

CHAPTER 17

THE NATURE OF EARLY FIRST-DAY OBSERVANCE

The history of first-day observance compared with that of the popes - First-day observance defined in the very words of each of the early fathers who mention it - The reasons which each had for its observance stated in his own words - Sunday in their judgment of no higher sacredness than Easter or Whitsunday, or even than the fifty days between those festivals - Sunday not a day of abstinence from labor - The reasons which are offered by those of them who rejected the Sabbath stated in their own words.

The history of first-day observance in the Christian church may be fitly illustrated by that of the bishops of Rome. The Roman bishop now claims supreme power over all the churches of Christ. He asserts that this power was given to Peter, and by him was transmitted to the bishops of Rome; or rather that Peter was the first Roman bishop, and that a succession of such bishops from his time to the present have exercised this absolute power in the church. They are able to trace back their line to apostolic times, and they assert that the power now claimed by the pope was claimed and exercised by the first pastors of the church of the Romans. Those who now acknowledge the supremacy of the pope believe this assertion, and with them it is a conclusive evidence that the pope is by divine right possessed of supreme power. But the assertion is absolutely false. The early pastors, or bishops, or elders, of the church of the Romans were modest, unassuming ministers of Christ, wholly unlike the arrogant bishop of Rome, who now usurps the place of Christ as the head of the Christian church.

The first day of the week now claims to be the Christian Sabbath, and enforces its authority by means of the fourth commandment, having set aside the seventh day, which that commandment enjoins, and usurped its place. Its advocates assert that this position and this authority were given to it by Christ. As no record of such gift is found in the Scriptures, the principal argument in its support is furnished by tracing first-day observance back to the early Christians, who, it is said, would not have hallowed the day if they had not been instructed to do it by the apostles; and the apostles would not have taught them to do it if Christ had not, in their presence, changed the Sabbath.

But first-day observance can be traced no nearer to apostolic times than A.D. 140, while the bishops of Rome can trace their line to the very times of the apostles. Herein is the papal claim to apostolic authority better than is that of the first-day Sabbath. But with this exception, the historical argument in behalf of each is the same. Both began with very moderate pretensions, and gradually gaining in power and sacredness, grew up in strength together.

Let us now go to those who were the earliest observers of Sunday and learn from them the nature of that observance at its commencement. We shall find, first, that no one claimed for first-day observance any divine authority; second, that none of them had ever heard of change of the Sabbath, and none believed the first-day festival to be a continuation of the Sabbatic institution; third, that labor on that day is never set forth as sinful, and that abstinence from labor is never mentioned as a feature of its observance, nor even implied, only so far as necessary in order to spend a portion of the day in worship; fourth, that if we put together all the hints respecting Sunday observance, which are scattered through the fathers of the first three centuries, for no one of them gives

more than two of these, and generally a single hint is all that is found in one writer, we shall find just four items: (1) an assembly on that day in which the Bible was read and expounded, and the supper celebrated and money collected; (2) that the day must be one of rejoicing; (3) that it must not be a day of fasting; (4) that the knee must not be bent in prayer on that day.

The following are all the hints respecting the nature of first-day observance during the first three centuries. The epistle falsely ascribed to Barnabas simply says: "We keep the eighth day with joyfulness."¹ Justin Martyr, in words already quoted at full length, describes the kind of meeting which they held at Rome and in that vicinity on that day, and this is all that he connects with its observance.² Irenaeus taught that to commemorate the resurrection, the knee must not be bent on that day, and mentions nothing else as essential to its honor. This act of standing in prayer was a symbol of the resurrection, which was to be celebrated only on that day, as he held.³ Bardesanes the Gnostic represents the Christians as everywhere meeting for worship on that day, but he does not describe that worship, and he gives no other honor to the day.⁴ Tertullian describes Sunday observance as follows: "We devote Sunday to rejoicing," and he adds, "We have some resemblance to those of you who devote the day of Saturn to ease and luxury."⁵ In another work he gives us a further idea of the festive character of Sunday. Thus he says to his brethren: "If any indulgence is to be granted to the flesh, you have it. I will not say your own days, but more too; for to the heathens each festive day occurs but once annually; you have a festive day every eighth day."⁶ Dr. Heylyn spoke the truth when he said:

"Tertullian tells us that they did devote the Sunday partly unto mirth and recreation, not to devotion altogether; when in a hundred years after Tertullian's time there was no law or constitution to restrain men from labor on this day in the Christian church."⁷

