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## Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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### LATIMER COMMENT 10

#### SUNDAY TRADE - A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Latimer Memoranda are short statements on current topics, written from a Christian point of view. On this occasion the memorandum is being given a wider distribution than usual, because it deals with a matter which is coming before Parliament, and which will be discussed there in its broad bearings upon the life of the nation, and not simply on church-people. Nevertheless, the main treatment here will be theological, because this is the sort of expertise which Latimer House was founded to provide, though other aspects of the matter will not be ignored.

As the report of the Auld committee last November proposed the removal of all restrictions on shop-opening hours, on weekdays as well as Sundays, the issue is a wider one than simply the preservation of the Christian Sunday. If the Times (4 March '85) is to be believed, and the Government considers that implementing the Auld proposals would necessarily involve the abolition of licensing hours as well, this makes the issue wider still. Nevertheless, we shall concentrate here upon the implications for Sunday, since that is a large enough matter in itself.

The Shops Act of 1950 is widely criticised for the inconsistencies of its regulations, and could no doubt be improved. At the same time it is possible to make any regulations look inconsistent, if one is opposed to them. It is often said, for example, that the Act permits the sale of a pornographic magazine on Sunday but prohibits the sale of a Bible, which looks very inconsistent. This, however, is a tendentious account. In so far as the sale of pornography is lawful at all, on any day of the week, it is only periodical literature of this kind which may be sold on Sunday, as any other periodical literature may be. This is because periodical literature will date. The Bible, however, belongs to the class of literature which will not date, and which therefore is not treated with the same indulgence.

But inconsistencies in the Shops Act could only justify amendment of its regulations, not abolition of them. Sunday trade has been regulated by law in this country for over a thousand years. The earliest act on record which deals with this matter dates from the reign of King Athelstan (925-41). Thus, within about a century of England becoming a single kingdom, Sunday trade was regulated by law, and such legislation was repeatedly enacted in the Middle Ages, in the Tudor and Stuart periods, and down to the present day. So the proposal to do away with all such legislation could scarcely be more revolutionary.

Yet, the length of time for which such legislation has existed is less important than the reasons for it. Today, the pros and cons are often stated in purely economic terms, if not in terms of mere convenience. It is convenient for shoppers to have shops open at all times: but whether it is convenient for shopkeepers or shopworkers, for suppliers, for the transport services or for the police, is another matter. The economic arguments seem finely balanced: would more be sold, or just the same amount more slowly? Would there be more jobs, or just longer hours (without more pay) for those who have jobs? Economic reasons have probably always had some influence on the legislation about Sunday trade, but the prime reasons underlying it have been social and religious.

Everyone needs rest and change from daily labour. Shopkeepers, shopworkers and the ancillary services are no exception. But if shopkeepers were forced by competition to open on Sundays against their will, and if shopworkers were forced by fear of unemployment to serve in shops on Sundays against their will, and if the same factors controlled the ancillary services, there would be grave danger of necessary rest and change being whittled away for a great many people. For some, the weekend could even cease to exist altogether, and their whole year (apart from annual leave) could become an unchanging series of working days, in which the division between week and week disappeared. This is a prime social consideration.

Of course, it will be said in reply that another day would be given instead of Sunday, and where a shop was prospering, this is no doubt true. But a second social consideration is the need to defend and foster family life, and for this it is not just any day off that is needed, but the same day off for all the family. The closing of shops on Sunday provides the same day off, and no substitute day off for some members of the family would be of equal value.

Christians would be particularly disadvantaged, since there are also religious reasons for limiting Sunday trade. For Sunday is the great day of Christian worship and teaching, which those involved in Sunday trade would no longer be free to take part in. To free themselves, they might well have to sacrifice their jobs, and this would apply not just to those who were already Christians, but also to those who were interested in becoming Christians, and wanted to learn more. It is true that today only a minority of people (11% of the population) regularly attend church each Sunday, but it would be sad if Parliament took steps which would prevent that number from increasing, and actually diminished it. It is also true that there is a minority of Jews and Moslems in this country, whose sacred day is Saturday or Friday, not Sunday. But they too would probably prefer any day of rest and worship to continue, rather than that there should be no such day.

To Christians, Sunday has always been a sacred day. It is three times mentioned in the New Testament, as a day devoted to the Lord and used for worship, teaching and acts of mercy (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rom. 1:10). For these purposes, daily work was probably always set aside on Sunday as far as possible, and there is explicit evidence to show it from the time of Tertullian (200 A. D.) onwards. The reason for choosing this particular day was that it was on the first day of the week (Sunday) that Jesus rose from the dead, thus demonstrating the truth of his claim to be the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. Just as the Old Testament sabbath had been a commemoration, of the the creation and the deliverance from Egypt, so the 'Lord's Day' became a commemoration of the new creation and the deliverance from sin and death through Christ's resurrection from the dead.

One must not exaggerate the similarity between the Old Testament sabbath and the Christian Sunday, as has often been done in the past. Sunday should not be regarded legalistically, but as part of the perfect 'law of liberty', the law of love to God and one's neighbour. But this means that it should not be regarded lawlessly either, as if even its main purposes of rest and worship were a matter of choice or whim. The sanctification of one day in seven is a principle which, according to the Old Testament, was established at creation itself, for all mankind (Gen.2:1-3). It was also embodied in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:8-11), which again shows its basic importance. And the sanctification of one day in seven is a principle which is embodied as much in the New Testament 'Lord's Day' as it is in the Old Testament sabbath. It is a rule of life for Christians, and a merciful provision for all men alike.

Two years ago, a private member's bill proposed what has now been proposed again by the Auld committee. The bill was adopted by the Government and given extra time, but when a free vote was reluctantly conceded, it was heavily defeated. According to the same report in the Times which was quoted earlier, the Government has accepted that, 'given the strength of the interest groups opposed to the changes, including the shopworkers' union and the churches', they could only be carried through by Government legislation. Consequently, the report states, the Home Secretary is shortly to announce that the Government will itself legislate in the next session of Parliament to remove restrictions on shop hours and Sunday trading, which could imply an intention to refuse a free vote on this occasion.

One hopes that the report in the Times is misleading, for that way lies tyranny. To impose such a change, against the wishes of those most directly involved, would be the sort of high-handed action that alters the voting-habits of a lifetime. In every constituency there are many shops and many churches. One may wonder, therefore, whether any Conservative seat in the country would be safe if the Government took this course.

ROGER BECKWITH

P. S. The fear expressed above proved well-founded. When the Auld report was first debated on 20 May 1985, the Government imposed a 3-line whip to ensure support for the report's proposals. The motion was accordingly passed, but great indignation was expressed by members and nearly 70 Conservatives rebelled. It seems quite possible, sad to say, that the Government will press ahead with its proposed legislation and use similar methods to push it through, despite the platform on which it came to power, pledging it to defend family life, and despite unexpectedly firm opposition from the British Council of Churches and the Church of England, whose General Synod condemned the Auld report this July by a vote of well over 300 to 1. Unless providence intervenes in answer to prayer, we may in the autumn be confronted with the bizarre spectacle of the Queen, the supreme governor of the Church of England and defender of the faith, announcing from the throne her ministers' plans to destroy the Christian Sunday.

For further reading, one may consult **THIS IS THE DAY : THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHRISTIAN SUNDAY IN ITS JEWISH AND EARLY CHURCH SETTING** by R. T. Beckwith and W. Stott (London, 1978).