

Chapter 5

The Attitude to the Sabbath in Patristic Thought

HAVING examined the evidence supplied by the New Testament, we now go on to see what attitude was taken in the succeeding period.

It seems clear that the observance of the first day of the week began in Jewish circles and from the earliest days.¹ It did not stem from Gentile sources.² What exactly happened at Jerusalem among those of the circumcision is not clear. They may also have continued to observe the sabbath, as they seem to have continued to practise circumcision.³ If we are to accept Eusebius's evidence about the Ebionites, presumably the survivors of those who continued to practise the Jewish ritual, there were in these sects those who kept two days, the seventh and the first (*HE* 3.27.5; *PG* xx. 273).

On the other hand, the *Didache* 14.8 (c. AD 90-110) mentions only Sunday and the two fast days of the Christians, apparently deliberately chosen so as not to coincide with Jewish fast days. Ignatius disapproves of the observance of the Jewish sabbath⁴ and, as Dumaine ('Dimanche') pointed out, it looks from the passage as if Ignatius considered such an observance as a recent innovation among Christians, in much the same way as Paul does in his letter to the Galatians, also Gentile churches (*Gal.* 4: 10). Ignatius claims that his attitude to the sabbath was handed down to him.

In the *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. AD 70-100) the author states that 'the present sabbaths are not acceptable to me', and explains the real meaning of the sabbath as the age after the six thousand years of the world's existence. Only then shall we be able to 'keep the sabbath' truly. As he mentions the Christian practice of celebrating the day after the sabbath, this is clearly meant to be a condemnation of the Jewish sabbath observance (*Barn.* 15.8).

It will not be necessary to give details of the same attitude as it continues throughout the next two centuries⁵. But two points need to be emphasised. The church refused to accept Marcion's attitude to the Old Testament suggesting that it was to be abandoned altogether by

Christians. It refused to make the seventh day into a fast day as Marcion would have liked (Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion* 4.12; *PL* ii. 383ff.). Only on the 'Great Sabbath', the day on which Christ lay in the grave, the day before Easter day, was fasting permitted. Secondly, Justin in his dialogue with Trypho the Jew is willing to allow him, if he becomes a Christian, to go on observing the sabbath, if he has conscientious qualms about it, provided he does not force it on others (*Dial.* 47; *PG* xx. 273). This is no doubt a development of Paul's argument in *Rom.* 14: 5.

There seems to have been, probably arising during the fourth century, an observance of the sabbath, as well as the Sunday, as a day free from work⁶. The origin of this practice is uncertain. It was considered the feast of the creation. By this time the emperor had already issued his Sunday decree of AD 321. Seventh Day Adventist scholars and others have attempted to prove that it was observed in this way from the earliest days, but the evidence is against them; for the passages in the *Apostolic Constitutions* which mention the observance of both days are absent from the *Didascalia*, which was written a hundred years earlier.⁷ In fact, this double observance seems only to have been the practice in Syria and Asia Minor, and later in Constantinople. It appears in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, in the Gregorians and Basil, and in Chrysostom. The practice of not working on the seventh day is condemned by the Council of Laodicea, AD 363. Socrates implies that it was unknown in Rome and Alexandria, and presumably also in North Africa.⁸ Though Gregory of Nyssa calls the days 'twin sisters' (*Adversus eos*; *PG* xlvi. 309), there is no doubt that even where the sabbath was observed it was never treated in the same way as the Sunday, though a eucharist was celebrated on it. This double observance during the period after the edict of Constantine may well be an excessive devotion, a preparation for Sunday which spread over an extra day.⁹ Such an explanation is supported by the additions to Ignatius, where the Saturday observance was the preparation for the observance of Sunday (*Ps.-Ign., Mag.* 9.4; *PG* v. 768). This is the practice of the Orthodox Syrian Church in India today, though it is only an evening service and does not involve the whole day. In assessing the evidence for such an observance of the sabbath, care must be taken to be sure that the reference is not to a late service on the Saturday evening with the Roman method of reckoning the day.

