

N E W  H O P E
Presbyterian Church

FROM SABBATH TO LORD'S DAY | by *R.L. Dabney*¹

PART 1:
THE INSPIRED HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:
THE GOSPELS AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

We shall attempt to show the ground on which 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.” (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.7) This proof is chiefly historical, and divides itself into two branches, the inspired and the uninspired. The first proceeds upon two plain principles. One is, that example may be as valid and instructive a guide to duty as precept. Or, to state it in another form, the precedent set by Christ and his apostles may be as binding as their command. The other is, that whatever necessarily follows from Scripture “by good and necessary consequence” is as really authorized by it as “what is expressly set down.” (WCF 1.6)

PROBABILITY FAVORS

Our first argument shows that every probability is in favor of the Sunday’s being now God’s day, in advance of particular testimony. We prove under the first main head that a Sabbath institution is universal and perpetual—that the command to keep it holy [is grounded in creation and the moral law]. But [with the passing of the of the Mosaic dispensation] . . . the seventh day is no longer the Sabbath. It has been changed. To what other day has it been changed? The law is not totally repealed; it cannot be. What day has taken the place of the seventh? None is so likely to be the substitute as the Lord’s day; this must be the day.

MEETING WITH THE RISEN CHRIST ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

The main direct argument is found in the fact Christ and his apostles did, from the very day of the resurrection, hallow the first day of the week as a religious day. To see the full force of this fact we must view it in the light of the first argument. We remember that the disciples, like all men of all ages, are bound by the Decalogue to keep holy God’s Sabbath. We seem them remit the observance of the seventh day as no longer binding, and we see them observing the first.

¹ From “The Christian Sabbath: Its Nature, Design and Proper Observance” (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1882); reprint, *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., LL.D.*, edited by C.R. Vaughan, volume I, *Theological and Evangelical* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890); reprint, (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), pp. 496-550. Minor editorial changes were made in the text for this version.

Must we not conclude that this inspired men regarded the authority of God as now attaching to this Lord's Day?

We shall find, then, that the disciples commenced the observance of the first day on the very day of Christ's resurrection, and thenceforward continued it. John 20: 19 tells us that the "same day, being the first day of the week, " the disciples were assembled at evening with closed doors, and Christ came and stood in the midst. Can we doubt that they met for worship? In the twenty-sixth verse we learn, "And after eight days again the disciples were within, and Thomas with them" (who had been absent before). "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 language implies that it was their second meeting. Now, it is admitted by all that the Jews, in counting time, always included in their count the days with which the period began and ended. The best known instances of this rule is seen in the rising of Christ. He was to be "three days in the heart of the earth," but the three days were made out only by counting the day of his death and the day of his rising, although the latter event happened early in the morning of that day. By this mode of counting, the eighth day, or full week from the disciples' first meeting, brings us again to the first day of the week. Thus we learn that twice at least between the resurrection and Pentecost the first day was kept as the Lord' day.

PENTECOST AND THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

But the decisive instance is that of Pentecost itself. The reader will see, by consulting Lev. 23:15-16, or Deut. 16:9, that this day was fixed in the following manner: 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 unto God. Thus the day of this ceremonial must always be the first day of the week, corresponding to our Lord's day. From this day they were to count seven weeks complete, and the fiftieth day was to be Pentecost day, or the beginning of their "feast of ingathering."

Remembering, now, that the Israelites always included in their reckoning the day from which and the day to which the counted, we see that the fiftieth day brings us again to the first day of the week. We are told expressly that Christ rose on the first day of the week.

We thus learn the important fact that the day selected by God for setting up the gospel dispensation and for the great pentecostal outpouring was the Lord's day—a significant and splendid testimony to the sacred honor it was intended to have in the Christian ages.

This epoch was indeed the creation of a new world in the spiritual sense. The work was equal in glory and everlasting moment to that first creation which caused "the morning stars to sing together and all the sons of God to shout for joy." Well might God substitute the first day for the seventh when the first day had now become the sign of two separate events, the rising of Christ and the founding of the new dispensation, either of which is as momentous and blessed to us as the world's foundation.

WORSHIP AND THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

But we read in Acts 1:14, and 2:1, that this seventh Lord's day was also employed by apostles and disciples as a day for religious worship; and it was while they were thus engaged that they received the divine sanction in their blessed baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost. Then the first public proclamation of the gospel under the new dispensation began, and the model was set up for the consecration of the new Christian Sabbath—not by the burning of additional lambs—by public preaching, the two sacraments of baptism and the supper, and the oblation of their

worldly substance to God. At this all-important stage every step, every act, of the divine providence recorded by inspiration in the Acts was formative and fundamental. Hence we must believe that this event was meant by God as a forcible precedent, establishing the Lord's day as our Christian Sabbath.

