

Chapter 14

Conclusion

IN the course of this book we have attempted to establish a number of facts. First and foremost, that the sabbath, as a creation ordinance and a precept of the Decalogue, was continued in the Lord's Day. There are certain points of difference between the two, owing to the transition from the Old Covenant to the New (just as there are certain points of difference between the primeval sabbath and the Mosaic, between circumcision and baptism, and between the Passover meal and the Lord's Supper), but there is also an essential continuity, shown in the thirteen correspondences listed in chapter four. The Lord's Day fulfils the role of the sabbath as the church's memorial day, day of worship and day of rest. It consequently does not depend upon a few passing references in the New Testament, but has a wide and deep basis in the Bible, as belonging to the order both of creation and of redemption, and as enjoined in one of the fundamental commandments of God's Law.

Secondly, we have argued that there was a difference between the attitudes of Hellenistic and Semitic Judaism to the sabbath. Hellenistic Judaism viewed it as a creation ordinance for all mankind, a day kept free for instruction and meditation in God's revelation, rather than as a national ordinance, compassed with countless restrictions. The New Testament attitude to the sabbath seems more akin to that of Hellenistic Judaism than of Semitic.

Thirdly, we have argued that the New Testament endorses the Ten Commandments, and that Christ endorses the sabbath, while reforming it; which he does by insisting on the propriety of works of mercy and necessity.

Fourthly, we have argued that the teaching of Paul takes the sabbath out of the context of justification by works into that of Christian liberty, but that it is a mistake to think of him as simply abolishing distinctions of days: he recognises the special character of the Lord's Day, and he knows of a fulfilment of the sabbath, in which the Lord's Day may well have had a part.

Fifthly, we have argued that in Jewish Christianity the Lord's Day

was originally observed side by side with the sabbath, just as baptism was observed side by side with circumcision, and the Lord's Supper with the Passover meal; but that this was due to weakness of faith, and that the relationship between the Jewish institutions and the Christian is more clearly seen in Gentile Christianity, where the former were immediately replaced by the latter.

Sixthly, we have argued that the name 'Lord's Day' does not allude to the Lord's Supper but to the Resurrection, and means that the festival of the Resurrection, like the sabbath, is a day of worship wholly devoted to the Lord.

Seventhly, we have argued that, though the ante-Nicene Fathers are often very critical of the Jewish sabbath, this is because of its pre-Christian associations and because of the way they believed the Jews to observe it, not because they were fundamentally opposed to such an institution.

Eighthly, we have argued that they thought of the Lord's Day in very similar terms to the sabbath, as a whole day, set apart to be a holy festival and a rest day. On Sunday Christians deliberately laid their daily work aside, and spent most of the day (not just a small part of it) in corporate worship.

Ninthly, we have argued, especially from the evidence of Eusebius, that the decree of Constantine was influenced by the church, rather than the reverse, and introduced nothing fundamentally new into Christian thought or practice regarding the Lord's Day.

Tenthly, we have argued that, though the early Fathers deny that the patriarchs kept the sabbath, and do not directly link the Lord's Day with the fourth commandment, yet they link it indirectly, and always insist that the Decalogue is binding upon Christians.

If these conclusions are sound, what do they teach us about our observance of the Christian Sunday today, especially in face of increasing secular pressures upon the church?

(a) They teach us that the observance of the day is important in itself, as the church's act of witness every week to the truth of the Resurrection, which the Lord's Day commemorates.

(b) They teach us that the observance of the day is also important because of the important activities of which that observance consists. Corporate worship is important—the reading and exposition of Scripture, public prayer, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Private devotions are important, both for individuals and for families. Rest and refreshment from the activities of the week are important.

Freedom for acts of kindness towards one's family and towards one's fellow men is important.

(c) They teach us that the whole day has been consecrated by God to these purposes. It is a rest day, set apart for these ends. Christians will not, therefore, be indifferent to the inroads being made upon the Sunday rest in modern society, especially by industry and commerce. The church needs to defend both the freedom of Christians to preach the gospel on the Lord's Day and the freedom of others to hear it.

