

SUNDAY

How Came it into the Christian Church?

F. L. Sharp

This is a question that has exercised the minds of many sincere and earnest Christians. Those who have made the most critical examination of the New Testament Scriptures have been unable to trace any evidence that the day of worship was ever changed either by Christ or His apostles. And while it is constantly affirmed that the early Christian church changed the day in commemoration of Christ's resurrection, there is no evidence of this forthcoming. Every writer in the New Testament is as silent as the tomb concerning any such change having been made. Yet Christendom is found observing the first day of the week notwithstanding the absence of any divine warrant for so doing.

Were it true that the early Christian church had made the change, such an act on their part would not only have been altogether illegal, but more, it would have been purely and simply a usurpation of divine authority, an assumption of a prerogative that belongs to God alone, for the Apostle James declares that "there is one lawgiver" (James 4:12), while the prophet Isaiah says that "the Lord is our lawgiver" or "statute maker." Isaiah 33:22.

But now, as no divine law for the observance of the first day of the week is to be found in the Scriptures, the question arises how came it into the Christian church? There being an entire absence of authority in the Scriptures, we must look elsewhere for information concerning it. History alone can enlighten us. We first turn to Neander, "the prince of church historians," who informs us that "The festival of Sunday, like all other festivals, was always only a human ordinance, and it was far from the intentions of the Apostles to establish a divine command in this respect, and far from the early apostolic church to transfer the laws of the Sabbath to Sunday." — *Church History,* Rose's translation, page 186.

Here then is a candid admission that, while there was an ordinance for the observance of Sunday, it was *not* of divine but of *human* origin.

In another work entitled, "The First Century of Christianity," pages 326, 327, the author, Homersham Cox, M.A., remarks: "It has been sometimes suggested that at the commencement of the Christian dispensation there must have been some divine precept changing the day of the Sabbath, that either Christ or the apostles changed the day. But where is the evidence of this? There is not an iota of such evidence in the New Testament, and there is cogent evidence to the contrary. Those who maintain the theory that the obligation of the Sabbath was transferred to the first day of the week cannot tell us by whose authority and at what time or in what manner the transfer was made. Besides, is it credible that if the command to change the day of the Sabbath had been given either by Christ or His apostles, we should not find some reference to it in the pages of the earliest Christian writers? We do not find in their writings the faintest allusion to such a command having been given."

In confirmation of this, and too, that this writer might not be considered singular in his conclusions, we will add what some other historians and writers have to say on this point.

Sir William Domville Church of England, in his "Examination of the Six Texts," supplement, pages 6, 7, says: "Not any ecclesiastical writer of the first three centuries attributed the origin of Sunday observance either to Christ or to His apostles." He also says: "Centuries of the Christian era passed away before Sunday was observed by the Christian church as a Sabbath. History does not furnish us with

a single proof or indication that it was at any time so observed previous to the Sabbatical edict of Constantine in ^{A.D.} 321.” — *ib.*, page 291.

Dr. Cox: “The early Fathers gave no support, direct or indirect, to the notion that the Sabbath had been transferred at all; but it is not surprising that those who wrote after the enactment by Constantine that Sunday should be kept as a Sabbath, were more apt to discover reasons for such an observance of it.” — “*Literature*,” Vol. 1, page 257, note.

Chambers Encyclopedia (Art. “Sabbath”): “By none of the Fathers before the fourth century is it [Sunday] identified with the Sabbath, nor is the duty of observing it grounded by them, either in the fourth commandment, or on the precept of Christ or His apostles.”

Dr. Coleman: “Down even to the fifth century the observance of the *Jewish Sabbath* was continued in the early Christian church, but with a rigour and solemnity gradually diminishing until it was wholly discontinued.” In speaking of the first day, he says: “During the early ages of the church it [the Sunday] was never entitled ‘the Sabbath,’ this word being confined to the seventh day of the week, the Jewish Sabbath, which as we have already said, continued to be observed for several centuries by the converts to Christianity.” “*Ancient Christianity*,” chap. 26, sec. 2.

