

The Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath

Part I

Jonathan Edwards

I Cor. xvi. 1, 2.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.

We find in the New Testament often mentioned a certain collection, which was made by the Grecian churches, for the brethren in Judea, who were reduced to pinching want by a dearth which then prevailed, and was the heavier upon them by reason of their circumstances, they having been from the beginning oppressed and persecuted by the unbelieving Jews. This collection or contribution is twice mentioned in the Acts, chap. xi. 28-30. and xxiv. 17. It is also noticed in several of the epistles; as Rom. xv. 26. and Gal. ii. 10. But it is most largely insisted on, in these two epistles to the Corinthians; in this first epistle, chap. xvi. and in the second epistle, chap. viii. and ix.- The apostle begins the directions, which in this place he delivers concerning this matter, with the words of the text;—wherein we may observe,

1. What is the thing to be done concerning which the apostle gives them direction,— the exercise and manifestation of their charity towards their brethren, by communicating to them, for the supply of their wants; which was by Christ and his apostles often insisted on, as one main duty of the christian religion, and is expressly declared to be so by the apostle James, chap. i. 27. “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction.”

2. We may observe the time on which the apostle directs that this should be done, viz. “on the first day of the week.” By the inspiration of the Holy Ghost he insists upon it, that it be done on such a particular day of the week, as if no other day would do so well as that, or were so proper and fit a time for such a work.—Thus, although the inspired apostle was not for making that distinction of days in gospel times, which the Jews made, as appears by Gal. iv. 10. “Ye observe days, and months,” &c. yet, here he gives the preference to one day of the week, before any other, for the performance of a certain great duty of Christianity.

3. It may be observed, that the apostle had given to other churches, that were concerned in the same duty, to do it on the first day of the week: “As I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye.” Whence we may learn, that it was nothing

peculiar in the circumstances of the Christians at Corinth, which was the reason why the Holy Ghost insisted that they should perform this duty on this day of the week. The apostle had given the like orders to the churches of Galatia.

Now Galatia was far distant from Corinth; the sea parted them, and there were several other countries between them. Therefore it cannot be thought that the Holy Ghost directs them to this time upon any secular account, having respect to some particular circumstances of the people in that city, but upon a religious account. In giving the preference to this day for such work, before any other day, he has respect to something which reached all Christians throughout the wide world.

And by other passages of the New Testament, we learn that the case was the same as to other exercises of religion; and that the first day of the week was preferred before any other day, in churches immediately under the care of the apostles, for an attendance on the exercises of religion in general. Acts xx. 7. "Upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them." — It seems by these things to have been among the primitive Christians in the apostles' days, with respect to the first day of the week, as it was among the Jews, with respect to the seventh.

We are taught by Christ, that the doing of alms and showing of mercy are proper works for the sabbath-day. When the Pharisees found fault with Christ for suffering his disciples to pluck the ears of corn, and eat on the sabbath, Christ corrects them with that saying, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice;" Matt. xii. 7. And Christ teaches that works of mercy are proper to be done on the sabbath, Luke xiii. 15, 16. and xiv. 5.— These works used to be done on sacred festivals and days of rejoicing, under the Old Testament, as in Nehemiah's and Esther's time; Neh. viii. 10. and Esth. ix. 19, 22.—And Josephus and Philo, two very noted Jews, who wrote not long after Christ's time, give an account that it was the manner among the Jews on the sabbath, to make collections for sacred and pious uses.

DOCTRINE

It is the mind and will of God, that the first day of the week should be especially set apart among Christians, for religious exercises and duties.

That this is the doctrine which the Holy Ghost intended to teach us, by this and some other passages of the New Testament, I hope will appear plainly by the sequel. This is a doctrine that we have been generally brought up in by the instructions and examples of our ancestors; and it has been the general profession of the Christian world, that this day ought to be religiously observed and distinguished from other days of the week. However, some deny it. Some refuse to take notice of the day, as different from other days. Others own, that it is a laudable custom of the Christian church, into which she fell by agreement, and by appointment of her ordinary rulers, to set apart this day for public worship. But they deny any other original to such an observation of the day, than prudential human appointment.—Others religiously observe the Jewish sabbath, as of

perpetual obligation, and that we want a foundation for determining that that is abrogated, and another day of the week is appointed in the room of the seventh.

All these classes of men say, that there is no clear revelation that it is the mind and will of God, that the first day of the week should be observed as a day to be set apart for religious exercises, in the room of the ancient sabbath; which there ought to be in order to the observation of it by the Christian church, as a divine institution. They say, that we ought not to go upon the tradition of past ages, or upon uncertain and far-fetched inferences from some passages of the history of the New Testament, or upon some obscure and uncertain hints in the apostolic writings; but that we ought to expect a plain institution; which, they say, we may conclude God would have given us, if he had designed that the whole Christian church, in all ages, should observe another day of the week for a holy sabbath, than that which was appointed of old by plain and positive institution.

