. . .*, 246).

How much of Irenaeus’ statement is hyperbole can be judged to some degree, as testified by Bacchiocchi himself. The objective of Irenaeus is to support the doctrine of apostolic succession as the means to refute the heresies of Marcion and others. His argument is to support the idea that apostolic succession began in Rome with the founding of the Church there by the apostles Peter and Paul, and hence coherent doctrine was handed down through the succession of bishops originally established by the apostles. Therefore, it is necessary to give homage to Rome as the “home church” because of its “preeminent authority” due to the establishment of apostolic succession and doctrine that began in Rome with Peter and Paul.

Bacchiocchi points out at least two inaccuracies of Irenaeus’ statement. First, the church in Rome was not the most ancient church. Second, Paul did not establish it. Bacchiocchi makes a key conclusion by pointing out that such statements “reveal a method that was being developed to justify the (preeminent authority) exerted by the Church of Rome” (246).

However, despite the admitted inaccuracies of Irenaeus’ account, Bacchiocchi continues to argue for Roman preeminence over the second century Church. This argument runs into some problems when analyzed closely.

First, his reference to the Easter-Sunday controversy (Quartodecimanism) does demonstrate the increasing authority of the Roman Church and the Roman Bishop (notably Bishop Victor) by the end of the second century. However, the failure of Bishop Victor to conform the Asian churches to Rome’s will demonstrates the lack of his preeminence over the universal Church even by the end of the second century. Furthermore, his decree of heresy over those who disagreed was a move that illustrated his inability to conform the Asian churches to an Easter-Sunday observance. The high-handed move on his part illustrates that the authority of the Roman Church or Bishop was not universally in force. This is demonstrated by the fact that the controversy was not finally officially ended until the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, at which point it took the authority of the Christian Emperor Constantine to enforce it. The *ecclesiastical* authority of the Roman Bishop in the late second century was not enough to enforce the observance of the Sunday-

Easter throughout the empire, but had to wait until the *civil/ecclesiastical* authority of the early fourth century to make it conclusive. Bacchiocchi attempts to demonstrate the universal jurisdiction of the Roman Bishop by citing a statement by Jean Colson to the effect that the ruling of excommunication by Victor not only spoke for the Roman Church, but for all the churches supporting the Sunday-Easter (*Divine Rest. . .*, 247). However, as pointed out by Bacchiocchi's citation from La Piana, Victor's declaration of excommunication for the Quartodeciman supporters was "the **beginning of that historical process** which in time led the Roman Church to identify Christian tradition with its own doctrine and its own organization" (247, emphasis supplied). I would suggest that Victor's declarations were the beginning of that historical process that would lead to total Roman supremacy in later centuries. "It was under Victor that this process of expansion of Roman influence **began** to assume a definite form and to give rise to a tradition which was destined to play a part of capital importance in the history of Christianity" (La Piana 252; cited in *Divine Rest. . .*, 247; emphasis supplied).

The question begs – Did Rome possess sufficient ecclesiastical authority to change observances of the entire Christian Church so early in the "process of expansion of Roman influence"? How could the Roman Church possess sufficient authority in the early second century to change the Christian weekly day of worship if the "process of expansion of Roman influence began" near the end of the second century over the Easter-Sunday? It is concluded that Bacchiocchi does not submit decisive and confirming evidence to detail such authority, but his evidence reveals the struggle that the Roman Church (especially Victor) had in conforming the other churches to the decrees of Roman ecclesiastical authority.

The controversy over Easter-Sunday was over the timing for the observance of the resurrection, not the origin of the observance itself. Indeed, while "the exact time of the origin of Easter-Sunday may be a subject of dispute" (*Divine Rest. . .*, 241), the assertion that Rome is the place of its birth is based more on opinion than documentation. "The scarcity of documents and the controversial nature of their information make it very difficult to determine with absolute certainty where, when and by whom Easter-Sunday was first introduced" (*Divine Rest. . .*, 239). Nevertheless, he concludes that the "close nexus existing between Easter-Sunday and weekly Sunday presupposes. . . the contemporaneous adoption of (weekly) Sunday worship in place of Sabbathkeeping" (245). This is a statement of opinion, not fact, and this must not be forgotten.

