

CHAPTER 14

THE FIRST WITNESSES FOR SUNDAY

Origin of Sunday observance the subject of present inquiry - Contradictory statements of Mosheim and Neander - The question between them stated, and the true data for deciding that question - The New Testament furnishes no support for Mosheim's statement - Epistle of Barnabas a forgery - The testimony of Pliny determines nothing in the case - the epistle of Ignatius probably spurious, and certainly interpolated so far as it is made to sustain Sunday - Decision of the question.

The first day of the week is now almost universally observed as the Christian Sabbath. The origin of this institution is still before us as the subject of inquiry. This is presented by two eminent church historians; but so directly do they contradict each other, that it is a question of curious interest to determine which of them states the truth. Thus Mosheim writes respecting the first century:

"All Christians were unanimous in setting apart the first day of the week, on which the triumphant Saviour arose from the dead, for the solemn celebration of public worship. This pious custom, which was derived from the example of the church of Jerusalem, was founded upon the express appointment of the apostles, who consecrated that day to the same sacred purpose, and was observed universally throughout the Christian churches, as appears from the united testimonies of the most credible writers."¹

Now let us read what Neander, the most distinguished of church historians, says of this apostolic authority for Sunday observance:

"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, far from them, and from the early apostolic church, to transfer the laws of the Sabbath to Sunday. Perhaps at the end of the second century a false application of this kind had begun to take place; for men appear by that time to have considered laboring on Sunday as a sin."²

How shall we determine which of these historians is in the right? Neither of them lived in the apostolic age of the church. Mosheim was a writer of the eighteenth century, and Neander, of the nineteenth. Of necessity therefore they must learn the facts in the case from the writings of that period which have come down to us. These contain all the testimony which can have any claim to be admitted in deciding this case. These are, first, the inspired writings of the New Testament; second, the reputed productions of such writers of that age as are supposed to mention the first day, viz., the epistle of Barnabas; the letter of Pliny, governor of Bythinia, to the emperor Trajan; and the epistle of Ignatius. These are all the writings prior to the middle of the second century - and this is late enough to amply cover the ground of Mosheim's statement - which can be introduced as even referring to the first day of the week.

The questions to be decided by this testimony are these: Did the apostles set apart Sunday for divine worship (as Mosheim affirms)? or does the evidence in the case show that the festival of Sunday, like all other festivals, was

always only a human ordinance (as is affirmed by Neander)?

It is certain that the New Testament contains no appointment of Sunday for the solemn celebration of public worship. And it is equally true that there is no example of the church of Jerusalem on which to found such observance. The New Testament therefore furnishes no support³ for the statement of Mosheim.

The three epistles which have come down to us purporting to have been written in the apostolic age, or immediately subsequent to that age, next come under examination. These are all that remain to us of a period more extended than that embraced in the statement of Mosheim. He speaks of the first century only; but we summon all the writers of that century, and of the following one prior to the time of Justin Martyr, A.D. 140, who are even supposed to mention the first day of the week. Thus the reader is furnished with all the data in the case. The epistle of Barnabas speaks as follows in behalf of first-day observance:

"Lastly he saith unto them, Your new-moons and your sabbaths I cannot bear them. Consider what he means by it; the sabbaths, says he, which ye now keep, are not acceptable unto me, but those which I have made; when resting from all things, I shall begin the eighth day, that is, the beginning of the other world; for which cause we observe the eighth day with gladness, in which Jesus arose from the dead, and having manifested himself to his disciples, ascended into Heaven."⁴

It might be reasonably concluded that Mosheim would place great reliance upon this testimony as coming from an apostle, and as being somewhat better suited to sustain the sacredness of Sunday than anything previously examined by us. Yet he frankly acknowledges that this epistle is spurious. Thus he says:

