

Celebrating the Lord's Day (2)

A great deal of ink has been spilled discussing what Jesus and Paul taught about the Sabbath. If Jesus has fulfilled the law, why not abolish the Sabbath? And didn't the apostle Paul teach that we are no longer bound by the law?

Jesus and the Sabbath.

When Jesus addressed the Sabbath question, He had in mind the legalism that had been developed over the centuries. The Pharisees based their case against the Lord and His disciples on the fact that He was allowing His disciples to transgress some of the traditional teachings on Sabbath keeping. The Pharisees had made salvation a matter of merit, of righteousness earned by the manner in which the law, according to their interpretation was to be kept. After the time of Ezra and Nehemiah the rules pertaining to the Sabbath became stricter. In our Lord's time, there were 1521 things one could NOT do on the Sabbath - including rescuing a drowning man. The Sabbath had become a prison of prohibitions, which had turned a day of joy and hope into a day of sullenness and fear. In fact, the fire taboo, among others, is still law. Even today orthodox Jews may neither kindle nor quench a flame on Saturday.

Since legalism had completely suppressed the true intent and joyous character of the Sabbath, Jesus openly defied the leaders of Israel in respect to their attitude toward the Sabbath. Jesus lived and acted according to the true spirit of the Sabbath. Thus when Jesus saw the people burdened by man - made laws, He called out, " Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11: 28). Thus Jesus was not breaking the Sabbath. In fact, He placed it in the proper perspective again. He declared lordship over it. He said that man was not made for the Sabbath (Mark 2: 27). [This text is often quoted by those who wish to free themselves from Sunday observance.] But this declaration by Christ arose from the context of His controversy with the Pharisees and their legalistic interpretation the Sabbath.

Our Lord taught that the Sabbath was made for man for his highest good, that he might enter into God's fellowship and rest. Far from abolishing the Sabbath, He pointed to God's original intent for that day. The Sabbath was made for man that being in the likeness of God he too should have a day of feasting and enjoyment in God and in His work, and that he should have it at regular intervals. Jesus kept the Sabbath. He went to the two "devotional" services in the synagogue. He also went about doing good. The scope of His doing good ranged from walking through the fields, the streets and the public places to having dinner with His friends. He allowed His disciples to pluck ears of corn because they were hungry. He also healed the sick on the Sabbath. He healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law after he had left a synagogue service. Jesus clearly shunned legalism. Furthermore, He taught by word and example that works of necessity, either for the preservation and protection of human and animal life, as well as works of mercy, and works required for public worship, are lawful on the Sabbath.

Paul and the Sabbath.

The apostle Paul never contradicted Jesus, who said "till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law." The same Jesus also threatened with severe punishment anyone who "relaxes one of the least of these commandments" (Matt. 5:18,19). It is evident, therefore, that the fourth commandment is included among "these commandments." Paul faced the same legalism as His Lord did. Hence he addressed the Judaizers, who accused Paul of not keeping the Jewish pharisaic Sabbath. Paul told them that their false gospel of legalism directly opposed the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. From this perspective his writing to the Galatians and the Colossians must be interpreted.

In Galatians 4:9-10 Paul condemns the observance of sacred seasons as a means of salvation. In Col. 2:16-17 Paul combats the Judaizers' legalism by pointing out that the Old Testament ordinances connected with meat and drink, holy days, new moons and Sabbath were only a shadow of things to come. But now Christ has come these shadows have been replaced by the reality, Christ, so that their observance is no longer necessary. As Paul therefore makes clear, the Judaizers have completely misunderstood the purpose and place of the Old Testament ordinances in the economy of God's grace. And those who use Romans 14: 5 in their attempt to prove that Paul abolished the Sabbath observance have no leg to stand on. This text says nothing, one way or another, about the question of the abiding validity of the fourth commandment, nor of Sabbath observance. Nowhere does Paul say that the Sabbath is now done away with.

Sabbath Rest.