The misuse of the sabbath by the Jews was a constant theme of Christian writers. The Jews are accused of spending the day in

'inactivity' (*argia*). Instead of using the day as it was intended by God in a study of the Scriptures and gaining knowledge, they spent it in idleness, in dancing and in the pleasures of debauchery (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.9, PG vii. 993; Origen, *Contr. Cels.* 4.31, PG xi. 1076). Sometimes there is contempt for people who take half-cold food and tepid drinks (Eusebius, *Pss.* 91 (92); PG xxviii. 1169). They are accused of finding leisure for evil, but not for good, and the charge is made that all work was forbidden, because the Jews could not be trusted to do what was good (Justin, *Dial.* 12, PG vi. 500; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.15.1, PG vii. 1012). Origen claims that it would be impossible to fulfil the sabbatic law, if taken literally, for one would not be able to move from one spot throughout the day (*De Princip.* 4.17; PG xi. 380).

THE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SABBATH

We have seen the practice of the early church on the sabbath question; what then was its meaning for the church? There are three main lines of thought.

1. *The sabbath is looked upon as a Jewish institution*

The aversion to it was not so much to the idea of one day in seven given to rest, as to its observance as part of the Jewish system and to its misuse. As a part of the Jewish system linked to the temple and the sacrificial system, to the laws of clean and unclean, and to the national outlook, it had passed away. It was included, often linked with circumcision, in the Old Covenant. This was partly due to its inadequacy as a picture of how time dedicated to God should be spent, its negative character; and partly to its grave misuse in unworthy forms. It was one of the signs of the Old Covenant with Israel. This was shown in Exod. 31: 13-16. 'It is a sign (*ōt*) between me and you throughout your generations'. Again, in Ezek. 20: 10-12, 'I gave them my sabbaths to be a sign between me and them that they might know that I am the Lord'; 'I gave them sabbaths to be a sign'. In the same chapter, v. 20, 'Hallow my sabbaths and they shall be a sign'. So, too, in Neh. 9: 14. The attitude of the Fathers is that with the passing of the whole system, temple, sacrifice, circumcision, clean and unclean, went the sabbath as a sign (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.1f., PG vii. 1012f.; Origen, *Contr. Cels.* 2.7, PG xi. 805, etc.).

The original purpose of the sabbath had been good. It was God-given. Several of the Fathers distinguish between 'my sabbaths' (Isa. 13: 14; 56: 4; Ezek. 20: 12) and 'your sabbaths' (Tertullian, *De Idol.*

14, PL ii. 682; Origen, *Contr. Cels.* 4.26, PG xi. 1076). In other words, the way in which the Israelites were observing the sabbath was not the way God intended. 'To delight oneself in the Lord' (Isa. 58: 13) was to seek the knowledge of God: to get to know him better. As Philo had seen, the sabbath gave the opportunity for meditation on the things of the spirit. It was meant for spiritual ends.

Yet some felt that this was not the best, but only a second best. Many of the Fathers consider that the whole Mosaic law was a law of bondage, given for slaves, who could not obey without it. No doubt this is connected with Paul's view of the Christian life as liberty and being 'set free from the law' (Rom. 7: 3; Gal. 5: 1). The sabbath regulations in this sense are only a part of this system of bondage. If the Israelites had not worshipped the golden calf, the Decalogue, God's natural law, would have been sufficient, but as they immediately broke it, they needed a 'yoke of bondage' to keep them from going astray.¹⁰

The Fathers, it seems unanimously, claimed that there was no sabbath observance before Moses; Abel, Enoch, and the patriarchs are held up as examples of those who had no sabbaths and yet lived godly lives.¹¹ They fulfilled what it implied without having a rule for its observance. Without sabbath regulations they observed its inner meaning. A modified form of this is the idea of a pupil learning his lesson. The law of Moses was 'being under a tutor'. When the lesson was learned, the tutor could be dismissed. Origen says, 'The work of the pedagogue is abolished by the perfection of the pupil' (*Comm. Rom.* 3.5-5.7, PG xiv. 958).

