

Celebrating the Lord's Day (1)

Why is the Sunday, the traditional day of rest and Christian worship in the US and Canada, on the retreat? It has become a day of work, not one of rest. Yet people seldom work on Sunday if they can help it: they use it for their own pleasure instead. Sports events draw greater crowds than churches. Is our culture reverting to a time when it is harder to be a Christian? We can point to the rapid changes in technology, which calls for staggered working day as manufacturers seem unwilling to shut down their plants for one day. In our highly industrialized economy Christian workers face the demands for more and more shift work, and thus for more Sunday labour. How can they say "no" without losing their jobs? With total disregard for the welfare of employees and the basic rights and needs of families, the unscrupulous desire for profit further contributes to the secularization of the Lord's Day. And consumerism - shop-until-you-drop mentality uses the Lord's Day to its advantage. Sadly, the proliferation of secularism and materialism have also infiltrated the church. Some Christians are trying to have it both ways, to serve the Kingdom of God and to surrender to the values of our hedonistic- consumerism age. Even some Christian bookstores are open for business on the Lord's Day.

The disappearance of the Lord's day testifies to the horrendous influence of secularism. In today's world God can hardly be said to play a vital role in the public square; in fact, He does not even play a role. When you take an honest look at today's world, you must come to the conclusion that our society has become frightfully unholy. The US and Canada were never Christian nations, but they had traditions formed by a knowledge of the Bible and its basic teachings. When secularism came to prevail in the mid-twentieth century, Bible reading disappeared among the majority, and with it the background of ideas accompanied by the memory loss of our Christian heritage. Every recent survey demonstrates that there is widespread biblical illiteracy, not only in an increasingly secularized American culture, but even within an apparently successful evangelicalism. According to Gallup, "Eight in ten Americans say they are Christians, but only four in ten know that Jesus, according to the Bible, delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Fewer than half of all adults can name Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as the four Gospels of the New Testament." In Canada the lack of Bible knowledge is even worse. Canada is not only a totally secularized nation, anti-Christian prejudice is its last respectable bigotry. The church should be deeply concerned about the desecration of the Lord's day not only for their own preservation, but just as much out of concern for the world. Christians should act in it as salt that preserves and purifies, and as a light that dispels the spiritual darkness - which holds many in its iron grip. But what can the church do to reverse the trend? How much has the media influenced Christians? The current "churchless" Christianity fad is not the answer. Some believe that to listen to a sermon on the radio or watch a church service on television, or Internet, in one's comfortable living room is "just the same" as attending a church service. But they forget that one of the first necessities of life is a congregation, a physical coming together of God's people. They don't seem to understand that solitary worship except for those physically unable to attend, is hardly Christian worship at all. And through the influence of the church growth school movement, a much-debated marketing approach to evangelism

has been developed to stem the tide of declining church attendance. The gospel is advertized as a commodity everyone needs. To attract unbelievers from the community to the church, seeker-focussed services have become perhaps the most visible and one of the most controversial issues. Even the centuries-old norm for worship services only on Sunday has come under pressure. Some churches are now offering Wednesday or Saturday evening services. The Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago features two services on Saturday night and two on Sunday morning. Whether this development is according to the Scriptures, does not seem to be up for discussion. As long as it works, it should be accepted for the good of the church. In the past, we called this approach "pragmatism." Today this development is called "the trend of the future." For a Christian who is deeply committed to his Saviour, the increasing deterioration of the Lord's Day, the Sunday, should be a matter of grave concern.

Why Keep the Lord's Day?.

Why should the church stress Sunday observance? Was the Sabbath of which we read in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 a temporary Jewish institution? Was the observance of this day not done away with by Christ's death and resurrection? Or is it an abiding institution, a day for the Lord? Should it be observed to the end of time when all God's children shall be gathered into His rest? If it is an abiding institution, why is there a change from the Sabbath to the Sunday rest? When did the change occur? If the change is correct, why do we read the Ten Commandments, including the fourth, each Sunday?

The Creation Order.

The Sabbath was not invented by the Israelites. It is unique; it is in no way determined by lunar or solar system. It is a regularly occurring day, irrespective of moon or sun cycles, irrespective of appointed or special feasts, irrespective of national or natural catastrophes. This cycle of six days of work, one day for joyous worship, is a gift from God. The account of creation reveals the importance of the cycle of time. Exodus 20:11 is sufficient to establish the fact that the Sabbath originated at creation. It is the only commandment in which there is a specific reference to the example of the Creator, and the order instituted by the creation week. It is referred to in terms of six days work and the seventh day worship, following the pattern of regulation of time set by God in creation. As a creation ordinance God instituted the Sabbath as a perpetual obligation for all mankind. In keeping the Sabbath as a day of rest, Israel followed the original creation pattern of the cycle of time set by God. Since the order of creation days cannot be changed, Christians are not exempted from Sabbath keeping. God's unchangeable moral law requires the dedication of one restful day of worship in every seven.