Antiquities of the Christian church: “The ancient Christians were very careful in the observance of Saturday, or the seventh day, which was the ancient Jewish Sabbath. Some observed it as a fast, others as a festival; but all unanimously agreed in keeping it as a more solemn day of religious worship and adoration. . . . Athanasius likewise tells us that they held religious assemblies on the Sabbath, *not because they were infected with Judaism, but to worship Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath*. Epiphanius says the same.” — Vol. VII, chap. 3 sec. 1, pages 52, 53.

Thus we learn from these historians and writers that for several centuries after Christ, the early Christian not only did *not* observe the first day of the week (Sunday) as the Christian Sabbath, but that they *did* observe the Sabbath of the fourth commandment — the seventh day of the week.

SUNDAY A WORK DAY

That some religious exercises were held by the Christians on the first day of the week, none will deny. The records are equally clear concerning this. But they are also equally clear that there was no cessation of ordinary labour on that day, thus evincing the fact that the early Christians did not regard the first day as being anything else but a working day.

Quoting again from “The First Century of Christianity”: Homesham Cox further states that “having thoroughly examined” “the principle passages from writings of the first and second centuries which relate to the Sabbath and the Lord’s day,” and “after a most careful and laborious search, it is asserted with confidence that there is not one writer of the first or second century who suggests that Christians of their times regarded the Lord’s day as a substitute for the Sabbath. Neither is there any evidence whatsoever in those early writings that Christians abstained from their usual labours on Sunday, except so far as was necessary for the purpose of attending their assemblies. The earliest suggestion that Christians should abstain from labour on Sunday is contained in a passage of Tertullian, written not before the close of the second century. . . . But this advice to defer matters of business is limited to the time of prayer, not the whole of the Lord’s day. Up to the time when Tertullian wrote, that is for more than a century after the last surviving apostle left the

earth, there is not the slightest trace of a practice of abstaining from ordinary pursuits on the Lord's day, excepting during the time devoted to Christian assemblies." (Page 324.) And again he says., "From the commencement if the apostolic era, Christians were accustomed to assemble for worship on the first day of the week but they did not regard that day as a Sabbath." — *Page 316.*

**"IT WAS CONSTANTINE THE GREAT
WHO FIRST MADE A LAW FOR THE
OBSERVANCE OF SUNDAY."**

As to the extent of the day of worship which was conducted on that day he says: "As to the mode in which the Lord's day was observed in the first century, the sources of information are somewhat scanty, but they are sufficient. They show clearly that the Christians assembled before dawn on the first day of the week to celebrate the eucharist, and afterwards proceeded to their ordinary daily labours and occupations." And this also is confirmed by other writers and historians.

Dictionary of Chronology (Art. "Sunday"), page 813: "The early Christians met on the morning of that day [Sunday] for prayer and the singing of hymns in commemoration of Christ's resurrection, and then went about their usual duties."

Jeremy Taylor: "The primitive Christians did all manner of works upon the Lord's day, even in times of persecution, when they were the strictest observers of all divine commandments; but in this they knew there was none." — *Duct. Dubi, Book 2, chap. 2, sec. 59.*

The Encyclopedia Britannica: "There is no evidence that in the earliest years of Christianity there was any formal observance of Sunday as a day of rest or any general cessation of work." — *Eleventh Edition, Vol. XXVI, page 94, Art, Sunday."*

The early Christian church being founded upon principles of eternal truth, its members knew only too well that they positively had no right or power to make any change in respect of the Sabbath of Jehovah.

The Scripture says: I know that whatsoever God doeth it shall be forever; nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it; and God doeth it that men should fear before Him.: Ecclesiastes 3:14. And God Himself has declared: "My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that has gone out of My lips." Psalms 89:34.

No the early church did not change the day, nor did Christ or His apostles. But the standard encyclopedias tell us who did.

HOW SUNDAY CREPT IN

Encyclopedia Britannica "It was Constantine the Great who first made a law for the proper observance of Sunday: who appointed it should be regularly celebrated throughout the Roman empire." — *Art. "Sunday."*

And this law was not enacted until the year a.d. 321, approximately three hundred years after Christ's ascension.

