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The Sabbath Institution[1]

THE questions relating to the weekly day of rest and worship are of perennial interest and concern. The circumstances in connection with which these questions arise differ from generation to generation, from family to family, and from person to person. But the basic questions are always the same. Any argument for or against the weekly Sabbath which fails to come to terms with these basic questions is one which misses the point of the debate. This is why a great deal that has been written in the interests of libertinism is a begging of the question, and, sad to say, a good deal written and pleaded in behalf of Sabbath observance has lacked the cogency of divine sanction. The argument for the perpetuity of the Sabbath rest stands or falls with the question of divine institution and obligation. Whatever expediency might dictate, it can never carry the sanction of law and it cannot bind the conscience of man. There is no law of expediency; it changes with circumstance. And what changes with circumstance is not universal and perpetual law. The recognition of this is necessary not only to guard law; it is also necessary to guard liberty. If we once allow expediency to dictate law then we are on the road to tyranny and conscience is no longer captive to the law of God but to the variable fancies of men.

There are three questions that must be dealt with if controversy regarding the Sabbath institution is to be placed in proper focus and if

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the perpetuity of this ordinance is to be established. These are the *Obligation*, the *Sanctity*, and the *Observance* of the Sabbath.

THE OBLIGATION

When we assert the obligation of the Sabbath we are not dealing simply with its obligation under the Mosaic economy. It is the question of its perpetual obligation; it is the question of the relevance to us of the institution which was defined for those of the Mosaic economy in the fourth commandment. What are the facts which indicate that it is of permanent application?

1. *The Sabbath was instituted at creation* (Gen. 2:2, 3). It belongs, therefore, to the order of things which God established for man at the beginning. It is relevant quite apart from sin and the need of redemption. In this respect it is like the institutions of labour (Gen. 2:15), of marriage (Gen. 2:24, 25), and of fruitfulness (Gen. 1:28). The Sabbath institution was given to man as man, for the good of man as man, and extended to man the assurance and promise that his labour would issue in a Sabbath rest similar to the rest of God himself. The Sabbath is a creation ordinance and does not derive its validity or its necessity or its sanction, in the first instance, from any exigencies arising from sin, nor from any of the provisions of redemptive grace. When sin entered, the circumstances under which the Sabbath rest was to be observed were altered just as in the case of these other institutions. The forces of redemptive grace were now indispensable to their proper discharge. But the entrance of sin did not abrogate the Sabbath institution any more than it abrogated the institutions of labour, marriage, and fruitfulness. The depravity arising from sin did not make in any way irrelevant or unnecessary the obligations emanating from these divine institutions. In a word, sin does not abrogate creation ordinances and redemption does not make superfluous their obligation and fulfilment.

2. *The Sabbath rests upon the divine example* (Gen. 2:2). This is expressly stated in the fourth commandment. '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). This means that the sequence for man of six days of labour and one day of rest is patterned after the sequence which God

followed in the grand scheme of his creative work. God created in six successive days and he rested on the seventh. That is the exemplar for man. In this connection there are a few questions to be asked and the questions contain their answers. Has God's work of creation ceased to be relevant to us? Has the fact that he created, not in one grand fiat but in the space of six days, become irrelevant? Is not the fact of creation basic to all Christian thinking? The biblical writers should be our monitors in this. How frequently the God of Christian faith and piety is identified by the inspired writers as the God who made the world and all things therein! More specifically, has the fact that God rested on the seventh day ceased to be relevant? God is not now creating; he is resting from his creative work. The sequence of six days of creative work and the seventh of rest is an irreversible fact in the transcendent sphere of God's relation to this universe which he has made. And now to the most pointed question of all: has the divine example become obsolete? Can we think of the exemplar established by God's working and resting as ever ceasing to be the pattern for man's conduct in the ordinances of labour and rest?