"The epistle of Barnabas was the production of some Jew, who, most probably, lived in this century, and whose mean abilities and superstitious attachment to Jewish fables, show, notwithstanding the uprightness of his intentions, that he must have been a very different person from the true Barnabas, who was St. Paul's companion."⁵

In another work, Mosheim says of this epistle:

"As to what is suggested by some, of its having been written by that Barnabas who was the friend and companion of St. Paul, the futility of such a notion is easily to be made apparent from the letter itself, several of the opinions and interpretations of Scripture which it contains, having in them so little of either truth, dignity or force, as to render it impossible that they could ever have proceeded from the pen of a man divinely instructed."⁶

Neander speaks thus of this epistle:

"It is impossible that we should acknowledge this epistle to belong to that Barnabas who was worthy to be the companion of the apostolic labors of St. Paul."⁷

Prof. Stuart bears a similar testimony:

"That a man by the name of Barnabas wrote this epistle I doubt not; that the chosen associate of Paul wrote it, I with many others must doubt."⁸

Dr. Killen, Professor of Ecclesiastical History, to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church of Ireland, uses the following language:

"The tract known as the Epistle of Barnabas was probably composed in A.D. 135. It is the production apparently of a convert from Judaism who took special pleasure in allegorical interpretation of Scripture."[9](#)

Prof. Hackett bears the following testimony:

"The letter still extant, which was known as that of Barnabas even in the second century, cannot be defended as genuine."[10](#)

Mr. Milner speaks of the reputed epistle of Barnabas as follows:-

"It is a great injury to him to apprehend the epistle, which goes by his name, to be his."[11](#)

Kitto speaks of this production as,

"The so-called epistle of Barnabas, probably a forgery of the second century."[12](#)

Says the Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, speaking of the Barnabas of the New Testament:

"He could not be the author of a work so full of forced allegories, extravagant and unwarrantable explications of Scripture, together with stories concerning beasts, and such like conceits, as make up the first part of this epistle."[13](#)

Eusebius, the earliest of church historians, places this epistle in the catalogue of spurious books. Thus he says:

"Among the spurious must be numbered both the books called, 'The Acts of Paul,' and that called, 'Pastor,' and 'The Revelation of Peter.' Besides these the books called 'The Epistle of Barnabas,' and what are called, 'The Institutions of the Apostles.'"[14](#)

Sir Wm. Domville speaks as follows:

"But the epistle was not written by Barnabas; it was not merely unworthy of him, - it would be a disgrace to him, and what is of much more consequence, it would be a disgrace to the Christian religion, as being the production of one of the authorized teachers of that religion in the times of the apostles, which circumstance would seriously damage the evidence of its divine origin. Not being the epistle of Barnabas, the document is, as regards the Sabbath question, nothing more than the testimony of some unknown writer to the practice of Sunday observance by some Christians of some unknown community, at some uncertain period of the Christian era, with no sufficient ground for believing that period to have been the first century."[15](#)

Coleman bears the following testimony:

"The epistle of Barnabas, bearing the honored name of the companion of Paul in his missionary labors, is evidently spurious. It abounds in fabulous narratives, mystic, allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament, and fanciful conceits, and is generally agreed by the learned to be of no authority."[16](#)

As a specimen of the unreasonable and absurd things contained in this epistle, the following passage is quoted:

"Neither shalt thou eat of the hyena: that is, again, be not an adulterer; nor a corrupter of others; neither be like to such. And wherefore so? Because that creature every year changes its kind, and is sometimes male, and sometimes female."[17](#)

Thus first-day historians being allowed to decide the case, we are authorized to treat this epistle as a forgery. And whoever will read its ninth chapter - for it will not bear quoting - will acknowledge the justice of this conclusion. This epistle is the only writing purporting to come from the first century except the New Testament, in which the first day is even referred to. That this furnishes no support for Sunday observance, even Mosheim acknowledges.

