

The Pattern of the Lord's Day¹

IF we accept the witness of Scripture there can be no question that the weekly Sabbath finds its basis in and derives its sanction from the example of God himself. He created the heavens and the earth in six days and 'on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it' (Gen. 2:2, 3). The fourth commandment in the decalogue sets forth the obligation resting upon man and it makes express appeal to this sanction. 'For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it' (Exod. 20:11).

Many regard this sabbath institution as a shadow of things that were to come and, therefore, as an ordinance to be observed, it has passed away, because that of which it was a shadow has been realized in the full light of the new and better covenant. At this point suffice it to ask the question: Has the pattern of God's work and rest in creation ceased to be relevant? Is this pattern a *shadow* in the sense of those who espouse this position? The realm of our existence is that established by creation and maintained by God's providence. The new covenant has in no respect abrogated creation nor has it diminished its relevance. Creation both as action and product is as significant for us as it was for Israel under the old covenant. The refrain of Scripture in both Testaments is that the God of creation is the God of redemption in all stages of covenantal

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disclosure and realization. This consideration is invested with greater significance when we bear in mind that the ultimate standard for us is likeness to God (cf. Matt. 5:48; 1 John 3:2, 3). And it is this likeness, in the sphere of our behaviour, that undergirds the demand for sabbath observance (Exod. 20:11; 31:17).

It is noteworthy that the sabbath commandment as given in Deuteronomy (Deut. 5:12-15) does not appeal to God's rest in creation as the reason for keeping the sabbath day. In this instance mention is made of something else. 'And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day' (Deut. 5:15). This cannot be understood as in any way annulling the sanction of Exodus 20:11; 31:17. Deuteronomy comprises what was the reiteration of the covenant made at Sinai. When the sabbath commandment is introduced Israel is reminded of the earlier promulgation: 'Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee' (Deut. 5:12). And we should observe that all the commandments have their redemptive sanction. The preface to all is: 'I am the Lord thy God which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (Exod. 20:2; cf. Deut. 5:6). So what we find in Deuteronomy 5:15 in connection with the Sabbath is but the application of the preface to the specific duty enunciated in the fourth command. It is supplement to Exodus 20:11, not suspension. We have now an added reason for observing the Sabbath. This is full of meaning and we must linger to analyse and appreciate.

The deliverance from Egypt was redemption. 'Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed' (Exod. 15:13). It is more than any other event the redemption of the Old Testament. It is the analogue of the greater redemption accomplished by Christ. The sabbath commandment derives its sanction not only from God's rest in creation but also from redemption out of Egypt's bondage. This fact, that the Sabbath in Israel had a redemptive reference and sanction, bears directly upon the question of its relevance in the New Testament. The redemption from Egypt cannot be properly viewed except as the anticipation of the greater redemption wrought in the fulness of the

time. Hence, if redemption from Egypt accorded sanction to the sabbath institution and provided reason for its observance, the same must apply to the greater redemption and apply in a way commensurate with the greater fulness and dimensions of the redemption secured by the death and resurrection of Christ. In other words, it is the fulness and richness of the new covenant that accord to the sabbath ordinance increased relevance, sanction, and blessing.

This redemptive reference explains and confirms three features of the New Testament.

I. THE RETROSPECTIVE REFERENCE

Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week (cf. Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). For our present interest the important feature of the New Testament witness is that the first day of the week continued to have *distinctive religious significance* (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). The only explanation of this fact is that the first day was the day of Jesus' resurrection and for that reason John calls it 'the Lord's day' (Rev. 1:10). The first day took on a memorial significance appropriate to the place the resurrection of Christ occupies in the accomplishment of redemption and in Jesus' *finished* work (cf. John 17:4), as also appropriate to the seal imparted by the repeated appearance to his disciples on that day (cf. Matt. 28:9; Luke 24:15-31, 36; John 20:19, 26). When Christ rose from the dead he was loosed from the pangs of death (cf. Acts 2:24), he entered upon life indestructible (cf. Rom. 5:10; 6:9, 10), became 'life-giving Spirit' (1 Cor. 15:45), and brought 'life and immortality to light' (2 Tim. 1:10). In a word, he entered upon the rest of his redeeming work. All of this and much more resides in the emphasis which falls upon the resurrection as a pivotal event in the accomplishment of redemption. The other pivot is the death upon the cross. The sanctity belonging to the first day of the week as the Lord's day is the constant reminder of all that Jesus' resurrection involves. It is the memorial of the resurrection as the Lord's supper is of Jesus' death upon the tree. Inescapable, therefore, is the conclusion that the resurrection in its redemptive character yields its sanction to the sacredness of the first day of the week, just as deliverance from Egypt's bondage accorded its sanction to the sabbath institution of the old covenant. This is the

rationale for regarding the Lord's day as the Christian Sabbath. It follows the line of thought which the Old Testament itself prescribes for us when it appeals to redemption as the reason for sabbath observance. The principle enunciated in Deuteronomy 5:15 receives its verification and application in the new covenant in the memorial of finalized redemption, the Lord's day.

II. THE MANWARD REFERENCE

Under this caption we have in mind our Lord's saying: 'The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath' (Mark 2:27, 28).