3. *The Sabbath commandment is comprised in the decalogue.* The fourth commandment is not an appendix to the decalogue, nor is it an application of the decalogue, nor is it an application of the decalogue to the temporary conditions and circumstances of Israel. There were ordinances in Israel, regulating the observance of the Sabbath, which were peculiar to the circumstances of the people of Israel at that time, and we have no warrant to believe that they are of permanent obligation. But the fourth commandment itself is an element of that basic law which was distinguished from all else in the Mosaic revelation by being inscribed on two tables of stone. The fourth commandment belongs to all that is distinctive and characteristic of that summary of human obligation set forth in the decalogue. It would require the most conclusive evidence to establish the thesis that the fourth command is in a different category from the other nine. That it finds its place among the ten words written by the finger of God upon tables of stone establishes for this commandment, and for the labour and rest it enjoins, a position equal to that of the third or the fifth or the seventh or the tenth.

4. *Our Lord has confirmed the relevance of the Sabbath institution.* 'The

sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath. Wherefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath' (Mark 2:27, 28). What the Lord is affirming is that the Sabbath has its place within the sphere of his messianic lordship and that he exercises lordship over the Sabbath because the Sabbath was made for man. Since he is Lord of the Sabbath it is his to guard it against those distortions and perversions with which Pharisaism had surrounded it and by which its truly beneficent purpose has been defeated. But he is also its Lord to guard and vindicate its permanent place within that messianic lordship which he exercises over all things—he is Lord of the Sabbath, too. And he is Lord of it, not for the purpose of depriving men of that inestimable benefit which the Sabbath bestows, but for the purpose of bringing to the fullest realization on behalf of men that beneficent design for which the Sabbath was instituted. If the Sabbath was made for man, and if Jesus is the Son of man to save man, surely the lordship which he exercises to that end is not to deprive man of that which was made for his good, but to seal to man that which the Sabbath institution involves. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath—we dare not tamper with his authority and we dare not misconstrue the intent of his words.

For these four reasons we are compelled to conclude that the weekly Sabbath is embedded in that order which God has established for man as man. As an institution it antedated the fall of man and would have been, therefore, a feature of man's obedience in a perfect state of integrity and bliss. It antedated the promulgation of the ten commandments at Mount Sinai; the fourth commandment simply defined what was the already existing institution. The commandment finds its place within the summary of the rôle of life for man; it is not an appendix nor even a prologue. Our Lord himself confirms its permanent relevance; the Sabbath was made for man, and the Son of man, as the Saviour of men is its Lord. We must appreciate the cumulative force of these arguments. They mutually supplement and reinforce one another and they all converge to establish the principle that the weekly Sabbath is of perpetual obligation and application.

THE SANCTITY

The sanctity of the Sabbath resides in the command to keep it holy or

to sanctify it (Exodus 20:8); the sanctity is that which is involved in sanctifying it. There are two elements in the word 'sanctify'. It means, first of all, to set apart. If set apart it is distinguished from something else. This belongs to the sanctity of the seventh day. There are people who will say that every day is to them a sabbath, at least that every day is to them the Lord's day. This may seem very pious. It seems pious because there is an element of truth in the assertion that every day is the Lord's day. It is true that we ought to serve the Lord every day and every moment of every day. And our devotion to the Lord should not be one whit less at our weekly labours than in our worship in God's house on the Sabbath. We should dig or plough with as much devotion to the Lord as we pray or sing in the assembly of the saints. Whatsoever we do we are to do it to the Lord and to his glory. In this connection we should remember that the fourth commandment is the commandment of labour as well as of rest. 'Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work' (Exod. 20:9).

But while it is true that we ought to serve the Lord every day and in all things we must not forget that there are different ways of serving God. We do not serve him by doing the same thing all the time. If we do that, we are either insane or notoriously perverse. There is a great variety in human vocation. If we neglect to observe that variation we shall soon pay the cost. One of the ways by which this variety is expressed and enjoined is to set apart every recurring seventh day. That is the divine institution. The recurring seventh day is different, and it is so by divine appointment. To obliterate this difference may appear pious. But it is piosity, not piety. It is not piety to be wiser than God; it is impiety of the darkest hue. The Sabbath day is different from every other day, and to obliterate this distinction either in thought or practice is to destroy what is of the essence of the institution.

