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A reply to John Wesson

William Still

The substance of an address given at the Lord's Day Observance Society's Pre-Assembly Rally in Edinburgh on Monday 20 May 1974.

John Wesson's article to which this refers was printed in the *Christian Graduate* for September 1973 under the title 'Sunday, puzzling Sunday'. As readers may not have the article at hand to refer to, we reprint some of John Wesson's points that Mr Still takes up.

'After the Reformation with its new emphasis on the Bible, the Sunday question resolved itself into two main approaches.

'1. To divide Sunday from the Jewish sabbath. Basically, this was the Continental Reformed position, represented extremely by Luther, more moderately by Calvin. . . .

'2. To look upon the Christian observance as following the pattern of the Jewish institution but held on another day, namely, Sunday, the "Christian sabbath". This was the view taken in England and became the standpoint of the English Puritan position.'

Then John Wesson asks three questions which Mr Still deals with.

'1. Why did the disciples change sabbath observance from the seventh day to the first day without a specific command from the Lord?

'2. If the first day of the week is the "Christian sabbath", how do we account for Paul's words to his Gentile converts?

'3. Why is the fourth commandment treated with such hesitation in the early church?'

Then he concludes:

'Sunday then is concerned with worship of the risen Christ. . . .

'If there is one thing that characterizes Sunday it is fellowship. . . .

'It is, I suggest, these two strands, the risen presence of Christ and the fellowship of His people, which define the place of Sunday in the New Testament.'

AN attack has been made recently upon the validity of the Christian sabbath (which, alas, we call Sunday), in two Christian magazines to my knowledge — the *Christian Graduate*, and also (the same article) in the magazine of the Scripture Union. It is written by the Rev. John Wesson, a clergyman of the Church of England.

Mr Wesson starts from the genuine difficulty of an older teenager attending church twice a Sunday, concerning Sunday afternoon sport, but what he says in reply to the teenager's question has much wider and deeper implications than that question, important though that is. He says: 'I came to the subject from a pastoral rather than a purely theological concern, and began to examine some of my own presuppositions.' He hopes his article will help others to do the same. I fear not. In fact the article suffers glaringly from its human, pastoral approach rather than from a divine and theological approach.

It begins, historically, by ridiculing the class distinctions which marred early Victorian attempts by the church to forbid Sunday excursions for the poor. Such a beginning is unfortunate, not because there was no snobbery in those days — and who would condone it? — but because the subject of the Lord's Day surely ought not to be approached from such a subjective, class-conscious angle, and more than a century out-of-date!

Continental Reformers and English Puritans

It goes on, more to the point, to distinguish between the continental Sunday, following the Reformation, and the Sunday of Puritan England. It cites one of the wilder sayings of Martin Luther, and also invokes Calvin's name, 'more moderately', as we would expect; but we may remark, are great men never guilty of indiscretion or indirection? But the Scriptures never are. It is clear that, of the two views (the continental Sunday and the Puritan), Mr Wesson prefers the continental, of those early days. I wonder if he prefers the continental Sunday now! I would have thought that one look at what happens on the continent, although, alas, too much here also, would have dissuaded him from taking that line.

The article goes on to quote a popular evangelical church magazine inset which takes what he calls the 'straight tie-up' of the Jewish sabbath with the Christian Sunday on account of the resurrection. Doubtless the quotation used could be better expressed; but in the same vein it goes on to charge a scholar as great and revered as the late E. J. Young with what it calls the same 'confidence trick'. I would have thought E. J. Young's statement in *The New Bible Dictionary* of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship

'To require the Almighty to state everything in injunctional terms is tantamount to irreverent dictation.'

was impeccable. It reads: 'On the first day of the week the Lord rose from the dead, and the Christians began to assemble on that day for worship of the risen Christ. This day is the Lord's Day, and as such is the sabbath which God had instituted at creation. . . .' Well, what's wrong with that? Harold Legerton certainly doesn't think there is anything wrong with it, for in taking Mr Wesson to task in the recent issue of the LDOS magazine, *Joy and Light*, he makes the institution of the sabbath at creation his cardinal point. Not surprisingly, since early Genesis is definitive of so much that pertains to man's life on earth, including marriage.