The Sunday festival in Tertullian's time was not like the modern first-day Sabbath, but was essentially the German festival of Sunday, a day for worship and for recreation, and one on which labor was not sinful. But Tertullian speaks further respecting Sunday observance, and the words now to be quoted have been used as proof that labor on that day was counted sinful. This is the only statement that can be found prior to Constantine's Sunday law that has such an appearance, and the proof is decisive that such was not its meaning. Here are his words:

"We, however (just 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 solicitude, deferring even our businesses, lest we give any place to the devil. Similarly, too, in the period of Pentecost; which period we distinguish by the same solemnity of exultation."⁸

He speaks of "deferring even our businesses;" but this does not necessarily imply anything more than its postponement during the hours devoted to religious services. It falls very far short of saying that labor on Sunday is a sin. But we will quote Tertullian's next mention of Sunday observance before noticing further the words last quoted. Thus he says:

"We count fasting or kneeling in worship on the Lord's day to be unlawful. We rejoice in the same privilege also from Easter to Whitsunday."⁹

These two things, fasting and kneeling, are the only acts which the fathers set down as unlawful on Sunday, unless, indeed, mourning may be included by some in the list. It is certain that labor is never thus mentioned. And observe that Tertullian repeats the important statement of the previous quotation that the honor due to Sunday pertains also to the "period of Pentecost," that is, to the fifty days between Easter and Passover and Whitsunday or Pentecost. If, therefore, labor on Sunday was in Tertullian's estimation sinful, the same was true for the period

of Pentecost, a space of fifty days! But this is not possible. We can conceive of the deferral of business for one religious assembly each day for fifty days, and also that men should neither fast nor kneel during that time, which was precisely what the religious celebration of Sunday actually was. But to make Tertullian assert that labor on Sunday was a sin is to make him declare that such was the case for fifty days together, which no one will venture to say was the doctrine of Tertullian.

In another work Tertullian gives us one more statement respecting the nature of Sunday observance: "We make Sunday a day of festivity. What then? Do you do less than this?"¹⁰ His language is very extraordinary when it is considered that he was addressing heathen. It seems that Sunday as a Christian festival was so similar to the festival which these heathen observed that he could challenge them to show wherein the Christians went further than did these heathen whom he here addressed.

The next father who gives us the nature of early Sunday observance is Peter of Alexandria. He says: "But the Lord's day we celebrate as a day of joy, because on it he rose again, on which day we have received it for a custom not even to bow the knee."¹¹ He marks two things essential. It must be a day of joy, and Christians must not kneel on that day. Zonaras, an ancient commentator on these words of Peter, explains the day of joy by saying, "We ought not to fast; for it is a day of joy for the resurrection of the Lord."¹² Next in order, we quote the so-called Apostolical Constitutions. These command Christians to assemble for worship every day, "but principally on the Sabbath day. And on the day of our Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's day, meet more diligently, sending praise to God," etc. The object of assembling was "to hear the saving word concerning the resurrection," to "pray thrice standing," to have the prophets read, to have preaching and also the supper.¹³ These "Constitutions" not only give the nature of the worship on Sunday as just set forth, but they also give us an idea of Sunday as a day of festivity:

"Now we exhort you, brethren and fellow-servants, to avoid vain talk and obscene discourses, and jestings, drunkenness, lasciviousness, luxury, unbounded passions, with foolish discourses, since we do not permit you so much as on the Lord's days, which are days of joy, to speak or act anything unseemly."¹⁴

This language plainly implies that the so-called Lord's day was a day of greater mirth than the other days of the week. Even on the Lord's day they must not speak or act anything unseemly, though it is evident that their license on that day was greater than on other days. Once more these "Constitutions" give us the nature of Sunday observance: "Every Sabbath day excepting one, and every Lord's day hold your solemn assemblies, and rejoice; for he will be guilty of sin who fasts on the Lord's day."¹⁵ But no one can read so much as once that "he is guilty of sin who performs work on this day."

Next we quote the epistle to the Magnesians in its longer form, which though not written by Ignatius was actually written about the time that the Apostolical Constitutions were committed to writing. Here are the words of this epistle:

"And after the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's day as a festival, the resurrection day, the queen and chief of all the days."¹⁶

The writer of the Syriac Documents concerning Edessa comes last, and he defines the services of Sunday as follows: "On the first [day] of the week, let there be service, and the reading of the Holy Scriptures, and the oblation."¹⁷ These are all the passages in the writings of the first three centuries which describe early first-day observance. Let the reader judge whether we have correctly stated the nature of that observance. Next we invite

attention to the several reasons offered by these fathers for celebrating the festival of Sunday.

