

## SUNDAY OBSERVANCE

THE question of Sunday observance is both topical and practical for all of us — especially those who have a family — yet there seems to be a good deal of confusion in Christian circles as to what is at stake. The basic questions which need to be asked seem to be as follows.

1. Is the *Christian* commanded to keep one day in seven as a day of rest from labour and a day holy to God? Can we argue that the fourth commandment and passages such as Genesis ii, 3 have their significance only for Old Testament times, or do they apply to Christians here and now?

2. If this duty to set aside one day in seven is binding on the Christian, why is it so? Is it a creation ordinance, an aspect of moral law, or has it some other authority?

3. How should a Christian Sunday differ from a Jewish sabbath? What are our reasons for thinking there should be a difference and what should guide us in planning our activities on that day? Is it, for instance, primarily a day for religious exercises or a day of rest or is it both? If it is both can the two functions be separated and the Minister take a 'secular sabbath' on Monday while the layman divides the Sunday into a religious morning and a secular afternoon?

4. How far should the observance of a 'sabbath' be imposed on the non-Christian?

The following four papers do not discuss all these questions fully and each takes a somewhat different point of view, but they do ventilate and to some extent clear up several of the important issues.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LORD'S DAY FROM THE JEWISH SABBATH

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WAS the sabbath simply a Jewish institution? Was it only temporary in its design? Was it abrogated with other special laws of the Old Testament? Did it leave no divinely appointed substitute?

The answer turns largely on this — is the fourth commandment binding upon the Church today? The text of the commandment itself has some bearing on this issue. The commandment, given at Sinai, was based, not on something done to Israel alone, but on something done in the creation of the world: 'For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth . . .' (Ex. xx. 11). The implication is that 'the sabbath was made for man', and not for the Jew only.

There are traces of the observance of the sabbath before the giving of the law at Sinai (see Ex. xvi. 23). The reckoning of time by weeks long before Moses (Gn. xxix. 27) may have had for 'its forgotten background' the original institution of the sabbath at the creation. A few Old Testament references (Ne. ix. 14; Ez. xx. 12) might indeed seem to imply that the

sabbath had its beginning at Sinai, but they mean no more than that in its *specific* Old Testament form it had its beginning with the legislation under Moses. The very word 'remember' in the commandment ('Remember the sabbath day') pre-supposes, as Franz Delitzsch points out, an acquaintance with the sabbath. It would seem as if the sabbath were intended to be a great river of blessing following man throughout his career on earth.

Some argue as if, while the other commandments of the Decalogue are still obligatory, the fourth is no longer so. It would indeed be strange if this were true. Was it not written with the finger of God like the others? Was it not placed like them in the ark as the very foundation of God's throne between the cherubim? As Professor John Murray has said: 'It would require the most conclusive evidence to establish the thesis that the fourth commandment is in a different category from the other nine.'

It is true that there are ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Testament which are no longer binding on us today — they had to do with the peculiar circumstances of the Jews of that time. But the fourth commandment is not a mere ceremonial or civil matter. It has its ground in the permanent nature of men and their relationship to God.

It is true that there are Old Testament regulations connected with the sabbath which do not hold for us today. It was forbidden to kindle a fire on the sabbath and it was enjoined that whosoever would do any work on the sabbath should be put to death (Ex. xxxv. 2, 3), but the fact that these are no longer binding does not involve the abrogation of the commandment. In the case of the fifth commandment it was ordained that whosoever cursed father or mother should be put to death, and in the case of the seventh commandment it was enjoined that the adulterer should die. These regulations are not binding upon us today, but the commandments themselves are no less binding in these New Testament times.

Appeal is sometimes made to our Lord's teaching and example, as if He did away with the sabbath. This is to misunderstand what our Lord was really contending against. The Pharisees had introduced so many regulations with regard to the keeping of the sabbath that it had become a burdensome yoke. Christ as the 'Lord also of the sabbath' claimed the right to deliver it from these dreadful burdens and to show how it should be kept — by attendance on the worship of God and by deeds of love and mercy. In all our Lord's controversies with the Pharisees over the sabbath, there is not the slightest hint that the sabbath was to be in any wise abolished.

Appeal is sometimes made to St. Paul's teaching where he says: 'Let no man therefore judge you . . . in respect of a feast day or a new moon or a sabbath day; which are a shadow of the things to come' (Col. ii. 16, 17, rv). We must remember, however, that there was a Judaizing party in apostolic times which troubled the Church about days and months and years, as well as about circumcision (see also Rom. xiv. 5; Gal. iv. 10, 11). They wished the *seventh* day to be kept in the new dispensation, and not only the seventh day but the whole cycle of Jewish feast days. With this position the apostle did not agree. He deals with it gently in Romans, but in the case of the Galatians more serious issues were involved. In Galatia false teachers were spreading the view that such observances were essential to salvation, and Paul withstood them might and main. These false teachers were seeking to bring the converts under a yoke of bondage.

The Jewish sabbath as such had been, as Franz Delitzsch says, buried in the Lord's tomb (He lay in the grave over the Jewish sabbath). The Lord's day — the first day of the week — took its place. Possibly there were those who for a time kept both days — the seventh and the first. But there is no trace in the early Church of any dispute over the Lord's day and its observance. Ignatius in his *Epistle to the Magnesians* (Sect. IX) speaks of 'no longer observing sabbaths but fashioning our lives after

the Lord's day'. It is worth noting that Ignatius died only a few decades after the apostle John—probably early in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian.