The Fall.

Through Adam's fall into sin, the Sabbath day became distorted. As the consequence of his sin, man became a restless creature, a rebel, and a slave of materialism. The worship of God was replaced by man's worship of self. Man sought to make himself

great, to become like God Himself. But instead of becoming godlike, he began to serve the prince of darkness. He does as he wishes on God's holy day, ignoring all divine injunctions and rationalizing to excuse his own dishonourable behaviour. Even God's chosen people, the Israelites, often departed from God's norm for Sabbath keeping. The prophet Isaiah (Is.58) accused them of trampling God's Sabbath under their feet. They had been dishonouring God's holy day and thereby dishonouring God Himself. They had sought their own enjoyments and made their own decisions as to how the Sabbath should be kept. Their formal and lifeless Sabbath observance had become burdensome to them - and to the Lord, and they had lost sight of its deep significance. And so Isaiah called upon the Sabbath-breakers to repent.

The Fourth Commandment.

How are we to understand that the Ten Commandments, which includes the call to remember the Sabbath, are of abiding validity and authority throughout the Old and New Testament ages? In 1925, the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell ridiculed the church when he wrote that in the fourth commandment "we are told not to work on Saturdays, and Protestants take this to mean we are not to play on Sundays." This taunt exposes the quandary which many interpreters sense when they deal with the fourth commandment. This snide remark also forces the church to face up to the fact that her teaching concerning the Sabbath commandment should be totally biblical.

Were the Ten Commandments totally new before God gave them to Moses? They did not BECOME the law of God when they were formulated on Mount Sinai. God's will was known before Moses' time. Disobedience to authority, murder, stealing, and adultery are referred to as the basic reasons for the Flood. The truths in Scripture were revealed progressively to mankind. Some were revealed before Moses' time. When the Old Testament believing community was organized as a nation, then God, through Moses, gave the record of His previous revelations to Israel as well as additional aspects. The commandments were addressed specifically to Israel. But this does not limit the moral law to Israel. After the fall, God did not remove the Sabbath. He did not close the door to the worship intended for His holy day of celebration. As God worked out His plan for recreation He reminded man of the time cycle, He called man to enter regularly into fellowship with Him. (The first biblical reference to the Sabbath occurs in Exodus 16:23-30). Moses told the Israelites that on the sixth day the Israelites were to gather twice the usual amount of manna because the following day would be a holy Sabbath to the Lord. From this passage we may infer that the custom of some sort of Sabbath predated the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The name Sabbath come originally from the Hebrew verb shabbath, which means primarily "to cease or desist" (Ex. 31:16-17). Genesis 2:2 literally says that God "ceased" on the seventh day. The seventh-day Sabbath as day of rest has a vital place in the history of redemption. It pointed Israel to the Sabbath that was to come. Through the weekly celebration of the Sabbath day which kept the memory of the rescue from Egypt alive, the Israelites were reminded of the greatest rescue yet to come, the redemption through the Redeemer who would give them salvation. Through this obligatory Sabbath rest, imposed upon Israel at Sinai, God promised them that some

day they would enjoy perfect rest, similar to the rest their God enjoyed after He had completed His creative activity. For that reason the Sabbath may be characterized **as a sign of God's grace to Israel**. Israel's keeping of the Sabbath was made a sign guaranteeing to them the coming of true rest. The Lord their God would deliver them from sin, and thereby set them free from the curse and its consequences (cf. Ez. 20:12). Since the whole law was placed in the context of redemption, Israel's exodus from Egypt is the great type of mankind's exodus from the slavery of sin. The Sabbath rest is ours through Christ. On the basis of the atoning work of Christ on Calvary's cross, believers in Christ have their sins forgiven and have peace with God (Rom.5:1). Believers in Christ thus enjoy the rest of God. Gratitude for this deliverance should motivate a reverence for and obedience to God's will.

