

From the Seventh Day to the First: A Brief Look at the History of the Sabbath Day vs. Lord's Day

by Robert Lewis Dabney



We shall now attempt to show the ground on which we assert that the Sabbath, "from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's day, and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath." This proof is chiefly historical, and divides itself into two branches; first, that drawn from the inspired history of the New Testament; and second, that found in the authentic but uninspired testimony of primitive Christians. The latter, which might have been thought to demand a place in our review of the history of Sabbath opinions has been reserved for this place, because it forms an interesting part of our ground of argument. But let us here say, once for all, that we invoke this patristic testimony, in no popish or prelatric spirit of dependence on it. In our view, all the uninspired church testimony in the world, however venerable, would never make it our duty to keep Sunday as a Sabbath. We use these fathers simply as historical witnesses; and their evidence derives its whole value in our eyes from its relevancy to this point; whether or not the apostles left a custom of observing Sunday, instead of the Sabbaths, established by their example in the Churches.

Our first, or preliminary argument for the observance of Sunday as the Sabbath, is that implied in the second Scripture reference subjoined by our Confession to the sentence we have just quoted from it. If we have been successful in proving that the Sabbath is a perpetual institution, the evidence will appear perfect. The perpetual law of the decalogue has commanded all men, in all time, to keep a Sabbath-day; and *"till heaven and, earth pass, one jot or tittle shall not pass from the law of God till all be fulfilled."* The Apostle, in Col. 2:16-17, clearly tells us that the seventh day is no longer our Sabbath. What day, then, is it? Some day must have been substituted; and what one so likely to be the true substitute as the Lord's day? The law is not repealed; it cannot be. But Paul has shown that it is changed. To what day is the Sabbath changed, if not to the first? No other day in the week has a shadow of a claim. It must be this, or none; but it cannot be none: therefore it must be this.

The other main argument consists in the fact that disciples, inspired apostles, and their Christian associates, did observe the Lord's day as a religious festival. And this fact must be viewed, to see its full force, in connection with the first argument. When we find them at once beginning, and uniformly continuing, the observance of the Lord's day, while they avow that they are no longer bound to observe the seventh day, and when we couple with this the knowledge of the

truth that they, like all the rest of the world, were still commanded by God to keep His Sabbath, we see that the inference is overwhelming, that the authority by which they observed the Lord's day was from God, although they did not say so. That which is inferred from Scripture, "by good and necessary consequence," is valid; as well as "that which is set down expressly in it." Examination shows us, then, that the disciples commenced the observance of the Lord's day by social worship the very next week after the resurrection. From John 20:19, we learn that the very day of the resurrection, at evening, the disciples were assembled with closed doors, with the exception of Thomas Didymus. Can we doubt that they had met for worship? In verse 26 we learn: "*And after eight days again His disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace be unto you.'*" None will doubt but that this was also a meeting for worship, and the phraseology implies that it was their second meeting. In Jewish language, and estimates of time, the days at which the counts begin and end are always included in the counts; so that "*after eight days,*" here indisputably means just a full week.

By consulting Leviticus 23:15-16; Deut. 16:9, we find that the day of Pentecost was fixed in this way. On the morrow after that Sabbath (seventh day) which was included within the passover week, a sheaf of the earliest ripe corn was cut, brought fresh into the sanctuary, and presented as a thank offering to God. The day of this ceremonial was always the first day of the week, or our Sunday, which was, to the Israelites, a working day. From this day they were to count seven is God's day, the Lord's day should mean a Christian Sabbath. And the occupation of the Apostle this day, with peculiar spiritual exercises, gives additional probability to the belief that it was observed by the New Testament Christians as a day of devotion.

We come now to the second branch of the historical argument --the testimony of the early, but uninspired Christian writers. The earliest of all cannot be called Christian. In the celebrated letter of inquiry written by Pliny the younger to the Emperor Trajan, on the treatment of persons accused of Christianity, this pagan governor says, that it was the custom of these Christians, "to meet, *stato die*, before light, to sing a hymn to Christ as God, and bind each other in an oath, (not to some crime but) to refrain from theft, robbery and adultery, not to break faith, and not to betray trusts." This letter was written a few years after the death of the Apostle John. We cannot doubt that this stated day, discovered by Pliny was the Lord's day. Ignatius, the celebrated martyr-bishop of Antioch, says, in his epistle to the Magnesians, written about A. D. 107 or 116, that this is "the Lord's day, the day, the day consecrated to the resurrection, the queen and chief of all the days."