The reputed epistle of Barnabas supports the Sunday festival by saying that it was the day "on which Jesus rose again from the dead," and it intimates that it prefigures the eighth thousand years, when God shall create the world anew.[18](#)

Justin Martyr has four reasons:

1. "It is the first day on which God having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world."[19](#)
2. "Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead."[20](#)
3. "It is possible for us to show how the eighth day possessed a certain mysterious import, which the seventh day did not possess, and which was promulgated by God through these rites,"[21](#) i.e., through circumcision.
4. "The command of circumcision, again, bidding [them] always circumcise the children on the eighth day, was a type of the true circumcision, by which we are circumcised from deceit and iniquity through Him who rose from the dead on the first day after the Sabbath."[22](#)

Clement, of Alexandria, appears to treat solely a mystical eighth day or Lord's day. It is perhaps possible that he has some reference to Sunday. We therefore quote what he says in behalf of this day, calling attention to the fact that he produces his testimony, not from the Bible, but from a heathen philosopher. Thus he says:

"And the Lord's day Plato prophetically speaks of in the tenth book of the Republic, in these words: `And when seven days have passed to each of them in the meadow on the eighth day they are to set out and arrive in four days.'"[23](#)

Clement's reasons for Sunday are found outside the Scriptures. The next father will give us a good reason for Clement's action in this case. Tertullian is the next writer who gives reasons for the Sunday festival. He is speaking of "offerings for the dead," the manner of Sunday observance, and the use of the sign of the cross upon the forehead. Here is the ground on which these observances rest:

"If, for these and other such rules, you insist upon having positive Scripture injunction, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth to you as the originator of them, custom, as their strengthener, and faith, as their observer. That reason will support tradition, and custom, and faith, you will either yourself perceive, or learn from some one who has."[24](#)

Tertullian's frankness is to be commended. He had no Scripture to offer, and he acknowledges the fact. He depended on tradition, and he was not ashamed to confess it. The next of the fathers who gives Scripture evidence in support of the Sunday festival, is Origen. Here are his words:

"The manna fell on the Lord's day, and not on the Sabbath to show the Jews that even then the Lord's day was preferred before it."[25](#)

Origen seems to have been of Tertullian's judgment as to the inconclusiveness of the arguments adduced by his predecessors. He therefore coined an original argument which seems to have been very conclusive in his

estimation as he offers this alone. But he must have forgotten that the manna fell on all the six working days, or he would have seen that while his argument does not elevate Sunday above the other five working days, it does make the Sabbath the least reputable day of the seven! And yet the miracle of the manna was expressly designed to set forth the sacredness of the Sabbath and to establish its authority before the people. Cyprian is the next father who gives an argument for the Sunday festival. He contents himself with one of Justin's old arguments, viz., that one drawn from circumcision. Thus he says:

"For in respect of the observance of the eighth day in the Jewish circumcision of the flesh, a sacrament was given beforehand in shadow and in usage; but when Christ came, it was fulfilled in truth. For because the eighth day, that is, the first day after the Sabbath, was to be that on which the Lord should rise again, and should quicken us, and give us circumcision of the Spirit, the eighth day, that is, the first day after the Sabbath, and the Lord's day, went before in the figure; which figure ceased when by and by the truth came, and spiritual circumcision was given to us."[26](#)

Such is the only argument adduced by Cyprian in behalf of the first-day-day festival. The circumcision of infants when eight days old was, in his judgment, a type of infant baptism. But circumcision on the eighth day of the child's life, in his estimation, did not signify that baptism need to be deferred till the infant is eight days old, but, as here stated, did signify that the eighth day was to be the Lord's day! But the eighth day, on which circumcision took place, was not the first day of the week, but the eighth day of each child's life, whatever day of the week that might be.

The next father who gives a reason for celebrating Sunday as a day of joy, and refraining from kneeling on it, is Peter of Alexandria, who simply says, "Because on it he rose again."[27](#)

Next in order come the Apostolic Constitutions, which assert that the Sunday festival is a memorial of the resurrection:

"But keep the Sabbath, and the Lord's day festival; because the former is a memorial of the creation, and the latter of the resurrection."[28](#)

The writer, however, offers no proof that Sunday was set apart by divine authority in memory of the resurrection. But the next person who gives his reasons for keeping Sunday "as a festival" is the writer of the longer form of the reputed epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians. He finds the eighth day prophetically set forth in the title to the sixth and twelfth psalms! In the margin, the word Sheminith is translated "the eighth." Here is this writer's argument for Sunday:

"Looking forward to this, the prophet declared, 'To the end for the eighth day,' on which our life both sprang up again, and the victory over death was obtained in Christ."[29](#)

There is yet another of the fathers of the first three centuries who gives the reasons then used in support of the Sunday festival.

