

Origin of Sunday Observance in the Christian Church

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A reply to Dudley Canright and others who affirm that the origin of Sunday observance is not Pagan or Roman Catholic but came from Jesus Christ and the apostles.

HISTORY teaches that the Sunday festival, originally pagan, was for reasons of sentiment and expediency adopted by that section of the Christian church which was beginning to apostatize by following the ways of the world, even in Paul's day. This falling away finally headed up in what is now known as the Roman Catholic, or papal, Church. (See 2 Thessalonians 2:3-8.)

Within recent years an effort has been made in the interests of the "Christian Sabbath," or "Lord's day," to break the force of this charge. To this end it is denied that Sunday was especially honored by the pagans, and it is asserted that the change from Sabbath keeping to Sunday observance was made in the Greek, or Eastern, Church, beginning with the apostles, long before there was any Roman Catholic Church or any Papacy.

This view was championed, if not originated, by the late D. M. Canright, in one of his books on the Sabbath question, and has been given wide currency by a large publishing house. It is important, therefore, that all men know how to meet this new phase of first-day propaganda.

Were it not that honest souls are being deceived by this Greek Church argument, the deceptive theory to which we have referred might be dismissed as unworthy of notice; for when examined, it is found to be as empty as a barrel with both heads out; but inasmuch as many to whom Mr. Canright's book comes have not at hand facilities for thorough investigation, we will present the truth of the matter here as briefly as possible.

What Is Involved

Those who take the position that the Sunday Sabbath is neither pagan nor papal ignore or deny several vital facts. In the first place, the Bible itself tells of a great apostasy among the professed followers of Christ in the early centuries of the church, and as stated by Dr. Adam Clarke in his General Observations on 2 Thessalonians 2: 17, "The general run of Protestant writers understand the whole [of this scripture] as referring to the popes and Church of Rome."

He who denies this must therefore in the end repudiate the consensus of Protestant opinion, and line up with the Roman Catholic interpretation of prophecy.

And not only so, but one taking such a position must ignore, falsify, and deny history as well as challenge Protestant exegesis. In his defense of Sunday observance as a Christian institution, Mr. Canright closed his eyes to two very important facts: (1) That there is a wide difference between a voluntary observance of Sunday for reasons of sentiment or expediency, and a divine command for its celebration; and (2) that

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Sunday as a sacred day came not from the paganism of Greece and Rome, which originally had no week and no weekly festival, but from the Mithraism of the East, which invaded the Roman Empire nearly a century in advance of Christianity, and which did have the week and a weekly festival Sunday.

In the eleventh edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (1911), article "Mithras," the fact of "the sanctification of Sunday and of the 25th of December "by Mithraism is strongly emphasized; but it is ignored by the advocates of the apostolic origin of the Sunday Sabbath.

This statement from the Britannica relative to Sunday is supported by the following letter from one of the authorities by whom Mr. Canright sought to disprove the pagan origin of Sunday observance:

**SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
UNITED STATES NATIONAL MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, DC**

November 21, 1923.

Office of Administrative Assistant to the Secretary in Charge U. S. National Museum.

Mr. C. P. Bollman,

Managing Editor, The Liberty Magazine, Washington, D. C.

DEAR SIR:

Receipt is acknowledged of your letter of November 19, and in response to your several inquiries Dr. L. M. Casanowicz, Assistant Curator of Old World Archaeology, makes the following statement concerning Mithraism:

"The devotees of Mithra held Sunday sacred because Mithra was identified with the "Invincible Sun," but we have not knowledge how they observed that day. Mithra was an old Aryan deity, and his worship is a special mystery cult developed with the decay of Zoroastrianism. Mithraism came to Rome from Asia Minor in 67 BC, but we do not know when it was organized into a cult. It became the religion especially of the Roman army, and besides Italy it spread especially along the frontiers where the garrisons were stationed. It did not supplant paganism, but existed alongside the old paganism, and other so-called mystery cults, as those of Isis, Cybele, and Attis."

Very truly yours,

W. DEC RAVENEL,

Administrative Assistant to the Secretary.

In his book, "The Mysteries of Mithra," Dr. Franz Cumont, with all the information before him available to anybody, says of the worship of Mithraism:

"Each day of the week, the planet to which the day was sacred was invoked in a fixed spot in the crypt; and Sunday, over which the sun presided, was especially holy." Page 167.

Writing as recently as 1921, Professor L. Patterson, Trinity College, Cambridge, vice-principal of Chichester Theological College, speaks of Dr. Cumont's book from which we quote, styling it a "masterly and comprehensive work." (See Patterson's book, "Mithraism and Christianity," Preface, p. viii.)