The next document that claims our attention is the letter of Pliny, the Roman governor of Bythinia, to the emperor Trajan. It was written about A.D. 104. He says of the Christians of his province:

"They affirmed that the whole of their guilt or error was, that they met on a certain stated day, before it was light, and addressed themselves in a form of prayer to Christ, as to some god, binding themselves by a solemn oath, not for the purposes of any wicked design, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery; never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then re-assemble to eat in common a harmless meal."[18](#)

This epistle of Pliny certainly furnishes no support for Sunday observance. The case is presented in a candid manner by Coleman. He says of this extract:

"This statement is evidence that these Christians kept a day as holy time, but whether it was the last or the first day of the week, does not appear."[19](#)

Charles Buck, an eminent first-day writer, saw no evidence in this epistle of first-day observance, as is manifest from the indefinite translation which he gives it. Thus he cites the epistle:

"These persons declare that their whole crime, if they are guilty, consists in this: that on certain days they assemble before sunrise to sing alternately the praises of Christ as of God."[20](#)

Tertullian, who wrote A.D. 200, speaks of this very statement of Pliny thus:

"He found in their religious services nothing but meetings at early morning for singing hymns to Christ and God, and sealing home their way of life by a united pledge to be faithful to their religion, forbidding murder, adultery, dishonesty, and other crimes."[21](#)

Tertullian certainly found in this no reference to the festival of Sunday.

Mr. W. B. Tayler speaks of this stated day as follows:

"As the Sabbath day appears to have been quite as commonly observed at this date as the sun's day (if not even more so), it is just as probable that this 'stated day' referred to by Pliny was the seventh day, as that it was the first day; though the latter is generally taken for granted."[22](#)

Taking for granted the very point that should be proved, is no new feature in the evidence thus far examined in support of first-day observance. Although Mosheim relies on this expression of Pliny as a chief support of

Sunday, yet he speaks thus of the opinion of another learned man:

"B. Just. Hen. Boehmer, would indeed have us to understand this day to have been the same with the Jewish Sabbath."[23](#)

This testimony of Pliny was written a few years subsequent to the time of the apostles. It relates to a church which probably had been founded by the apostle Peter.[24](#) It is certainly far more probable that this church, only forty years after the death of Peter, was keeping the fourth commandment, than that it was observing a day never enjoined by divine authority. It must be conceded that this testimony from Pliny proves nothing in support of Sunday observance; for it does not designate what day of the week was thus observed.

The epistles of Ignatius of Antioch so often quoted in behalf of first-day observance, next claim our attention. He is represented as saying:

"Wherefore if they who are brought up in these ancient laws came nevertheless to the newness of hope; no longer observing sabbaths, but keeping the Lord's day, in which also our life is sprung up by him, and through his death, whom yet some deny (by which mystery we have been brought to believe, and therefore wait that we may be found the disciples of Jesus Christ, our only master): how shall we be able to live different from him; whose disciples the very prophets themselves being, did by the Spirit expect him as their master."[25](#)

Two important facts relative to this quotation are worthy of particular notice: 1. That the epistles of Ignatius are acknowledged to be spurious by first-day writers of high authority; and those epistles which some of them except as possibly genuine, do not include in their number the epistle to the Magnesians from which the above quotation is made, nor do they say anything relative to first-day observance. 2. That the epistle to Magnesians would say nothing of any day, were it not that the word day had been fraudulently inserted by the translator! In support of the first of these propositions the following testimony is adduced. Dr. Killen speaks as follows:

"In the sixteenth century, fifteen letters were brought out from beneath the mantle of a hoary antiquity, and offered to the world as the productions of the pastor of Antioch. Scholars refused to receive them on the terms required, and forthwith eight of them were admitted to be forgeries. In the seventeenth century, the seven remaining letters, in a somewhat altered form, again came forth from obscurity, and claimed to be the works of Ignatius. Again discerning critics refused to acknowledge their pretensions; but curiosity was roused by this second apparition, and many expressed an earnest desire to obtain a sight of the real epistles. Greece, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, were ransacked in search of them, and at length three letters are found. The discovery creates general gratulation; it is confessed that four of the epistles so lately asserted to be genuine, are apocryphal; and it is boldly said that the three now forthcoming are above challenge. But truth still refuses to be compromised, and sternly disowns these claimants for her approbation. The internal evidence of these three epistles abundantly attests that, like the last three books of the Sibyl, they are only the last shifts of a grave imposture."[26](#)