Chambers Encyclopedia: "Unquestionably the first law, either ecclesiastical or civil, by which the Sabbatical observance of Sunday is known to have been ordained, is the Sabbatical edict of Constantine, in a.d. 321." — *Art. Sunday.*

Constantine was a Roman emperor and was originally a pagan — a sun

worshipper. But about the time of his issuing his Sunday law he professed conversion to Christianity. It was only a profession, however, it was not a genuine conversion. And not only did he connect himself with the church, but "Wharey's Church History" (page 56) informs us that he "placed himself at the head of the church, usurped supreme power over it and claimed the right of modeling and controlling it in such a manner as would best sub-serve the public good. And so delighted were the bishops at the idea of having the emperor at the head of the church. . . . that there was not found one disposed to question his right to exercise this most unscriptural usurpation."

Mosheim also states that the time of his professed conversion Constantine. "became Bishop of the Catholic Church." Thus in his dual capacity as "Bishop of the Catholic Church" and emperor, Constantine issued "the first law" ever known, "either ecclesiastical or civil," for the observance of Sunday, the first day of the week. The following is his decree:—

"On the venerable day of the sun let the magistrates and all the people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed. In the country, however, persons engaged in agriculture may freely and lawfully continue their pursuits; because it often happens that another day is not so suitable for grain growing or for vine planting; lest by neglecting the proper moment for such operations, the bounty of heaven should be lost. (Given the 7th day of March, Crispus and Constantine being consuls each of them for the second time)." — Schaff's "History of the Christian Church," Vol. III, chap. 75.

Concerning this decree, Dr. Schaff says: "He enjoined the observance, or rather forbade the public desecration of Sunday, not under the name of *Sabbatum* (the Sabbath), or *Dies Domini* (Day of the Lord), but under its old astrological and heathen title, *Dies Solis* (Day of the Sun), familiar to all his subjects, so the law was as applicable to the worshippers of Hercules, Apollo, and Mithras, as to the Christians." — *"History of the Christian Church," Vol. VIII, chap. 75, par. 5.*

Following close upon this, in the year a.d. 325, Pope Sylvester authoritatively bestowed upon the first day of the week the title, "Lord's Day." Then an a.d. 338, Eusebius, the court bishop of Constantine, wrote: "All things whatsoever that it was the duty to do on the Sabbath [the seventh day of the week] we [Constantine and other bishops] have transferred to the Lord's day [the first day of the week] as more appropriately belonging to it." — *Commentary on the Psalms.*

Later, in a.d. 364, the council of Laodicea issued another very definite decree that "Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on the Sabbath [the seventh day], but shall work on that day; but the Lord's day [the first day] they shall specially honour, and as being Christians, shall, if possible, do no work on that day. If, however, they shall be found Judaizing, they shall be accursed from Christ." The reason for this decree is stated by the Rev. William James, when addressing the University at Oxford. He said:—

"When the practice of keeping Saturday Sabbaths, which had become so general at the close of this (the third) century, was evidently gaining ground in the Eastern church, a decree was passed in the council held at Laodicea (a.d. 364) 'that members of the church should not rest from work on the Sabbath, like Jews, but should labour on that day, and preferring in honour the Lord's day, then if it be in their power should rest from work as Christians,'" — *"Sermons on the Sacraments and the Sabbath," pages 122, 123.*

Then about the year a.d. 458 or 459, Pope Leo the Great issued the following

decree:—

"We ordain, according to the true meaning of the Holy Christ, and of the apostles as thereby directed, that on the sacred day [Sunday] wherein our own integrity was restored, all do rest and cease from labour." — *Cited by Dr. Justin Edwards in "Sabbath Manual," page 123.*

Such then is the evidence which answers the question, "How came Sunday to be observed in the Christian church?" It was not by any divine command, but it came in gradually through a series of human ordinances of which Constantine's was the first.

And now we will let the historians tell us what Constantine's object was in issuing his Sunday law.