The letter from the Smithsonian Institution disposes very effectually of the confident assertion of the Canright book that "there was no special reverence for Sunday in pagan times." Both the British Museum and the Smithsonian Institution are quoted by Mr. Canright in support of his misleading statement. The fact is that the questions which he put to the historians of both institutions were unfair and misleading; the archaeologists in both Washington and London were asked, not if there were pagans in Asia and Europe who in the early centuries of the Christian era held Sunday as a sacred day, but, "Did the pagan Romans and Greeks ever have a regular weekly day of rest from secular work?"

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It is not contended by Seventh-day Adventists, or by any one else, so far as we know, nor was it ever held by anybody of ordinary intelligence, that any pagans of any sort ever had a “weekly day of rest from secular work.” It is not even claimed, and never was, that the Sunday of the Mithraists was a counterpart of the Sabbath of the Jews. Evidently it was not, though they did hold Sunday sacred to the sun; but the day seems to have been observed originally as a festival after the order of the 25th of December, and not after the order of the Sabbath of the Bible, of which the pagans of Europe knew nothing except as they came into contact first with the Jews, and later with Sabbath-keeping Christians.

Constantine’s Sunday law of AD 321 shows two things very plainly; namely, (1) that Sunday was a well-known day generally held in reverence, “venerable” from the standpoint of Mithraists; and (2) that previous to Constantine’s edict, it was not observed by general abstinence “from secular work.”

It is a fact, however, as stated by Cyril Bailey, M. A., fellow and tutor of Balliol College, Oxford, in his book, “The Religion of Ancient Rome,” that the pagan Romans did have *ferice*, or feast days, “set apart for the worship of the gods,” on which “therefore the citizen ought to do no manner of work.” Mr. Bailey says:

“The state observed this condition fully in the closing of law courts and the absence of legislative assemblies, and in theory too the private citizen must refrain from any act which was not concerned with the worship of the gods, or rendered absolutely necessary. But it is characteristic of Rome that the state did not seek for offense, but only punished it if accidentally seen.” - Pages 93, 94.

This shows us how naturally and easily Constantine’s Sunday law of AD 321 could come in. All Mithraists held the day sacred to Mithra. Many Christians, while still observing the ancient Sabbath by abstinence from labor, paid certain honors to the early hours of Sunday as the time of the resurrection of their Lord. It would be easy, therefore, for all worshipers of the gods of Rome, devotees of Mithra, and Gentile Christians to accept Constantine’s law without protest.

Incidentally the Smithsonian letter throws a flood of light upon Constantine’s phrase, “Venerable day of the sun.” Nearly four centuries before that emperor’s time, Mithraism had become the religion of the Roman army. It is unthinkable that the emperor, himself a soldier, would or could have described Sunday, the sacred day of the Mithraists, as “venerable” from any other standpoint than that of the devout couriers of the Mithraic cult, the invincible legions of Rome.

Mr. Canright did not ask the scholars of the British Museum and of the Smithsonian Institution if the Mithraists had a weekly festival in honor of the sun, but if the pagans of Greece and Rome knew of or observed such a day. Of course the answer was No. The pagans of Europe knew nothing of the week of seven days, nor of a weekly festival, until they learned it from the Egyptians, the Jews, and the worshipers of Mithra.

But Mithraism, the paganism by which the Christian church was corrupted, especially in the second and third centuries, did have the week and a weekly festival, and as we have seen, that festival was Sunday. The reason and the results of the amalgamation of these two systems of worship, apostatizing Christianity and Mithraism, are thus briefly stated by Gibbon:

“The most respectable bishops had persuaded themselves that the ignorant rustics would more cheerfully renounce the superstitions of paganism if they found some resemblance, some compensation, in the bosom of Christianity. The religion of Constantine achieved, in less than a century, the final conquest of the Roman Empire; but the victors themselves were insensibly subdued by the arts of their vanquished rivals.” — “Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” chap. 28, last paragraph.

Though Mithra was not worshiped primarily as the sun, Mithraism was, as Dr. Casanowicz states, a form of sun worship. Of Anaitis, the Persian goddess of “springs and streams and of all fertility,” “of generation and all sexual life,” the Britannica, article “Persia,” says:

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“At her side stands the sun god Mithras, who is represented as a young and victorious hero. Both deities occupy the very first rank in the popular creed; while to the theologian they are the most potent of the good powers - Mithras being the herald and propagator of the service of Light and the mediator betwixt man and Ahuramazda [the original chief god of the Persians], who now fades more into the background.”

The introduction of Mithraism into the Roman Empire antedates the Christian era, as we have shown, by nearly a century, which enables us to understand how and why it was possible for that particular brand of paganism to become, as we are told it did become, “the greatest antagonist of Christianity.”

This was not the paganism of Greece and Rome, but was the neo paganism of the early centuries of the Christian era, which, coming from the East, not only sought to supplant the paganism of the West, but hotly contested every inch of ground with Christianity itself, corrupting and debasing, though unable to supersede, the religion of Jesus.