The writer alleges that the 'confidence trick' is to 'transplant all sabbatical regulations of the Old Testament into Sunday observance in the New Testament', and thus, he says, 'our modern problem becomes how to fulfil all these in a Christian setting and in a highly complex industrial society.' Obviously our modern problem, which it is alleged is that of how to fulfil all sabbatical regulations of the Old Testament in a Christian setting, is nothing of the sort. If that means fulfilling them by carnal effort, and pharisaically, then we have our Lord's own authority for contradicting it. That's not our remit. Is this not setting up a legalistic Aunt Sally, which may be some people's particular bugbear — we are not saying that legal sabbatarianism is not an idol of some Christians, in England as in Scotland — to knock it down to one's own satisfaction? But not to the help of others. Of course the continental Sunday of the Reformers is a live option to a pharisee-ridden legalism; but surely the truth, the lively truth of a joyous walk with our risen Lord is a far better option, and may stand between these two; and that is only maintained by the beautiful equipoise of the Holy Spirit living and working in the hearts of believers, and in His living church.

A specific command to change the day?

Mr Wesson then airs three questions. The first is: 'Why did the disciples change sabbath observance from the seventh day to the first day without a specific command from the Lord?' But surely to frame the question in those terms is to fail to see the elemental significance of the resurrection. C. S. Lewis, I think, calls the resurrection the first miracle of the new creation: is that a little matter to change the whole cast of life from how it is set forth in Old Testament terms? To minimize the significance of that pivot of change is as if in cold blood the disciples with motive-less thought arbitrarily and even whimsically changed the day of Christian worship. It is far from that. The writer criticizes Daniel Wilson for saying that 'the Sabbath' was 'transferred by Divine Authority' when he

cites Mark 2: 27, 28: 'the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath', and then charging him with contradicting himself by adding that 'an express and formal injunction for a subordinate change' is not required. Of course men will quibble concerning how defenders of the Lord's Day express their views, and doubtless the position is sometimes defended too narrowly and legalistically. And assuredly there does not seem to be in the New Testament the kind of specific command that critics in their mock triumphant literalism seek; but the matter is surely far broader and more fundamental than to be based upon only one or two contributory texts of Scripture. To require the Almighty to state everything in injunctional terms is tantamount to irreverent dictation. Men may run around cynically looking for what they call the missing sentence, then gleefully conclude that it is not to be found, and then pathetically confess to being shaken in their view of the alleged change that is made; but God's Son rose from the dead, and who will hinder the change that that makes to man's destiny and his life on earth! The Lord's Day comes round, and those who desecrate it suffer, as the crop of Sunday disasters filling the pages of Monday newspapers show. Pharaoh resisted the God of Israel, Maker of heaven and earth, and was destroyed for his pains; so those who, being enlightened concerning the joy and light of God's day, refuse and dishonour it, must necessarily and inevitably suffer. God is not mocked!

Paul's words to Gentile converts

The next question is: 'If the first day of the week is the "Christian sabbath", how do we account for Paul's words to his Gentile converts?' This question stems from the writer's tactical approach to the whole subject. If he had laid a broad, sure foundation upon God's first primal revelation in Genesis 2 after creation, and had made that gift and blessing then offered to man his starting-point, he would not have needed to juggle with the thorny subject as between Jews and Gentiles in relation to Christ. Of course we approach Jews on the subject differently from Gentiles, as indeed the Lord's Day Observance Society surely approaches highland communities differently on the subject from lowland communities. The fundamentals don't change, but the common sin in some highland communities may be mere legalism, and even hypocrisy, let it be admitted — not that it is by any means always so — whereas in the lowlands the common sin is more likely to be anything from uncertainty concerning the biblical principle of the Lord's Day to gross desecration of it.

