

# The “Fixed Day” in Pliny’s Letter to Trajan

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## INTRODUCTION

Pliny’s letter to Trajan (1) contains the earliest non-Christian account of Christian worship practices. Included is one of the earliest post-apostolic references to Christians gathering on a particular day for worship. The reference to Christians gathering on a “fixed day” has historically been interpreted as referring to Sunday (2). However, others have suggested the “fixed day” could refer to Easter or the Jewish Sabbath (3).

In view of the potential importance of Pliny’s letter to understanding the Lord’s Day and the difficulties in both the Easter and Sabbath interpretations of the “fixed day”, it seems wise to take another look at the reference itself. Examination of the background of the letter will be followed by discussion of the Easter and Sabbath interpretations. The final section will examine the traditional Sunday interpretation of the text and its importance to the ongoing Sabbath-Sunday debate.

## BACKGROUND

Bithynia was a Roman province located on the south coast of the Black Sea in northern Asia Minor. Peter addresses his first letter to believers in Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1). First Peter is dated no later than 67-68 A.D., but probably written between 60-68 A.D. By the time of Pliny’s letter (112 A.D.), the Bithynian church had existed for about fifty years. Pliny comments that Christianity (superstitio) had penetrated both the urban and rural areas of the province. Christian teaching had indeed pervaded to every sector of society.

It is noteworthy that the charges brought upon the Christians as a hetaeria (secret group or club), originated from the non-Christian population. Apparently, the Christians had enough prominence to warrant suspicion. This was not simply a new occurrence. The pagans in Bithynia, as well as other provinces, had accused Christians of wrong-doing (cf. 1 Peter 2:12). By A.D. 112, this was an unusual occurrence for most of the Roman Empire. “In most areas of the Roman Empire Christians lived quietly and peaceably among their neighbors conducting their affairs without disturbance” (4). It seems that legal action was brought against Christians only where friction existed between pagans and believers.

Pliny does not describe the specific charges brought against the Christians, but we can attempt to ascertain their character. There was a universal imperial declaration against the gathering of groups or associations (hetaeria) in the Empire. The Christians, who were known to gather together, were suspected of unlawful and perhaps clandestine secret rights (5). Based upon these accusations, Pliny had to judge the reliability of these charges by interrogating suspected Christians.

Once brought in for interrogation by Pliny, the accused Christians were tested regarding their sincerity as Christians. Pliny ordered an image to the emperor be brought in along with images to the gods. Pliny understood that true Christians would not worship these images, so he ordered them to worship them. Those who did not pray, offer incense, and curse the name of Christ proved to be the real Christians. Many were executed after confessing to being Christian after three chances under threat.

Confessions were by **former** believers who had abandoned Christianity (6). Those who had

abandoned Christianity twenty years before probably had done so under the persecution of Domitian, A.D. 81-96 (7). Their confession consisted of the following characteristics. They had in the past met together as a group prior to daylight on a “fixed day.” At the assembly they sang hymns of worship to Jesus as they would to a god (8). They committed themselves to an oath not to steal, commit adultery, lie, nor neglect to give to one another. After this they would depart and meet again later the same day to eat.

Of note in the description is the detail given about the time of day the meeting took place and what occurred at the meetings. However, particularly absent is any reference to which day the observance took place. The day was “fixed” so that the Christians knew when to meet - yet even the former Christians interrogated did not reveal the day it occurred. Apparently, nothing more was revealed through the torturing of the women. Pliny’s conclusion was that Christianity was nothing more than a perverted superstition.

### **THE EASTER INTERPRETATION**

One suggestion for the identity of the “fixed day” is the annual Easter Sunday celebration (9). The argument suggests the Romans would not have been threatened by the Christian custom of meeting on a weekly basis any more than they were threatened by the Jewish weekly observance of the Sabbath. But, they would have been threatened by an annual celebration giving “divine honors to some person other than the Roman emperor” (10).

This scenario seems unlikely. Though the frequency of the gatherings is not given, it doubtless occurred more than once a year. The description of the meeting in Pliny’s letter is too reminiscent of the description of the Christian worship service in Justin’s letter to merely dismiss as describing a yearly celebration. The events at the meeting seem descriptive of a regular gathering (singing, an oath of fidelity, gathering again to eat) (11). The nature of the complaints against the Christians from Bithynian citizens suggests frequent meetings. Pliny does not elucidate the nature of the charges (12), yet some of them certainly concerned what occurred in the meetings. This suggests the meetings were frequent enough to merit notice from the local citizenry. The rapid growth of Christianity in the local area suggests widespread suspicion of Christian practices.