Moreover in spite of the sabbath regulations, God himself for his own purposes overrules the sabbath law which he has himself instituted. He himself has not ceased to work, for he says, 'My Father worketh hitherto and I work' (John 5: 17). God has not ceased to guide his universe.¹² Since the time of Moses God has overruled his own law. In commanding the Israelites to march round Jericho for seven days, it is clear that one of these days must have been a sabbath (Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion* 21, PL ii. 309b). This, these Fathers claim, was in fact 'doing the service of God'. It was in the same category with the priests 'who profane the sabbath and are blameless'. If God has commanded a thing it must be right to do it on a sabbath (Justin, *Dial.* 27, PG vi. 533; Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 10, PG xii. 752). This is in fact taking a step further the argument of Christ in the Gospels that the priestly service is beyond the law of the sabbath. The service of God lies outside the sabbath regulation. Or perhaps it would be better to say that included

in the sabbath meaning was this spiritual service to God. Behind the outward regulation of the sabbath lay deeper insights into its meaning.

2. *The sabbath is looked upon as a physical benefit*

Clement of Alexandria stresses this point of view, that man needs a day of rest (*Strom.* 6.16, PG ix. 364). Following Aristobulus, he says, 'God gave a seventh day for rest on account of the trouble there is in life'. Aphrahat (*Serm.* 12), writing between AD 336 and 345, and from outside the Roman Empire where Constantine's edict would not hold, points out that the sabbath was not instituted primarily for 'sin and righteousness, life and death', for it was prescribed also for animals which have no soul¹³. I presume that his meaning is that its observance was not of the essentials of the approach to God; it was nevertheless for man's good. For he goes on to point out that its institution was only binding on what grows tired in labour. He points out that rivers, clouds, rain, and sun, which do not grow tired, are excluded from the commandment and from the sabbath rest. Adam did not need a sabbath before the Fall, because his work was not laborious. Only what grows weary needs a sabbath. The sabbath then was a day of relaxation from toil enjoyed by both slaves and animals. This seems to be an extension of Christ's words that 'the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath'.

3. *The sabbath is looked upon as a spiritual benefit as well as a physical*

This viewpoint stems from Philo, as we have seen, and is taken up by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 6.16, PG ix. 364) and Origen (*Hom. Exod.* 7.7, PG xii. 347).

We have then in these varying attitudes a narrower view in which the sabbath was seen as part of the Jewish national covenant life and a wider view that it had a universal significance, a humanitarian, besides a religious significance. Perhaps these different views did not depend so much on the individual writer as on those to whom he was writing. This is brought out clearly in Tertullian. In writing against the Jews he claims that the sabbath is temporary and with the coming of Christ has come to an end. But in writing against Marcion, who claimed that the Old Testament had no connection with the Christian, he says, 'He was called the Lord of the sabbath because he maintained the sabbath as his own institution, but he did not utterly destroy it . . . he did not at all rescind the sabbath . . . he exhibits in a clear light the different kinds

of work . . . he imparted an additional sanctity' (*Adv. Jud.* 6, PL ii. 608c; *Adv. Marcion* 4.12, PL ii. 383ff.).

This warns us that in examining teaching on the sabbath it is very important to see what the purpose of the writer is. The Jewish sabbath has for all Christians passed away. The sabbath in its spiritual meaning is still of great importance to the Christian. Of what that meaning is we shall get glimpses in a study of what the Fathers felt the Old Testament usage implied for Christians.

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SABBATH

It is possible to find various strands of thought in the Christian view of the Jewish sabbath. One suggestion is that the sabbath was the memorial of the first creation and of its completion (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.1f., PG vii. 1012f.; Origen, *Contr. Cels.* 2.7, PG xi. 805; Ps.-Athanasius, *De Sab. et Circum.*, PG xli. 468). Another view was that it represented a ceasing from our own works and a resting in the work of God. Salvation was by faith not works (Clement Alex., *Strom.* 6.16, PG ix. 364). Rather another slant was to see the sabbath as a picture of ceasing to do what was evil, a rest of conscience (Epiphanius, *Adv. Haer.* 1.2.32, PG xli. 468; Ps.-Athanasius, *De Sab. et Circum.*, PG xli. 468).