The recognition of distinction is indispensable to observance. Too frequently among Christians, refraining from certain practices is merely a matter of custom. There is perchance adherence to honoured tradition, but it is the shell without the kernel. Truly, they do not do certain things, but this abstinence does not spring from a well-grounded sense of sanctity. And the consequence is that when solicitation or temptation to deviate from custom confronts them there is no recoil dictated by

principle—they are the victims of circumstance. It needs to be underlined that Sabbath observance soon becomes obsolete if it does not spring from the sense of sanctity generated and nourished in us by the recognition that God has *set apart* one day in seven.

The second element in sanctity is that the difference which God has ordained is a difference of a specific kind. The Sabbath is set apart *to the Lord*—'the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God' (Exod. 20:10). It is 'a sabbath of rest to the Lord' (Exod. 35:2). The Sabbath rest does not mean inactivity. God's rest on the seventh day after six days of creative activity was not the rest of inactivity. Jesus said, 'My Father worketh until now, and I work' (John 5:17). And he said this in reference to this question of Sabbath observance. He justified the activity which the Jews had condemned, and he did this by appeal to the activity of the Father. God rested on the seventh day from his work of creation but he continued to be omnipresently active in the work of providence. Hence our rest of the Sabbath is not one of inaction, of idleness, far less of sloth. It is the rest of another kind of activity. It is indeed rest *from* the ordinary employments of the other six days. There is cessation from that activity and the labour it entails. But it is also rest *to* or rest *in*; it is rest *to* and rest *in* the Lord. That must mean the rest of activity in the specific worship of the Lord our God. There is release from the labours of the six days, but it is also release to the contemplation of the glory of God. Cessation from the labours of the week must itself have its source and ground in obedience to God, and the gratitude which is both the motive and fruit of such obedience will minister to the worship which is the specific employment of the Sabbath rest. This is just saying that rest from weekly labours and the exercises of specific worship are inseparable and they mutually condition one another. In a Sabbath of rest *to the Lord* we cannot have the one without the other.

This is the sanctity of the Sabbath institution—it is the sanctity of separateness and it is the sanctity of concentrated adoration of the glory of the Lord our God.

THE OBSERVANCE

It is sometimes said, and it is said by good men, that we do not now under this economy observe the Sabbath as strictly as was required of

the people of Israel under the Old Testament. This statement of the case needs examination, and careful distinction must be made if we are to assess it properly. There is an element of truth in it. But there is also a good deal of error. It is true that certain regulations both preceptive and primitive, regulations which governed the observance of the Sabbath under the Mosaic law, do not apply to us under the New Testament. In Israel it was distinctly provided that they were not to kindle a fire throughout their habitations upon the Sabbath day (Exod. 35:3). It was also enacted that whosoever would do any work on the Sabbath would be put to death (Exod. 35:2).

Now there is no warrant for supposing that such regulatory provisions both prohibitive and punitive bind us under the New Testament. This is particularly apparent in the case of the capital punishment executed for Sabbath desecration in the matter of labour. If this is what is meant when it is said that observance is not as strict in its application to us as it was under the Mosaic law, then the contention should have to be granted. It must be said, however, that this would be a rather awkward and inaccurate way of expressing the distinction between the Mosaic economy and the New Testament economy in respect of Sabbath observance. For, recognizing to the fullest extent the discontinuance of certain regulatory provisions in the jurisprudence of Israel under the law of Moses, we may still ask quite insistently: What has this to do with the strictness of observance?

The force of this question can be made more obvious if we think of the regulatory provisions of the Mosaic law governing the observance of other commandments of the decalogue. There were regulations in connection with the other commandments, regulations which we have no warrant to believe apply to us under the New Testament. For example, in respect of the fifth commandment it was provided that the man who cursed father or mother was to be put to death (Exod. 21:17; Lev. 20:9). In respect of the seventh it was provided that the adulterer and the adulteress were to be put to death (Lev. 20:10). Now, however grievous these sins are, we do not believe that the sanction by which they were punished under the Mosaic law is applicable under the New Testament. Such provisions of the Mosaic law are so closely bound up with an economy which has passed away as to its observance, that we

could hold to the continuance of these provisions no more than we could hold to the continuance of the Mosaic economy itself.