Geraty argues that Roman reaction to the time of the meeting seemingly indicates an annual Easter observance. On the contrary, evidence within the letter indicates Pliny was concerned about the meeting itself and what occurred in it, rather than the time of the meeting. The mystery regards when the meeting occurred, not Pliny’s concern about when it occurred. Geraty regards the contents of the meeting as a “lesser” concern on the part of the Romans. However, evidence indicates it was an important concern. Finally, the major concern focuses on the confession of the meeting, not the time of the meeting. The attention was on who the meeting focused on (adoration of Christ as divine), not upon when it occurred. Would not the Christians express their worship of Christ as a god on a weekly basis? It is extremely unlikely they waited for a year to express such adoration.

### **THE SABBATH INTERPRETATION**

Samuele Bacchiocchi holds to the possibility that the “fixed day” may be the Jewish Sabbath.

In the light of this excursus we conclude that the ‘appointed day’ of Pliny is not necessarily the selfsame day of the week, unless it was the Sabbath, which possibly Pliny prefers not to mention to avoid placing Christians in a worse light by associating them with Jews would have encouraged the emperor to take harsher measures, the very thing Pliny’s letter wished to discourage. (13)

Such a possibility is unlikely for the Bithynian Christians were probably not Jewish in character. This points to the Christians in Bithynia as having their own distinct identity from that of Judaism. “There is no hint that the Christians had anything to do with Jews or that they came from Jewish background. It is likely that some were converted Jews, but Pliny treated the Christians as an independent sect” (14).

Because of the largely Gentile makeup of the Bithynian church (15), it is difficult to definitely see any Sabbath reference in the “fixed day.” One may insist these Gentile Christians kept the Sabbath which seems highly unlikely in view of the fact that upon Pliny’s edict forbidding the existence of clubs (hetaeria), the observance of the day of worship was abandoned by the Christians. If it had been the Sabbath there certainly would have been more than a simple abandonment of these gatherings.

It seems more likely that the abandonment of this day in obedience to Pliny’s edict was not a moral issue for the Christians, but one of personal choice. The day itself did not have inherently moral import. If it had we could expect to see the Christians “drawing the line” where Sabbath was concerned. It would have been similar to Acts 5:29—“Peter and the other apostles replied: ‘We must obey God rather than men!’” Clearly, the persecution of these Bithynian Christians was because they were Christians, not because of which day they observed.

Bacchiocchi seems to imply that Pliny prefers not to mention Sabbath as the “fixed day” so as to save the Christians from further unjust persecution as Jewish followers. It would seem truer to the context that Pliny would have surely mentioned if it were Sabbath because of its association with Judaism (16).

### THE SUNDAY INTERPRETATION

Bacchiocchi contends that it could not have been the first day of the week for several reasons. The Latin “stato die” (fixed day) can mean a day fixed from week to week, but not necessarily the **same** day from week to week. “The gathering then could occur periodically but not necessarily on the self-same day” (17). The context suggests two possible understandings. The Christians were being accused before Pliny arrived. To avoid suspicion, the Christians may have “changed the day and place of their gathering” (18). After torture and interrogation the governor only found out the time of the day and manner of worship, yet not the day itself. Thus, if “Christians in Bithynia were already gathering regularly on Sunday, they would have confessed this as they disclosed the rest of their worship activities” (19). Why?

In 150 A.D. Justin Martyr used “the day of the Sun” as a rationale for gathering to worship,

“apparently as a means of creating a favorable impression” (20). Thus, if the Christians were worshipping on Sunday in Pliny’s time, they would have mentioned it to Pliny to gain a favorable impression.

If Pliny had found that they gathered on the day of the Sun, would he not presumably have mentioned this fact in order to present the Christian worship in a more favorable light? (21).

Bacchiocchi’s point regarding the *stato die* is valid in that it is not specific. Yet, he has chosen to take one alternative (not the same day), and neglected the other (a fixed day week to week). He has merely chosen one of two alternatives. However, the implications of his argument are profound. First, if these Christians did meet together regularly, but on alternate days, then what becomes of the practice of Sabbath and Sunday observance? If they are alternating days then it is quite difficult to see how the Christians could observe a weekly “fixed day” of worship, whether Sabbath or Sunday. Second, such a position indeed opens up the argument that early Christians in Bithynia did not observe any particular day as of special significance above another. They were simply alternating days of gathering to “avoid cause of suspicion” (22). With the above considerations, it is indeed “possible that Christians every week changed the day and place of their gathering,” (23), yet not probable. It would seem the day remained the same because of its “fixed” character.