Justin Martyr, who died about A.D. 160, says that the Christians "neither celebrated the Jewish festivals, nor observed their Sabbaths, nor practised circumcision." (*Dialogue with Trypho*, P. 34). In another place, he says, that "they, both those who lived in the city and those who lived in the country, were all accustomed to meet on the day which is denominated Sunday, for the reading of the Scriptures, prayer, exhortation and communion. The assembly met on Sunday, because this is the first day on which God, having changed the

darkness and the elements, created the world; and because Jesus our Lord on this day rose from the dead."

The epistle attributed to Barnabas, though not written by this apostolic man, is undoubtedly of early origin. This unknown writer introduces the Lord, as saying: "The Sabbaths which you now keep are not acceptable to me; but those which I have made when resting from all things, I shall begin the eighth day, that is the beginning of the other world." "For which cause, we (Christians) observe the eighth day with gladness, in which Jesus rose from the dead," &c. Ephesians 15.

Tertullian, at the close of the second century, says: "We celebrate Sunday as a joyful day. On the Lord's day we think it wrong to fast, or to kneel in prayer."

Clement of Alexandria, contemporary with Tertullian, says "A true Christian, according to the commands of the Gospel, observes the Lord's day by casting out all bad thoughts, and cherishing all goodness, honouring the resurrection of the Lord, which took place on that day."

But, perhaps the most important, because the most learned, and, at the same time, the most explicit witness, is Eusebius, the celebrated bishop of Cæsarea, who was in his literary prime about the era of the Council of Nice, A.D. 325. In his Commentary on the xcii Psalm, which the reader will remember, is entitled "a psalm or song for the Sabbath-day," he says: "The Word, (Christ), by the new covenant, translated and transferred the feast of the Sabbath to the morning light, and gave us the symbol of true rest, the saving Lord's day, the first (day) of light, in which the Saviour gained the victory over death, &c. On this day, which is the first of the Light, and the true Sun, we assemble after the interval of six days, and celebrate holy and spiritual Sabbath; even all nations redeemed by Him throughout the world assemble, and do those things according to the spiritual law, which were decreed for the priests to do on the Sabbath. All things which it was duty to do on the Sabbath, these we have transferred to the Lord's day as more appropriately belonging to it, because it has the precedence, and is first in rank, and more honourable than the Jewish Sabbath. It is delivered to us that we should meet together on this day, and it is evidence that we should do these things announced in the psalm."

The first Church council which formally enjoined cessation of labour upon the Lord's day was the provincial synod of Laodicea, held a little after the middle of the fourth century. The twenty-ninth canon of this body commanded that none but necessary secular labours should be carried on upon Sunday. But Constantine the Great, when he adopted the Christian as the religion of the State, had already enacted that all the labours of courts of justice, civil and military functionaries, and handicraft trades, should be suspended on the Lord's day, and that it should be devoted to prayer and public worship. This suspension of labour was not, however, extended to agriculturists, because it was supposed they must needs avail themselves of the propitious season to gather their harvests, or sow their seed, without regard to sacred days. But the Emperor Leo (who came to the throne A.D. 457) ultimately extended the law to all classes of persons.

