

Sunday in the Early Church

THE word Sunday is not found in the Bible, but the first day of the week is mentioned just nine times. Let us examine these nine texts.

1. The first day of the week originated as a workday. This world was created on a Sunday, so that, wherever one goes, he is reminded of God's Sunday work. (Genesis 1:1-5.)

2. In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene. Matthew 28:1. Here we notice that Sunday is an ordinary week day, not a holy day, and that the New Testament says the Sabbath is over when the first day begins.

3. When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint Him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulcher at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone. Mark 16:1-3. Here again we see that Sunday is a working day on which work was resumed.

(The fourth text we will examine a little later.)

5. Christ was buried on Friday, and that day was the preparation for the Sabbath. After the burial, His followers returned home and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the Sabbath day according to the commandment. Now, upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulcher, bringing the spices. Luke 23:54-56; 24:1. Here three consecutive days are mentioned: They prepared the spices on Friday, rested on the Sabbath, and early Sunday morning they went to finish the work left over from Friday. So we see that Sunday is a working day, which follows immediately after the Sabbath of the New Testament.

6. The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulcher. John 20:1. This is simply a repetition of the other texts.

7. Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut, where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, Jesus appeared. John 20:19. Here, says some one, you see the disciples were gathered to keep the new Sabbath in memory of the resurrection. But the text does not say that they were gathered in honour of the day, but for fear of the Jews. Let us now examine the fourth text.

4. Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene. . . She went and told them that had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that He was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not. After

that He appeared to the two who went to Emmaus. They returned and told the rest: neither believed they them. Afterward He appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen Him after He was risen. Mark 16:9-14. This is the same meeting which is recorded in John 20:19. We ask: How could they be gathered to celebrate Sunday in honor of Christ's resurrection, when they did not believe He had risen? No, the disciples were simply in their common living quarters, and were having their evening meal when Jesus came, and they gave Him some fish and honey that was left. (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36-43).

8. In Acts 20:7 we have the only place in the New Testament where a religious meeting is said to be held on the first day of the week, and this was a farewell meeting, when, of course, it was natural to celebrate the Lord's Supper in parting. (Vs. 7, 25) Besides this, the believers gathered daily, breaking bread (Acts 2:46), so there was nothing in the act to indicate that the day was holy. Then too, the meeting at Troas was held on Saturday night. In the Bible reckoning, every day begins and ends at sunset, because God began the work of creation with the dark part and ended the day with the light part. The evening and the morning were the first day. Genesis 1:1-5. From even unto even, shall ye celebrate your Sabbath! Leviticus 23:32.

And at even, when the sun did set, they brought unto Him all that were diseased. Mark 1:32. They would not bring them until after the Sabbath; but at even, when the sun did set, the first working day of the week began. Therefore the Sabbath began at sunset Friday, and ended at sunset Saturday, and the first day of the week began at sunset on our Saturday evening, and ended at sunset on our Sunday evening. The only dark part of the first day, was therefore the night that preceded it, as the night following it was part of the second day. The meeting at Troas was held at night, for there were many lights in the upper chamber, where they were gathered together, and Paul continued his speech until midnight. Being the first day of the week, it must have been our Saturday night. (Acts 20:7, 8) Having spent the Sabbath together, they simply had a farewell meeting in the evening. Professor McGarvey says:

I conclude that the brethren met on the night after the Jewish Sabbath which was still observed as a day of rest by all of them who were Jews or Jewish proselytes; and considering this the beginning of the first day of the week, spent it in the manner above described. On Sunday morning Paul and his companions resumed their journey. - *Commentary on Acts, under Acts 20:7.*

Conybeare and Howson write:

It was the evening which succeeded the Jewish Sabbath. . . . On the Sunday morning the vessel was about to sail. The Christians of Troas were gathered together at this solemn time. . . . The night was dark. . . . Many lamps were burning in the room where the congregation was assembled. - *Life and Epistles of the Apostle Paul*, pp. 520, 521. New York.

If Sunday was their holy day, why then would Paul stay with the brethren at Troas seven days, and leave them on Sunday morning to walk eighteen and one-half miles that day, for so had he appointed. This was planning quite a work for Sunday! (Acts 20: 6, 13).

9. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store. 1 Corinthians 16:2. This text says that every one should lay by him in store. The new Swedish and new Norwegian Bibles read, at home by himself. Weymouth's reads: Let each of you put on one side and store up at his home. Ballantine's translation reads: Let each of you lay up at home. And the Syriac has it: Let every one of you lay aside and preserve at home. So the text proves the opposite of what is often claimed for it.