THE WARRANT OF APOSTOLIC EXAMPLE

Let the reader carefully weigh this question: Have we any other kind of warrant for the framework of the church? All Christians, for instance, believe that the deacon's office in the church is of perpetual divine appointment. Even Rome has it, though perverted. What is the basis of that belief? The precedent set in the sixth chapter of Acts. The apostles there say, It is not good "for us to leave the word of God and serve tables," etc. They do not say even as much about the universal perpetuity of this office as Paul says to Titus (1:15) about the elder's office: "Ordain elders in every city." But all sensible men see that the principle stated and the example set are enough, and that the Holy Spirit obviously taught the inspired historians to relate this formative act of the new dispensation as a model for all churches. The warrant for making the Lord's day the Sabbath is of the same kind.

PART 2: THE INSPIRED HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE EPISTLES

It is most evident, from the New Testament history, that the Apostles and churches they planted uniformly hallowed the Lord's day. The instances are not numerous, but they are distinct.

ACTS 20:7—PAUL AT TROAS

The first clear instance is in Acts 20:7. The apostle Paul was now returning from his famous mission to Macedonia and Achaia in full prospect of captivity at Jerusalem. He stops at the favorite little church of Troas, on the Asiatic coast, a little south of the Hellespont, to spend a week with his converts there. "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight." Here we have a double evidence of our point. First, Paul preached to the disciples on this day, while he had been, as the sixth verse shows, a whole week at Troas, including the Jewish Sabbath. Why did he wait a whole week? Why did not the meeting, with the sermon and sacrament, take place on the Jewish Sabbath? We learn from verse sixteen that Paul had very little time to spare, because he had to make the whole journey from Philippi to Jerusalem, with all his wayside visits, within the six weeks between the end of the paschal and the beginning of the pentecostal feast. He was obviously waiting for the church's sacred day in order to join them in their public worship, just as a missionary would wait now under similar circumstances.

But, second, the words, "When the disciples came together to break bread," show that the first day of the week was the one on which they met to celebrate the Lord's Supper. So it appears that this church at Troas, planted and trained by Paul, kept the first day of the week for public worship and the sacraments, and the inspired man puts himself to some inconvenience to comply with their usage. It has indeed been objected that he selected this day, not because it was the Lord's day, but because he could not wait any longer. This is exploded by the fact that he had

already waited six days, including the Jewish Sabbath; he was evidently waiting for this day because it was the Lord's day.

1 CORINTHIANS 16:1, 2—COLLECTIONS AT CORINTH

The next clear instance is in 1 Cor. 16:1-2: "Now, concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the Churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come." We here learn two things: that the weekly oblation of alms-giving was fixed for the Lord's day, and that this rule was enacted not only for the Church at Corinth, but for all the churches of Galatia. It seems a very clear inference that the apostle afterward made the rule uniform in other churches as he organized them.

Again, we find the objectors arguing that, admitting what we claim, we have not proved that there was any regular public worship on the Lord's day, because it is said, "Lay by you in store;" that is, at home. But the answers are two: The words, "Lay by him" etc., are, literally, "place to himself," or "segregate"—"treasuring according as the Lord hath prospered him." It is a misunderstanding of the apostle's meaning to take the word "treasuring" as putting a piece of money on Sunday morning in a separate box or purse at home. Most frequently, as we know from history, it was not money, but bread, meat, fruit, clothing, a part of anything with which providence had blessed them; and the *undoubted usage* in the earliest age after the apostles was to carry this oblation with them to church every Lord's day morning and give it to the deacons, who put it into a common stock for charitable uses. The words "treasuring it" refer, says Calvin, to a wholly different idea—to that which our Savior expresses (Mat. 6:20): "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven;" to that idea which the charitable Christian expressed on his tombstone: "What I kept, I lost; what I gave away, I have." It is the Lord's treasury which the apostle here has in view—the Lord's "store." So that the natural meaning of the precept is fairly presented in this paraphrase: "Let every one every Sunday morning set apart, according as the Lord hath prospered him, what he intends to carry to church with him to put into the Lord's store."

But second, even if we contradict the unanimous voice of history, testifying that the weekly oblation took place at the church-meeting and went at once into the deacon's hands, the truth remains that this oblation was an act of worship. (See Phil. 4:18; 2 Cor. 9:12-13.) This weekly oblation was, then, a weekly act of worship, and it was appointed by inspired authority to be done on the Lord's day. That makes this day a sacred day of worship; we care not whether this oblation was public or private, so far as the argument is concerned.