The writer first deals with Acts 15, and tries to show that it is significant that at the first Jerusalem council 'the sabbath is not mentioned as a requirement for Gentiles'. But surely Paul's intention is to drive the blessing of the gospel right through the wall of Jewish bigotry and legalism into the camp of his beloved Gentiles — nor does he love his own Jewish people less, as he shows —

and so he laid down several principles for Jews which were compatible with their ancestry and normal God-given observances, along with others from the decalogue which have universal sanction for Gentiles as well as Jews. Of the four principles Paul enumerates here, one concerns sacrificing to idols, and another concerns the eating of flesh with the blood in it; the other two are the sixth and seventh commandments, those two commandments perhaps most frequently cited in the Scriptures from the second table concerning man's duty to his fellow man. Paul might have cited the eighth commandment, or the ninth, tenth, or fifth, but he did not, here. I don't think men of judgment will quibble with Paul for his selection; but do you think that by omitting the others he was implying that whereas Jews must not steal, nor bear false witness, nor covet, nor dishonour their parents, Gentile Christians may do these things? The question is absurd — apart from the fact that the distinction between the two tables of the decalogue is here confused. In any case the argument from silence will not do.

Legalism

Even less successful is the citation from Galatians 4: 10. 'The context shows plainly enough that the reference is to a Jewish way of life (cf. Gal. 2: 14).' Yes, not only Jewish, but legal, and the Jewish way of life was not always legalistic, else none of the Old Testament saints would have been saved; Abel, for instance, or Enoch, Noah, or Abraham. Then Colossians 2: 16, 17 is quoted, which says: 'Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.' Ah, the writer seems to say, Here is a reference to 'sabbath' in a derogatory context; this can be used. Well, we need to know the context, which at this point is the Christian's happy deliverance from the bondage of legalism and mere external observance, as cited in the examples of food and drink, or monthly or weekly festivals. I have already spoken of the legal sabbatarianism (like all works of attempted self-salvation) as the antithesis of the gospel, but that does not mean that Christians as distinct from Jews are not required by grace to fulfil the law. Jesus talks constantly in John's Gospel and in his Epistles of loving God and keeping His commandments. Is that ruled out because some take one commandment or another and pile the whole decalogue dizzily upon it to make it *the* ground of salvation? These are not roots, but fruits.

Such misconceptions arise from men imperfectly understanding, if they understand at all, the true relation between the Mosaic law (as part of the one covenant of grace) and the gospel. The law was given to Israel in the context of grace, indeed after redemption by blood! If the Jews in fact turned the law of God graciously given (notwithstanding the thunders) into an irksome legalism, as many church members do today, and then tried to save themselves by keeping it, and failed, are we going to

'We must carefully distinguish between what is abiding and what is temporary in the law as given to the Jews.'

throw out the eternal law of God because it has been misused? The writer moves on to Hebrews 4: 9, and sets what he calls the 'shadow' of the sabbath over against the 'body' or 'reality' of Christ, as if the spiritual fact of sabbath rest which we enjoy in Christ permitted us to dismiss the outward fact of observance of the Christian sabbath, the Lord's Day — as if the fourth commandment had never been in the decalogue, nor God's own primal revelation concerning His own rest after creation in Genesis 2. We must carefully distinguish between what is abiding and what is temporary in the law as given to the Jews. Otherwise it is as if, after receiving Christ, we said to young Christians, 'You don't need to worry now whether you steal, or kill, or commit adultery.' What madness! Christ came to fulfil the law, and to enable us to fulfil it by grace, not destroy it!