### THE CHANGE OF THE DAY

The change from the seventh day to the first took its rise, of course, from the resurrection of our Lord on the first day of the week. He appeared to His disciples on the first Easter Sunday. He appeared again on the following Sunday. In the expression 'after eight days' in John xx. 26 the inclusive reckoning of time is employed. It would seem probable that our Lord waited until the return of another Sunday to encourage His disciples to observe *that* day as the new day of rest and worship. It is significant too that the Spirit was poured out on another Lord's day — at Pentecost.

The references in Acts xx. 7 and 1 Corinthians xvi. 2 indicate that the disciples were in the habit of meeting — with apostolic sanction — on the first day of the week for worship. This day received the title 'the Lord's day' — the day consecrated to the Lord (see Rev. i. 10, with note in H. B. Swete's Commentary on the Apocalypse, *in loc.*).

It was vital to the commandment from the first that there should be the succession of six days of labour and a day of rest. The particular day set apart was not of the essence of the commandment. But it was entirely fitting that the Old Testament people of God should look forward to their holy day of rest at the close of the week, for their rest had yet to be won. It was also fitting that the New Testament Church should celebrate her sacred day at the beginning of the week and enter on her toil as a people whose rest had been won.

### THE OBSERVANCE OF THE DAY

The observance of the day rests upon the divine command and the divine example (Ex. xx. 11; Gn. ii. 2, 3). The principle underlying it is that man must copy God in his course of life. In the creation there was the sequence of six days of creative activity and a day of rest. Rest, of course, with God does not mean mere cessation from labour. It has a deeper and richer significance — it speaks of satisfaction and delight in the works of His hands. It is interesting to note that the seventh day was man's first upon earth — he began his career by keeping sabbath with his God.

Christians often look on the Lord's day as primarily for the sake of advancing religion. There is a danger in placing the emphasis too much in this direction. Its main significance is in the things of which it speaks. It witnesses to creation by God's power at the beginning of history; and it reminds us of redemption accomplished through the crucified and risen Saviour. But these great truths do not exhaust its significance. It speaks also of eternity — of the sabbath rest that remains for the people of God. Its witness to these great truths as it recurs every week is every whit as necessary under the New Testament as under the Old.

Dr. Geerhardus Vos points out the danger of the modern Church becoming so busy with religious propaganda on this holy day as to leave too little place for the quiet 'God-ward occupation with piety'. The day is 'set apart' *from* mere secular employments and worldly pursuits and enjoyments, and 'set apart' *to* God and His worship. It is no doubt possible for Christian workers to be so much taken up with religious propaganda on this holy day as to empty it too much of the opportunities for the 'rest' and reflection which lie at the heart of its significance. As we ponder upon the great truths of which the Christian sabbath speaks, it becomes like a Pisgah-height from which we view the promised land. We cannot afford to be without what Dr. Vos has called its 'eternity-typifying values'.

## IS EVERY DAY ALIKE ?

It is sometimes argued that true Christians should devote every day specially to God and this is used as an argument against the observance of the sabbath in particular. It is true that we should devote ourselves to God all the time. But as Professor John Murray says: 'We should not forget that there are different ways of serving God. We do not serve Him by doing the same thing all the time. If we do that, we are either insane or notoriously perverse. There is a great variety in human vocation. If we neglect to observe that variation we shall soon pay the cost. One of the ways by which this variety is expressed and enjoined is to set apart every recurring seventh day. That is the divine institution. The recurring seventh day is different and it is so by divine appointment. To obliterate this difference may appear pious. But it is piosity, not piety. It is not piety to be wiser than God; it is impiety of the darkest hue.'

### THE UNCONVERTED AND THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH

It is often affirmed that in the matter of sabbath-observance we should not attempt to legislate for the unconverted. But the legislation is already in force. The Almighty has spoken in the Decalogue. As to the laws of the land, the government of the nation has no right to legalize murder or theft — no right to disregard the sixth or the eighth commandment. It should not act as though there were no distinction between right and wrong. It should not act as though God had not spoken. It should not legislate contrary to any command of the Decalogue, but rather in support of these commands. And it would seem to be a Christian duty heartily to support the laws of the land which are for the maintenance of the ten great Words of God's law — the fourth included.

Admittedly, men will never truly keep the Lord's day aright until they love the Lord of the day. Our first great aim and endeavour, therefore, should be to lead them to the Redeemer.

## THE INCONSISTENCIES OF A CHRISTIAN SABBATH

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### THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE

**I**T is remarkable that there is so little emphasis on the sabbath day or the fourth commandment in the New Testament Epistles. This is in sharp contrast with the great emphasis placed on the sabbath day in the Old Testament, where, in the Pentateuch, it is strictly commanded, and, in the prophets, neglect of it is severely censured (especially in Ezekiel) and promises of its future honour are made (especially in Isaiah). Paul only mentions the day once (in Col. ii. 16) and this is to warn Christians not to let anyone judge them for their use or misuse of the day. There is a possible reference to the day in Romans xiv. 5; but here Paul makes the observance of it optional. Some have considered Hebrews iv. 9 ('There remaineth therefore a *sabbatismos* to the people of God') to be a reference to the Lord's day; but the writer feels that this passage is dealing with the rest, from our own self-justifying works, given in a salvation by grace, and not with a literal day at all.