The apostle Paul was instructing the believers to take time on Sunday to lay aside at home from the wages received during the preceding week, such an amount as they could afford to give for the relief of their poor brethren at Jerusalem. If we always remembered on Sunday to take something from our previous week's earnings and lay it up at home, we would find a larger ready offering at hand, when the call comes, than if we wait, and give what we happen to have on hand. The fact that they should sit down and figure up their accounts to see how God bath prospered them, and give accordingly, would indicate that the day was not considered a holy day. Then, too, Sunday is never given a sacred title in the New Testament.

The Lord's Day

Some claim that the Lord's day of Revelation 1:10, refers to Sunday, but this text does not say which day is meant, and Sunday is not called the Lord's day in any other place in the New Testament. There is therefore no evidence that Sunday is meant here. It is generally agreed that John wrote his Gospel two years after he wrote Revelation. If the term Lord's day had become the designation for Sunday, when John wrote Revelation, then he would have used that name for it two years later when he wrote the Gospel, but he simply

calls it the first day of the week. John 20:1. The only day which the Lord has designated as His day, is the seventh. (Exodus 20:10; Isaiah 58:13; Mark 2:28).

Dr. Summerbell says:

Many suppose that they must denominate the first day of the week the Lord's day; but we have no certain Scripture for this. The phrase Lord's day, occurs but once in the Bible: I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and there probably refers to the day of which Christ said: The Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath day, as the whole book of Revelation has a strong Jewish bearing. - *History of the Christian Church*, p. 152. Cincinnati: 1873.

W. B. Taylor says:

If a current day was intended, the only day bearing this definition, in either the Old or New Testaments, is Saturday, the seventh day of the week. *Obligation of the Sabbath*, p. 296.

Dr. Peter Heylyn remarks:

Take which you will, either of the Fathers, or the Modernes, and we shall find no *Lord's day* instituted by any *Apostolic Mandate*, no *Sabbath* set on foot by them upon the *first day of the weeke*, as some would have it: much lesse than any such *Ordinance* should be hence collected, out of the words of the apostle. - *History of the Sabbath*, (original spelling), Part 2, p. 27. London: 1686.

The Conclusion

Dr. William Smith, LL.D., after carefully examining all the texts in the New Testament usually adduced in favour of the first day, comes to this conclusion:

Taken separately, perhaps, and even all together, these passages seem scarcely adequate to prove that the dedication of the first day of the week to the purposes above mentioned was a matter of apostolic institution, or even of apostolic practice. - *A Dictionary of the Bible*, art. *Lord's Day*, p. 356. Hartford: Burr and Hyde, 1871.

The learned Dr. John Kitto sums up those texts in the following words:

Thus far, then, we cannot say that the evidence for any particular observance of this day amounts to much; still less does it appear what purpose or object was referred to. We find no mention of any commemoration, whether of the resurrection or any other event in the Apostolic records. - *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature* (2-vol. ed.), Vol. II, art. *Lord's Day*, p. 269. New York.

But, say some, it was *changed* from the seventh to the first day. Where? when? and by whom? No man can tell. No, it never was changed, nor could it be, unless creation was to be gone through again: for the reason assigned must be changed before the observance, or respect to the reason, can be changed!! It is all old wives fables to talk of the change of the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day. If it be changed, it was that august personage changed it who changes times and laws *ex officio* - I think his name is DOCTOR ANTICHRIST. - *Alexander Campbell, in The Christian Baptist, revised by D. S. Burnet, from the Second Edition, with Mr. Campbell's last corrections, page 44. Cincinnati: D. S. Burnet, 1835.*

A tract widely circulated against those who keep the seventh day as the Sabbath has this to say in its fourteenth proposition:

If Christians are to keep the Sabbath day, how do you account for the fact that the apostles preached the gospel in Jerusalem, Samaria, to Cornelius the Gentile, and to many others, without commanding a single individual to keep it? Did they under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit fail to properly instruct their converts?

We answer: The Christians everywhere were keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, and there was an acknowledged law enforcing its observance. There was therefore no occasion for giving any commandment on this point. (Luke 23:52-56, 16:17; Matthew 5:17-19; Romans 3:31) And the apostles by their example and teaching had educated both Jewish and Gentile believers to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. (Acts 13:42-44, 18:14, 17:2, 16:12, 13; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Romans 7:12; 3: 31.) What more could they have done in this direction?