Second, the growth of Roman ecclesiastical authority underway in the second century is not the issue. The issue is whether it possessed sufficient authority to change a weekly or annual day of worship into a universal observance. Contrary to Bacchiocchi's conclusions, the "sampling of historical evidences.

. . (does not) indicate that the Church of Rome enjoyed already in the second century sufficient authority to influence the greater part of Christendom to accept new customs such as Easter-Sunday and weekly Sunday” (247). Bacchiocchi enlists the pre-Montanist Tertullian in support for the high esteem and authority of the Roman Bishop (*Divine Rest. . .* , 310, footnote 149). However, as admitted by Bacchiocchi, the Montanist Tertullian “ridicules the claim of the Roman Bishop” (310, footnote 149). Rather than substantiating the “unusual authority asserted by the Bishop of Rome by the end of the second century,” Tertullian’s about-face comments indicates the subjective nature of evaluating the power and authority of the Roman Bishop. Which Tertullian was correct? Furthermore, Tertullian possibly confirms the authority of the Roman Bishop by the **end** of the second century.

Even if the Roman Church and/or Bishop possessed the authority over the Christian world to the extent Bacchiocchi asserts, the evidence he cites relates to the end of the second century more than to the early to mid-second century (the era he asserts the Sunday change occurred). The usage of later evidence to prove assertions for an earlier time is at best tenuous and risks misinterpreting history.

Pagan Sun Worship and the Origin of Sunday

Bacchiocchi believes that the “diffusion of the Sun cults and the consequent advancement of ‘Sun-day’ from the position of second to that of first day of the week provide a most plausible explanation” for the adoption of it as the Christian day of worship (*Divine Rest. . .* , 248). To establish support for this proposition, Bacchiocchi goes to great pains to prove that the pagan Sun-day was widespread and important in the Roman world of the first and second centuries. He does establish that it was prominent in the early Roman Empire.

In the section discussing this topic (*Divine Rest. . .* , 248-250), Bacchiocchi spends most of the time attempting to establish the importance of the pagan Sun-day in the first and second centuries. Afterward, he asks, “Did the advancement of the day of the Sun to the position of first day of the week possibly influence Christians who desired to differentiate themselves from the Sabbath of the Jews, to adopt and adapt this same day for their weekly worship?” (249). He then gives “several indications” that “indirectly” prove this occurred.

1. The “frequent condemnation” of the early Fathers of Christians who venerated the Sun.
2. Using the Sun as a symbol of Christ in early Christian art and literature.
3. The direction of prayer from the Jerusalem to the east.
4. The development of Christmas.

There is no disputing that early Christians used the Sun as a representation or

symbol of Christ. However, these instances do not refer to or infer that Christians adopted the **pagan** day of the Sun to be the new **Christian** day of worship. Rather, it demonstrates that early Christians used Sunday as a symbol of already present Christian realities, theology, and themes, not as originating Christian custom and practice.

Bacchiocchi then cites evidence he believes directly indicates that the pagan Sunday influenced Christians to adopt it as the Christian day of worship.

- He refers to Justin Martyr's account of a Christian assembly where he mentions the "day of the Sun." Such a reference gives no proof of Christian adoption of a pagan day for Christian usage. Rather, it refers to the pagan "day of the Sun" as a common reference point between Justin's pagan readers and Christian custom. The common reference point is not to demonstrate a cause-effect relationship between pagan and Christian practice, but to apologetically explain Christian custom, such as assemblage on the first day of the week. The connection between Justin's reference to "the day of the Sun and the creation of light on the first day" is clearly not coincidental, as Bacchiocchi points out. However, the connection is not for the reasons he believes. The connection is not to admit a pagan origin for a Christian custom, but is meant to explain the reason for the Christian custom, namely, the creation of light on the first day.
- Bacchiocchi's reference to Eusebius again does not demonstrate what he seeks to prove. Eusebius appropriates Sun symbology to explain that the first day of the week is the "true day of the sun" because on it God created light. Jesus is therefore the "Sun of Justice." Such references and analogies do not mean the day of Christian worship is a borrowed pagan day of worship cloaked in Christian terminology and theology. Rather, the Christian day of worship is referred to as the "**true** day of the sun" when God created light on the first day. In effect, Eusebius is evidence for the exact opposite of what Bacchiocchi seeks to prove.