This is the writer of the Syriac Documents concerning Edessa. He comes next in order and closes the list. Here are four reasons:

1. "Because on the first day of the week our Lord rose from the place of the dead."[30](#)
2. "On the first day of the week he arose upon the world,"[31](#) i.e., he was born upon Sunday.

3. "On the first day of the week he ascended upon to Heaven."[4](#)

4. "On the first day of the week he will appear at last with the angels of Heaven."[33](#)

The first of these reasons is as good a one as man can devise out of his own heart for doing what God never commanded; the second and fourth are mere assertions of which mankind know nothing; while the third is a positive untruth, for the ascension was upon Thursday.

We have now presented every reason for the Sunday festival which can be found in all the writings of the first three centuries. Though generally very trivial, and sometimes worse than trivial, they are nevertheless worthy of careful study. They constitute a decisive testimony that the change of the Sabbath by Christ or by his apostles from the seventh to the first day of the week was absolutely unknown during that entire period. But were it true that such change had been made they must have known it. Had they believed that Christ changed the Sabbath to commemorate his resurrection, how emphatically would they have stated that fact instead of offering reasons for the festival of Sunday which are so worthless as to be, with one or two exceptions, entirely discarded by modern first-day writers. Or had they believed that the apostles honored Sunday as the Sabbath or Lord's day, how would they have produced these facts in triumph! But Tertullian said that they had no positive Scripture injunction for the Sunday festival, and the others, by offering reasons that were only devised in their own hearts, corroborated his testimony, and all of them together establish the fact that even in their own estimation the day was only sustained by the authority of the church. They were totally unacquainted with the modern doctrine that the seventh day in the commandment means simply one day in seven, and that the Saviour, to commemorate his resurrection, appointed that the first day of the week should be that one of the seven to which the commandment should apply!

We have given every statement in the fathers of the first three centuries in which the manner of celebrating the Sunday festival is set forth. We have also given every reason for that observance which is to be found in any of them. These two classes of testimonies show clearly that ordinary labor was not one of the things which were forbidden on that day. We now offer direct proof that other days which on all hands are accounted nothing but church festivals were expressly declared by the fathers to be equal if not superior in sacredness to the Sunday festival.

The "Lost Writings of Irenaeus" gives us his mind concerning the relative sacredness of the festival of Sunday and that of either Easter or Pentecost. This is the statement:

"Upon which [feast] we do not bend the knee, because it is of equal significance with the Lord's day, for the reason already alleged concerning it."[34](#)

Tertullian in a passage already quoted, which by omitting the sentence we are about to quote, has been used as the strongest testimony to the first-day Sabbath in the fathers, expressly equals in sacredness the period of Pentecost - a space of fifty days - with the festival which he calls Lord's day. Thus he says:

"Similarly, too, in the period of Pentecost; which period we distinguish by the same solemnity of exaltation."[35](#)

He states the same fact in another work:

"We count fasting or kneeling in worship on the Lord's day to be unlawful. We rejoice in the same

privilege also from Easter to Whitsunday."36

Origen classes the so-called Lord's day with three other church festivals:

"If it be objected to us on this subject that we ourselves are accustomed to observe certain days, as for example the Lord's day, the Preparation, the Passover, or Pentecost, I have to answer, that to the perfect Christian, who is ever in his thoughts, words, and deeds, serving his natural Lord, God the Word, all his days are the Lord's, and he is always keeping the Lord's day."37

Irenaeus and Tertullian make the Sunday Lord's day equal in sacredness with the period from the Passover to the Pentecost; but Origen, after classing the day with several church festivals, virtually confesses that it has no pre-eminence above other days.

Commodianus, who once uses the term Lord's day, speaks of the Catholic festival of the Passover as "Easter, that day of ours most blessed."38 This certainly indicates that in his estimation no other sacred day was superior in sanctity to Easter.