Romans 14: 5, 6 is now cited about one man esteeming one day better than another, while another man esteems all days alike; and it is suggested that this is in favour of Gentile Christians abolishing sabbath observance. But the text at that place goes on to say, 'Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord.' But Paul does not go on to say 'and he that does not observe the day observes it not in honour of the Lord', as he does immediately afterwards on the 'eating' question. Why did Paul leave out the negative in the case of the 'day', but not in the 'case' of 'eating'? At least he was being more careful than the writer. And so, having followed him through these various passages of Scripture and seen these misguided applications of them to this question, we are not surprised that he concludes 'that it is difficult to square Paul's theology with regard to Gentile Christians with the idea that we as Gentile Christians today are observing the sabbath on the first day of the week instead of the seventh'. But the difficulties of the Jewish sabbatarian are of the writer's own making!

The fourth commandment and the early church

Lastly he asks the question: 'Why is the fourth commandment treated with such hesitation in the early church?' He says: 'It is certainly strange that whenever we come across the use of the Ten Commandments within the church in the early days, the sabbath commandment is always missing,' and he cites Mark 10: 19ff.; Romans 13: 9; James 2: 8 as examples, along with the Sermon on the Mount. This also, it seems to me, is an Aunt Sally, set up to be knocked down, for it is clear that in all these cases it is the second table of the Law only (not the first table which includes the fourth commandment) that these

passages quote, where love to God is demonstrated by love to one's fellow or neighbour, or brother. Only in one case could the first table possibly be included, in that of Matthew 5: 33-37, in the matter of swearing, which may be said to apply to the third commandment as well as the ninth; but there is no doubt that in Matthew 5, from verse 17 onwards, where Jesus begins to say He has come to fulfil and not to abolish the law, the emphasis is upon the second table of the law concerning duty to man. There is a confusion of the tables here. What does it matter if, as is said, scholars have pointed out that during at least the first four centuries there is no direct appeal to the ten commandments to support observance of the Christian Sunday? 'This is surely a problem for those who hold the traditional position.' Not at all; if it is so that the first four centuries contained no direct appeal to the ten commandments, that is a problem for the first four centuries. They will have to answer for that, not we. After all, it has also been pointed out by scholars, not least in Edinburgh, how soon the second generation of Christians departed from elements of the divine revelation that we would regard as cardinal.

To sum up, the problems of the principles underlying the Lord's Day and its observance lie with those who do not take Genesis 2 seriously. This is a fundamental matter.

Where is the first biblical foundation stone with regard to human marriage? It is in Genesis 2: 24; and Jesus confirmed that, *simpliciter*. Where is the biblical foundation for the whole idea of redemption and deliverance from evil? It is in Genesis 3: 15. Where is the biblical foundation for a day of rest after work which must, obviously, for godly people, be a day of 'resting in the Lord' (*cf.* Heb. 3:7 - 4:13) and must, necessarily, involve worship and rejoicing at the key of redemption, which is Christ's resurrection, the white and golden, blue and red thread, that runs right through the Scriptures? It is in Genesis 2: 1-3.

I have not discussed the practical problems of Lord's Day observance. Someone else can do that, although one is wrestling with them practically in the pastoral ministry (not to say in ordinary life) every day. It is surely enough to have reiterated once more — how often has it been done at this annual rally? — the primal, elemental, ineradicable and eternal nature of the sanction laid upon us — not as a burden, but by grace and as a delight. The law is but the schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. Hallelujah for schoolmasters. Thrice hallelujah for Christ!

The Rev. William Still is Minister of Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen.

This is the day the Lord hath made,
He calls the hours His own;
Let heaven rejoice, let earth be glad,
And praise surround the throne.

This day He rose and left the dead,
And Satan's empire fell;
This day the saints His triumphs spread,
And all His wonders tell.

Hosanna to the anointed King,
To David's holy Son!
O help us, Lord, descend and bring
Salvation from Thy throne.

Blessed be the Lord, who comes to men
With messages of grace;
Who comes, in God His Father's name,
To save our sinful race.

Hosanna in the highest strains
The Church on earth can raise;
The highest heavens in which He reigns
Shall give Him nobler praise.

ISAAC WATTS
(based on Psalm 118)