Bacchiocchi argues that had the Christians been gathering on Sunday, Pliny would have made note of it because worship on Sunday was looked upon as venerated with prestige. Thus, he would have noted it to “present the Christian worship in a more favorable light” (24). Pliny would have found out about it because “they would have confessed this as they disclosed the rest of their worship activities” in order to gain favorable treatment (25). Bacchiocchi then cites the appeal made by Justin Martyr (150 A.D.) to the emperor that “the Christians gathered on ‘the day of the Sun,’ apparently as a means of creating a favorable impression” (26).

Is it conceivable that Bithynian Christians, had they worshipped on Sunday, would use the same rationale to justify worship to Pliny as Justin did to impress the emperor several decades later? While it remains questionable that Justin would mention Sunday to gain a favorable impression, such a claim for Pliny’s letter is presupposed and reasons that the same psychology existed with the Bithynian Christians as with the Christians of Justin’s time.

The citation of Justin’s rationale should not be transferred to the situation in Bithynia 30 years earlier. The situation of Christians in Bithynia in 112 A.D. was different than that of Rome in 150 A.D. Bacchiocchi notes that a connection between Paul’s writings to Bithynian Christian Sunday worship is thin due to fifty years separating Paul’s and Pliny’s letter, and “that during that period of time, as we shall notice, changes could readily have occurred” (27). The same point could be argued respecting Pliny’s and Justin’s letters.

The situation is different between Pliny’s and Justin’s time in that the Bithynian Christians nowhere sought to accommodate Pliny’s interrogations by conceding or justifying their practice by citing pagan similarities. Indeed, the opposite occurred. It should be further noted that the information Pliny received about the manner of Christian worship originated from former believers, not contemporary

Christians. This is further seen by the fact that those Christians who confessed three times to being Christian were led away to execution. The former believers cursed the name of Christ, and worshipped Trajan's statue and the images of the gods. There is simply no hint in Pliny's letter that the genuine Christians compromised or justified their practice by appealing to pagan similarities.

Fifty years prior to this the Bithynian believers had confronted a similar situation about which they received instruction from Peter regarding how they were to act toward civil authorities (see 1 Peter 1:17; 2:12; 3:14-15; 4:14-16).

It has long been recognized that the famous letter of the Younger Pliny to Trajan concerning the trials of Christians has important bearing on the understanding of 1 Peter... it is clear that Pliny and (1 Peter)... are dealing with the same kind of situation of Christians vis-a-vis the state and are dealing with it in somewhat the same terms, although of course from opposite points of view. (28)

The similarity of the two situations demonstrates that Bithynian believers continued to show fidelity to Peter's counsel.

Bacchiocchi's belief pictures the Christians as eventually compromising their faith by seeking better relations with the State. There is certainly a conflict here. The genuine Christians present a picture of non-compromise, even to death. Pliny was not doing the Christians any favors which leads to the final point.

Why did Pliny make his "cautious" appeal? Was it merely because the condemnation "was causing their killing without regard to their age, sex or attitude" (29)? Certainly it was one of the reasons. However, Trajan's reply to Pliny's letter indicates the real issue was one of **legality** and **public relations**. Legally, Pliny was correct to only punish those who were convicted of being Christian through the test he set up of triple confession under threat. In public relations, Trajan saw an inconsistency in Roman justice when **anyone** who was seen as a Christian was punished. Many non-Christians were unjustly condemned. Hence, anonymous lists of names were further forbidden. They set a bad example unworthy of Roman toleration and justice. We see here Roman bureaucracy at its best.

The point is to show that Bacchiocchi's contention that Pliny would have included any reference to Sunday to facilitate better treatment of Christians is not cogent. Additionally, Pliny did not appeal for the Christians. He appealed for a better method of facilitating justice. He was a bureaucrat, and a good one at that. He sought to create better handling of the charges against the Christians by appealing to Trajan's desire for better handling of the anti-Christian law. The enforcement of the law had created inequities that resulted in many wrong decisions.

Trajan praised Pliny for his handling of the Christian situation. "You have followed the right course of procedure, my dear Pliny, in your examination of the cases of persons charged with being Christians" (30). Therefore, the central issue was not better treatment for Christians, or presenting "the Christian worship in a more favorable light" (31), but one of better facilitation of the existing anti-

Christian law. In a sense, they wanted to “streamline” the law and make it more effective.

Bacchiocchi’s main weakness in this area is his belief that “the anti-Christian law . . . was causing their [that is, Christian] killing without regard to their age, sex or attitude” (32). The issue was not one of leniency to Christians themselves, but of mistakes made to non-Christians because of an inept procedure of determining who was a Christian. Pliny received praise from Trajan for his innovation in handling the charges, not in showing leniency to Christians. Thus, Bacchiocchi’s contextual analysis is against the context.