The "Apostolical Constitutions" treat the Sunday festival in the same manner that it is treated by Irenaeus and Tertullian. They make it equal to the sacredness of the period from Easter to the Pentecost. Thus they say:

"He will be guilty of sin who fasts on the Lord's day, being the day of the resurrection, or during the time of Pentecost, or in general, who is sad on a festival day to the Lord."39

These testimonies prove conclusively that the festival of Sunday, in the judgment of such men as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others, stood in the same rank with that of Easter, or Whitsunday. They had no idea that one was commanded by God, while the others were only ordained by the church. Indeed, Tertullian, as we have seen, expressly declares that there is no precept for Sunday observance.40

Besides these important facts, we have decisive evidence that Sunday was not a day of abstinence from labor, and our first witness is Justin, the earliest witness to the Sunday festival in the Christian church. Trypho the Jew said to Justin, by way of reproof, "You observe no festivals or Sabbaths."41 This was exactly adapted to bring out from Justin the statement that, though he did not observe the seventh day as the Sabbath, he did thus rest on the first day of the week, if it were true that that day was with him a day of abstinence from labor. But he gives no such answer. He sneers at the very idea of abstinence from labor, declaring that "God does not take pleasure in such observances." Nor does he intimate that this is because the Jews did not rest upon the right day, but he condemns the very idea of refraining from labor for a day, stating that "the new law," which has taken the place of the commandments given on Sinai42 requires a perpetual Sabbath, and this is kept by repenting of sin and refraining from its commission. Here are his words:

"The new law requires you to keep a perpetual Sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you; and if you eat unleavened bread, you say the will of God has been fulfilled. The Lord our God does not take pleasure in such observances: if there is any perjured person or a thief among you, let him cease to be so; if any adulterer, let him repent; then he has kept the sweet and true Sabbaths of God."43

This language plainly implies that Justin did not believe that any day should be kept as a Sabbath by abstinence from labor, but that all days should be kept as sabbaths by abstinence from sin. This testimony is decisive, and it

is in exact harmony with the facts already adduced from the fathers, and with others yet to be presented. Moreover, it is confirmed by the express testimony of Tertullian. He says:

"By us (to whom Sabbaths are strange, and the new moons, and festivals formerly beloved by God) the saturnalia and new year's and mid-winter's festivals and Matronalia are frequented."[44](#)

And he adds in the same paragraph, in words already quoted:

"If any indulgence is to be granted to the flesh, you have it. I will not say your own days, but more too; for to the heathens each festive day occurs but once annually; you have a festive day every eighth day."[45](#)

Tertullian tells his brethren in plain language that they kept no sabbaths, but did keep many heathen festivals. If the Sunday festival, which was a day of "indulgence" to the flesh, and which he here mentions as the "eighth day," was kept by them as the Christian Sabbath in place of the ancient seventh day, then he would not have asserted that to us "sabbaths are strange."

But Tertullian has precisely the same Sabbath as Justin Martyr. He does not keep the first day in place of the seventh, but he keeps a "perpetual sabbath," in which he professes to refrain from sin every day, and actually abstains from labor on none. Thus, after saying that the Jews teach that "from the beginning God sanctified the seventh day" and therefore observe that day, he says:

"Whence we [Christians] understand that we still more ought to observe a Sabbath from all 'servile work' always, and not only every seventh day, but through all time."[46](#)

Tertullian certainly had no idea that Sunday was the Sabbath in any other sense than were all the seven days of the week. We shall find a decisive confirmation of this when we come to quote Tertullian respecting the origin of the Sabbath. We shall also find that Clement expressly makes Sunday a day of labor.

Several of the early fathers wrote in opposition to the observance of the seventh day. We now give the reasons assigned by each for that opposition. The writer called Barnabas did not keep the seventh day, not because it was a ceremonial ordinance unworthy of being observed by a Christian, but because it was so pure an institution that even Christians cannot truly sanctify it till they are made immortal. Here are his words:

"Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, 'He finished in six days.' This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with him a thousand years. And he himself testifieth, saying, 'Behold, to-day will be as a thousand years.' Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished. 'And he rested on the seventh day.' This meaneth: When his Son, coming [again], shall destroy the time of the wicked man, and judge the ungodly, and change the sun, and the moon, and the stars, then shall he truly rest on the seventh day. Moreover, he says, 'Thou shalt sanctify it with pure hands and a pure heart.' If, therefore, any one can now sanctify the day which God hath sanctified, except he is pure in heart in all things, we are deceived. Behold, therefore: certainly then one properly resting sanctifies it, when we ourselves, having received the promise, wickedness no longer existing, and all things having been made new by the Lord, shall be able to work righteousness. Then we shall be able to sanctify it, having been first sanctified ourselves. Further he says to them, 'Your new moons and your sabbaths I cannot endure.' Ye perceive how he speaks: Your present sabbaths are not acceptable to me, but that is

which I have made [namely this], when giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world, wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day, also, on which Jesus rose again from the dead."[47](#)

