

The Christian Sabbath

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Voltaire, the French philosopher and skeptic of the 18th century, is reported to have said, "If you would destroy Christianity you must first kill Sunday." The inference is that so long as men preserve and observe the one day in seven as a sacred day, so long will religious life be vigorous; and conversely, just in the measure that men secularize the Sabbath and make a common day of it, will they lose the sense of God and so lose religion.

SOME PHASES OF SABBATH HISTORY

1. The Sabbath is as old as man. The creation story in Genesis concludes with the words, "And on the seventh day God finished His work which he had made, and He rested on the seventh day . . . and God blessed the seventh Day and hallowed it, because that in it He rested from all His work." So the Fourth Commandment did not embody any new legislation, but simply codified and re-emphasized a rule of life and conduct written into the conscience and constitution of the race from the beginning. If this is the case we would expect to find some traces, at least, of a seventh day rest among other ancient peoples besides the Israelites. Not many decades ago such evidence came to light. A Babylonian calendar was unearthed in which the 7th, 14th, 21st, and 28th days of the month were called "days unlawful to work on". On those days, it was said, "the king was forbidden to eat ordinary food, change his dress or do his royal duties".

2. The Sabbath of ancient Judaism was a delightful institution. The Jews were an agricultural people. You who have known the long hours and hard labor of farm life can well understand how welcome would be that

day of rest to weary bodies and burdened spirits. Moreover, under the social organization of that time, there were many servants and bond-slaves in the population. To them, whose lot was so hopeless, it was an incalculable boon that for one day in seven they were really free. For the law was all-inclusive: "Thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son nor thy daughter, thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger (the foreigner) that is within thy gates". No person was to benefit himself with a Sabbath rest at the expense of his servants and his domestic animals. The Sabbath was a blessed gift of God to all burdened people. But in time the Jews perverted the gift. Worse yet, when the Lord of the Sabbath came they refused to let Him recover to them the spirit and blessings of God's Sabbath for man. They crucified Him.

3. The Sabbath died and was raised again.

In the resurrection of Christ, which made all things new, the Sabbath had a resurrection. Not only did that mighty event recover the holy and beneficent character of the institution, it also changed the day of its weekly observance. Before, it was the seventh day of the week, the conclusion of the first creation. Now it became the first day of the week, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead, the day which would forever mark the beginning of a new spiritual creation. This is the way Ignatius, one of the fathers of the church, puts it: "No longer observing Sabbaths, but fashioning their lives after the Lord's Day, on which our life also rose through Him".

For a considerable time after the resurrection the Christians who were Jewish kept both the Sabbath of the ancient faith and the new Lord's Day. In the Epistle of Barnabas, an extra-Biblical writing of the early church, that Christian leader says, "Wherefore also we keep the eighth day for gladness, on which Jesus also rose from the dead". When the Christians gradually abandoned the seventh day for the first day, all the values of the Mosaic Sabbath were carried over and incorporated into the Lord's Day of the Chris-

tians, allowing us to say that in essence and in principle the two days are the same. So much is this true that many Christians still prefer to speak of "keeping the Sabbath" because "Sabbath" has a religious significance in line with our spiritual traditions, whereas Sunday is a heathen name, borrowed from the sun-worshippers.

SOME PRINCIPLES OF SABBATH OBSERVANCE

1. **Keep the Sabbath as a holy day.** We cannot appreciate fully what that means without examining the original meaning of the word "holy". Fundamentally the word means "set apart". This day is to be a day set apart from other days, hedged about and different from other days. It is to differ from ordinary work days and school days; it is to differ from ordinary holidays and pleasure days. With both the Jews and the early Christians the most obvious difference was that it was free from labor.

"How still the morning of the hallowed day!
Mute is the voice of rural labor, hushed
The ploughboy's whistle and the milkmaid's
song." James Grahame.

It is most unfortunate that laboring men, under the enticement of overtime pay, are allowing themselves to be robbed of their Sabbath rest. It is seriously to be questioned whether a government which insists upon a seven-day week as a war-time emergency, has found or ever will find, that production justifies that policy. No less a labor leader than Samuel Gompers is reported to have said, "Seven-day workers are positively poor workers, lacking the vigor, stamina and character so necessary to the maintenance of a sterling manhood and womanhood." In the first world war, Sabbath work was tried out at first and then abandoned. Josephus Daniels, member of the war cabinet, said, with reference to that change of policy, "The world has learned even in war, that Sabbath obser-

vance is not only a Christian duty but an industrial necessity."