HEBREWS 4:9—THERE REMAINS A SABBATH-KEEPING

The next place to be cited is Heb. 4:9. This verse (with its context, which must be carefully read) teaches that, as there remains to believers under the Christian dispensation a hope of an eternal rest, so there remains to us an earthy Sabbath to foreshadow it. The points to be noticed in the explanation of the chapter are: That God has an eternal spiritual rest; that he invited Old Testament believers to share it; that it is something higher than Israel's home in Canaan, because after Joshua had fully installed Israel in that rest, God's rest is still held up as something future. The seventh day (verse 4) was the memorial of God's rest, and was thus connected with it. It was under the old dispensation, as under the new, a spiritual *faith* which introduced into God's rest, and it was unbelief which excluded from it. But as God's rest was something higher than a home in Canaan, and was still offered in the ninety-fifth Psalm long after Joshua settled Israel in that rest, it follows (verse 9) that there still remains a sabbatism, or Sabbath-keeping, for God's people

under the new dispensation; and hence (verse 11) we ought to seek to enter into that spiritual rest of God, which is by faith.

Now, let it be noted that the word for God's "rest" throughout the passage is a different one from "Sabbath." But the apostle's inference is that because God still offers us his "rest" under the new dispensation, *there remaineth to us a Sabbath-keeping under this dispensation*. What does this mean? Is the sabbatism identically our "rest" in faith? But the seventh day was not identically that rest; it was the memorial and emblem of it. So now sabbatism is the memorial and emblem of the rest. Because the rest is ours, therefore the Sabbath-keeping is still ours; heaven and its earthly type belong equally to both dispensations.

REVELATION 1:10—THE LORD'S DAY

The other instance of apostolic consecration of the first day is perhaps the most instructive of all. In Rev. 1:10, John, when about to describe how he came to have this revelation, says, "I was in the spirit on the Lord's day." The venerable apostle was "in the isle that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus." We know from history exactly what this means. The pagan magistrates had banished him to this rocky, desolate, islet in the Ægean Sea as a punishment for preaching the gospel and testifying that Jesus is our risen Savior. He was there alone, separated from all his brethren. But he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." What does this mean? It means that he was doing what godly people now call "keeping Sunday." He was engaging in spiritual exercises. He was hold communion with the Holy Spirit. Here, then, is our first point: that although in solitude, cut off alike from Christian meetings and ordinary week-day occupations, by his banishment, the inspired apostle was "keeping Sunday." It is the strongest possible example. Our second point is, that God blessed him in his Sabbath-keeping with the greatest spiritual blessing which perhaps he had enjoyed since he sat at the feet of Jesus. His Savior came down from glory to "keep Sunday" with him. Our third and strongest point is, that the inspired man here calls the day "the Lord's day." There is no doubt but that the "Lord" named is the glorified Redeemer, whom he declares in his epistle to be "the true God and eternal life." There is but one consistent and scriptural sense to place on this name of the day. It is the day that belongs especially to the Lord. But as all our days belong in one sense to him, the only meaning is that the first day of the week is now set apart and hallowed to Christ. In Isa. 53:13, the Sabbath is called by God "my holy day;" in 56:4, "my Sabbath." That was God's day; it belonged to God. This is Christ's day, and in the same sense belongs to Christ. It is consecrated to his worship as was the Sabbath; it is virtually "the Christian Sabbath."

PART 3: THE UNINSPIRED HISTORY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

We now add the uninspired testimony of the early historians and Fathers, showing that from the apostles days Christians understood this matter as we do, and consecrated the first day of the week.

But let us explain in what sense we use this human testimony. In our view, all the uninspired church testimony in the world, however venerable, would never make it our religious duty to keep Sunday as a Sabbath without God's own commandment. We use these "Fathers" simply as historical witnesses. Their evidence derives its sole value from its relevancy to this

point, *whether the apostles, who were inspired, left the command and precedent in the churches of observing the Lord's day as the Sabbath of the fourth commandment.* If they said, "We Fathers command you to observe Sunday," we should reject the authority as nothing worth. But when, as honest and well-informed witnesses, they testify that the apostles taught the churches to observe Sunday, we regard their testimony as of some value.

THE WITNESS OF THE FATHERS

Our first witness, then, is a learned pagan, Pliny the younger, a high magistrate under the Emperor Trajan. He says, in a letter written a little after the death of the apostle John, that the Christians were accustomed to meet for worship on a "stated day." This was the Lord's day, as we see from other witnesses.