The same writer thus states the opinion of Calvin:

"It is no mean proof of the sagacity of the great Calvin, that, upwards of three hundred years ago, he passed a sweeping sentence of condemnation on these Ignatian epistles."[27](#)

Of the three epistles of Ignatius still claimed as genuine, Prof. C. F. Hudson speaks as follows:

"Ignatius of Antioch was martyred probably A.D. 115. Of the eight epistles ascribed to him, three are genuine; viz., those addressed to Polycarp, the Ephesians, and the Romans."[28](#)

It will be observed that the three epistles which are here mentioned as genuine do not include that epistle from which the quotation in behalf of Sunday is taken, and it is a fact also that they contain no allusion to Sunday. Sir Wm. Domville, an anti-Sabbatarian writer, uses the following language:

"Every one at all conversant with such matters is aware that the works of Ignatius have been more interpolated and corrupted than those of any other of the ancient fathers; and also that some writings have been attributed to him which are wholly spurious."[29](#)

Robinson, an eminent English Baptist writer of the last century, expresses the following opinion of the epistles ascribed to Ignatius, Barnabas, and others:

"If any of the writings attributed to those who are called apostolical fathers, as Ignatius, teacher at Antioch, Polycarp, at Smyrna, Barnabas, who was half a Jew, and Hermas, who was brother to Pius, teacher at Rome, if any of these be genuine, of which there is great reason to doubt, they only prove the piety and illiteracy of the good men. Some are worse, and the best not better, than the godly epistles of the lower sort of Baptists and Quakers in the time of the civil war in England. Barnabas and Hermas both mention baptism; but both of these books are contemptible reveries of wild and irregular geniuses."[30](#)

The doubtful character of these Ignatian epistles is thus sufficiently attested. The quotation in behalf of Sunday is not taken from one of the three epistles that are still claimed as genuine; and what is still further to be observed, it would say nothing in behalf of any day were it not for an extraordinary license, not to say fraud, which the translator has used in inserting the word day. This fact is shown with critical accuracy by Kitto, whose Cyclopaedia is in high repute among first-day scholars. Thus he presents the original of Ignatius with comments and a translation as follows:

"We must here notice one other passage . . . as bearing on the subject of the Lord's day, though it certainly contains no mention of it. It occurs in the epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians (about A.D. 100.) The whole passage is confessedly obscure, and the text may be corrupt. . . . The passage is as follows:

Eioun oi en palaiois pragmasin anastraphentes eis kainoteta elpidos elthon-meketi sabbatixontes, alla kata kuriaken xoen xontes-(en e kai e xoe emon aneteilen oi autou, etc.)[31](#)

"Now many commentators assume (on what ground does not appear), that after kuriaken [Lord's] the word emeran [day] is to be understood. . . . Let us now look at the passage simply as it stands. The defect of the sentence is the want of a substantive to which autou can refer. This defect, so far from being remedied, is rendered still more glaring by the introduction of emera. Now if we take kuriake xon as simply 'the life of the Lord,' having a more personal meaning, it certainly goes nearer to supplying the substantive to autou. . . . Thus upon the whole the meaning might be given thus:

"If those who lived under the old dispensation have come to the newness of hope, no longer keeping sabbaths, but living according to our Lord's life (in which, as it were, our life has risen again through him, &c.). . . .

