

Chapter 6

The Early Church and Sunday in the First Three Centuries (I)

WE have examined the attitude of the early church to the Jewish sabbath. We now turn to its attitude to Sunday. Professor Rordorf, as we have seen, has claimed that it was not until Constantine's decree in AD 321 forbidding Sunday work that the church began to think in terms of a whole day. Before that it had been the occasion for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, but little more. We shall be concentrating on the evidence before that date. The evidence before AD 321 will be mostly indirect, but if it all points in one direction we shall be able to form something of a definite picture of what was taking place. Our first question in this chapter will be, 'Did the Christians think in terms of a whole day?' and in the next chapter, 'If so, what sort of a day?'

I. DID CHRISTIANS THINK IN TERMS OF A WHOLE 'DAY'?

The Jews, and so Jewish Christians, the first nucleus of the church, were used to the observance of special days. To begin with, the Christian Sunday carried its Jewish name 'the first day of the week'. But later, by the end of the first century, it had gained its own special title, 'the Lord's Day' (*hē kyriakē hēmera*).¹ Before very long the title is in use without the word 'day', its meaning being already well known.

In the patristic evidence, it is always with the resurrection of Christ and not with the Lord's Supper² that the origin of the day is connected. To the Fathers it is Christ's rising again which has made it 'the Lord's Day'. As we shall see later, they were fond of linking it with Psalm 118 (117): 24, 'This is the day the Lord hath made . . . let us rejoice.'³ Two verses earlier comes the great Resurrection testimonium, 'This is the stone . . .' So far as I am aware there is no instance of the name 'the Lord's Day' being attributed to the performance of the 'Lord's Supper' on that day.⁴ The day carried, as we shall see, all the associations of that first day in Jerusalem when the Christ arose from the grave and appeared to the disciples and on various occasions during the day they saw him 'alive after his passion'. By AD 165 this day was considered

important enough to have a complete work written about it. Melito, bishop of Sardis, wrote a work *On the Lord's Day* (Eusebius, *HE* 4.26.2; *PG* xx. 392). As Melito wrote another book *On Baptism*, but did not, it seems, write on the Lord's Supper, it appears strange that if the church did not think in terms of a whole day the title was not *On the Lord's Supper*.

In assessing the attitude of the early church to Sunday several insights are important.

(1) The Christians compared Sunday both with the Jewish sabbath and with pagan festivals. It is not necessary to go into all these instances.⁵ Several writers compare the observance of the sabbath by the Jews with the observance of Sunday by Christians. Perhaps we may give an example from Tertullian. He blames the Christians for joining in heathen festival days and sarcastically refers to the impossibility of the heathen being willing to join in the Christian festivals. He says, 'O better fidelity of the pagans to their sect which does not claim any solemnity (*solemnitas*) for itself, no Lord's Day, no Pentecost, would they have shared with us.'⁶ Just before he has spoken of the Jewish sabbaths, so that here is a double comparison of the Christian Sunday with both pagan and Jewish sacred days. In both cases these involved the whole day.

(2) That the whole day was thought of is seen also in two regulations of the early church. The first dealt with fasting. No fasting was allowed on the Sunday.⁷ Nor, except later in Rome, was it allowed on the sabbath either. Now a fast covers the whole day and not only a part of the day, showing that they were thinking in terms of a whole day.

Again, on Sunday the regular custom was, throughout the day, to stand for prayer. Tertullian criticises those who 'not only on the Lord's day, but on the sabbath kneel for prayer' (*De Orat.* 23; *PL* i. 1191). He goes on, 'We, however, as we have received, only on the day of the Lord's resurrection ought to guard not only against kneeling, but every posture and office of anxiety.' This clearly does not refer only to a service. Had Tertullian mentioned only kneeling this might have been inferred, but the inclusion of anxious thoughts shows that he was thinking of the whole day.

(3) Again, the word *epiteleō*, to 'complete', 'fulfil', when used of the Christian Sunday, suggests the same. It is the word used by Eusebius of the observance of Sunday by the Ebionites and can rightly be translated 'celebrate' the day.⁸ The other two words *ago* and *diago* which are both used of Sunday have no religious significance and would

simply mean 'to spend' or 'pass'. The same two words are used of the sabbath.