Ignatius, the celebrated martyr-bishop of Antioch, says, in his Epistle to the Magnesians, written not more than 20 years after the death of John, that "this is the Lord's day, the day consecrated to the resurrection, the chief and queen 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 practiced circumcision." (*Dialogue with Trypho*). In another place he says that they were "all accustomed to meet on the day which is denominated Sunday, for reading the Scriptures, prayer, exhortation and communion. The assemblies 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," etc.

Tertullian, at the close of the second century, says: We Christians "celebrate Sunday as a joyful day. On the Lord's day we think it wrong to fast, or to kneel in prayer." It was a common opinion of the earlier Christians that all public prayers on the Lord's day should be uttered standing, because kneeling is a more sorrowful attitude and inconsistent with the joy and blessedness of Christ's day.

Clement of Alexandria, a very learned Christian 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."

Perhaps the most valuable, because the most important and explicit, as well as the most learned, witness, is Eusebius of Cæsarea, who was in his prime about A.D. 325. In a Commentary on the ninety-second 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 the true rest, the saving Lord's day, the first of light, in which the Saviour gained the victory over death. 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 hath been enjoined on us that we should meet together on this day, and it is evidence that we should do these things announced in this psalm."

THE WITNESS OF THE COUNCILS

These citations from the pastors of the early church might be continued to great length. Not only individuals, but church councils, added their sanctions to the sacred observance of the Lord's day. Thus the council of Laodicea (A.D. 363) commanded Christians to rest on the Lord's day from all secular labors except those imposed by necessity. Many other councils during the fourth century ordain that public worship and the sacraments shall be observed on the same day. . . .

OPPOSING TESTIMONY OF SOME FATHERS EXPLAINED

Those who are familiar with the controversy about the Lord's day are aware that quite a number of writers, especially those of prelatical views, are in the habit of roundly asserting that the "fathers" held the fourth commandment to be abrogated; that they grounded their observance of the Lord's day, not on God's authority, but on comity, convenience, and church authority, like the other feasts, and that no "father" bases the observance of the Lord's day on the fourth commandment expressly. . . .

If, now, a father is found saying that the apostles "abolished the Sabbath," he is to be understood, *not as meaning that the apostles abrogated the fourth commandment*—a statement which can be found in no respectable Christian writer—but he is thinking only of the rabbinical seventh day, with its senseless and unscriptural superstitions. This is the simple key to all these patristic citations. . . .

[What of the] stress on the assertion that none of the fathers expressly trace the Christian observance of the Lord's day to the fourth commandment[?] What if they do not? This is, after all, only negative testimony, which proves nothing positive. We point, on the opposite hand, to the fact that none of the fathers deny the continued authority of the fourth commandment in its essential substance. . . .

DECLINE IN THE DARK AGES, INCOMPLETE REFORMATION, RESTORATION

A comprehensive view of these testimonies sufficiently shows what was the opinion and what the usages of the early Christians. As the Dark Ages approached, sound knowledge of the Hebrew literature became very rare; few could read the Old Testament in the original language, and the embittered and sinful prejudices of the Christians against the Jews had their influences in making the former indifferent to the Hebrew Scriptures. Hence, great ignorance of the old dispensation and of its relations to the new sprang up. It was natural that the grounds of Sabbath observance should be misunderstood. Superstition was then rapidly increasing, and saints' days and holy days of human invention first rivaled and then surpassed God's own day in the veneration of the people. When the great Reformation came, many of the Reformers remained under the error which confounded the Lord's day with the church's superstitious holy days, and when they threw off the trammels of superstition, unfortunately they cast away the divine obligation of the Sabbath with them. . . . [The scriptural view was most clearly restored to the church by the Westminster Assembly]; and to the honor of the Presbyterian branches of the Protestant body it may be asserted that these have been, since the Reformation, the most intelligent and decided supporters of it.

CONCLUSION

The chief attention in this discussion has been given to this point: That the duty of keeping holy the Lord's day is of perpetual and moral obligation on all men. . . . We have weighed

the objections patiently, candidly, thoroughly, not because they really deserved weighing, but only because a sad experience shows their power in deceiving. We wished to clear away the last shadow of doubt from God's command. . . .

It was worth the time and toil for us to reach this settled conviction of a continuing divine obligation for the Sabbath. Its proper observance can never be secured in any other way. It is a "thus saith the Lord," and this alone, which binds the conscience and spurs the heart of every true Christian. Let the intimate conviction of this divine warrant for the holy day be established in the minds of Christian people against all the doubts and quibbles which have infested parts of Christendom since the Dark Ages, and all men that really fear God will begin to sanctify his day. Hence we close this essay with the feeling that if this conviction is established, little more remains to be done except to invoke the aid of divine grace for assistance in executing our convictions of duty.

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OR THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH

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