Pliny was not in the business of protecting Christians. The Christians in Bithynia were being tried not as a Jewish sect or due to associations with Judaism, but because they were perceived as suspicious in their association and activities as a hetaeria by the local population. Pliny, upon hearing testimony from various Christians and former Christians, concluded that Christianity was a foreign cult, a perverse superstition (33). If they were seen as associated with Judaism, Pliny would not have been unsure of how to deal with them (34). At least in Bithynia, the Christians had developed their own identity and were distinct from Judaism.

### **Why the Omission?**

Why was the identification of the fixed day omitted? The custom extended back prior to Pliny’s account. It seems puzzling that the former Christians did not identify the day since they had nothing apparently to lose by disclosing it. The meetings had ceased after Pliny appeared as governor of Bithynia in accordance with the emperor’s order and Pliny’s edict. Thus, we may have a clue why the day itself was not revealed.

Given the fact that no meetings were held due to Pliny’s edict, it would seem that the former believers would not hesitate to reveal the day. However, the witnesses were more concerned with revealing what went on during the meetings rather than the day itself, since the real issue was about the activities taking place during the assemblies. Thus, it may have been glossed over as a trivial, unimportant matter as compared to the character and events taking place at the meetings. Also, the witnesses would not wish to implicate themselves by portraying the assemblies in other than an innocent way.

The fault or error as recorded later is rather trivial and innocent compared to the charges that were perhaps raised against them. Therefore, it is conceivable that the identification of the day itself was not seen as important by both Pliny and the former Christians because the primary focus was upon the activities taking place on the fixed day.

### **Was it Sunday?**

Despite this probability, can identification of the day be made? It is impossible to “unambiguously” state which day is referred to (35). However, speculation as to which day it was **not** can be arrived at with more certainty. Was it Sabbath or Sunday, or was it neither?

Various reasons have been given as to why it is unlikely that the “fixed day” was Easter or the Sabbath. If it was neither, was it Sunday? It cannot be ruled out that perhaps it was the first day of the week. Whether it was weekly or bi-weekly no one can tell.

Even the former believers did not tell which day it was. It was concluded earlier that this may be due to the primary importance given to the activities occurring on that day. Pliny did not seem to be occupied with finding out which day it was. Pliny may not have known because the former Christians did not tell him. Bacchiocchi seems too concerned with giving Pliny’s rationale for not revealing that it was Sabbath on one hand, or the reasons why he would reveal the “fixed day” as Sunday. Both are based on the supposition that Pliny knew which day it was, which is something one cannot be certain of.

Following are reasons why the “fixed day” may be referring to the first day of the week. A clue is found in the time of day that they met. They first met “before daylight” while it was still dark. This is significant in itself. Perhaps they met before dawn to conceal their location, but this seems inconsistent when one considers that they met later on that day to “take food.” Meeting at dawn is reminiscent of Christ’s resurrection “at dawn on the first day of the week” (Matthew 28:1).

Justin Martyr’s description of a Christian worship service in Rome carries striking similarities to the one given in Pliny’s letter (36). Both contain references to observing what God’s Word teaches (Pliny - “bind themselves by oath”; Justin - “exhorts to the imitation of these good things”); both mention giving to others in the group (Pliny - “not to deny a deposit”; Justin - “give what each thinks fit. . . and deposited”); each partakes in a meal, perhaps both Eucharistic (Pliny - “reassemble later to take food”; Justin - “distribution of [Eucharist meal]”).

Though there is not a complete parallel between the two accounts of the worship services, the brevity of Pliny’s letter does not allow for detail. Whereas Justin’s letter was a believer’s account, Pliny’s letter was recollection by an unbeliever ignorant of Christian custom and certainly not concerned with detailing the worship routine of a group determined to be a “superstition.” Furthermore, to presuppose complete uniformity in early Christian worship practices is certainly to err. There were “practical considerations, including circumstances of persecution” which “helped to determine the times of worship” (37). This was certainly the case with the Christians in Bithynia.

The Christian’s willingness to abandon this custom in conformity to Pliny’s edict stemmed from fear and obedience. Fear of punishment was probably one factor that influenced them to obey Pliny’s directive. However, apostolic instruction for submitting to the governing authorities more likely directed their conformity. They believed they should “Submit for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to a king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right” (1 Peter 2:13-14). Therefore, if they were observing the first day of the week it was certainly not in the vein of Sabbath observance.

