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The Christian Sabbath.

THE CIRCULAR LETTER

From the N. S. Western Baptist Association, to the Churches of which it is composed.

DEAR BRETHREN,—

It is our purpose to set before you in this our Annual Epistle the Scriptural Authority for the Observance of the First day of the week as the Sabbath of the New Dispensation.

It is of paramount importance that we recognize the authority of the law of God as respects every thing concerning which it speaks. That authority is supreme, it is divine. Man has no right to change its enactments in the least. No inconvenience, no opposition, no views of propriety should induce a departure from the Authoritative requirements and teachings of Scripture. The Divine Law can in no respect be changed, except by its Author. It does not however follow of necessity that a formal or express enactment is requisite in order to change or modify some circumstance connected with the observance of a particular precept of that Law. Even the whole ceremonial law was abrogated without a formal and positive enactment to that effect. God may choose to intimate his will in respect to a change by certain significant facts which indicate his design, and at the same time afford intelligible ground for the change.

It is confidently believed that such facts exist as fully warrant the conviction that it is the Divine will that the weekly Sabbath should under the New Dispensation be celebrated on the first day of the week, instead of the seventh as originally enacted. It is a question of time only.

If we have Divine sanction of any other time than that expressed in the command, we have a change authorized by God. We have in our opinion such sanction for the observance of the first day. The facts on which this view is grounded shall now be presented.

1. The selection of the first day of the week by Infinite Wisdom for the resurrection of our blessed Lord seems to be expressive of the Divine intention to mark and render that day sacred and memorable beyond all other days. The time of the resurrection was not a mere casual thing,—without design and without end. It was predestined and arranged by the Almighty. It was foretold that the Redeemer should rise on the third day after his death. Both the death and resurrection of Christ were from eternity fixed as events certain to come to pass at a certain and specified time. The seventh day though highly honoured of God as being sanctified by Him and made commemorative of the completion of the mysterious and glorious work of Creation, was designedly passed over and rejected; and the first day was chosen and fixed upon as the day to which the distinguished honour was given of witnessing the triumphant achievement of the Saviour's resurrection,—the grandest, most glorious and important event that ever occurred, or can occur.

In this transaction the seventh day,—the primeval and Jewish sabbath—suffered an eclipse,—from which it can never emerge; or rather its glory as a day of sacred rest must be swallowed up in that of the first day,—which, from the unparalleled glory and importance of the event, of which it was the pre-ordained servant and witness, shines out with an effulgence, glorious and permanent. This striking and honourable distinction was made by God. Has it no significance? Do we need an express injunction to inform us that it is the will of God that the first day should henceforth receive honour never before given it, and to which no other day is entitled, as being commemorative of our Lord's victory over death and Hell, as being therefore the most fitting for sabbatic rest and worship under the Gospel dispensation?

2nd. Not only the resurrection of our Lord on this day, but his appearing to, and communing with his disciples, and imparting to them rich spiritual blessings (see John xx: 23) show his design as Lord of the Sabbath (Ma. 2: 28) to make the first day illustrious, memorable and sacred. It may be said that his appearance on this day follows as a matter of course in order to furnish infallible proof of his resurrection, and therefore indicates no special design beyond that. Though this should be admitted, yet the fact that he conversed repeatedly with his disciples, expounded to them the prophecies concerning himself, opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and imparted to them the Holy Spirit, and commissioned them to act as his ambassadors cannot be so viewed or regarded. (See Lu. xxiv: 27-32, 45. John xx: 21-23).

These last events, when taken in connexion with the resurrection on that particular day, are of such a special nature as to manifest a design to transfer to this day the consideration, regard, and honour his disciples had been accustomed to render to the seventh. Do not the facts here referred to, indicate a

preference on the part of our Lord for the first day? Would not his disciples so understand his conduct? Would not that day stand out in their view as peculiarly glorious and sacred in which they not only had seen and conversed with their Saviour now risen victorious from the dead, but had received from Him blessings rich and precious in themselves and precious also as an earnest of still greater blessings soon, to be imparted to them by their ascended and glorified Lord?

Would not the weekly occurrence of this day recall anew to their minds his resurrection and its attendant glories? The Jewish Sabbath could suggest nothing in respect to either.

