

THIS IS THE DAY

*The Biblical Doctrine of the
Christian Sunday in its
Jewish and Early
Church Setting*

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CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
<i>PART I The Biblical and Jewish Evidence</i>	
by R. T. BECKWITH	
1 The Memorial of the World's Creation	2
2 The Memorial of Israel's Redemption	13
3 The Memorial of Christ's Resurrection	30
4 The Continuity between the Sabbath and the Lord's Day	43
<i>PART II The Evidence of the Fathers</i>	
by W. STOTT	
5 The Attitude to the Sabbath in Patristic Thought	50
6 The Early Church and Sunday: a Whole Day?	58
7 The Early Church and Sunday: What Sort of Day?	62
8 Eusebius of Caesarea and the Christian Sunday	75
9 How Christians Spent the Lord's Day	84
10 The Theology of the Christian Sunday: The First Day	104
11 The Theology of the Christian Sunday: The Lord's Day	112
12 The Theology of the Christian Sunday: The Eighth Day	117
13 The Attitude of the Early Church to the Ten Commandments	125
14 Conclusion	140
<i>Notes</i>	145
<i>Bibliography</i>	165
<i>Abbreviations</i>	169
<i>Index of Biblical References</i>	171
<i>Index of Jewish Writings</i>	175
<i>Index of Patristic Writings</i>	177
<i>General Index</i>	179

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Introduction

THE subject of this book is the origin and significance of the Christian Sunday, or Lord's Day, and it takes its title from Ps 118:24, which was so frequently applied to that day by the early Fathers. Sunday has been continuously observed by the church from the New Testament period onwards;¹ and since the year 321, when Constantine, the first Roman emperor to become a Christian, commanded his subjects to rest on Sunday, it has been protected in many Christian countries by legislation.²

The benefit that the institution of Sunday has brought to mankind is incalculable. Not only has the day itself been a standing witness to Christ's resurrection, but it has provided the church with its chief opportunity to meet for worship, teaching, and evangelism, and has provided the individual Christian and Christian family with their chief (though not, of course, their only) opportunity to spend time in prayer and Bible study at home. Again, it has safeguarded for all who work a regular occasion of rest, change, and refreshment from daily toil, when they can devote time to showing kindness to their family and their fellow men.

It was not until some years after the Reformation that Sunday became a matter of serious controversy among Christians. Different emphases, indeed, are found in the teaching of the Fathers, the mediaeval schoolmen, and the Reformers themselves. The differences between the Reformers have often been exaggerated, however, and for the most part they are not of a serious character. Luther,³ Calvin,⁴ Bullinger,⁵ Bucer,⁶ Peter Martyr,⁷ and Jewel⁸ were all agreed that the fourth commandment requires Christians to observe days of rest and worship, or sabbaths, and that Sunday is the chief means of fulfilling the requirement. They were not agreed whether it was by human or divine law that Sunday was selected for this purpose, and Calvin, who held that it was by human law, differed from the others named in denying that the commandment bound the church to the observance of precisely one day in every seven;⁹ but they were unanimous that, for practical purposes, the ancient and agreed day of Sunday fulfilled the role of the Christian sabbath and must continue. It was this 'sabbatarian' view which was embodied by Jewel in the homily 'Of the Place and Time of

Prayer' in the Church of England's *Second Book of Homilies*, and the same view was endorsed by Richard Hooker,¹⁰ elaborated by Nicholas Bownde,¹¹ and given classical expression in the Westminster Confession (1647); since when it has had a deep influence on life and thought in the English-speaking world, notably in England, Scotland, and the U.S.A. It has also had a following on the continent, where it was approved by the Synod of Dort (1619), and has been advocated, among others, by E. W. Hengstenberg¹² and Karl Barth.¹³ By contrast, a radical view was adopted by Tyndale, who tended to deny any connection with the fourth commandment,¹⁴ and his followers include Peter Heylyn,¹⁵ J. A. Hesse¹⁶ and, in our own day, Willy Rordorf.¹⁷

Certainly, the two main views are not reconcilable, but it may be doubted whether positions would have polarised so far, or the conflict would have been so sharp, had it not been for the growing rivalry in the seventeenth century between Laudians and Puritans, and the tendency which both shared to a legalistic casuistry. The desire among Puritans to answer all cases of conscience about the Christian sabbath, and to exclude not only work but also innocent recreation,¹⁸ was in doubtful harmony with the Pauline principle of Christian liberty and with the fact that the sabbath and the Lord's Day are joyful feasts. This is not to say that their main position was wrong: the aim of this book is to demonstrate that it was right.

The division of opinion which became traditional in the seventeenth century has been accentuated in our own day by the pressures of secularism upon the church. In 1962, after preparatory work on this volume had already begun, Willy Rordorf's book *Der Sonntag* was published in Switzerland, and showed very clearly what reaction to secular pressures could be expected from the non-sabbatarian school. The book has since been translated into English as *Sunday* (1968), and has rapidly become a standard work in the English-speaking world as well. The information it contains is very useful, and no attempt has been made to duplicate all of it here. Its main thesis, however, is open to the gravest doubt, and has had to be refuted in order to achieve the positive purposes of the present work, to trace the origin and expound the theology of the Christian Sunday.

According to Rordorf, the Lord's Day was originally the occasion on which the Lord's Supper was celebrated—hence its name. This alone is the essential activity of the day, and this is what the church must strive to maintain when Sunday again becomes an ordinary working day, as he expects it to do. Quite unlike the sabbath, which Christ

abolished, the Lord's Day was at first a day of worship, not a day of rest. More accurately, it was a day on which worship occurred, for only a small part of the day was devoted to worship, the Lord's Supper and any other act of worship being fitted in before or after the hours of daily work. Sunday became a day of rest only as a consequence of Constantine's decree in 321, which was not indeed biblical but pagan and political in its motivation, yet led to the development of sabbatarian conceptions in the church, and to a search for ways of occupying devotionally a day on which work had previously continued as usual. Such being the original character of the Lord's Day, the subsequent character of the day has no claim to be maintained.