The title our Lord uses to designate himself is one that belongs to him in his messianic identity, commission, and office. The lordship he claims is, therefore, redemptively conditioned; it is his lordship as Mediator and Saviour. As such, in accord with his own testimony, he is given all authority in heaven and earth (cf. John 3:35; Matt. 28:18). So every institution is brought within the scope of his lordship. Since he exercises this lordship in the interests of God's redemptive purpose, it is particularly true that institutions given for the good of man are brought within the scope of his lordship and made to serve the interests of the supreme good which redemption designs and guarantees. It is this governing thought that is applied in the text to the institution of the Sabbath. The accent falls upon the beneficent design of the Sabbath—it was made for man. 'Therefore the Son of man is Lord' of it.

When Jesus speaks of the *Sabbath*, he is specifying the institution defined by the fourth commandment, and he asserts his lordship over it in that precise character. There is not the slightest intimation of abrogation. For it is the Sabbath in that identity over which he claims to be Lord. Too frequently this text is adduced in support of an alleged relaxation of the requirements set forth in the commandment, as if Jesus on this ground were, in the exercise of his authority, defending his disciples for behaviour that went counter to Old Testament requirements. This totally misconstrues the situation in which the words were spoken. Jesus is defending his disciples against the charge of desecration brought by the Pharisees (cf. Mark 2:24). But in doing so he shows by appeal to the Old Testament itself (cf. Matt. 12:4, 5; Mark 2:25, 26)

that the behaviour of the disciples was in accord with what the Old Testament sanctioned. It was not deviation from Old Testament requirements that our Lord was condoning, but deviation from pharisaical distortion. He was condemning the tyranny by which the sabbath institution had been made an instrument of oppression. And he did this by appeal to the true intent of the Sabbath as verified by Scripture itself.

Of special interest is the relation of the redemptive sanction of the fourth commandment to the claim of Jesus on this occasion. The lordship over the Sabbath is, as observed, redemptively conditioned and thus only within a redemptive design can his lordship of the Sabbath be understood. This is to say that the sabbath ordinance in its beneficent character comes to full expression within the realm of our Lord's mediatorial lordship. The Sabbath is not alien to redemption at the zenith of its realization and blessing. As made for man it continues to serve its great purpose in that administration that achieves the acme of covenantal grace. This Jesus' word seals to us—'the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath'.

III. THE PROSPECTIVE REFERENCE

'There remains therefore a sabbath-keeping for the people of God' (Heb. 4:9).

The context of this passage is all-important for its interpretation and for appreciation of its implications. At verse 4 there is quotation of Genesis 2:2: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works'. This, of course, refers to God's *own* rest. At verse 5 there is allusion to the rest of Canaan and quotation of Psalm 95:11 (cf. also vs. 3 and 3:11) in reference to the failure of too many to enter into it (cf. Psalm 95:10). The remarkable feature of verse 5, as of Psalm 95:11, is that this rest of Canaan is called God's rest ('my rest'). Why this characterization? It is not sufficient to say that it was the rest God provided. The proximity of reference to God's own rest in verse 4 requires more than the thought of mere provision by God. We cannot say less than that God calls it his rest because the rest of Canaan was patterned after God's rest—it partook of the character of God's rest. The same kind of identification appears in verse 10 with reference to the rest that remains for the people of God. 'For he that has entered into his rest, he also has ceased from his own

works, as God did from his.' So the rest of Canaan and the rest that remains for the people of God are called God's rest because both partake of the character of God's own rest in resting from his creative work on the seventh day. Here is something highly germane to the present topic.

It is clear that the rest of Canaan and the rest that remains for the people of God are redemptive in character. Since they are patterned after God's rest in creation, this means that the redemptive takes on the character of that rest of God upon which the sabbath institution for man originally rested and from which it derived its sanction. We cannot but discover in this again the close relation between the creative and the redemptive in the sabbath ordinance and the coherence of Exodus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 5:15. We are reminded again that likeness to God governs man's obligation and is brought to its realization in the provisions of redemption. In the consummation of redemption the sabbath rest of God's people achieves conformity to the fullest extent. 'For he who has entered into his rest, he also has ceased from his own works, as God did from his' (cf. Rev. 14:13). The sabbath institution in all its aspects and application has this prospective reference; the whole movement of redemption will find its finale in the sabbath rest that remains. The weekly Sabbath is the promise, token, and foretaste of the consummated rest; it is also the earnest. The biblical philosophy of the Sabbath is such that to deny its perpetuity is to deprive the movement of redemption of one of its most precious strands.

Redemption has a past, a present, and a future. In the Sabbath as 'the Lord's day' all three are focused. In retrospect it is the memorial of our Lord's resurrection. In the present, with resurrection joy it fulfils its beneficent design by the lordship of the Son of man. As prospect, it is the promise of the inheritance of the saints. With varying degrees of understanding and application it is this perspective that dictated the observance of the Lord's day in Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed tradition. Shall we forfeit an institution so embedded in redemptive revelation and recognized as such in the history of the church of Christ? In the faith and for the honour of the Sabbath's Lord may we answer with a decisive, no! In devotion to him may we increasingly know the joy and blessing of the recurring day of rest and worship.