Observe the points embodied in this statement of doctrine: 1. He asserts that the six days of creation prefigure the six thousand years which our world shall endure in its present state of wickedness. 2. He teaches that at the end of that period Christ shall come again and make an end of wickedness, and "then shall he truly rest on the seventh day." 3. That no "one can now sanctify the day which God hath sanctified, except he is pure in heart in all things." 4. But that cannot be the case until the present world shall pass away, "when we ourselves, having received the promise, wickedness no longer existing, and all things having been made new by the Lord, shall be able to work righteousness. Then we shall be able to sanctify it, having been first sanctified ourselves." Men cannot, therefore, keep the Sabbath while this wicked world lasts. 5. Therefore, he says, "Your present sabbaths are not acceptable," not because they are not pure, but because you are not now able to keep them as purely as their nature demands. 6. That is to say, the keeping of the day which God has sanctified is not possible in such a wicked world as this. 7. But though the seventh day cannot now be kept, the eighth day can be, and ought to be, because when the seven thousand years are past, there will be at the beginning of the eighth thousand, the new creation. 8. Therefore, he did not attempt to keep the seventh day, which God had sanctified; for that is too pure to be kept in the present wicked world, and can only be kept after the Saviour comes at the commencement of the seventh thousand years; but he kept the eighth day, with joyfulness on which Jesus arose from the dead. 9. So it appears that the eighth day which God never sanctified, is exactly suitable for observance in our world during its present state of wickedness. 10. But when all things have been made new, and we are able to work righteousness, and wickedness no longer exists, then we shall be able to sanctify the seventh day, having first been sanctified ourselves.

The reason of Barnabas for not observing the Sabbath of the Lord is not that the commandment enjoining it is abolished, but that the institution is so pure that men in their present imperfect state cannot acceptably sanctify it. They will keep it, however, in the new creation, but in the meantime they keep with joyfulness the eighth day, which having never been sanctified by God is not difficult to keep in the present state of wickedness.

Justin Martyr's reasons for not observing the Sabbath are not at all like those of the so-called Barnabas, for Justin seems to have heartily despised the Sabbatic institution. He denies that it was obligatory before the time of Moses, and affirms that it was abolished by the advent of Christ. He teaches that it was given to the Jews because of their wickedness, and he expressly affirms the abolition of both the Sabbath and the law. So far is he from teaching the change of the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week, or from making the Sunday festival a continuation of the ancient Sabbatic institution, that he sneers at the very idea of days of abstinence from labor, or days of idleness, and though God gives as his reason for the observance of the Sabbath, that that was the day on which he rested from all his work, Justin gives as his first reason for the Sunday festival that that was the day on which God began his work! Of abstinence from labor as an act of obedience to the Sabbath, Justin says:

"The Lord our God does not take pleasure in such observances."[48](#)

A second reason for not observing the Sabbath is thus stated by him:

"For we too would observe the fleshly circumcision, and the Sabbaths, and in short, all the feasts, if we did not know for what reason they were enjoined you - namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts."[49](#)

As Justin never discriminates between the Sabbath of the Lord and the annual sabbaths he doubtless here means to include it as well as them. But what a falsehood is it to assert that the Sabbath was given to the Jews because of their wickedness! The truth is, it was given to the Jews because of the universal apostasy of the Gentiles.⁵⁰ But in the following paragraph Justin gives three more reasons for not keeping the Sabbath:

"Do you see that the elements are not idle, and keep no Sabbaths? Remain as you were born. For if there was no need of circumcision before Abraham, or of the observance of Sabbaths, of feasts and sacrifices, before Moses; no more need is there of them now, after that, according to the will of God, Jesus Christ the Son of God has been born without sin, of a virgin sprung from the stock of Abraham."⁵¹

Here are three reasons: 1. "That the elements are not idle, and keep no Sabbaths." Though this reason is simply worthless as an argument against the seventh day, it is a decisive confirmation of the fact already proven, that Justin did not make Sunday a day of abstinence from labor. 2. His second reason here given is that there was no observance of Sabbath before Moses, and yet we do know that God at the beginning did appoint the Sabbath to a holy use, a fact to which as we shall see quite a number of the fathers testify, and we also know that in that age were men who kept all the precepts of God. 3. There is no need of Sabbatic observance since Christ. Though this is mere assertion, it is by no means easy for those to meet it fairly who represent Justin as maintaining the Christian Sabbath.