"On this view the passages does not refer at all to the Lord's day; but even on the opposite supposition it can not be regarded as affording any positive evidence to the early use of the term 'Lord's day' (for which it is often cited), since the material word *emera* [day] is purely conjectural."[32](#)

The learned Morer, a clergyman of the church of England, confirms this statement of Kitto. He renders Ignatius thus:

"If therefore they who were well versed in the works of ancient days came to newness of hope, not sabbatizing, but living according to the dominical life, &c. . . . The Medicean copy, the best and most like that of Eusebius, leaves no scruple, because *xoen* is expressed and determines the word dominical to the person of Christ, and not to the day of his resurrection."[33](#)

Sir Wm. Domville speaks on this point as follows:

"Judging therefore by the tenor of the epistle itself, the literal translation of the passage in discussion, 'no longer observing sabbaths, but living according to the Lord's life,' appears to give its true and proper meaning; and if this be so, Ignatius, whom Mr. Gurney[34](#) puts forward as a material witness to prove the observance of the Lord's day in the beginning of the second century, fails to prove any such fact, it appearing on a thorough examination of his testimony that he does not even mention the Lord's day, nor in any way allude to the religious observance of it, whether by that name or by any other."[35](#)

It is manifest, therefore, that this famous quotation has no reference whatever to the first day of the week, and that it furnishes no evidence that that day was known in the time of Ignatius by the title of Lord's day.[36](#) The evidence is now before the reader which must determine whether Mosheim or Neander spoke in accordance with the facts in the case. And thus it appears that in the New Testament, and in the uninspired writers of the period referred to, there is absolutely nothing to sustain the strong Sunday statement of Mosheim. When we come to the fourth century, we shall find a statement by him which essentially modifies what he has here said. Of the epistles ascribed to Barnabas, Pliny, and Ignatius, we have found that the first is a forgery; that the second speaks of a stated day without defining what one; and that the third, which is probably a spurious document, would say nothing relative to Sunday, if the advocates of first-day sacredness had not interpolated the word day into the document! We can hardly avoid the conclusion that Mosheim spoke on this subject as a doctor of divinity, and not as a historian; and with the firmest conviction that we speak the truth, we say with Neander, "The festival of Sunday was always only a human ordinance."

1 Maclaine's Mosheim, cent. 1, part ii. chap. iv. sec. 4. I have given Maclaine's translation, not because it is an accurate version of Mosheim, but because it is so much used in support of the first day Sabbath. Maclaine in his preface to Mosheim says: "I have sometimes taken considerable liberties with my author." And he tells us what these liberties were by saying that he had "often added a few sentences, to render an observation more striking, a fact more clear, a portrait more finished." The present quotation is an instance of these liberties. Dr. Murdock of

New Haven who has given "a close, literal version" of Mosheim, gives the passage thus:

"The Christians of this century, assembled for the worship of God, and for their advancement in piety, on the first day of the week, the day on which Christ reassumed his life: for that this day was set apart for religious worship, by the apostles themselves, and that, after the example of the church of Jerusalem, it was generally observed, we have unexceptionable testimony."- Murdock's Mosheim, cent. 1, part ii. chap. iv. sec. 4. <[Return](#)>

2 Neander's Church History, translated by H. J. Rose, p. 186. To break the force of this strong statement of Neander 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, far from them, and from the early apostolic church, to transfer the laws of the Sabbath to Sunday," two things have been said:

1. That Neander, in a later edition of his work, retracted this declaration. It is true that in re-writing his work he omitted this sentence. But he inserted nothing of a contrary character, and the general tenor of the revised edition is in this place precisely the same as in that from which this out-spoken statement is taken.

In proof of this, we cite from the later edition of Neander his statement in this very place of what constituted Sunday observance in the early church. He says:

"Sunday was distinguished as a day of joy, by being exempted from fasts, and by the circumstance that prayer was performed on this day in a standing and not in a kneeling posture, as Christ, by his resurrection, had raised up fallen man again to Heaven." - Torrey's Neander, vol. i. p. 295, ed. 1852.