Sabbath rest is one of the great themes in the letter to the Hebrews. The author urges the believers in the early church to be faithful to Christ. He uses the example of Sabbath rest to explain the development and outworking of God's plan of salvation. He reminds his readers that some of the chosen people living in Old Testament times were not able to enter into God's rest due to their unbelief and sin (Heb.3:18,19). This rest is the promised land which was a type, a symbol, of God's rest intended for man. In Hebrews 4 the author points out that those who die in Christ receive a foretaste of this rest. He says that there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labours as God did from His. Meanwhile already in this life, before the inauguration of the new heaven and earth, the true child of God enjoys the peace which passes all understanding (Phil.4: 7).

Sunday points to Christ's entry into His rest on His ascension day and points forward to the believer's full entry into his rest on the Day of the Lord. In the rest promised in Rev. 14: 13, the writer's aim is to show that Jesus has provided the rest of salvation for His people. The weekly Sabbath, therefore, points to the final rest which God now already enjoys and which is His gift to His people in heaven and the new heaven and earth. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* puts it, may "all the days of his life rest from his evil works, let

the Lord work in him by His Spirit, and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath." With these truths in mind, we can understand why the author of the Hebrews exhorts Christians to keep the Lord's day holy. Furthermore, they are to encourage each other "not to give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing - and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Heb.20:25).

This Biblical view of rest has practical implications. When a Christian works on Sunday, he uses time, which does not belong to him, but to the Lord. Sunday is a spiritual oasis in a desert of worldly cares. On Sunday, believers rest from their daily activities, which are temporal, and are engaged in spiritual matters, which are eternal. God never meant that His people should toil endlessly, day after day. This no-work obligation still stands (cf. Lev.23:25). One day a week Christians may taste a measure of relief from the toil of the ground, which was cursed because of Adam's fall into sin. Christians are not slaves to their work. Through Christ they are kings over their daily work, and they use and give expression to this kingly freedom by resting the first day of the week. By observing this day in honour of Christ, they testify to the fact that they live out of the accomplished work of Christ.

As God rested after His work of creating the world, Christians should rest from their labours. In our restless, frantic, fast-paced society, we need our rest. Our labour-saving devices may make our tasks easier, but fax-machines, cellular phones, computers, and home entertainment centres don't give us much time for solitude. Genuine rest is rooted in faith. We are saved by faith, and not by works (Eph.2: 8-10). Yet we act as if everything depends on our works. We are God's children by God's grace. We do not seek to earn; we receive salvation. Our Sunday rest, therefore, should reflect our spiritual rest.

The Sabbath and the Reformation.

The reformers and their heirs went to the Scriptures and the teachings of the early church fathers to get a deeper understanding of the Sunday as the Lord's day. Why keep all the Saints' days and other special "holy" days, when the Scripture refers to only one day for celebration - the Sunday?

Martin Luther believed that Christ fulfilled the ceremonial aspect of the fourth commandment. But he did not mean to say that Sunday observance should be set aside. Luther wrote in his *Address to the German Nobility* (1520) "All festivals should be abrogated except Sunday." He taught that Sunday should be kept as a day of rest to give physical respite to all workers, so that everyone might attend the worship services in order to hear the Word of God." In his *Larger Catechism* of 1529 he stated in his article on the Fourth Commandment that "nature teaches that the working classes...who have spent the whole week in their work...absolutely require a day in which they can...rest and refresh themselves." However, Luther never taught a strict Sunday observance. "The believers must live in accordance to the Scriptures," Luther said. "But Christian freedom in respect to Sunday finds its origin in an unrestricted conscience which relies on God's Word."

