

Chapter 12

The Theology of the Christian Sunday

III. THE EIGHTH DAY

As we have seen already, the origin of this name for Sunday seems to lie, partly at least, in the Old Testament.¹ The expression is not used in the New Testament. The idea is that Sunday fulfils the Jewish feasts. In Lev. 23 : 36 the first day and the eighth day are mentioned together. So also Pentecost is an eighth day after seven sevens (see chapter 7). We have seen too that, according to the Johannine account, Christ appeared to the disciples, gathered together with Thomas, on the eighth day after the resurrection (John 20 : 26).

With regard to circumcision on the eighth day, it seems more likely that this came to be regarded as a type of spiritual circumcision on the eighth day after the day had already got its name, than that it gave the day that name.

Before examining the theological thoughts connected with the eighth day, it will be worth while to notice a point brought out by more than one of the Fathers² in connection with the creation account in Gen. 1 and 2 : 1-2.

The thought that the seventh day had no evening and morning (none is mentioned in the Genesis account), but that it merged into the eighth day without a break, contains a deep theological insight into the relationship of the Jewish sabbath to the Christian Lord's Day. The rest of the Jewish sabbath merges into the rest of the Christian Sunday. Both are associated with rest, though the rest of the Christian Sunday is not the inactivity associated with the Jewish sabbath, but the restful activity of the service of God. So the atmosphere of the Christian Sunday is the foretaste of the perfect rest in activity of the world to come.

Further thoughts behind the name 'Eighth Day': (i) Eschatological

The eighth day indicated a conception outside the ordinary week and beyond it. If the week stood for 'time', then the eighth day would speak of something beyond and outside time.³ The belief common among the Hebrews from the apocalyptic literature onwards

that there were fixed and distinct periods in the world's history, helped this conception, and especially when they were thought of as seven periods.⁴

The eighth in this case would be beyond history and beyond time. It would in some sense stand for eternity, the world to come (Daniélou, *Bible and Liturgy*, p. 264). This conception must have arisen very early, for the Gnostics, building on this basis, transferred the idea from sequence in time to stages in the soul's development, degrees to which the Gnostic could progress. *Hebdomad* and *ogdoad*, as we saw earlier, became states of the soul.⁵ In the characteristics attached to the state of the *ogdoad*, we traced ideas which were connected with the thought of Sunday, the eighth day.

'The eighth day', then, is generally an eschatological name in orthodox circles. For instance, its first appearance in *Barnabas* 15 is as the day which follows the seventh day, the true sabbath, when God will have restored all things and brought them to rest, the final age. Yet it is connected with Sunday, 'wherefore we keep the eighth day for rejoicing, in the which also Jesus rose from the dead'.

Numbers carried deep meaning for some minds in the early church. 'Seven' appears to have stood for the present world and 'eight' for the world to come. Or sometimes 'seven' stood for the Mosaic dispensation, while 'eight' stood for the Gospel (Ambrose, *Ep.* 1.44.4, *PL* xvi. 1137; Hilary of Poitiers, *Prolog. in libr. Pss* 16, *PL*. ix. 242). The verse in Eccles. 11 : 2, 'Give a portion to seven and also to eight', received the fanciful explanation of meaning the Old and New Covenants (Gregory Naz., *Orat. in Pent.* 41.2, *PG* xxxvi. 432; Ambrose, *Ep.* 1.44.4, *PL* xvi. 1137; Augustine, *Ep.* 2.55.13, *PL* xxxiii. 215; Chrysostom, *Hom. Ps.* 6.1, *PG* lv. 543. See Daniélou, *Bible and Liturgy*, ch. 16, p. 268).

As we have seen, the eighth day held an eschatological meaning: that which lay beyond the seven days or ages of the world's history. With this thought there were connected a number of similar ideas. If the eighth day was the resurrection of Christ (the first day), then in its eschatological content it was the day of the resurrection of the body of Christ, the church. The world to come would be ushered in by the general resurrection (Methodius, *Sympos.* 9.3; *PG* xviii. 181). This was connected with the feast of Tabernacles, the final harvest.

Another way of viewing this was that it was the final fulfilment of the new creation, of the new heavens and new earth (Ps.-Athanasius, *De Sab. et Circum.* 4; *PG* xxviii. 133ff.). As Sunday was the mark of the new creation begun, so the eighth day was the new creation completed.

