As one appreciative of texts Justo González has written for classroom use (notably his two-volume *Story of Christianity*, revised 2010) this reviewer was eager to take up the author’s recent volume, *A Brief History of Sunday*. A compact work, it concerns itself not with the question of the transition from Jewish Sabbath to Christian Sunday but with the development of and uses of Sunday since the first Easter.

Any reader who is familiar with González’ earlier writings will find here continuities of approach and emphasis, of which two stand out in particular. A first is that the Christian Sunday needs to be conceived of primarily as *before* and *after* Constantine. González has earlier made clear that, in his judgment, the favors paid to the Church by this, the first emperor to be supportive of Christianity, were far outweighed by the long-term costs. His position, expressed in a nutshell, is that the church of today—situated in a rapidly secularizing culture—needs to return to a concept of the Christian Sunday that assumes nothing by way of supporting legislation by government. A second theme, also found in his earlier writings, is that the spread of Christianity prior to Constantine in and beyond the Mediterranean world happened almost inadvertently, while the young church made its primary focus the nurturing of believers in assemblies (usually at odd hours) centered primarily on participation in the Lord’s Supper. One’s final assessment of González’s *Sunday* will be colored, to a large extent, by whether or not the reader shares these foundational assumptions. Not all will.

There is no debating the fact that once they were made unwelcome in the Saturday gatherings of the Jewish synagogues of the Mediterranean world, early Christians had to resort to Saturday evening gatherings (with their preferred first day of the week reckoned to begin at dusk, Saturday) or else at dawn on Sunday. With no particular day of the week guaranteed to Christians for their own use, their celebrative gatherings—held in honor of Jesus’ resurrection—needed to be furtive and “on the fly.” Sunday considered as a day of “rest” (whether for professed Christians or the population in general) was something that awaited the concession of Constantine, who decreed an Empire-wide day of rest on the Christian Sunday in 321 AD.
Yet from this “wrong turn” (in González’s judgment) have flowed a series of unfortunate and ultimately futile attempts to legislate the Western world into marking the first day of the week—the day of Jesus’ resurrection—as a day of required rest (even if not of worship). These expectations, which we might have associated with Puritan Massachusetts, González shows began in the days of the Christian emperor, Theodosius. The barbarian west-European kingdoms of the Visigoths, once Christianized, joined in, as did Emperor Charlemagne. Medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas helped provide theological legitimization for this development—with that rationale being largely continued in both Catholic and Protestant Europe beyond the sixteenth-century Reformation. The severities of sabbatarianism insisted on by leading Puritans and evangelicals (such as González’s own denominational forebear, John Wesley) prove to be a continuation of an enforcement of the Christian day of worship rooted in the early medieval period. It has all been a miscalculation, González thinks. Constantine’s proposal to provide a uniform rest day ought to have been spurned; then the Christian movement could have continued with its integrity intact, meeting furtively at dusk and at dawn as it had already been doing. Resurrection joy would not have had to give way to the somberness of enforced rest.

But this line of analysis, as stimulating as it is (the reviewer tagged forty places for further consideration), suffers from a serious miscalculation, and from it questionable inferences have been drawn. The calculation made in A Brief History of Sunday is that the rapid growth and expansion of the Christian movement is largely attributable to the endorsement of Constantine and the successive emperors and governments (extending into the century now passed) who have given state recognition to Christianity. And it is here that a second, long-standing opinion of González (noted above from his earlier writings) is operative in a powerful way. The Christian movement would have remained small and marginal without imperial or governmental support inasmuch as believers met furtively, at odd hours, and primarily for liturgical purposes. Open proclamation of the gospel, on this accounting, played almost no role whatsoever in the proliferation of Christianity; instead this was the “boon” of the emperor.

The reviewer recognizes that the young church indeed paid a heavy price when it accepted Constantine’s many favors. Yet the young church was at the same time aggressive in proclamation and mission; even after the Western Empire gave way to barbarian kingdoms,
missionary evangelists (many of them monks) took the gospel to the unbelieving. It was the Christianization of societies by mission and evangelization that made the question of a Christian Sunday a matter of import for those not-yet-nations of Europe. Thus, one must ask—not solely of Europe, but of any country on earth where the gospel has taken root: “Is not the role of Sunday in society a legitimate question for any public authority to take up, once there is a preponderance of Christians in that society?” González would seem to answer no. His approach assumes a church perpetually on the margins—a minority church rather than a vigorous, expansionist church—that, in taking the gospel to a nation, aims also to transform that culture, its habits, and weekly rhythms.

In passing, it should be said that González, while sympathetic to the Reformers of the sixteenth century (Luther, especially), did not exert himself to understand Sunday and its associated practice of the Lord’s Supper in the post-Reformation world. While taking note of valuable work on the Puritan Sabbath by John Primus, other interpreters of the Reformed approach to Sunday (and the Lord’s Supper) such as Paul King Jewett, *The Lord’s Day* (1971), the Don Carson edited collection *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* (1982), and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs* (2001) were not consulted. For lack of such investigation, the Puritan and later Reformed tradition is too often caricatured.

In sum, the Christian Sunday of our future might indeed look more and more like the Christian Sunday before Constantine. Where Christians will differ is over the question of whether such a retrenched state of affairs need be permanent. Could it be permanent in a world full of the knowledge of the Lord “as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14)? Could it be permanent in a world whose kingdoms “have become the kingdom of our God and of his Messiah” (Rev. 11:15)?

—Kenneth J. Stewart