The call to Sabbath rest was not intended for people to sit down with their arms folded, forgetting about the world. It did not mean the neglect of animals and fellow-men, or even one's own body. Rather the call to rest was to enhance everyone's physical and spiritual well-being. Creative, productive labour, including commercial transactions, should be avoided,. Activity that is enjoyable and not undertaken for the purpose of accomplishment qualifies as acceptable for Sabbath time. The fourth commandment covers a wide range of people, and even domestic animals. In Deuteronomy 5 the ox and donkey (beast of burden) are mentioned separately with the cattle. In this passage God's concern for servants is also clearly expressed. Everyone, even the animals, is to abstain from doing any work "in order that your servants, male and female, may rest as well as you." God provided rest for all, even for travellers. The institution of the Sabbath was, therefore, intensely practical. The creature might rest on the Sabbath day and be refreshed, even as God had rested on the seventh day and was refreshed (Ex.31:17). The Sabbath was intended as a day for gaining new spiritual strength and for physical relaxation. That purpose was to be accomplished by resting from one's ordinary work - but not refraining from doing good (Luke 6:9) - and by dedicating the day to God.

A Sign of the Covenant.

The Sabbath is not only a day of rest, but also a sign of the Covenant. In Ex. 31:16-17, the Sabbath is described as a perpetual covenant (agreement), a sign forever between God and Israel. The Sabbath has survived the Fall, survived the Flood, survived slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon. The prophet Ezekiel charged Israel not to defile herself with ungodly behaviour. He urged them to observe God's ordinances and hallow His Sabbath as a sign between Him and Israel so "that you may know that I am the Lord your God" (20:20). The deeply abiding spiritual relationship, which is the heart of the eternal covenant, is the dominant element in Sabbath observance. This is the only possible meaning of the emphatic phrase: "I am the Lord your God." The Sabbath is meant for enjoyment of this fellowship, this living communion between God and man. God took the initiative when He established His people in a covenant relationship. But the line of the covenant did not stop with Old Testament Israel. It stretches all the way from Genesis to the close of the age (Rev. 21:3,7). The apostle Paul shows that Abraham is the "father of all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile. The latter is included

in the "nation of Abraham" (Rom. 4:18). To the Galatians, Paul wrote that "those who believe are children of Abraham (Gal. 3:8; cf. 3:29).

The Change from Sabbath to Sunday.

Why the change from Saturday to Sunday observance? There is no mention of God's people keeping the Saturday Sabbath as a weekly ordinance after resurrection, but there is considerable evidence of the first day of the week, i.e. Sunday being kept, thus preserving the sevenfold weekly cycle. Christianity reinterprets and gives a true exposition of the Sabbath. Observance of this day was an entirely new custom, not in any way as substitute for the Jewish Sabbath. Our covenant God chose the Sabbath as a memorial of the original creation, but also as a sign of redemption. Our Lord inaugurated the New Covenant, early Sunday morning before sunrise. The Saturday Sabbath was past forever, and the New Sunday Sabbath had arrived. The Sunday is the sign of the New Covenant. When the Lord was raised from the dead on the first day of the week, Sunday replaced Saturday and was henceforth to be kept as the new day of rest. When Christ had finished His redemptive work in His death; it signalled the end of the Old Testament Sabbath as an obligation. With His resurrection from the dead by which He finished His work of redemption and entered into His rest, we see Christ as the Lord of the Sabbath, introducing a change as to when the Church is to keep the Sabbath. On the evening of the first Easter, the risen Christ appeared to His assembled disciples (John 20:19). When the disciples gathered again on the first day of the week, until a full week had passed, "doubting" Thomas was with them when the risen Jesus made Himself known (John 20:26). In I Corinthians 16:2 the apostle Paul says, "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come, no collections will have to be made." Revelation 1:10 speaks of the apostle John being in the Spirit on the Lord's day. The implication is clearly that the first day of the week has become the Christian Sabbath, a day to be kept holy unto Him who is the Lord. Therefore, the use of the "Lord's Day" in the New Testament points to the apostolic practice of observing the Sunday as the day to commemorate the resurrection of Christ and to celebrate communion.

Various writings from the second century reveal that Christians followed the practice of observing the Lord's Day as taught by the apostles. Ignatius exhorts: "Let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection day." Justin Martyr, who lived at the close of the first and the beginning of the second century, says, "But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God made the world; and Jesus Christ on the same day rose from the dead." In a letter addressed to the church of Rome and dated A.D. 170, Dionysius of Corinth we have clear evidence of Christians meeting together for worship on Sunday. He wrote: "Today we have passed the Lord's holy day, in which we have read your epistle."

How should Christians understand the law, including the fourth commandment? We read it as God gave it but it must be understood through and in Christ. The law is for us a divine guide to show us how to live in gratitude in our daily walk and talk before the Lord. To put it in the words of Lord's Day 38: "What is the will of God in the fourth commandment? A. First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained,

and that, especially on the festive day of rest. I regularly attend the assembly of God's people to learn what God's Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and to begin in this life the eternal Sabbath."

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