But with this idea came also the idea that the eighth day was the day of judgment (Methodius, loc. cit.; Theodoret, *In Ps.* 11; *PG* lxxx. 941; also *In Prov.*; *PG* lxxx. 901). With the thought of resurrection came the thought that the sabbath stood for death, while the eighth day stood for resurrection. Perhaps this originated in the idea of our Lord lying in the grave on the sabbath and rising on the first day, which is also the eighth day. Behind it lies the notion of the inactivity of the sabbath rest, while Sunday was to be a day of rest in activity. Augustine says, 'The Lord's Day however has been made known, not to the Jews, but to Christians, by the resurrection of the Lord, and from him it began to have that festal character which is proper to it. For the souls of the pious dead are indeed in a state of repose before the resurrection of the body, but they are not engaged in the same active exercises as shall engage the strength of their bodies when restored. Now, of the condition of active exercise the eighth day, which is also the first day of the week, is a type, because it does not put an end to that repose, but glorifies it. For with the reunion of soul and body no hindrance to the soul's rest returns' (Augustine, *Ep.* 2.55.13 (23); *PL* xxxiii. 215). Elsewhere Augustine says, 'This rest is not a slothful inaction, but a certain ineffable tranquillity caused by work in which there is no painful element' (*idem* 9.17; *PL* xxxiii. 212). He speaks of praising God without toil or mental anxiety, a repose that is not followed by labour, but is wholly free from weariness in work and uncertainty in thought. Augustine seems to conceive of the life to come as service which is rest. In the last lines of *The City of God* he speaks of 'The eighth and eternal day, consecrated by the resurrection of Christ and prefiguring the eternal repose not only of the spirit, but also of the body. Then we shall rest and see; see and love; love and praise' (*De Civit. Dei* 22.30.5, *PL* xli. 804).

This view, then, is a conception of rest in activity, of frictionless service without weariness, because it is the service of God, and in it all activity takes the form of worship. This is the thought of Rev. 22 : 3, 'His servants shall serve him' (*Jatrensousi*). That is the service of God.

Together with this conception of the eighth day is that of the Jubilee, the fiftieth year, and the fiftieth day, Pentecost, seven sevens followed by an eighth. Hippolytus,⁶ in the *Fragments on the Psalms*, says, 'The number fifty contains seven sevens or a sabbath of sabbaths and also, over and above these full sabbaths, a new beginning in the eighth of a really new rest, that remains above the sabbaths . . . thus, for instance,

it is not without a purpose that the eighth Psalm has the inscription 'on the winepress', as it comprehends the perfection of fruits in the eighth; for the time for the enjoyment of the fruits could not be before the eighth.'

In the ideas which we have examined about the life to come, as seen in the eighth day, it is clear that the thought of 'rest' is prominent—not a rest of inactivity, but rest in activity, in worship and service. This will be important when we re-apply these thoughts from the world to come to Sunday. It is not the old rest, but a new rest.

We have already studied the conception of Sunday as a festival. This too is transferred to the eighth day of the world to come. Hilary of Poitiers says in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, 'Although the name and the observance of the sabbath had been established for the seventh day, it is the eighth which is also the first that we ourselves celebrate, and that is the feast of the perfect sabbath' (*Prol. in Lib. Pss.* 12; *PL* xi. 239). Much earlier, *c.* AD 150, we get the same thought in a Gnostic writer, Theodotus. He says, 'The rest of spiritual men will take place on the Lord's Day (*kyriakē*) in the *ogdoad* which is called 'the Lord's' (*kyriakē*). It is there that the souls that have been reclthed will be beside the Mother, until the end. . . . At the consummation they will also penetrate into the *ogdoad*. Then comes the marriage feast, common to all the saved, until all are equal and know one another' (*Excerpta* 63; *PG* ix. 689).

Perhaps these thoughts are connected with Christ's promise of the eschatological feast,⁷ of which the Lord's Supper and the *agapē* were the foretaste. In the final eighth day this would be realised in full. But certainly there is the thought of rest again, both in Hilary's 'perfect sabbath' and in Theodotus' 'the rest of spiritual men'.

Further thoughts behind the name 'Eighth Day': (ii) Sacramental

There is another line of thought in connection with the eighth day, not associated with the world to come. It is the association of the eighth day of the circumcision of the Jewish child with the idea of Christ's resurrection. This seems first to appear in Justin Martyr. In his discussion with Trypho (*Dial.* 41), Justin says, 'The command of circumcision, again, bidding them always circumcise their children on the eighth day, was a type of the true circumcision, by which we are circumcised from deceit and iniquity through him who rose from the dead on the first day after the sabbath, our Lord Jesus Christ. For the first day after the sabbath, remaining the first of all the days, is called