Another argument by Justin against the obligation of the Sabbath is that God "directs the government of the universe on this day equally as on all others!"⁵² as though this were inconsistent with the present sacredness of the Sabbath, when it is also true that God thus governed the world in the period when Justin acknowledges the Sabbath to have been obligatory. Though this reason is trivial as an argument against the Sabbath, it does show that Justin could have attached no Sabbatic character to Sunday. But he has yet one more argument against the Sabbath. The ancient law has been done away by the new and final law, and the old covenant has been superseded by the new.⁵³ But he forgets that the design of the new covenant was not to do away with the law of God, but to put that law into the heart of every Christian. And many of the fathers, as we shall see expressly repudiate this doctrine of the abrogation of the Decalogue.

Such were Justin's reasons for rejecting the ancient sabbath.

But though he was a decided asserter of the abrogation of the law, and of the Sabbatic institution itself, and kept Sunday only as a festival, modern first-day writers cite him as a witness in support of the doctrine that the first day of the week should be observed as the Christian Sabbath on the authority of the fourth commandment.

Now let us learn what stood in the way of Irenaeus' observance of the Sabbath. It was not that the commandments were abolished, for we shall presently learn that he taught their perpetuity. Nor was it that he believed in the change of the Sabbath, for he gives no hint of such an idea. The Sunday festival in his estimation appears to have been simply of "equal significance" with the Pentecost.⁵⁴ Nor was it that Christ broke the Sabbath, for Irenaeus says that he did not.⁵⁵ But because the Sabbath is called a sign he regarded it as significant of the future kingdom, and appears to have considered it no longer obligatory, though he does not expressly say this. Thus he sets forth the meaning of the Sabbath as held by him:

"Moreover the Sabbaths of God, that is, the kingdom, was, as it were, indicated by created things," etc.⁵⁶

"These [promises to the righteous] are [to take place] in the times of the kingdom, that is, upon the seventh day which has been sanctified, in which God rested from all the works which he created, which is the true Sabbath of the righteous,"[57](#) etc.

"For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years: and in six days created things were completed: it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousand year."[58](#)

But Irenaeus did not notice that the Sabbath as a sign does not point forward to the restitution, but backward to the creation, that it may signify that the true God is the Creator.[59](#) Nor did he observe the fact that when the Kingdom of God shall be established under the whole heaven all flesh shall hallow the Sabbath.[60](#)

But he says that those who lived before Moses were justified "without observance of Sabbaths," and offers as proof that the covenant at Horeb was not made with the fathers. Of course if this proves that the patriarchs were free from obligation toward the fourth commandment, it is equally good as proof that they might violate any other. These things indicate that Irenaeus was opposed to Sabbatic observance, though he did not in express language assert its abrogation, and did in most decisive terms assert the continued obligation of the ten commandments.

Tertullian offers numerous reasons for not observing the Sabbath, but there is scarcely one of these that he does not in some other place expressly contradict. Thus he asserts that the patriarchs before Moses did not observe the Sabbath.[61](#) But he offers no proof, and he elsewhere dates the origin of the Sabbath at the creation,[62](#) as we shall show hereafter. In several places he teaches the abrogation of the law, and seems to set aside moral law as well as ceremonial. But elsewhere, as we shall show, he bears express testimony that the ten commandments are still binding as the rule of the Christian's life.[63](#) He quotes the words of Isaiah in which God is represented as hating the feasts, new-moons, and sabbaths observed by the Jews,[64](#) as proof that the seventh-day Sabbath was a temporary institution which Christ abrogated. But in another place he says: "Christ did not at all rescind the Sabbath: he kept the law thereof."[65](#) And he also explains this very text by stating that God's aversion toward the Sabbaths observed by the Jews was "because they were celebrated without the fear of God by a people full of iniquities," and adds that the prophet, in a later passage speaking of Sabbaths celebrated according to God's commandment, "declares them to be true, delightful, and inviolable."[66](#) Another statement is that Joshua violated the Sabbath in the siege of Jericho.[67](#) Yet he elsewhere explains this very case, showing that the commandment forbids our own work, not God's. Those who acted at Jericho did not do their own work, but God's, which they executed, and that, too, from his express commandment."[68](#) He also both asserts and denies that Christ violated the Sabbath.[69](#) Tertullian was a double-minded man. He wrote much against the law and the Sabbath, but he also contradicted and exposed his own errors.