Then again, some saw it as a picture of the Christian experience, the new land of promise into which the new Joshua was leading his people, the Canaan of God, life consecrated and made holy (Justin, *Dial.* 12, PG vi. 500; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.1-3, PG vii. 1013ff.; Origen, *Contr. Cels.* 8.23, PG xi. 1552). This was rest in comparison with the toil of the old selfish life. To keep sabbath was to have the heart set upon God all the time. All time belonged to God.

Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise thee.
(George Herbert)

Yet another suggestion is that as in the Genesis account there is no mention of an evening and a morning to the seventh day, the seventh day becomes the eighth day without any break. The rest of the seventh day merges into the perfect rest of the eighth day (Augustine, *Serm.* 259, PL xxxviii. 1197; *Civ. Dei* 22. 30, PL xli. 803).

Then too there was an eschatological meaning given to it. This might take two forms. In the first the sabbath was a picture of the eternal rest after death laid up for the Christian. It was an eternal sabbath

after the toil of this world. Of this the patriarchs had a foretaste.¹⁴ As the ideals of the sabbath could not be fully realised down here and no one could serve God all the time, or have a wholly quiet conscience, its full meaning would only be realised in the world to come.¹⁵ Heb. 4: 9, which seems primarily to refer to the present life, was taken, and still is, by many expositors to refer to 'the keeping of the sabbath in the world to come'. But even as early as *Barnabas* this has already begun to take on a chiliastic slant. The earth's existence will last for six thousand years. Then will come the millennium, the thousand years of sabbath keeping. This conception continued to catch the imagination of those who held chiliastic views (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.2, PG vii, 1017; Origen, *Hom. in Gen.* 7, PG xii, 218; Methodius, *Symp.* 9.5, PG viii, 189). Augustine at first seems to have held these views, but later changed.¹⁶

It has been suggested (Daniélou, 'Typologie') that Christ's attitude to the sabbath lay along the lines of realised eschatology. The sabbath was the foreshadowing of the Messianic reign and therefore Christ's miracles were deliberately performed on the sabbath day to show this. The Messianic salvation had begun in accordance with Isa. 61: 1, and this Christ claimed to be fulfilling (Luke 4: 17-21). True rest was to be found in Christ himself: 'Come unto me . . . I will give you rest' (Matt. 11: 28). Perhaps this is the basis of another view to be found in Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis (c. AD 380) in which Christ himself was the sabbath fulfilment. He says (*Adv. Haer.* 1.2.30, PG xli, 468), 'But when the Great Sabbath came, that is Christ, who gave us rest from our sins, of whom Noah was the type, This one shall give us rest from our sins . . .' He goes on to say, '*Sebeth*, which is interpreted rest and sabbath, which is Christ, in whom the Father rests and the Spirit rests'. He speaks of the Jewish sabbath as the 'little sabbath'. Christ then is the fulfilment of the Jewish sabbath, as he was also of circumcision. He was both the Joshua who circumcises and the flint, the stone, with which they were circumcised. Apart perhaps from the millenarian, these different views could all be traced back to biblical origin.

SUMMARY OF THE PATRISTIC ATTITUDE TO THE SABBATH

(a) *Practically*

1. The sabbath possessed a national character as a mark of the Old Covenant between God and Israel, and in that capacity it came to an end.

2. It bore a humanitarian character, wider than the national, a rhythm of life by which what 'grows weary' could gain refreshment.
3. It had a spiritual value and enabled men to have time for the service of God. The priestly service, being God's, was not given up.
4. By inference from the last two points, as the Fathers concerned seem to imply, the Saturday day of rest had merged into the Christian Sunday.

(b) *Theologically*

1. It was a memorial of the old creation and showed the completion of that work.
2. It was a picture of salvation by faith, not works.
3. It was a picture of the rest of conscience from sin.
4. It was a foretaste of the final rest in the world to come.
5. It was fulfilled in Christ and his Messianic work.¹⁷

What emerges from all this is that the Christian church considered the Jewish sabbath, in its setting in the Jewish economy and as a sign of the Old Covenant, to have come to an end. The seventh day was no longer the sacred day to the Christian. It had served its purpose in the Mosaic ritual, but was inadequate to express all that was contained in the New Covenant. This inadequacy Christ had begun to show in the way in which he acted on the sabbath day, and it was confirmed in the Epistles and the works of the Fathers. As Ignatius expressed it soon after the end of the first century, 'No longer observing sabbaths, but fashioning our lives according to the Lord's Day, on which also our life arose through him'.¹⁸ As the Epistle to the Hebrews says, referring to the whole conception of Judaism, it had begun 'to become obsolete and, growing old, is ready to vanish away' (Heb. 8: 13).