however the eighth . . . and yet remained the first.'⁸ This conception is so constant that it may be taken as a regular attitude of the church. Sometimes it is linked with the thought of Christ being the rock, the flint, with which Joshua circumcised the people before entering the promised land.⁹ Writing on the Psalms, Origen says, 'For before the eighth day of our Lord Jesus Christ came, the whole world was impure and uncircumcised, but when the eighth day, the day of Christ's resurrection came, immediately all were purified in the circumcision of Christ, being buried with him and raised with him.'¹⁰ Asterius, in his *Homily* on Psalm 6, speaks of 'death' being circumcised by the resurrection of Christ on the eighth day (*Hom. in Pss.* 20; *PG* xl. 444). His meaning seems to be that, in the spiritual circumcision of the new covenant, death itself has been conquered. These are rather unusual approaches. The usual approach is that the eighth day represents the spiritual circumcision of the individual. Cyprian takes this line in his well-known letter on the baptism of infants. He has been asked if the baptism of a child ought not to be postponed until the eighth day after birth. His answer is, 'For in respect of the observance of the eighth day in the Jewish circumcision of the flesh, a sacrament was given beforehand and a usage; but when Christ came it was fulfilled in truth. For because the eighth day, that is the first day after the sabbath, was to be that on which our Lord should rise again and should quicken us and give us circumcision of the spirit, the eighth day . . . the Lord's Day went before in the figure, which figure ceased when, by and by, the truth came and spiritual circumcision was given to us.'¹¹

Perhaps the most important example is the short tract under the name of Athanasius, which states, 'but this day is not the property of all, but of those who have died to sin and live to the Lord. For because of this it was on the eighth day that the Lord commanded circumcision. . . . For we put off the man who died on the sixth day and we are renewed on the Lord's Day, wherein the old man, having been put off, is born again by the resurrection . . . [a section about circumcision and its relation to baptism] . . . When we have put off the old, the sign is superfluous. And as the Lord's Day is the beginning of the new creation, the sabbath too ceases. . . . For each is completed on the eighth day, both the beginning of the new creation and the new birth of man, and so the eighth day abolishes the sabbath and not the sabbath the eighth day.'

Here the thoughts of the sabbath and circumcision are connected together in the thought of the eighth day, which causes both to cease,

the sabbath because of the coming of the Lord's Day, and circumcision because of the coming of baptism.¹² In each, the resurrection of Christ has provided a new meaning, and the inadequate pictures in the old institutions have ceased. Quoting Col. 2 : 11f., the writer says, 'For circumcision is a type of the putting off through baptism. . . . For when Abraham believed, he received circumcision, which was a sign of the new birth through baptism. Therefore, when what is signified is come, the sign ceases. For circumcision was the sign, but the bath (*loutron*) of the second birth is what is signified. . . . As the Lord's Day is the beginning of the new creation, the sabbath too ceases. So also that which regenerates the man causes the circumcision to cease. For each is completed on the eighth day, both the beginning of the new creation and the new birth of the man' (Ps.-Athanasius, *De Sab. et Circum.* 5; PG xxviii, 133ff.). In this way baptism, normally carried out on a Sunday, came to be connected with the number eight. Probably there is the same suggestion in the phenomenon of octagonal baptistries and fonts, dating from quite early days (Daniélou, *Bible and Liturgy*, p. 37).

A SUMMARY OF THE THEOLOGICAL IDEAS

We have examined the thoughts connected with the three names given in the early church to the Christian Sunday, the First Day, the Lord's Day, the Eighth Day. These give us an overall picture of the place Sunday held in the theology of the Christian Church.

(i) It stood for a new beginning which was at the same time the final age. It was both the first and the last, the eighth standing for what was last and final. It was, then, the distinctive outward mark of the New Covenant. For the New Covenant was both a new development and the final word of God to man. As the Epistle to the Hebrews begins, 'God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.' The New Covenant was both a new word and at the same time the last word that God was speaking.

(ii) The rhythm of life, one day in seven devoted to God, remained the same. The cycle was still the weekly cycle of seven days. This had been revealed as God's pattern in the fourth (third) commandment, and this cycle was not abrogated. The day was changed, but the rhythm remained the same. It was still one day in seven. The commandment in this sense retained its validity for the Christian.

(iii) The day was viewed in the light of the Jewish festivals. These had been days of gathering together, for the communal worship of

God by all his people; they had been days of rejoicing, days of recalling the physical and spiritual blessings which flowed from their special relationship to God. Instead of annual observances, the spirit of the festivals was concentrated into the weekly observance, looking back in gratitude and looking forward in anticipation.