So far it is undoubtedly true, that if this be the mind and will of God, he hath not left the matter to human tradition; but hath so revealed his mind about it, in his word, that there is to be found good and substantial evidence that it is his mind: and doubtless, the revelation is plain enough for them that have ears to hear; that is, for them that will justly exercise their understandings about what God says to them. No Christian, therefore, should rest till he has satisfactorily discovered the mind of God in this matter. If the christian sabbath be of divine institution, it is doubtless of great importance to religion that it be well kept; and therefore, that every Christian be well acquainted with the institution.

If men take it only upon trust, and keep the first day of the week because their parents taught them so, or because they see others do it, they will never be likely to keep it so conscientiously and strictly, as if they had been convinced by seeing for themselves, that there are good grounds in the word of God for their practice. Unless they do see thus for themselves, whenever they are negligent in sanctifying the sabbath, or are guilty of profaning it, their consciences will not have that advantage to smite them for it, as otherwise they would.—And those who have a sincere desire to obey God in all things, will keep the sabbath more carefully and more cheerfully, if they have seen and been convinced that therein they do what is according to the will and command of God, and what is acceptable to him; and will also have a great deal more comfort in the reflection upon their having carefully and painfully kept the sabbath.

Therefore, I design now, by the help of God, to show, that it is sufficiently revealed in the Scriptures, to be the mind and will of God, that the first day of the week should be distinguished in the Christian church from other days of the week, as a sabbath, to be devoted to religious exercises.

In order to this, I shall here premise, that the mind and will of God, concerning any duty to be performed by us, may be sufficiently revealed in his word, without a particular precept in so many express terms, enjoining it. The human understanding is the ear to which the word of God is spoken; and if it be so spoken, that that ear may plainly hear it,

it is enough. God is sovereign as to the manner of speaking his mind, whether he will speak it in express terms, or whether he will speak it by saying several other things which imply it, and from which we may, by comparing them together, plainly perceive it. If the mind of God be but revealed, if there be but sufficient means for the communication of his mind to our minds, that is sufficient; whether we hear so many express words with our ears, or see them in writing with our eyes; or whether we see the thing that he would signify to us, by the eye of reason and understanding.

Who can positively say, that if it had been the mind of God, that we should keep the first day of the week, he would have commanded it in express terms, as he did the observation of the seventh day of old? Indeed, if God had so made our faculties, that we were not capable of receiving a revelation of his mind in any other way; then there would have been some reason to say so. But God hath given us such understandings, that we are capable of receiving a revelation, when made in another manner. And if God deals with us agreeably to our natures, and in a way suitable to our capacities, it is enough. If God discovers his mind in any way whatsoever, provided it be according to our faculties, we are obliged to obedience; and God may expect our notice and observance of his revelation, in the same manner as if he had revealed it in express terms.

I shall speak upon this subject under these two general propositions.

1. It is sufficiently clear, that it is the mind of God, that one day of the week should be devoted to rest, and to religious exercises, throughout all ages and nations.

2. It is sufficiently clear, that under the gospel-dispensation, this day is the first day of the week.

I. Prop. It is sufficiently clear, that it is the mind of God, that one day of the week should be devoted to rest, and to religious exercises, throughout all ages and nations; and not only among the ancient Israelites, till Christ came, but even in these gospel times, and among all nations professing Christianity.

1. From the consideration of the nature and state of mankind in this world, it is most consonant to human reason, that certain fixed parts of time should be set apart, to be spent by the church wholly in religious exercises, and in the duties of divine worship. It is a duty incumbent on all mankind, in all ages alike, to worship and serve God. His service should be our great business. It becomes us to worship him with the greatest devotion and engagedness of mind; and therefore to put ourselves, at proper times, in such circumstances, as will most contribute to render our minds entirely devoted to this work, without being diverted or interrupted by other things.

The state of mankind in this world is such, that we are called to concern ourselves in secular business and affairs, which will necessarily, in a considerable degree, take up the thoughts and engage the attention of the mind. However some particular persons may be in circumstances more free and disengaged; yet the state of mankind is such,

that the bulk of them, in all ages and nations, are called ordinarily to exercise their thoughts about secular affairs, and to follow worldly business, which, in its own nature, is remote from the solemn duties of religion.

It is therefore most meet and suitable, that certain times should be set apart, upon which men should be required to throw by all other concerns, that their minds may be the more freely and entirely engaged in spiritual exercises, in the duties of religion, and in the immediate worship of God; and that their minds being disengaged from common concerns, their religion may not be mixed with them.