Calvin's view of the Lord's day was stricter than Luther's. He pointed to the order of creation in his discussion of Sabbath keeping. In the year 1554, Calvin wrote in his *Commentary on Genesis* (2:1-3) that God "first rested, then blessed this rest, that all ages it might be sacred among men." "Moreover", he concluded, "it is to be noted that this institution has been given not to a single century or people, but to the entire human race." For Calvin the Christian Sunday is not a simple continuation of the Jewish Sabbath "changed into the first day of the week." He taught that the rest that Israel was commanded to observe was a ceremonial rest and together with the other ceremonies of the Mosaic law, it was fulfilled and abolished by the accomplished work of Christ. But this does not mean that the fourth commandment has been entirely dismissed; it demands from us that we observe the order of creation in taking one day off for worship and physical rest. We must give relief from servile labour to others and ourselves. "God instituted" the day of rest, said Calvin and "we, created in God's image, must follow His example." And Calvin made a point which today's Christian retailers should take to heart. In one of his sermons on the Ten Commandments, he said, "If our shop windows are shut on Sunday, when we travel not after the common order, this is to the end that we should have more liberty and leisure to attend to that which God commandeth...". Calvin had the people of Geneva come together for worship services in the morning hours and for instruction in the Christian faith during the afternoon of the Lord's Day. This practice, with slight modifications, has continued. Many Calvinistic churches have, in addition to the regular morning worship service, an afternoon or evening service in which the Heidelberg Catechism or the Westminster Catechism is explained. When the Reformation Churches discussed the Sabbath observance during the Synod of Dort (1618-19), they declared: "This day is thus consecrated for divine worship, so that in it one might rest from all servile works (with these excepted, which are works of charity and pressing necessity) and from those recreations which impede the worship of God." We must conclude, therefore, that the historic Reformed position on the subject of working on Sunday is that only works of mercy and works of necessity are permitted. In North America the Reformed churches of Dutch descent were strongly influenced by the Calvinist traditions as taught and practised in the Netherlands. Abraham Kuyper looked upon the Sabbath as a creation ordinance. He stated: "The institution of one of the seven days as (the) day of rest is thus no specifically Christian institution, but one of mankind in general, which falls not under particular grace but under general grace."

According to Kuyper even the unbeliever is blessed by the institution of the Sabbath. Every week the Sabbath grants the unbeliever a much needed physical rest. In 1890, Kuyper (who later became the Dutch Prime Minister) insisted that the state should hallow the Sabbath in public life by limiting the Sunday employment of its public service to necessary military activities and upholding legislation to procure silence during public worship and to ensure cessation of normal worldly business; and he insisted too that private citizens close their business. In practice, today it seems that his views on the Sabbath have become wishful thinking. Klaas Schilder held that already in paradise the Sabbath was symbolic for the rest that remains for the people of God. G.Brillenburgh Wurth spoke up for the Lord's Day as the central feast day of the Christian life. The day is meant to be a day of freedom and enjoyment for every worker; a day of sanctified feasting.

A Day of Gladness.

Our Lord transformed Sunday into a day of joy and gladness (cf. Ps. 18: 24). But how many view it instead as a day to endure? Before his conversion under the ministry of D.L. Moody, Charles T. Studd (1862-1931) said he used to think that religion was a Sunday thing, "like one's Sunday clothes, to put away on Monday morning. We boys were brought up to go to church regularly, but, although we had a kind of religion, it didn't amount to much. It was like having a toothache. We were always sorry to have Sunday come, and glad when it was Monday morning. The Sabbath was the dullest day of the whole week, and just because we got the hold of the wrong of religion." But from the Biblical perspective, each Lord's day is a celebration of hope. A great many disputes about how to keep the Sunday as a holy day would disappear if we cared more to look from that perspective upon the Lord's Day. In the fourth commandment, Christians hear God's jubilant declaration that Christ has borne the curse resting upon creation (Gal. 3). The resurrection of our Lord on the first day of the week is one of THE great events in God's plan of salvation. The Lord is Victor! He overcame Satan, suffering, death, and hell. The door to God's heavenly home is now open. With this in mind every Sunday becomes a feast day. Each Lord's day is a day of celebrating our new creation in Christ through the Spirit. Our life is now filled with purpose. Through our Saviour all the days of our week are now holy to the Lord. Instead of seeing the fourth commandment as a burden to bear, it should send a flash of heavenly joy surging through our hearts. When we remember who we are in God's sight as we gather on the Lord's Day for worship, a church service will not be a horrible bore. It will give it beauty and delight beyond all other delights; if it is truly celebrated in His name. The Lord's Day, therefore, is not the dullest day of the week, as Charles T. Studd experienced it before his conversion. On that day, man does as his Creator did, he ceases from his daily labours. If we keep in mind that from the beginning of creation God meant the Lord's day to be a feast for man to enjoy, we will think twice before we desecrate it. The practice of keeping the Lord's day holy does not mean running away from the multitude of problems our world experiences. It gives us, instead, the opportunity to receive the grace to face them. Let us call the Lord's day a delight and by our behaviour on that day show that we really rejoice in this day of rest and fellowship with the Lord and His people. Worship is a feast, a delightful experience, a holy time in the presence of God.