3rd. His appearing to them again on the first day of the next week, and giving further manifestations of his love, glory and divinity, (John xx: 26-9) seem still more distinctly expressive of his purpose to set apart and fix this day,—his resurrection day,—as one of peculiar sacredness, and worthy to be observed statelly as commemorative of his triumph over death, hell and the grave;—and as the day chosen by himself to specially visit and bless his church. A Jewish Sabbath had intervened; but the Saviour did not meet with them on that Heaven-honoured day, though no doubt they observed the day as they had heretofore.

This preference of the first day as the time to re-eat his visit and manifest anew his grace, truth, and glory to his disciples, seems to us to express a very plain intimation that it was his will, and consequently his Father's, that they should meet in his name on the periodic return of this day, and expect to receive peculiar blessings in the exercises of faith, communion and devotion.

Why was his visit and instruction repeated on this day, except to fix in their hearts a regard for this day as peculiarly his own;—the stated observance of which was fitted to keep before their minds the grand culminating fact in Christianity,—his resurrection; (1 Cor. xv.), a fact which necessarily implies and suggests the Atonement, as well as emphatically expresses the Father's approbation of the work of Christ. Our Lord's preference of the first day on this occasion is in our view a strong way of declaring to his disciples that it is the Divine will that his bride,—the church, should in all coming time prefer and adopt this day as a day of rest and worship, as being thus consecrated by the Lord himself.

4. The choice of the day of Pentecost, that is, the first day of the week, for the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit,—the crowning gift and glory of the New Dispensation,—appears still more strongly to manifest it to be the will of God that the first day should be regarded by the church as peculiarly sacred, and be observed as a day of rest and worship—a day when the most precious spiritual blessings may be expected and received through faith in our risen and glorified Saviour, in answer to heart-felt, public, united prayer. The force of this statement depends of course, on whether it be a fact or not the day of Pentecost really occurred on the first day. That the Pentecost, i. e. the fiftieth day from the Passover came on the first day of the week, is we think capable of proof. In Lev. xxiii: 15-16, we read as follows,—“And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the Sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering, seven sabbaths shall be complete; even unto the morrow after the seventh Sabbath shall ye number fifty days, &c.” “The morrow after the seventh Sabbath” must be acknowledged to be the first day of the week;—this was therefore the Pentecost. Thus the seventh day was again rejected and the first day was chosen for the manifestation of the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed, according to the Divine promise, in his fulness on the disciples to fit them for their appointed work, and in attestation of our Lord's progression of regal and mediatorial power and glory at the right hand of God. This fact taken in connexion with the preceding ones we have noticed, as having occurred by Divine appointment on the first day, must produce in a thoughtful, serious, and unprejudiced mind, a conviction that Father, Son and Holy Spirit united to sanctify and bless this day as one to be had in perpetual remembrance and honour. Is it not plain from the facts stated, that it is the will of God that his church should transfer the regard that had hitherto been properly given to the seventh day as the Sabbath to the first day, as being more glorious, because of its more intimate relation to Christ and his victory; and from this consideration better fitted than any other day to be made the memorial of what is most glorious in the Past; and also the type of that eternal rest and glory which await the church redeemed by the precious blood of the Lamb?

5. Christian disciples in the times of the Apostles and under Apostolic sanction met on the first day of the week, and celebrated a peculiarly christian ordinance, and performed other acts appropriate to Christian worship on that day. (Acts xx: 7). This is not spoken of as an unusual thing, but apparently as an established custom—a thing known, approved and practised by the Christians of that early period. How appropriate the day for remembering with peculiar sacredness and affection their risen and all-conquering Lord!

Both the service and the day, how suggestive of the grand and eternally precious truths of Christianity!

6. The first day of the week was appointed by the Apostle to the Gentiles as the most fitting time for the members of the churches of Achaia and Galatia (and doubtless for all others too) to lay by their contributions for sacred purposes. (1 Cor. xvi: 1-2). Does not the nature of this injunction militate against the idea of this day having been devoted and observed a day of rest and worship? By no means.

