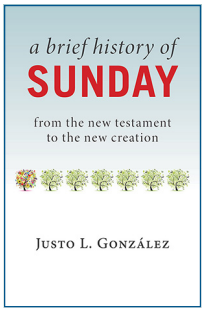
Book Review



Justo L. González.
A Brief History of Sunday:
From the New Testament to the New Creation
Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Press, 2017.
Pp. v-166 incl. Index. Paperback. $16.00 U.S..

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Martin Luther King, Jr. is oft quoted as bemoaning, "11am Sunday is the most segregated hour in America." The civil rights implications of this statement may not have changed a great deal since the early 60s, but the assumption that a majority of Americans are going to church on Sunday certainly has. A more apt observation for today may be, "11am Sunday is the most secular hour in America." Justo González hopes to combat this by offering the "gift of rediscovering the joy and the excitement of Sunday as early Christians viewed and celebrated it" (viii-ix). This gift is unwrapped through a rapid tour of liturgical history in four periods—"Before Constantine," "From Constantine to the End of Antiquity," "The Middle Ages," and "The Reformation and Beyond"—paying particular attention to the evolution of the relationship between "Sabbath" and "The Lord's Day."

Although González claims he is uninterested in a "focus on the debates as to whether Christians should keep the seventh day of the week or the first" (128), a great deal of the book is dedicated to exploring the history of this very issue. Indeed, González is not arguing the merits of one over the other, but merely charting the history that led to Sunday becoming the primary day for Christian worship.

In the Early Church, there was a great deal of overlap between Christian and Jewish worship, with both Jews and Gentiles participating in synagogue worship on the Sabbath (seventh day of the week), then later in the evening "breaking bread" as part of newly developing Christian rituals. This is where some distancing between Saturday and Sunday observance began, considering that the Jewish calendar counted days from sunset to sunset, unlike today's practice of midnight to midnight. Thus, an early Christian may have been in the synagogue after sunrise on Saturday, then partake in a Christian observance of "The Lord's Day" after sunset—today's Saturday evening, but Sunday by the Jewish calendar.

That Saturday/Sunday divide increased as more and more Gentiles joined the church, and their work responsibilities did not allow for seventh day rest. While the Sabbath expectation was for rest from labor and devotion to prayer, the Lord's Day expectation was for joy and celebration of the resurrection and new creation. In the time of Constantine, laws were established that released employment obligations on Sundays, which was considered the first day of the week by the Romans, and more and more elaborate Sunday worship rituals emerged.

In the Middle Ages, legislation further cemented Sunday as a day of rest from labor, and many began to consider Sunday the "Christian Sabbath." However, a shift toward emphasis on the sacrifice of Christ in Communion led to more somber observances of "the divine drama,"

while more secular spectacles celebrated Sunday as a day of leisure. "Thus Sunday was both the day of the great and overwhelming spectacle of the renewed sacrifice of Christ and the day of many other spectacles that often showed precisely why that sacrifice was necessary" (96).

Luther, and subsequent reformers, agreed that a "Sabbath" day was intended to be a day of "tranquility" allowing reflection on the gospel, and although there could be freedom as to what day that would be (save for Anabaptists, who considered Sunday a divine commandment), a commonly set day allowed the community to gather for regular proclamation of the Word (103). By this point, that weekly observance had fully transferred from the Jewish Sabbath on the seventh day to the Lord's Day on the first day (which, interestingly, Roman Catholics saw as proof that even the new, *sola scriptura* Protestants were willing, in some cases, to allow authority of tradition to trump authority of Scripture).

Post-Reformation, legislation of Sunday rest continued for several centuries, though it became a more and more secular observance, as is remarkably clear in today's Post-Christendom world, where Sunday is a day of leisure for most in the West, but many "blue laws" and other legislation smacking of religious ideology has been repealed. This is precisely what González hopes to combat by returning to holy observance of Sunday as a day of resurrection and new creation. "And therefore Sunday, ever more neglected by society at large, will become ever more cherished by those who believe" (153).

While I heartily concur that the contemporary church is in need of renewal and would greatly benefit from reinvigorated, joyful celebration as resurrection people looking to the promised new creation, I fear González's hope for a specific return to Sunday is fruitless. Not only have secular forms of rest thoroughly, and I suspect irrevocably, encroached on Sundays, but our globalized, technological daily life has also forced us to reconsider the very notion of rest, tranquility, Sabbath. Rather than fixating on the Early Church's observance of Sunday in particular, today's church would be best served to consider *why* that shift was made—the growing Gentile church had different schedules, different customs, different day-to-day demands that had to be addressed differently than Jewish practices. They were no less earnest in their desire to carve out holy time and space, they were simply more innovative. Today's church must first return to this deeply engrained understanding and desire for Sabbath in all parts of our lives, and perhaps then we will see more clearly how this should be embodied in our corporate worship practices.

In all, González has offered a breezy romp through liturgical history, drawing on a rich array of original sources, which makes *A Brief History of Sunday* a fine primer to those seeking an introduction to liturgical history. There is, however, a disappointing lack of any novel perspective or particular contextual insight from history seen through the eyes of this Cuban Methodist historian. Save for reference to the "Popular Salvadoran Mass" as an example of post-Vatican II embrace of the vernacular (146-147), there is nary a hint of González's Latino context. But perhaps that is the point. Perhaps this primer was not written for Westerners seeking new insights from long-ignored majority world voices, but for majority world believers disconnected from these Western liturgical roots. As a trusted voice from within, González's zeal for the Early Church's embrace of Sunday may, in fact, be a novel and innovative call.