For a rite so firmly imbedded in their past with such obvious advantages and so strongly appreciated as the sabbath had been, to have been discarded must have required a most powerful dynamic. What was this? The answer lies in the theology of the Christian Sunday.

CHAPTER 5 (pp. 50-57)

1. Rordorf, *Sunday*, p. 234; and pp. 31-3 above.
2. Dumaine, 'Dimanche', p. 889. See also Callewaert, 'Synaxe', p. 35; Dix, *Shape*, p. 336; Duchesne *Christian Worship*, p. 47. Rordorf, op. cit., p. 291.
3. Eusebius calls the Jerusalem bishops, 'they of the circumcision' (*HE* 4.5.3; *PG* xx. 308).
4. Ignatius, *Ad Mag.* 9.11 (*PG* v. 669): 'no longer observing sabbaths'.
5. Ignatius, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, etc.
6. *Apost. Constit.* 2:36:1, 2; 2:59:2f; 7:23:3; 8:33:2 (*FXF*, vol. 1, pp. 121, 171f., 408, 538). There is a list of passages where Sunday and Saturday services are mentioned. Rordorf (op. cit., p. 140), believes it may have started in Tertullian's time, but Tertullian says in *De Idol.* 14 (*PL* ii. 682), 'We to whom sabbaths are strange.'
7. Bishai, 'Sabbath', pp. 25-31; Kraft, 'Notes', p. 18. Dugmore *Influence*,

- pp. 31ff., seems to take the same view. See too Dumaine, op. cit., p. 937.
8. Socrates, *HE* 5.22 (PG lxvii. 625) and 6.8 (PG lxvii. 688), mentions Arian gatherings on Saturdays and Sundays in Constantinople.
 9. This observance tells against Rordorf's argument that after the edict the church leaders had to multiply services in order to fill the day and avoid laziness, when work on Sundays had ceased. It suggests rather that they wanted more time. They even forbade slaves working on the Saturdays (Apost. Constit. 8. 33).
 10. Irenaeus, *Haer* 4.13.2 (PG vii. 1007), holds this view strongly. It is developed even more fully in the idea of the Middle (Second) Legislation (*Deuterosis*) in the *Didascalia*. See R. H. Connolly's edition, ii, iii, pp. 12-14 and lvii ff., where the writer calls the Mosaic law 'the middle times' between the Patriarchs and Christians. Cf. Ephrem Syrus in *Three Rhythms* 2.40-41; Morris, *Select Works*, p. 391.
 11. Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 3 (PL ii. 605); Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.1 (PG vii. 1013); Eusebius, *Comm. Pss.* 92 (PG xxiii. 1163); Aphrahat, *Serm.* 12; Ephrem Syr., *Rhythm on Faith* 1.41.
 12. Ephrem Syr., *Hymns on the Nativity*: 'Praise to him who made void the sabbath by fulfilling it'; *CSCO*, 186, Hymns Nat. 3.2.
 13. *CEP* 25, pp. 412ff. See also Chrysostom, *Hom. Matt.* 39.3 (PG lvii. 436).
 14. Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 6 (PL ii. 608). The hymn by Abelard looks at the sabbath in this way.
 15. *Barnabas* 15. Apocalyptic literature had already paved the way for this; cf. *Enoch*.
 16. Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Victorinus, and Lactantius all held millenarian views; so also rabbinic Judasim.
 17. There is a fine summary of the attitude of different Fathers to the sabbath in Daniélou, *Bible and Liturgy*, pp. 230ff. See also Dumaine, 'Dimanche', pp. 918-29.
 18. Ignatius, *Ad Mag.* 9.1. This, the usual explanation of the passage in Ignatius, has been challenged by the Seventh Day Adventists. See Guy, 'Lord's Day'.