In his book, “Mithraism,” W. J. Phythian-Adams not only traces the cult, in its Western migrations, into Cilicia and other parts of Asia Minor, but shows that the capital of the empire itself, and its environs, “teemed with Mithraic devotees.” All over Germany, far up the Danube and along the whole course of the Rhine, and as far west as Britain, “its course,” says Mr. Adams, “can be tracked by monuments and inscriptions.” (See “Mithraism,” pages 22, 23.)

And wherever the cult went, there went the weekly celebration of Sunday and the annual celebration of the 25th of December, both in honor of the sun.

This explains how Sunday and the 25th of December both come to us bearing German and Scandinavian as well as Latin names.

Throughout the Roman Empire in all its ramifications, the avant-couriers of Mithraism were, as Mr. Adams puts it, men of the army and civil service drawn by the government from “those provinces of eastern Asia Minor and north Syria, in which the cult of Mithras had grown to maturity.” – “Mithraism,” page 31.

Of the success of these Mithraic missionaries, Mr. Adams says:

“We know now that, at one period in his history, Mithras was worshiped in every corner of the Latin world, from Spain to Anatolia, from the ‘Wall’ in Britain to Alexandria and Memphis; and more than this, that he was invoked, not merely by the humblest classes in the empire, but by the commanders of legions, by the governors of provinces, by the emperors themselves.” - Id., page 3.

Beginning of the Great Apostasy

Everything must have a beginning. The great apostasy, which later crystallized into the Roman Catholic, or papal, Church, had its origin in the East, and that as far back as the time of the apostle Paul. The gospel was first preached in the East, and there the first churches were organized. From a very early date unconverted people were brought into the church, as for example Ananias and Sapphira, at Jerusalem (Acts 5:1-11); Simon Magus, in Samaria (Acts 8:9-23); and Diotrephes, who loved “to have the preeminence,” and to this end cast some “out of the church” (3 John 9, 10).

The case of Diotrephes especially was a manifestation of the papal spirit. That this spirit crystallized into the finished papal system in Rome rather than in Constantinople was due largely to the superior organizing ability of the Latins over the Greeks. Political conditions also favored the West in this respect. Just how, we shall have occasion to explain later.

The apostle Paul was constantly on guard against worldliness and apostasy, holding ever before believers the rewards to be given at the second appearing of our Lord. In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul had used the phrase, “We which are alive and remain!”

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This had been construed to mean that the apostle himself expected to live to witness the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. To correct that misunderstanding, the apostle wrote a second letter, in which he said, in part:

“Now we beseech you, brethren. . . . that ye be not soon shaken in mind. . . . that the day of Christ is at hand. . . . That day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who . . . sits in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now lets [or hinders] will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming.” 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8.

The Consensus of Protestant Opinion

In his general observations, to which reference has already been made, Dr. Clarke says:

“There appears little room to doubt of the genuine sense and meaning of the passage. This apostasy all the concurrent marks and characters will justify us in charging upon the Church of Rome. It follows of consequence that the man of sin is the pope; not meaning any pope in particular, but the pope in general, as the chief head and supporter of this apostasy.

“The foundations of popery were laid in the apostle’s days, but the superstructure was raised by degrees; and several ages passed before the building was completed, and the man of sin revealed in full perfection.”

Then after stating that his views accord with forecasts by such old writers as “Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, Lactantius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, Hilary, Jerome, Augustine, and Chrysostom” touching “the whole passage,” Clarke sites Dr. Macknight and Bishop Newton, more modern exegesis, as entertaining the same opinion as himself.

The Part Enacted by the Greek Church

And now, what part was enacted by the Greek Church in this work of apostasy? It is true, as stated by some, that the change from Sabbath to Sunday, from the seventh to the first day of the week, was effected largely in the East, that it was adopted and promoted rather than originated by the Western, or Roman, Church. But that does not make it any more Biblical than if it had been purely a Western innovation. It was a product of the papal principle.

There was long an unholy rivalry between the East and the West for spiritual and ecclesiastical supremacy. After some years the prize was captured by Rome. This was, in fact, what brought about the final schism between the church of the East and that of the West.

It was in the early centuries of the Christian era that many questionable practices were admitted into the church, as measures of expediency. And it is largely in these that we find the several points of similarity between Christianity and the new paganism, or Mithraism. Sunday observance was one of the earliest of these.

Sunday Bears Pagan Earmarks

Even in its earliest introduction into the Christian church, Sunday observance bears the earmarks of its pagan origin. Until after the Sabbath edict of Constantine, only those bishops who were seeking the aid of the civil power to bolster up the waning influence of the church ever thought of Sunday as a day of rest. It was a neo pagan festival dedicated to the sun, but was not a Sabbath, such an institution being unknown to the heathen.

They had, as we have already stated, no Sabbath, and Sunday was not a day of rest. The first day of the week was observed by them by greeting the sun by prayers, sacrifices, and rejoicing at the hour of his rising on Sunday, after which every person was at full liberty (until the Sunday edict of AD 321) to spend the