Many men do fully appreciate this weekly relaxation from labor; but there are some in every generation who murmur, "When will the Sabbath be past, that we may buy and sell?" or who, like the Merchants of Tyre, whom Nehemiah rebuked, are willing to disregard the command of God in the interests of gain. The Sabbath is "a check on that insane devotion to secular business which is one of the most serious perils of our country."

But the word "holy" means more than "set apart". It has a religious significance. It is a day set apart with reference to God. It is God's day. In the commandment it is called "A Sabbath unto the Lord thy God". It is a day of worship. That was the way Jesus used it. Luke's gospel says of Jesus, "He came to Nazareth where he had been brought up; and he entered, as his custom was, into the synagogue on the Sabbath Day." The logic is inevitable that if he, the perfect man, had the church habit on the Sabbath Day, we imperfect men ought by all means to cultivate the church habit as part of our Sabbath observance.

"It is good to sing Thy praises, and to thank
Thee, O Most High,

Showing forth Thy loving-kindness when
the morning lights the sky.

It is good when night is falling of Thy
faithfulness to tell,

While with sweet melodious music, songs
of adoration swell."

What a strange, unhealthy temper that is which has gripped many people and has turned their thoughts away from worship on the Lord's Day to pleasures and pursuits that are almost wholly secular, selfish and unspiritual. They spend God's Day without God. A spirit quite the opposite of this is revealed in the following words of Oliver Wendell Holmes: "There is a little plant called reverence that grows in a corner of my soul's garden which I like to have watered

once a week." "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." That is the first principle of Sabbath keeping.

2. **Keep the Sabbath as a Happy Day.** To say that the Sabbath is to be given a holy significance does not at all mean that it is to be a joyless, cheerless, stiff and formal day. Quite the contrary. The two great ideas of the Sabbath in the mind of the ancient Jews were rest and gladness. "This is the day the Lord hath made; in it we glad will be." Isaiah says we are to call the Sabbath a "delight". In one of the books of Edward A. Steiner, the Jewish-Christian immigrant, there is a description of the Sabbath in the Jewish ghetto of a Russian city in his childhood. It is a delightful picture. Simple customs of the home were quietly observed; then followed the synagogue service; and then the happy afternoon hours as the family walked together out into the country beyond the ghetto. Sabbath was a home day, a family day, a quiet day but a wonderful day in a homely and simple way.

So, when we say the Sabbath should be a happy day, we do not mean a hilarious day of sports and public spectacles, a day of ball games and theatres, a day of parties and excursions and picnics. By no possible stretch of the imagination could one picture these as contributing to the "holiness" of the day. We cannot turn the Sabbath into a time of commercialized amusements and sports and still retain in the minds of people the sense of its sacredness. A long time ago Sir Walter Scott remarked: "Give the world one-half of Sunday, and religion will not long continue to have any strong hold on the other half."

The distinction which we are making between a "delightful" Sabbath and a day of sports and amusements, was made long ago by the prophet Isaiah: "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath from doing thy pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of Jehovah, honorable, and shall honor it, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words; then shalt thou delight thyself in Jehovah; and I will make

thee to ride upon the high places of the earth."

3. **Keep the Sabbath as a humane day.** Jesus said the Sabbath was made for man. It was an institution which existed not for its own sake but for man's highest good. By its very nature it is a humane day. It provides release from the labor of mind and muscle. Henry George asserts that "Moses was the first labor reformer; and the Sabbath was his first labor reform."

But the Sabbath is a humane day, too, in that it gives to all people an opportunity for deeds of kindness, ministries of mercy and acts of loving thoughtfulness. Jesus made it plain both by his words and his conduct that acts of mercy were always permissible and desirable on the Lord's Day. The aged in homes and asylums, the sick in hospitals, can be visited and cheered. The lonely and troubled can be comforted by your gifts and your presence and your prayers. It is the release from toil and the stimulus of Sabbath that makes possible such angelic ministries. Even children can be taught to use those precious hours of the Sabbath afternoon or evening for some errands of love. There will never be any question of boredom if the Christian really uses the Sabbath as God intended.

The Sabbath is not something forced upon us as an irksome obligation, but granted to us as a precious boon. It is not a sad day but a glad day; not a penalty but a privilege and an opportunity.

"The Book, the Church, the Day were given
For men, not God—for earth, not heaven;
Are blessed means to holiest ends,
Not masters, but benignant friends."

Whittier

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