SUN-WORSHIP

Milman: "If we may believe the biographies in the Augustan history, a more ambitious scheme of a *universal religion* had dawned upon the mind of the emperor. The Jewish, the Samaritan, even the Christian, were to be fused and recast into *one great system, of which the sun was to be the central object of adoration*" — *"History of Christianity," Book 2, chap. 8.*

Stanley: "The retention of the old pagan name *Dies Solis* or Sunday, for the weekly Christian festival is, in a great measure, owing to the union of pagan and Christian sentiment with which the first day of the week was recommended by Constantine to his subjects, pagan and Christian alike, as the 'venerable day of the sun.' . . . It was his mode of harmonizing the discordant religions of the empire under one common institution." — *History of the Eastern Church, "lecture 6, par. 15.*

Thus Constantine's aim was to establish universal sun-worship; and the first step toward this was his decree for the observance of the sun's day (Sunday); and as the ultimate result nearly all Christendom has been led to abandon the Sabbath of Jehovah, and in its place adopt the pagan festival.

As the very best, then Sunday observance is a man-made institution — an institution of the Catholic Church, and view it as we will, it is a relic of paganism — sun-worship — an idolatrous system which the Lord has denounced as in His sight, the greatest abomination, and against which He declares that He will "deal in fury." See Ezekiel 8:15-18.

On the other hand, the seventh-day Sabbath is of Divine origin, and is enjoined as one of God's immutable and unchangeable laws. Further, it is the sign of true worship — the sign declared by God Himself to be the sign between Him and His people for ever.

"And hallow My Sabbaths, and they shall be a sign between Me and you, that ye may know that I am the Lord your God." Ezekiel 20:20. Or as Spurrell's translation renders it: "And sanctify My Sabbaths that they may be a token between Me and between you, that ye may acknowledge that I am Jehovah your God.

Thus has God enjoined upon us the observance of His Sabbath as the token or sign by which we acknowledge Him as our God.

The majority of Christians today are altogether unaware of these facts, and are unwittingly honouring a human ordinance of heathen origin, but meanwhile disobeying the God of heaven. But is view of the facts which we here present and

which truthfully set out the real situation, should we not earnestly and sincerely consider how our observance of a day instituted by a half heathen monarch and fostered by the "man of sin" will affect our standing before God.

God says: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy the seventh day is the Sabbath."

The Catholic Church says: "No! *By my divine power I abolish* the Sabbath day, and *command you* to keep holy the *first day of the week*." Then whom shall we obey — God or the Catholic Church? "To whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are." Romans 6:16.

THE STANDARD OF THE JUDGMENT

Now, the ten commandments are to be the rule or standard of the judgment. We shall be judged by that law. Our lives — our acts — will be measured by those ten precepts; and the willful violation of any one of them will result in such violators being shut out of the kingdom of heaven. God is particular. He demands implicit obedience as a first essential. When Saul presumed to vary God's command, he lost his kingdom, and was told that "to obey is better than sacrifice." So today the observance of Sunday — a day which God has never made holy, and which, and which is beyond the power of man to make holy — much less to keep holy — will never compensate for the desecration of the seventh day — God's holy day. Concerning this point the Rev. Geo Hodges writes: "The seventh day, the commandment says, is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. No kind of arithmetic, no kind of almanac, can make seven equal to one, nor the seventh mean the first, nor Saturday mean Sunday. . . . The fact is that we are all Sabbath-breakers, every one of us."

Another writer says: "If our authority for keeping Sunday be the fourth commandment simply, just as it stands without interpretation, without reservation, *the whole Christian world lies convicted of a most moral breach of God's law*. Stay! this is not quite true. There is a curious sect, called, I believe, 'Seventh-day Adventists' which literally obeys. they alone, then of all Christians, keep the whole of God's commandments. . . . those who deny the church's authority, if they desire to be consistent, should keep Saturday as the Jews do . . . and refuse to have to do with an institution *which is admittedly Catholic*." — *St. Cyprian's Parish Chronicle, Durban, Natal*.

Then shall we be content to go on breaking God's law, desecrating his Sabbath knowing that we are judgment bound, and will have to answer at the bar of heaven for the persistent and willful breaking of God's law any more than we could hope to be exonerated in an earthly court, had we broken the law of the land? We cannot indeed.

Then why not cease to be a Sabbath-breaker by becoming a Sabbath-keeper, and thus come into right relationship with Christ by honouring His law? In doing so we demonstrate our love for Him, for Christ says: "He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me." John 14:21. And again: "If ye love Me, keep My commandments." John 14:14.

New Millennium Ministries
P.O. Box 290, Morisset 2264
NSW. AUSTRALIA