(d) They teach us that the Christian sabbath is part of the perfect law of liberty, the law of love. The broad lines of the observance of the day are settled—it is a day of public and private worship, of rest and of mercy—but the gospel has taken it out of the context of elaborate legalistic restrictions, and every Christian must now be 'fully persuaded in his own mind' precisely how, in the light of the biblical principles outlined above, and in the light of his individual circumstances, he is to spend the day. He must make his own decision, though not forgetting the example he is setting to others. It might seem right to one man to spend more of the day in public worship and less in private, while to another man the reverse might seem right. It might seem right to a man who is very busy with his work on every other day of the week to spend part of the Lord's Day in innocent recreation, which does not cause labour for his fellows, but to a man who works a five-day week this might seem wrong. It might seem right to a preacher of the gospel to spend a minimum of time with his family on the Lord's Day, making up for it on a weekday, but right to another man deliberately to set aside time on the Lord's Day for the purpose. In details of this sort, every man must answer to God personally, without judging his neighbour. May the Lord give all of us wisdom to spend his own day in the way that is pleasing to him.

Finally, we must ask how fully these four ideals are actually being achieved in contemporary Christian practice.

The first ideal, that the day should be the church's weekly witness to the resurrection of Christ, is one which at present receives little attention. If an ordinary Christian were asked: When does the church commemorate Christ's resurrection? he would probably answer: At Easter. Easter Sunday naturally came to receive special emphasis as a commemoration of the Resurrection, being that Sunday which was nearest to the Passover; but the basic commemoration of the Resurrection was always Sunday itself. Today, even Easter is overshadowed by Christmas, and the primary significance of Sunday has been for-

gotten almost entirely. The early church really believed in the Resurrection; that the tomb was empty; that the disciples saw, heard, and handled the risen Christ; that he had conquered death and sin; and that now all authority in heaven and earth had been given to him. Every time they were reminded of the Resurrection, therefore, they rejoiced; and Sunday was their great reminder. Is it any wonder, then, that to them Sunday was a day of joy, not a day of gloom? We need to recover both their faith in the Resurrection and their conception of Sunday as the church's reminder of it.

The second ideal, that the church should value Sunday as its great opportunity for worship, rest and works of mercy, is more adequately appreciated than the first, though whether these three uses of the day are consciously before every Christian's mind is a question. Corporate worship is practised, but not loved as it once was; and in most places the level of attendance at church is low. Some biblical forms of worship are emphasised at the expense of others equally biblical: in one church nothing matters except the Lord's Supper, in another nothing except teaching and prayer. Rest from the activities of the week, and acts of kindness towards one's family, tend not to be taken very seriously; and where they are not, Christians begin their next working week with tired minds, and in particular their wives (receiving no more help than on any other day) begin their next working week with tired hands and feet. Sunday should be a family day, both for the human family and for God's family, the church. Like the early Christians, we should love one another, in deed as well as in word; and, this being so, we should enjoy each other's company, and look forward to the opportunity of sharing it which Sunday affords.

The third ideal, that the sanctity of the day should be respected, as especially holy in a week of which all the days are God's, is another matter on which today we fall far short. To many of our contemporaries, Sunday is just a second Saturday, and a less pleasant one, because it has duties and restrictions attached to it. Of course, the duties are really privileges and the restrictions opportunities (as the early church, which had *only* Sunday, could readily appreciate). But the unchurched masses of the twentieth century do not see things that way, and it is the church's task to help them to do so. Instead, Christian spokesmen only too often accept the secular viewpoint as their basis for discussion. Their defence of the day is therefore feeble in the extreme, and their own outlook on the day, and especially that of their half-instructed children, cannot fail to be affected.

The fourth ideal, that we should see the institution of Sunday as part of the perfect law of liberty, the law of love, is yet another point at which we nowadays tend to go astray. Some of us treat Sunday legalistically, and often in a very negative manner, while others of us treat Sunday lawlessly, regarding even its main purposes as matters of choice or whim. The middle path, of following biblical principles in the context of individual circumstance, of being fully persuaded in one's own mind, yet without judging others, is difficult to tread. Nevertheless, this is the only path for the Christian, and it is as we dare to tread it that we exercise our rights and responsibilities as sharers in the New Covenant, not in the Old, and learn to become mature as full grown men and women in Jesus Christ.