The Christians did not for several hundred years apply the word Sabbath to

the first day of the week, but always used it distinctly to indicate the Jewish seventh day. Their own sacred day, the first day, was called by them the Lord's day as they said, because it was dedicated to the honour of Christ, and because it was the head, crown, and chief of all the days. They also called it Sunday (*Dies solis*, a phrase frequently found among the Latin Christians), because, according to their interpretation of Genesis 1:3, the sun was created on the first day of the week; but still more, because on that day the brighter Sun of Righteousness arose from the dead, with healing in His beams. The objection often made by persons over-puritanical, that it smacks of Pagan or Scandinavian profanity to say Sunday, because the word indicates a heathenish consecration of the day to the sun, is therefore more Quakerish than sensible. We are willing to confess that we always loved the good old name Sunday --name worthy of that day which should ever seem the brightest in the Christian's conceptions, of all the week, when the glorious works of the natural creation first began to display the honours of the great Creator, and when that new and more divine creation of redeeming grace was perfected by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, in the application of the phrase "Christian Sabbath" to the first day, the Westminster Assembly had a definite and truthful design, although the early Church had not given it this name. It was their intention to express thus that vital head of their theory; that the Old Testament institute called Sabbath, which was coeval with man, and was destined to coexist with all dispensations, was not abrogated; that it still existed substantially, and that Christians were now to find it in the Lord's day. To the Christian the Lord's day is the Sabbath (such is the significance of the name), possessing the Divine authority, and demanding in the main the sanctification which was formerly attached to the seventh day.

Another head of the Sabbath argument remains: from its practical necessity, as a means of securing man's corporeal and mental health, his morality, his temporal success in life, and his religious interests. This is the department of the discussion which has been more particularly unfolded in the "Permanent Sabbath Documents," published under the auspices of Dr. Justin Edwards, and more recently in the remarkable essays on the Sabbath, produced by workmen in Great Britain. It is now by so much the best understood part of the Sabbath discussion that we should not have introduced it at all except that it was one of the stones in the arch of our attempted demonstration, that there is a natural necessity in man for a Sabbath rest. The Creator, who appointed the Sabbath, formed man's frame; and all intelligent observers are now agreed that the latter was adapted to the former. Either body or mind can do more work by resting one day in seven, than by labouring all the seven days. And neither mind nor body can enjoy health and continued activity without its appointed rest. Even the structure of the brutes exhibits the same law. Again: As a moral and social institution, a weekly rest is invaluable. It is a quiet domestic reunion for the bustling sons of toil. It ensures the necessary vacation in those earthly and turbulent anxieties and affections, which would otherwise become inordinate and morbid. It brings around a season of periodical neatness and decency, when the soil of weekly labour is laid aside, and men meet each other amidst the decencies of the sanctuary, and renew their social affections. But above all, a

Sabbath is necessary for man's moral and religious interests. Even in Paradise, and in man's state of innocence, it was true that a stated season, resolutely appropriated to religious exercises, was necessary to his welfare as a religious being. A creature subject to the law of habit, of finite faculties, and required by the conditions of his existence to distribute his attention and labours between things secular and things sacred, cannot successfully accomplish this destiny without a regular distribution of his time between the two great departments. This is literally a physical necessity. And when we add the consideration that man is now a being of depraved, earthly affections, prone to avert his eyes from heaven to the earth, the necessity is still more obvious. Man does nothing regularly for which he has not a regular time. The absolute necessity of the Sabbath, as a season for the public preaching of religion and morality, as a leisure time for the domestic religious instruction of the young, as a time for private self-examination and devotion, is most clear to all who admit the importance of these duties. And now, it is most obvious to practical good sense, that if such a stated season is necessary, then it is proper that it should be ordained and marked off by Divine authority, and not by a sort of convention on man's part. To neglect the stated observance of a religious rest, is to neglect religion. And when there is so much of mundane and carnal affection -- so much of craving, eager worldly bustle -- to entice us to an infringement of this sacred rest, it is certain that it will be neglected, unless it be defended by the highest sanction of God's own authority. Nay, do we not see that this sanction is insufficient, even among some who admit its validity? Again: If such a stated rest is necessary, then it is also necessary that its metes and bounds be defined by the same authority which enjoins the rest itself. Otherwise, the license which men will allow themselves in interpreting the duration of the season, and in deciding how much constitutes the observance of it, or how little, will effectually abrogate the rest itself. If, then, the necessities of human nature require a Sabbath, it does not appear how God could ordain less than we suppose He has done, in requiring the whole of a definite length of time to be faithfully devoted to religious exercises, and in making this, command explicit and absolute.