(4) The passage already quoted which deals with the Ebionites suggests that Sunday was in very early times looked upon as the Christian equivalent of the Jewish sabbath. It is true that Eusebius uses a different Greek verb for the Jewish observance and the Christian, but the fact that he couples the two together and seems surprised that the Ebionites should accept both shows that the Christian Sunday was treated as the observance of a day.⁹

(5) In the controversy over the observance of the *Pascha* between the churches of Asia Minor and the church as a whole, called the Quartodeciman controversy, we get further light. These churches insisted that the *Pascha*, the observance of the Christian Passover, the death and resurrection of Christ, should be observed on the fourteenth of Nisan. This was the Jewish custom for slaying the Passover lamb. The rest of Christendom claimed that the feast of the Resurrection could only fittingly be observed on a Sunday. It is not necessary to go into the details of this controversy, but what emerges is that the church as a whole looked upon Sunday as the day to be observed in honour of the Resurrection. It would seem probable that the Asia Minor churches would claim that in observing Sunday¹⁰ they were already observing regularly the feast of the Resurrection, and that the *Pascha* was not really a remembrance of the Resurrection but of the whole act of redemption, the sufferings, burial and resurrection, looked upon as the new Exodus, and therefore more appropriately connected with the Jewish Passover which it fulfilled.¹¹ On either side of the dispute we can see that honour was paid to the Lord's Day. In the one case, it was thought the only suitable day to celebrate the Resurrection. In the other, it was the regular celebration of the Resurrection. And as we have seen, Melito, himself a Quartodeciman, wrote a work on the Lord's Day.

(6) But the attitude to Sunday can perhaps be finally settled by a passage from Origen.¹² He writes, 'For this reason Paul seems to have said very finely, "Do you observe days and months and times and years? I am afraid for you." If anyone makes a rejoinder to this by talking of our observances of certain days, the Lord's Days, or the Preparation, or the Passover, or Pentecost, we would reply to this that the perfect man, who is always engaged in the words, works, and thoughts of the Divine Logos, who is by nature his Lord, is always living in his (*autou*) days and is constantly observing the Lord's Days.'

Here Origen admits that, in spite of Paul's words in Galatians, Christians do observe days, of which he places the Lord's Days first. If the early church had only observed a celebration of the Eucharist, it seems plain that Origen would never have needed to take this up at all. His answer, that to the perfect man each day becomes a Lord's Day, suggests clearly that he meant that the day was devoted to Christ and that this was how the early Christians looked on the Lord's Day.

We may conclude then from these hints that long before the time of Constantine the church thought in terms of a whole day, a day for the Christian set apart from other days of the week.

9. This throws light on the Seventh Day Adventist claim that Christians observed the sabbath from the earliest times.
10. Eusebius, *HE* 5.24 (*PG* xx. 499). See, for the whole controversy, Brightman, 'Quartodeciman Controversy'; Lohse, *Passafest*.
11. Melito, himself a Quartodeciman, wrote a treatise on the *Pascha*, recovered earlier this century and edited by C. Bonner (in Lake, *Studies* xii). As Melito also wrote a treatise on the Lord's Day, which has not survived, it looks as if this was his view.
12. Origen, *Contr. Cels.* 8.32 (*GCS*, p. 239); cf. Tertullian, *De jejum.* 14 (*PL* ii. 773).

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1. In the *Gospel of Peter* (probably c. AD 150) 'the first day' is already changed to 'the Lord's Day'.
2. As Rordorf suggested op. cit., pp. 22off.
3. This seems first to occur in Clement of Alexandria.
4. I have attempted to explore the significance of the word *kyriakē* in Rev. 1 : 10 in an article in *NTS* 12 (1965), pp. 70-75.
5. See, for instance, Clement Alex., *Strom.* 6.16 (*PG* ix. 364); Tertullian, *De Idol.* 14 (*PL* ii. 682) and *De Orat.* 23 (*PL* i. 1191); Victorinus, *De Fab. Mundi* (*PL* v. 306).
6. A *sollemnitas* was generally the observance of a day; see Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*.
7. It was a day of rejoicing, Hippolytus, *Comm. Daniel* 4.20 (*GCS*).
8. Eusebius, *HE* 3.27.5 (*PG* xx. 273); see also *HE* 5.24.11 (*PG* xx. 500ff.).