In Keeping *The Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* Marva Dawn points out that the Sabbath is a sign of liberation. In our culture, which attaches so much value to work and productivity, our weekly ceasing reminds us that the value of work lies not in itself, nor in the worth it gives us, but in the worship of God that takes place in it. Even the way we dress for worship makes a statement regarding Sunday observance. Dawn argues that we should dress with particular care on Sundays. We don't dress to show off one's finery to others, but to be duly respectful before God and to honour Him. This, of course, rebukes the seeker services' "come-as-you-are-attitude." Dawn rightly says that you shouldn't go to church dressed ready to go to the beach, or give the impression you have just rolled out of bed. Reverence should be restored to contemporary worship.

When do we prepare for the Lord's Day? When we still lived in the Netherlands, I vividly recall how my parents began preparing for the Lord's day on Saturday. At our home, the Sunday was always a "feast-day," never a joyless burden. This Saturday preparation has also spiritual significance. Karen Burton Mains, author of *Making Sunday Special*, emphasizes that our Saturday habit of getting ready for Sunday is "the discipline of getting ready for the Lord's final coming."

What is the task of the church? Many churches are increasingly limiting their acts of worship to the Sunday morning service, thus reflecting the pressures of the world. They are rapidly converting the Lord's Day into the "Lord's Half-day." To accommodate the preferences of some "worshippers," some seek a day that will suit these people. But we may not shift our worship to an alternative day of the week to suit seekers or ourselves. The celebration of the Lord's Day is also part of the Gospel. The church should not surrender to the secularization and consumerism of our times. She should oppose the godless tendency to make the Lord's Day a normal working-day with continuous labour. In any way possible the Christian should avoid such labour, in protest against the increasing profanation of the Christian Sabbath. The church may not remain silent. It is her task to proclaim the will of God expressed in the fourth commandment and to protest, privately and publicly, against profaning the Lord's Day. The correct understanding of Scripture passages like Gen.2: 2,3 and Col. 2:16, 17 with emphasis on the difference between the Jewish and Christian Sabbath should be preached from the pulpit and taught in catechism classes. As we study God's Word, we are shown where to find our spiritual rest. When we are genuinely freed from the bondage of sin by the grace of God, we have found rest for our soul. Consequently, we will become deliberate about our choices about the Lord's Day observance in order to live truly as we want to live in response to the grace of God. We are then committed to Biblical principles and, therefore, live in accordance with them as fully as we can. By keeping the Lord's Day holy, we are making it clear that we are not going to do what everybody else does. Each Lord's Day reminds us of God's rest. The latter offers a foretaste of eternal life. Someday we shall know God's rest in its fullness. The celebration of the Lord's Day is one way to anticipate our going to our heavenly home and, in part, to experience its joy now. Why celebrate the Lord's day? In his *The Covenantal Sabbath*, Francis Nigel Lee gives this thoroughly biblical answer: After all, it is the Lord's Day, not ours! It is **His** day, and it must be **hallowed**. Like St. John the Divine, we too should be in the **Spirit** on the Lord's Day (Rev.1 :10) - and not in the flesh! For like the apostle John, on the Lord's Day we too must not only look back to the Day of God's Creation rest (John 5:17-18), but also forward to that Day to which all Lord's days point - the Day of the Lord! (Rev.1:7-10, 17-20). Amen, even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

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