Never do Christians need a holier state of mind and a deeper sense of what they owe to Christ, his Church and cause, than when they are called upon to lay by them in store a portion of their worldly substance for the unselfish and divine work of christian beneficence. The holiest time is not too holy for such a purpose. Why was the first day chosen? Does it not suggest that the day had already become sacred as being peculiarly associated with Christian worship. How appropriate the day selected by the inspired apostle to consecrate a fitting portion of our substance to the service of God and his saints! In view of the associations of the first day with our Lord's work and Kingdom would not believers be less likely to deal out of their means to the Lord's cause and people with an unwilling or grudging mind, or in a stinted and dishonest measure?

7. In the closing book of the sacred Canon there is, we think, a distinct intimation of a day recognized and distinctively known as one peculiarly associated with, and devoted to Christ;—it is there called the Lord's day. (Rev. i: 10).

The Greek word—*Kyriake*—here used to define the day is employed only once elsewhere in the New Testament,—(1 Cor. xi: 20) in which place it is used to describe the supper celebrated by our Lord and appointed to be observed in commemoration of his death, and undoubtedly refers to Christ. That the reference is to Christ in Rev. i: 10 is, as it seems to us, no less certain; for the Lamb is represented in that book as Lord of Lords. Now what day are we to understand by the Lord's day? Can it be any other than the first day of the week,—our Lord's resurrection day, and on which he met with and blessed his disciples,—the day on which the Holy Spirit was given by our Lord in his greatest fulness, power and love,—the day on which Christian disciples had been accustomed to meet to celebrate the death and love of their crucified Saviour? This is the day that was chosen by the exalted and glorified Redeemer himself as the most fitting to make his last communications to the church,—to unfold to the beloved and venerable apostle, those visions which are recorded in the closing book of the New Testament, and which are so full of light and glory, majesty and mystery, vengeance and wrath, mercy and love; and in which is present a prophetic exhibition of the future of his Church and the world, down to the end of time. We have now laid before you the evidence on which we ground the observance of the first day of the week as a day of rest and worship.

Sometimes the interpretation which we have given of the facts here adduced in proof of the first, as the Sabbath of the Gospel dispensation has been represented as visionary; but instead of the conclusion reached being visionary, it seems to us to rest on a solid foundation;—we are led to it step by step by an irresistible induction,—one built on facts occurring in such a connexion, and order of such a nature as to preclude all reasonable doubt or hesitation.

It has often been asserted that infant baptism rests upon as good evidence as the observance of the first of the week, as the day of rest and worship. This we deny. The Scripture evidence for a change of day as respects the Sabbath is strong, satisfactory and conclusive. The evidence which the most zealous believer in the infant rite has been able to adduce from the New Testament in its favour, is, to say the least, weak and unsatisfactory. A rite or observance that cannot show either precept or example to support it, cannot lawfully claim to stand on the same ground as regards Divine authority, as the observance of the first day of the week—the Lord's day,—which is mentioned in Scripture in connexion with the most important, vital and sublime facts and doctrines of Christianity, and to which day frequent reference is made in the New Testament. If any one will furnish from the Sacred Volume the same amount of evidence for infant baptism, that is here presented for the observance of the first day as the Sabbath of the New Dispensation, we will admit its claim. We see no reason why the Christian Community should be disturbed as to the propriety of observing the first day as the Sabbath of the Lord,—holy and honourable. The facts we have presented may justly be regarded as God's comment on the law of the Sabbath as adapted to the Gospel;—the ruling of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, indicated by these facts being under the peculiar circumstances of their occurrence, clearly suggestive of the Divine will, and is as authoritative and binding in this matter as an express command. Be careful and zealous, dear Brethren, to spend the day in the worship of God,—in reading the Scriptures, in meditation and prayer, in hearing the Gospel preached, in attendance on christian ordinances, and for the purpose of instruction, reproof and edification,—and in efforts to make known the truth and bring sinners to Christ for salvation. The Lord's day should be observed with not less than all the sanctity due to the ancient Sabbath. All travelling and visiting except for the purpose of Christian worship and beneficence, should be discontinued and discontinued. Communion with God and Christ, should be our special aim and endeavour throughout all the duties of this day;—thus shall the day be to us, not only a memorial of epochs and facts most important and glorious in the past, both in the consummation of Creation and the completion of Redemption; but answering more fully and brightly than the seventh day of old, as a type of that rest—that communion and blessedness which by the Grace of God, through faith in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the saints shall forever enjoy in Heaven.