And so we come to the real point at issue: may it be said that we are free to observe less strictly the fifth and seventh commandments? The abolition of certain Mosaic provisions guarding and promoting the sanctity of these two commandments we must recognize. But has the sanctity of these commandments been in any way revoked or the strictness with which we observe them relaxed? The very thought is, of course, revolting. And every enlightened mind and tender conscience recoils from the suggestion. The fact is that the sanctity of these commandments is more clearly revealed and enforced in the New Testament than in the Old, and the depth and breadth of their application made more apparent. Is this not the burden of the Sermon on the Mount? And this is just another way of saying that the demands of strictness in the observance of these commandments are made more potent than they are in the Old. It is because this is the case, because the revelation of the sanctity of the commandments is more abundant and the illumining and sanctifying operations of the Holy Spirit more profuse, that the regulations guarding and promoting the observance of these commandments under the Old Testament have been abrogated. Hence the abolition of these regulations is coincident with the deeper understanding of the sanctity of the commandments. It is this same line of thought that must also be applied to the fourth commandment. Abolition of certain Mosaic regulations? Yes! But this in no way affects the sanctity of the commandment nor the strictness of observance that is the complement of that sanctity.

And so it is to confuse the question at issue to speak of observance under the present economy as less strict than under the Old. As in the case of the other commandments, it is the fulness of New Testament revelation and redemptive accomplishment that serves to confirm the sanctity of the Sabbath institution and the strictness of observance demanded of us. The only way whereby the logic of this conclusion could be controverted is by driving a wedge of sharp discrimination between the fourth commandment and the other nine. And this is a position which the proponents of less strict observance have not been successful in proving.

Sometimes appeal is made to what Jesus said on one occasion, 'It is

lawful to do well on the sabbath days' (Matt. 12:12), and these words o our Lord are interpreted to mean that it is lawful to do on the Sabbatl days everything that it is lawful or well for man to do. If that were th case, then it would be lawful to do on the Sabbath everything that mar might lawfully do at any time, and there would be no necessary distinc tion between the activities on the day of rest and the activities of the six days of labour.

This word of Jesus was spoken in a context, and the context alway determines the meaning of what is said. Jesus was vindicating anc defending the doing of certain things on the Sabbath day. If we examin the context we shall find that the works defended and approved by hin are not works of every conceivable kind; they are works which fall int certain categories. These categories are indeed very instructive—the are the categories of piety, necessity, and mercy. A work of piety, tha is, work connected with the worship of the sanctuary, is in view whe he says, 'Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath day the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?' (Matt 12:5). A work of necessity is referred to when he says, 'Have ye not rea what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were wit him; how he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were wit him, but only for the priests?' (Matt. 12:3, 4). That is to say, dire neces sity warranted the doing of something which under normal condition would have been a culpable violation of divine prescription and restric tion. And a work of mercy is in view when he says, 'What man shal there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit o the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?' (Matt. 12:11) It is this service of mercy which Jesus then in the most conspicuous wa exemplified when he said to the man with the withered hand, 'Stretc forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whol like as the other' (Matt. 12:13). It is in reference to such works of piety necessity, and mercy that Jesus says, 'Wherefore it is lawful to do wel on the sabbath days?', and, more specifically, it is in reference to th work of mercy illustrated by drawing a sheep out of a pit, and exempli fied in the concrete situation by his own miracle of healing the man wit the withered hand.

The occasion upon which Jesus spoke all these words was the criticism which the Pharisees brought against the disciples for satisfying their hunger by eating from the standing grain on the sabbath day. Jesus defended his disciples against this censoriousness, which arose, not from insight into the design of the Sabbath, but from the sophistry by which rabbinical tradition had perverted the Sabbath institution and had turned it into an instrument of oppression and hypocrisy.

It is true that we must guard against the encroachments which proceed from pharisaical imposition. This is self-righteousness and will-worship. It completely frustrates the divine design. The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. When we encumber the institutions of God with the accretions of our own invention we not only pervert his law but we impugn his wisdom and usurp his authority. We make ourselves lawgivers and forget that there is only one lawgiver. Not only the wisdom but the holiness of God is reflected in what he has not required, as well as in what he actually demands. If we add to his law then we suppose ourselves to be better and wiser than God. And that is the essence of impiety and lawlessness.