Rordorf's thesis, as he himself recognises, has practical, not just theoretical, consequences. It allows him to take up an accommodating attitude towards modern secularism. Because he reduces the biblical basis for Sunday to the narrowest limits, severing all links with the fourth commandment, he is able to agree that it would not ultimately matter if the church had to squeeze in its services in the hours of darkness before and after a working day (as under conditions of persecution), or if humanitarian needs for rest had to be satisfied on some other day (which would probably mean different days for different people, even within the same family). Whether the Christian Sunday could have survived to the present day if this sort of attitude had prevailed among Christians in the past is extremely doubtful, and whether it will survive for future generations if this sort of attitude now becomes prevalent is equally uncertain. But we would not have felt justified in opposing Rordorf's thesis simply because of its practical consequences. What has made us feel obliged to oppose it is the conviction that it is theologically and historically unsound.

In answering Rordorf's thesis, appeal must first be made to the Bible. The present work attempts to set out the biblical evidence in its fullness, without any arbitrary deletion of awkward passages as 'late' or 'secondary', and to trace the parallels between the Lord's Day and the sabbath, not simply the differences. This is something that has often been done before. Two other tasks are also attempted, however, and in these, it is believed, the present work supplies something relatively unique. Certainly they are tasks which Rordorf performs in a very inadequate, not to say misleading, manner. One is to set the New Testament evidence against its full background in contemporary Judaism, distinguishing carefully between Jewish writings which are really early and those which are late. Thus, use is chiefly made of the

relevant material in pre-Christian works (Judith, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Aristobulus, *Jubilees*), in first-century works (the Zadokite Document, Philo, Josephus) and in the earliest records of rabbinical tradition (*Megillath Taanith*, *Mishnah*, *Tosephta*, *Mekilta*, *baraitas*, i.e. extracts from older compilations, in the two *Talmuds*); and though there are perforce a few references to the main body of the *Jerusalem Talmud* and to *Bereshith Rabbah*, which are of later date, and one to *Exodus Rabbah*, which is later still, nothing of moment is allowed to rest on these references alone.

The other task is to give a thorough and balanced account of the evidence of the Fathers about Sunday (both their theology and their practice), concentrating on the ante-Nicene Fathers, who date from between the New Testament and Constantine, and on the Syrian Fathers from outside the Roman Empire, and so from outside the sphere of Constantine's influence. By performing these two tasks one is taking precautions against interpreting the New Testament teaching about the sabbath and Sunday in an anachronistic way, and is also providing the means for knowing whether, in fact, the decree of Constantine did introduce anything new into Christian thought or practice, as Rordorf claims.

Our book, as the title page and contents page indicate, is a co-operative enterprise. The chapters on the biblical and Jewish evidence (chs. 1-4) are basically the work of one of the authors, Roger Beckwith, while the chapters on the evidence of the Fathers (chs. 5-13) are basically the work of the other author, Wilfrid Stott. However, each author has read and commented on all the material, and both have benefited from membership of the study group on 'Sunday' organised by the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research, Cambridge, to which the first four chapters were originally submitted. To the other members of the study group the authors express their sincere thanks. The patristic chapters took embryonic shape a good many years earlier, in an address to the Gloucester diocesan conference, and were afterwards developed into a thesis for an Oxford doctorate in philosophy, before being revised and condensed for their appearance here. The author of these latter chapters owes a deep debt of gratitude to the supervisor of his work on the thesis, Professor S. L. Greenslade, and has also received kind help on a number of points from Professor G. W. H. Lampe, Professor C. F. D. Moule, and the late Professor F. L. Cross.

PART I

The Biblical and Jewish Evidence

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. The Seventh Day Adventist claim that, until the time of Constantine, the church did not observe Sunday but only Saturday, is one which first sprang out of ignorance, and can only be maintained today in the face of the most cogent historical evidence to the contrary. See chs. 3, 6-13.
2. On the present state of the law about Sunday in the United Kingdom, and the direction any change in it should take, see Hodgkins, *Sunday* ch. 13. For some account of American law, see Jewett, *Lord's Day* pp.136-51.
3. *Large Catechism* (1529).
4. *Institutes* (1536), bk. 2, ch. 8, sections 28-34.
5. *Decades* II (1549), sermon 4; in Parker Society reprint, vol. 1, pp. 253ff.
6. *De Regno Christi* (1557), lib. 1, cap. 11; lib. 2, cap. 10.
7. *Loci Communes* (1576), on fourth commandment.
8. See foot of p. vii.
9. Luther (loc. cit.) regarded one day in seven as a minimum.
10. *Ecclesiastical Polity*, bk. 5 (1597), ch. 70 : 9.
11. *The Doctrine of the Sabbath* (1595).
12. *Über den Tag des Herrn* (1852).
13. *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt. 4 (1951), sect. 53.1; in ET, pp. 47-72.
14. *Answer to More* (1531), bk. 1, ch. 25; in Parker Society reprint, pp. 97f.
15. *The History of the Sabbath* (1635).
16. Bampton Lectures on *Sunday* (1860).
17. See pp. viii-ix.
18. They were partly influenced in this by a doubtful interpretation of Isa. 58 : 13f. Even if 'pleasure', not 'business', is the right translation there, it may well refer to wilfulness rather than to recreation.