This is an accurate account of early Sunday observance, as we shall hereafter show; and that such observance was only a human ordinance, of which no feature was ever commanded by the apostles, will be very manifest to every person who attempts to find any precept for any particular of it in the New Testament.

2. But the other method of setting aside this testimony of Neander is to assert that he did not mean to deny that the apostles established a divine command for Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, but meant to assert that they did not establish a divine command for Sunday as a Catholic festival! Those who make this assertion must know that it is false. Neander expressly denies that the apostles either constituted or recognized Sunday as a Sabbath, and he represents Sunday as a mere festival from the very first of its observance, and established only by human authority. <[Return](#)>

3 See chapters x. and xi., in which the New Testament has been carefully examined on this point. <[Return](#)>

4 Epistle of Barnabas 13:9, 10; or, as others divide the epistle, chapter 15. <[Return](#)>

5 Eccl. Hist., cent. 1, part ii. chap. ii. sect. 21. <[Return](#)>

6 Historical Commentaries, cent. 1, sect. 53. <[Return](#)>

7 Rose's Neander, p. 407. <[Return](#)>

8 Note appended to Gurney's History, Authority, and Use of the Sabbath, p. 86. <[Return](#)>

- 9 Ancient Church, pp. 367, 368. <[Return](#)>
- 10 Commentary on Acts, p. 251. <[Return](#)>
- 11 History of the Church, cent. 1, chap. xv. <[Return](#)>
- 12 Cyc. Bib. Lit., art. Lord's day, tenth ed. 1858. <[Return](#)>
- 13 Encyc. of Rel. Knowl., art. Barnabas' Epistle. <[Return](#)>
- 14 Eccl. Hist., Book iii. chap. xxv. <[Return](#)>
- 15 The Sabbath, or an Examination of the Six Texts commonly adduced from the New Testament in proof of a Christian Sabbath, p. 233. <[Return](#)>
- 16 Ancient Christianity, chap. i. sect. 2. <[Return](#)>
- 17 Epistle of Barnabas, 9:8. In some editions it is chap. 10. <[Return](#)>
- 18 Coleman's Ancient Christianity, pp. 35, 36. <[Return](#)>
- 19 Ancient Christianity Exemplified, chap. 26, sect. 2. <[Return](#)>
- 20 Buck's Theological Dictionary, art. Christians. <[Return](#)>
- 21 Tertullian's Apology, sect. 2. <[Return](#)>
- 22 Obligation of the Sabbath, p. 300. <[Return](#)>
- 23 Historical Commentaries, cent. 1, sect. 47. <[Return](#)>
- 24 1Pet.1:1. See Clarke's Commentary, preface to the epistles of Peter. <[Return](#)>
- 25 Ignatius to the Magnesians, 3:3-5; or, as others divide the epistle, chap. 9. <[Return](#)>
- 26 Ancient Church, pp. 413, 414. <[Return](#)>
- 27 Id. p. 427. <[Return](#)>
- 28 Future Life, p. 290. <[Return](#)>
- 29 Examination of the Six Tests, p. 237. <[Return](#)>
- 30 Ecclesiastical Researches, chap. vi. pp. 50, 51, ed. 1792. <[Return](#)>
- 31 Ignatius ad Magnesios, sect. 9. <[Return](#)>
- 32 Cyc. Bib. Lit., art. Lord's day. <[Return](#)>
- 33 Dialogues on the Lord's Day, pp. 206, 207. <[Return](#)>

34 A first-day writer, author of the "History, Authority, and Use, of the Sabbath." <[Return](#)>

35 Examination of the Six Texts, pp. 250, 251. <[Return](#)>

36 For a more full statement of the case of Ignatius, see the "Testimony of the Fathers," pp. 26-30. The quotation from Ignatius examined in this chapter is there shown, according to the connection, to relate, not to New Testament Christians, but to the ancient prophets. <[Return](#)>

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