But if a new day (Sunday) was to be instituted among God's people, how can we account for the fact that the apostles preached the gospel in Jerusalem, Samaria, to Cornelius the Gentile and to many others, without ever mentioning the institution of Sunday in place of the Sabbath, or ever commanding any one to keep Sunday, the first day of the week? If the day of rest was changed from the seventh to the first day of the week, how can we account for the fact that the New Testament is entirely silent about any such change, and that the apostles wrote four Gospels, and twenty-one letters to instruct the churches, besides the Acts and the Revelation, and never instructed the Christians to keep Sunday, or even mentioned it with any sacred title, but always as a week day; that is, a work day? Did the apostles, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, fail to instruct their converts properly? (See Acts 20, 26, 27).

The new Christian institutions of baptism and the Lord's supper are clearly taught in the New Testament. We can point to the chapter and

verse where they are commanded. Then why should not so important an institution as a new Christian rest day be mentioned? To this there can be but one answer: The silence of the New Testament as to any change of the weekly rest day is an indisputable evidence that no such change was made till after the New Testament canon was closed.

Sunday a Working Day

Dr. Francis Mite, Lord Bishop of Ely, says:

In S Hieromes days [420 A. D.], and in the very place where he was residing, the devoutest Christians did ordinary work upon the *Lord's day* (Sunday was called Lord's Day in England in the seventeenth century when Bishop Ely wrote this; he therefore uses this designation of the day. Jerome is here spelled Hierome), when the service of the Church was ended. *Treatise of the Sabbath-Day. p. 219. London: 1636.*

The Catholic Church for more than six hundred yeares After Christ, permitted labour, and gave license to many Christian people, to worke upon the Lord's-day [Sunday], at such houres, as they were not commanded to bee present at the publike service, by the precept of the church. - *Id., pp. 217, 218.*

Bishop Jeremy Taylor says:

St. Ignatius expressly affirms: The Christian is bound to labour, even upon that day. And the primitive Christians did all manner of works upon the Lord's day, even in the times of persecution, when they are the strictest observers of all the divine commandments: but in this they knew there was none. - *Whole Works of Jeremy Taylor, D. D. (R. Heber, ed.), Vol. XII, Book 2, chap. 2, rule 6, par. 59, p. 426. London: 1822.*

Dr. John Kitto, D. D., F. S. A., says:

Chrysostom (A. D. 360) concludes one of his Homilies by dismissing his audience to their respective ordinary occupations. *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature, Vol. 2, art. Lord's Day, p. 270.*

Dr. Peter Heylyn quotes St. Jerome as telling us that, when the services were ended on Sunday morning, the holy women, after their returne from thence. . . . set themselves unto their tasks which was the making garments for themselves or others: a thing which questionlesse so good a woman had not done, and much lesse ordered it to be done by others; had it beene then accounted an unlawful Act. And finally S. Chrysostome . . . confesseth. . . . that after the dismissal of the Congregation, every man might apply himselfe to his lawfull businesse. . . . As for the time appointed to these publick

exercises, it seemes not to be very long . . . an houre, or two at the most. - *History of the Sabbath (original spelling) Part 2, chap. 8, par. 7, 8, pp. 79, 80. London: 1636.*

(Note: This book is in Facts of Faith library.)

Dr. Heylyn says further that the people in the country worked freely on Sunday, and that those in populous cities might lawfully apply themselves to their *severall businesses*, the exercises being ended in the church. (Id., pp. 80, 81.) And of the Christians of the East he says:

It was neere 900 yeares from our Saviour's birth, if not quite so much, before restraint of husbandry on this day, had beene first thought of in the *East*: and probably being thus restrained, did finde no more obedience there, then it had done before in the *Westerne* parts. - *Id., chap. 5, par. 6, p. 140.*

The *Sunday* in the *Easterne* Churches had no great prerogative above other dayes, especially above the *Wednesday* and the *Friday*. - *Id., chap. 3, par. 4, p. 73.*

Some may wonder why these early morning meetings were held on Sunday, when the Christians considered it only a working day. We shall see that there was a natural cause for it, when we learn that the heathen living around them were sun worshippers, who met at their temples Sunday morning, and prostrated themselves before the rising sun. Christians are a missionary people, and to win their neighbours they held a meeting at the time when their neighbours were used to worshipping their sun god. And, as it takes a crowd to draw a crowd, the church leaders requested their members to gather at this early morning hour, after which all went to their respective places of business. But this custom became a stepping stone toward eventually adopting the heathen Sunday, as we soon shall see. Other influences also led in the same direction.