Bacchiocchi discusses the change of the pagan day of the Sun from the second to the first day of the week by attempting to demonstrate the prominence of Mithraism in the early Empire (*Divine Rest. . .*, 311; footnote 167). However, such a factor does not mean that Christians changed the day of worship under the influence of pagan factors. By the late first century Mithraism was gaining ground in the Empire, but the influence of Mithraism on pagan Rome is far different than arguing for its influence on Christianity. This latter point is one Bacchiocchi offers no proof in support.

Bacchiocchi debates three points given against his thesis by fellow Seventh Day Adventist scholar Kenneth Strand (311, footnote 167). Following are Strand's points with Bacchiocchi's responses.

- Strand does not support a pagan influence on the Christian Sunday because Mithraism was primarily a religion followed by men in the Roman military.

Therefore, its scope of influence was too narrow to influence the fledgling movement of Christianity. Bacchiocchi responds by pointing out that Mithraism was “more widespread and influential than earlier thought” (*Divine Rest. . .*, 311, footnote 167). He adds that Mithraism was in part influential in the change of Sunday from the second to the first day of the week (311, footnote 167).

- Strand asserts that Christians were too resistant to pagan influence for them to adopt a pagan day of worship as a Christian day of worship. While Bacchiocchi agrees that early Christians would rather die than give in to pagan practices (Strand’s contention), he maintains that Christians would reject pagan practice on one hand and adopt it on the other (cited in Jacquetta Hawkes, *Man and the Sun*, pg. 199).

The assessment of Bacchiocchi’s responses is given in the following observations.

- There is more to Strand’s argument about Mithraism than Bacchiocchi alludes to. While Mithraism reached Rome at some point in the late first century AD, Strand correctly asks, “But just how likely a source for adoption of Sunday would Mithraism have provided to second-century Christians?” (*Samuele Bacchiocchi’s Reconstruction*, 89).

Strand stresses the fact that Mithraism was a rival of Christianity as early as the second century and would later be its main rival among pagan religions (89). More importantly, Strand points out that Bacchiocchi originally names only Mithraism as the source of pagan sun worship in ancient Rome (90, footnote 6). Bacchiocchi responds to this observation in his later work by conceding that other influences were responsible for the change of the sun-day from the second to the first day of the week without referring to their identities (*Divine Rest. . .*, 312, footnote 167). He then refers to a statement by Tertullian (*Ad Nationes* 1:13; *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 3:123) where Tertullian “attributes to the pagans in general (and not specifically to the Mithraists), the responsibility for the advancement and preference of the day of the Sun over that of Saturn” (312, footnote 167). What does this reveal? It is extremely unlikely that Mithraism (in the late first to early second centuries) would likely be a source “for the borrowing of Sunday by Christians in the early second century” (*Bacchiocchi’s Reconstruction*, 90). The reason is quite simple. Mithraism by itself could not exert such influence on Christians that would make them compromise their faith by adopting a pagan day of worship because it was not prominent enough in Rome to do so by the early second century. Furthermore, Bacchiocchi’s reference to Tertullian given earlier reflects commentary made in the late second century when Mithraism was clearly of major influence in the Empire.

- Bacchiocchi’s reference to Christian inconsistency in resisting pagan encroachment into the church is well taken. However, the issue regards pagan

customs being wholeheartedly adopted into Christian dogma and practice as opposed to referencing pagan images/representations as symbols of Christian dogma and practice. It seems overwhelmingly apparent that the second alternative was done and not the former. Strand rightly affirms, “And how could Christianity so widely – in East as well as West – in a relatively short time (or at such an early time) have been duped into accepting a purely pagan practice?” (*Bacchiocchi’s Reconstruction*, 90; parenthetical comment my own). Furthermore, Bacchiocchi again cites references from later Christian history to support his criticism of Strand. As Strand perceptively asks, “But was not the situation in the second century quite different” from that which existed in the post-Constantinian Church (90-91)?

Conclusions

It is believed that Samuele Bacchiocchi fails to mount conclusive evidence to support (1) the power of Roman ecclesiastical authority in the second century and (2) the influence of pagan sun cults as proof for the wholesale adoption of the pagan Sunday as the Christian day of worship.