We must not, however, fall into the snare of libertinism because we want to avoid the charybdis of pharisaism. The opponents of Sabbath observance and of its complementary restrictions like to peddle the charge of pharisaism when efforts are made to preserve the Sabbath from desecration and to maintain its sanctity. We should not be disturbed by this type of vilification. Why should insistence upon Sabbath observance be pharisaical or legalistic? The question is: is it a divine ordinance? If it is, then adherence to it is not legalistic any more than adherence to the other commandments of God. Are we to be charged with legalism if we are meticulously honest? If we are jealous not to deprive our neighbour unjustly of one penny which is his, and are therefore meticulous in the details of money transactions, are we necessarily legalistic? Our Christianity is not worth much if we can knowingly and deliberately deprive our neighbour of one penny that belongs to him and not to us. Are we to be charged with legalism if we are scrupulously chaste and condemn the very suggestions or gesture of lewdness? How distorted our conception of the Christian ethic and of the demands of holiness has become if we associate concern for the

details of integrity with pharisaism and legalism! 'He that is faithful i that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in th least is unjust also in much' (Luke 16:10). Why then should insistenc upon Sabbath observance be legalism and pharisaism? This charge ca appear plausible only because our consciences have become insensitiv to the demands of the sanctity which the ordinance entails. The charg really springs from failure to understand what is the liberty of th Christian man. The law of God is the royal law of liberty and liber consists in being captive to the Word and law of God. All other liber is not liberty but the thraldom of servitude to sin.

The law of God is summarily comprehended in the ten command ments. Underlying each commandment is a sanctity. Underlying th first is the sanctity of the being of God—there is none other but he Underlying the second is the sanctity of the worship of God—he ma be worshipped only in a way that is consonant with his spirituality an his holiness, and therefore only in the way which he has himsel prescribed. Underlying the third is the sanctity of the name of God— the name of God expresses his glory and reverence for his being mus carry with it reverence for his name. Underlying the fifth command ment is the sanctity of the parental relation, underlying the sixth th sanctity of life, underlying the seventh the sanctity of the source of lif or of the instruments for the propagation of life, underlying the eight the sanctity of property, underlying the ninth the sanctity of truth underlying the tenth the sanctity of individual possession.

What then is the sanctity underlying the fourth commandment? It i the sanctity of every recurring seventh day as the day of rest to th Lord. Co-ordinate with this is also the sanctity of six days of labour an therefore the sanctity of the institution of labour. But the main emphasi rests upon the sanctity of each recurring seventh day. 'Remember th sabbath day to keep it holy.' It is not the sanctity simply of the seventh part of our time. That could be done in a variety of ways. It is th sanctity of each seventh day. And so the sanctity of the cycle and th sequence implied in the division of time into weeks is recognized an confirmed.

This ordinance rests upon the divine example. The cycle and sequenc established for man in the division of time into weeks rests upon th

sequence which God followed in the work of creation. We may speak of the Sabbath as the memorial of God's rest, the rest of delight and satisfaction in work accomplished. 'And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good' (Gen. 1:31). In the Christian economy the Sabbath is the Lord's Day and therefore the memorial of the completion of a work of God greater than that of creation. It is the memorial of redemption completed by the resurrection of our Lord from the dead. It is altogether appropriate that the recurring seventh day of rest should now memorialize the rest from the labour involved in the working out of redemption upon which our Lord and Redeemer entered when he was raised from the dead by the exceeding greatness of the power of God.

But the Sabbath is not only a memorial of creation completed and redemption accomplished; it is also the promise of a glorious prospect, the foretaste of the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God. It is the prospect of the grand finale to the whole of history, the Sabbath rest that is the promised sequel to the sum total of the toils and labours of history. 'We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness' (2 Pet. 3:13). 'There remaineth therefore a sabbath-keeping for the people of God' (Heb. 4:9). The weekly Sabbath in the divinely established sequences of temporal history is the constant reminder to us of the beginning and the end. And for the people of God it is the foretaste of that eternal rest which was secured by redemption once for all accomplished and will be dispensed in redemption consummated. The perpetual relevance of the weekly Sabbath resides in the divine plan of history and of destiny, and with its perpetual relevance goes its perpetual obligation. Is it superfluous to be reminded of the words of the prophet? '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 the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it' (Isa. 58:13, 14).

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