It is also suitable that these times should be fixed and settled, that the church may agree therein, and that they should be the same for all, that men may not interrupt one another; but may rather assist one another by mutual example: for example has a great influence in such cases. If there be a time set apart for public rejoicing, and there be a general manifestation of joy, the general example seems to inspire men with a spirit of joy; one kindles another. So, if it be a time of mourning, and there be general appearances and manifestation of sorrow, it naturally affects the mind, it disposes it to depression, it casts a gloom upon it, and does as it were dull and deaden the spirits.— So, if a certain time be set apart as holy time, for general devotion, and solemn religious exercises, a general example tends to render the spirit serious and solemn.

2. Without doubt, one proportion of time is better and fitter than another for this purpose. One proportion is more suitable to the state of mankind, and will have a greater tendency to answer the ends of such times, than another. The times may be too far asunder. I think human reason is sufficient to discover, that it would be too seldom for the purposes of such solemn times, that they should be but once a year. So, I conclude, nobody will deny, but that such times may be too near together to agree with the state and necessary affairs of mankind.

Therefore, there can be no difficulty in allowing, that some certain proportion of time, whether we can exactly discover it or not, is really fittest and best—considering the end for which such times are kept, and the condition, circumstances, and necessary affairs of men; and considering what the state of man is, taking one age and nation with another—more convenient and suitable than any other; which God may know and exactly determine, though we, by reason of the scantiness of our understandings, cannot.

As a certain frequency of the returns of these times may be more suitable than any other, so one length or continuance of the times themselves may be fitter than another, to answer the purposes of such times. If such times, when they come, were to last but an hour, it would not well answer the end; for then worldly things would crowd too nearly upon sacred exercises, and there would not be that opportunity to get the mind so thoroughly free and disengaged from other things, as there would be if the times were longer. Being so short, sacred and profane things would be as it were mixed together. Therefore, a certain distance between these times, and a certain continuance of them

when they come, is more proper than others; which God knows and is able to determine, though perhaps we cannot.

3. It is unreasonable to suppose any other, than that God's working six days, and resting the seventh, and blessing and hallowing it, was to be of general use in determining this matter, and that it was written, that the practice of mankind in general might some way or other be regulated by it. What could be the meaning of God's resting the seventh day, and hallowing and blessing it, which he did, before the giving of the fourth commandment, unless he hallowed and blessed it with respect to mankind? For he did not bless and sanctify it with respect to himself, or that he within himself might observe it: as that is most absurd. And it is unreasonable to suppose that he hallowed it only with respect to the Jews, a particular nation, which rose up above two thousand years after.

So much therefore must be intended by it, that it was his mind, that mankind should, after his example, work six days, and then rest, and hallow or sanctify the next following; and that they should sanctify every seventh day, or that the space between rest and rest, one hallowed time and another, among his creatures here upon earth, should be six days.—So that it hence appears to be the mind and will of God, that not only the Jews, but men in all nations and ages, should sanctify one day in seven: which is the thing we are endeavouring to prove.

4. The mind of God in this matter as clearly revealed in the fourth commandment. The will of God is there revealed, not only that the Israelitish nation, but that all nations, should keep every seventh day holy; or, which is the same thing, one day after every sixth. This command, as well as the rest, is doubtless everlasting and of perpetual obligation, at least, as to the substance of it, as is intimated by its being engraven on the tables of stone. Nor is it to be thought that Christ ever abolished any command of the ten; but that there is the complete number ten yet, and will be to the end of the world.

Some say, that the fourth command is perpetual, but not in its literal sense; not as designing any particular proportion of time to be set apart and devoted to literal rest and religious exercises. They say, that it stands in force only in a mystical sense, viz. as that weekly rest of the Jews typified spiritual rest in the Christian church; and that we under the gospel are not to make any distinction of one day from another, but are to keep all time holy, doing every thing in a spiritual manner.

But this is an absurd way of interpreting the command, as it refers to Christians. For if the command be so far abolished, it is entirely abolished. For it is the very design of the command, to fix the time of worship. The first command fixes the object, the second the means, the third the manner, the fourth the time. And, if it stands in force now only as signifying a spiritual, Christian rest, and holy behaviour at all times, it doth not remain as one of the ten commands, but as a summary of all the commands.

The main objection against the perpetuity of this command is, that the duty required is not moral. Those laws whose obligation arises from the nature of things, and from the

general state and nature of mankind, as well as from God's positive revealed will, are called moral laws. Others, whose obligation depends merely upon God's positive and arbitrary institution, are not moral; such as the ceremonial laws, and the precepts of the gospel, about the two sacraments. Now, the objectors say, they will allow all that is moral in the decalogue to be of perpetual obligation; but this command, they say, is not moral.