Origen attempts to prove that the ancient Sabbath is to be understood mystically or spiritually, and not literally. Here is his argument:

"`Ye shall sit, every one in your dwelling: no one shall move from his place on the Sabbath day.' Which precept it is impossible to observe literally; for no man can sit a whole day so as not to move from the place where he sat down."[70](#)

Great men are not always wise. There is no such precept in the Bible. Origen referred to that which forbade the people to go out for manna on the Sabbath, but which did not conflict with another that commanded holy convocations or assemblies for worship on the Sabbath.[71](#)

Victorinus is the latest of the fathers before Constantine who offers reasons against the observance of the Sabbath. His first reason is that Christ said by Isaiah that his soul hated the Sabbath; which Sabbath he in his body abolished; and these assertions we have seen answered by Tertullian.⁷² His second reason is that "Jesus [Joshua] the son of Nave [Nun], the successor of Moses, himself broke the Sabbath day,"⁷³ which is false. His third reason is that "Matthias [a Maccabean] also, prince of Judah, broke the Sabbath,"⁷⁴ which is doubtless false, but is of no consequence as authority. His fourth argument is original, and may fitly close the list of reasons assigned in the early fathers for not observing the Sabbath. It is given in full without an answer:

"And in Matthew we read, that it is written Isaiah also and the rest of his colleagues broke the Sabbath."⁷⁵

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20 Id.Ib. <[Return](#)>

21 Dialogue with Trypho, chap. xxiv. <[Return](#)>

22 Id. chap. xli. <[Return](#)>

23 Clement's Miscellanies, book v. chap. xiv. <[Return](#)>

24 De Corona, sect. 4. <[Return](#)>

25 Origen's Opera. Tome ii. p. 158, Paris, A.D. 1733, "Quod si ex Divinis Scripturis hoc constat, quod die Dominica Deus pluit manna de caelo et in Sabbato non pluit, intelligant Judaei jam tune praelatam esse Dominicam nostram Judaico Sabbato." <[Return](#)>

26 Cyprian's Epistle, No. lviii. sect. 4. <[Return](#)>

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31 Id.Ib. <[Return](#)>

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47 Epistle of Barnabas, chap. xv. <[Return](#)>

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50 See the third chapter of this History. <[Return](#)>

51 Dialogue with Trypho, chap. xxiii. <[Return](#)>

52 Id. chap. xxix. <[Return](#)>

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54 Lost Writings of Irenaeus, Fragment 7. <[Return](#)>

55 Against Heresies, book iv. chap. viii. sect. 2. <[Return](#)>

56 Id. book iv. chap. xvi. sect. 1. <[Return](#)>

57 Irenaeus against Heresies, book v. chap. xxxiii. sect. 2. <[Return](#)>

58 Id. book. v. chap. xxviii. sect. 3. <[Return](#)>

59 Ex.31:17; Eze.20:12,20. <[Return](#)>

60 Isa.66:22,23; Dan.7:18,27. <[Return](#)>

61 Answer to the Jews, chap. ii. <[Return](#)>

62 Tertullian against Marcion, book iv. chap. xii. <[Return](#)>

63 Compare his works as follows: Answer to the Jews, chaps. ii, iii, iv, vi; Against Marcion, book i. chap. xx; book v. chaps. iv, xix. with De Anima, Chap. xxxvii.; and, On Modesty, chap. v. <[Return](#)>

64 Isa.1:13,14. <[Return](#)>

65 Answer to the Jews, chap. iv.; Against Marcion, book iv. chap.. xii. <[Return](#)>

66 Isa.56:2; 58:13. <[Return](#)>

67 Answer to the Jews, chap. iv.;; Against Marcion, book iv. chap.. xii. <[Return](#)>

68 Against Marcion, book ii. chap. xxi. <[Return](#)>

69 Against Marcion, book iv. chap. xii. <[Return](#)>

70 De Principiis, book iv. chap. i. sect. 17. <[Return](#)>

71 Ex.16:29; Lev.23:3. <[Return](#)>

72 Creation of the World, sect. 4. <[Return](#)>

73 Id. sect. 5. <[Return](#)>

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