Pliny’s letter to Trajan cannot be used as firm proof of first day observance (38), yet seems to indicate a reasonable possibility that the “fixed day” may have been the first day. Therefore, early post-apostolic practice in Bithynia may indicate first day gathering. Pliny’s letter weighs in as “evidence that Christians in (Pliny’s) time did worship on Sunday” (39). Furthermore, the evidence seems to strongly

indicate the “fixed day” does not refer to the Sabbath. If it was not the Sabbath, only one alternative remains - the first day of the week observed as a Christian day of worship, yet not as a rest day (40).

### FOOTNOTES

1. Radice, Betty. Pliny: Letters and Panegyricus. Volume 2, Books VIII-X. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1969.
2. A. A. McArthur. The Evolution of the Christian Year. London: SCM Press, 1953, pg. 18; Willy Rordorf. Sunday. London: SCM Press, 1968, pgs. 202,204; Paul K. Jewett. The Lord’s Day. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971; pg. 69.
3. For the Easter view see Lawrence T. Geraty, “The Pascha and the Origin of Sunday Observance,” Andrews University Seminary Studies 3(1965): 87-90; The Sabbath proposal is by Samuele Bacchiocchi, From Sabbath to Sunday, Rome: Pontifical Gregorian UP, 1977; pg. 99.
4. Robert L. Wilken. The Christians as the Romans Saw Them. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1984; pg. 16.
5. Wilken, pgs. 15-25.
6. Robert L. Odom. Sabbath and Sunday in Early Christianity. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1977; pg. 73.
7. Odom, pg. 74.
8. Franz Jozef van Beeck. “The Worship of Christians in Pliny’s Letter.” Studia Liturgica 18.2 (1988). “Like a good Roman, Pliny is simply saying that the Christians have a god of their own; his name is Christ, and they worship him” (pg. 124).
9. Geraty, “The Pascha and the Origin of Sunday Observance,” pgs. 88-90.
10. Geraty, pgs. 88-89.
11. van Beeck notes, “The vague reference, in the singular, to the ‘fixed day’, while conveying Pliny’s unfamiliarity with the Christians’ calendar, suggests regularity, such as that of the first day of the week” (pg. 125).
12. Wilken, pg. 15.
13. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
14. Wilken, pg. 23.
15. “Asia Minor. . . was (a) focal point of missionary activity in the Empire during the second century A.D. . . . This rapid and intensive spread of Christianity was responsible for the early outbreak of conflicts with non-Christians (cf. Acts 19:23-40). This was especially so because the Jews in the region distanced themselves pointedly from the Christians. . . I Peter clearly

- presupposes a predominantly Gentile Christian circle of readers.” Leonhard Goppelt, A Commentary on I Peter. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993; pg. 6. Jews distanced themselves from the new Christian sect which caused Jewish and Gentile Christians to unite in communities where Gentiles quickly became dominant (Goppelt, pg. 6).
16. Jewett, The Lord’s Day, pg. 70.
  17. Bacchiocchi, pg. 98.
  18. Bacchiocchi, pg. 98.
  19. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  20. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  21. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  22. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  23. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  24. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  25. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  26. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  27. Bacchiocchi, pg. 98.
  28. See John Knox’s excellent discussion of the relationship between 1 Peter and Pliny’s letter, “Pliny and 1 Peter: A Note on 1 Peter 4:14-16 and 3:15.” Journal of Biblical Literature 72 (1953): 187-189.
  29. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  30. Radice, Letter 10:97.
  31. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  32. Bacchiocchi, pg. 99.
  33. Wilken, pg. 22.
  34. Wilken, pg. 22.
  35. Richard J. Bauckham. “The Lord’s Day.” From Sabbath to Lord’s Day. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982; pg. 250, footnote 79.
  36. Justin Martyr. “The First Apology of Justin.” Ante-Nicene Fathers. Volume 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987; pg. 187.
  37. Bauckham, pg. 239; van Beeck, pg. 125.
  38. Bauckham, pg. 250, footnote 79.
  39. Bauckham, pg. 250, footnote 79.
  40. There is general recognition that Sunday was not originally observed as a Sabbath or rest day. The letter of Pliny may be taken as evidence for this position, though no explicit statement is made in the letter that Christians worked during the “fixed day.” However, there is strong implication this was probably the case. “Our study of the origins of the Lord’s Day has given no hint of properly sabbatical associations; for the earliest Christians it was not a substitute for the Sabbath nor a day of rest nor related in any way to the fourth commandment” (Bauckham, From Sabbath to Lord’s Day, pg. 240).