But this objection is weak and insufficient for the purpose for which it is brought, or to prove that the fourth command, as to the substance of it, is not of perpetual obligation. For,

(1.) If it should be allowed that there is no morality belonging to the command, and that the duty required is founded merely on arbitrary institution, it cannot therefore be certainly concluded that the command is not perpetual. We know that there may be commands in force under the gospel, and to the end of the world, which are not moral: such are the institutions of the two sacraments. And why may there not be positive commands in force in all ages of the church? If positive, arbitrary institutions are in force in gospel-times, what is there which concludes that no positive precept given before the times of the gospel can yet continue in force? But,

(2.) As we have observed already, the thing in general, that there should be certain fixed parts of time set apart to be devoted to religious exercises, is founded in the fitness of the thing, arising from the nature of things, and the nature and universal state of mankind. Therefore, there is as much reason that there should be a command of perpetual and universal obligation about this, as about any other duty whatsoever. For if the thing in general, that there be a time fixed, be founded in the nature of things, there is consequent upon it a necessity, that the time be limited by a command; for there must be a proportion of time fixed, or else the general moral duty cannot be observed.

(3.) The particular determination of the proportion of time in the fourth commandment, is also founded in the nature of things, only our understandings are not sufficient absolutely to determine it of themselves. We have observed already, that without doubt one proportion of time is in itself fitter than another, and a certain continuance of time fitter than any other, considering the universal state and nature of mankind, which God may see, though our understandings are not perfect enough absolutely to determine it. So that the difference between this command and others, doth not lie in this, that other commands are founded in the fitness of the things themselves, arising from the universal state and nature of mankind, and this not; but, only that the fitness of other commands is more obvious to the understandings of men, and they might have seen it of themselves; but this could not be precisely discovered and positively determined without the assistance of revelation.

So that the command of God, that every seventh day should be devoted to religious exercises, is founded in the universal state and nature of mankind, as well as other commands; only man's reason is not sufficient, without divine direction, so exactly to determine it: though perhaps man's reason is sufficient to determine, that it ought not to

be much seldomer, nor much oftener, than once in seven days.

5. God appears in his word laying abundantly more weight on this precept concerning the sabbath, than on any precept of the ceremonial law. It is in the decalogue, one of the ten commands, which were delivered by God with an audible voice. It was written with his own finger on the tables of stone in the mount, and was appointed afterwards to be written on the tables which Moses made. The keeping of the weekly sabbath is spoken of by the prophets, as that wherein consists a great part of holiness of life; and is inserted among moral duties, Isa. lviii. 13, 14. "If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

6. It is foretold, that this command should be observed in gospel-times; as in Isaiah lvi. at the beginning, where the due observance of the sabbath is spoken of as a great part of holiness of life, and is placed among moral duties. It is also mentioned as a duty that should be most acceptable to God from his people, even where the prophet is speaking of gospel-times; as in the foregoing chapter, and in the first verse of this chapter. And, in the third and fourth verses, the prophet is speaking of the abolition of the ceremonial law in gospel-times, and particularly of that law, which forbids eunuchs to come into the congregation of the Lord. Yet, here the man is pronounced blessed, who keeps the sabbath from polluting it, ver. 2. And even in the very sentence where the eunuchs are spoken of as being free from the ceremonial law, they are spoken of as being yet under obligation to keep the sabbath, and actually keeping it, as that which God lays great weight upon: "For thus saith the Lord, unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; Even unto them will I give in mine house, and within my walls, a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off."

Besides, the strangers spoken of in the sixth and seventh verses, are the Gentiles, that should be called in the times of the gospel, as is evident by the last clause in the seventh, and by the eighth verse: "For mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people. The Lord God, which gathereth the outcasts of Israel, saith, Yet will I gather others to him, besides those that are gathered unto him." Yet it is represented here as their duty to keep the sabbath: "Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be his servants, every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant; even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer."

7. A further argument for the perpetuity of the sabbath, we have in Matt. xxiv. 20. "Pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath-day." Christ is here speaking of the flight of the apostles and other Christians out of Jerusalem and Judea, just before their final destruction, as is manifest by the whole context, and especially by

the 16th verse: "Then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains." But this final destruction of Jerusalem was after the dissolution of the Jewish constitution, and after the Christian dispensation was fully set up. Yet, it is plainly implied in these words of our Lord, that even then Christians were bound to a strict observation of the sabbath.

Thus I have shown, that it is the will of God, that every seventh day be devoted to rest and to religious exercises.

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