(iv) The day was in a special way connected with Christ. It was his day. The day on which he had risen had declared without the possibility of doubt that he was Lord. The day was the day he had chosen, and the day belonged to him. On that day he revealed himself fully to his own as the one who fulfilled and completed the earlier covenant. All that had been spoken in that revelation 'about me' was now being fulfilled (Luke 24 : 27, 44).

(v) But in this revelation of the person of Jesus Christ as Lord there was included the doctrine of the Trinity, for it was on a Sunday, the Day of Pentecost, that the Spirit was given. So that in the observance of the Christian Sunday there was not only an acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord and God, but also of the third Person of the Trinity. In other words, the Lord's Day was the confession of faith that the One God of the Old Covenant had now been revealed as existing in three Persons. John in Patmos was 'in the Spirit' on the Lord's Day. So in the change of the day came the acknowledgement of the Persons of the Trinity. Not that this was theologically expressed: it belonged to the realm of devotion and worship, and was only expressed theologically later on, but it is clearly seen in that worship, and in the baptismal creed. In the Resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit a new revelation of the nature of God had been given, and Sunday was the sign of this.

(vi) But not only was there a new revelation of the nature of God, there was also a new revelation of man's relationship with God. It was to be a new creation. This had been foretold in the Old Testament and began in the earthly life of Jesus, but it could only become clear after his death, resurrection, ascension and the giving of the Holy Spirit. It was linked with the full illumination of the Holy Spirit's teaching. The light had come into the world in Christ; the Sun of Righteousness had risen. There was no excuse any longer for darkness or half-light. The first day of creation had been the giving of light: this was repeated in the Christian Sunday, the Day of Resurrection, and each subsequent Sunday when the light was given afresh.

(vii) With the coming of light came a new order out of the chaos of the Fall, for man was being remade in the new creation. Of this the

Christian Sunday was the outward symbol, the first (and eighth) day revealing and initiating the new creation in Christ.

So it follows that just as the sabbath, the seventh day, was the symbol, the sign (*ʾot*) of the Old Covenant, so the Christian Sunday became the symbol and sign of the New Covenant in Christ.

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1. Bultmann (*Theology*, 1, p. 128) suggests that the name may have arisen merely in contrast with Jewish custom. Rordorf (p. 271) suggests a baptismal origin.
2. Justin Martyr, *Fragment* 16 in Anastasius (PG vi. 1597c); *Barnabas* 15 (PG ii. 769c); Clement Alex., *Strom.* 6.16 (PG ix. 364b). *Barnabas* says, 'the sabbath . . . in the which, when I have set all things at rest, I will make the beginning the eighth day'.
3. Jungmann (*Early Liturgy*, p. 22) points out that the Christian did not like to think of the seventh day as the climax of the week; cp. Gregory of Nyssa, *Comm. Pss.* 2.5 (PG xlv. 504-505).
4. In non-millenarian circles there were seven ages followed by the world to come. In millenarian circles there were six ages, then the millennium on earth, i.e., the seventh day, then the eighth, the final state.
5. See the references under ch. 7, n. 26.
6. Hippolytus, *Fragments on Pss.* 4 (PG x. 713); compare Clement Alex., *Strom.* 4.25 (PG viii. 1368b); Origen, *Hom. Canticles* 1.1 (PG xiii. 37).
7. Luke 22 : 18; Matt. 26 : 29; and the parables of the Great Feast and the Marriage Supper. Cf. Rev. 21 : 2.
8. Justin, *Dial.* 41 (PG vi. 564); see also Methodius, *Sympos.* 7.6 (PG xviii. 133). Ps.-Athanasius has the complete connection of the sabbath and circumcision worked out in the idea of the new creation: *De Sab. et Circum.* (PG xxviii. 133).
9. Justin, *Dial* 113 (PG vi. 736); Origen, *Comm. Johan.* 6.26 (PG xiv. 277); Augustine, *Serm.* 169.2, 3 and *Serm.* 231.2 (PL xxxviii. 916 and 1105).
10. Origen, *Pss.* 118.2 (PG xii. 1588); Philastrius of Brescia (*De Haer.* 141) speaks of the eighth day as the perfection of virtues. (PL xii. 1274).
11. Cyprian, *Ep.* 58 (Oxford 64) 2-4 (PL iii. 1015). See also Didymus the Blind (AD 313-398), *Exp. Pss.* 6 (PG xxxix. 1173).
12. Probably in the writer's mind is the conviction that it is the coming and work of Christ which have brought both to an end. As they were signs of the first covenant, the new covenant required new signs for the spiritual truths behind them, namely Baptism and Sunday.