



From Sabbath to Lord's Day

Recently the matter of the Lord's Day observance has been repeatedly brought to the attention of the general public. There has been considerable controversy — at least in some parts of Canada — on the question of whether stores should be open on Sunday or not. When some large department stores challenged the law and opened their doors on Sunday, many people took action against it by writing to the press and their M.P. to voice their disapproval. Others claimed it as their right to shop whenever they wanted, and thus insisted on seven-day shopping. This controversy is only one symptom of a general decline of Sunday observance which has intensified, especially during the last thirty years. Working on Sunday has become more and more common place and well-accepted by the majority of people. The Lord's Day has increasingly become a day of recreation and family activities, rather than a day of worshipping the Lord.

This serious situation presents a great challenge to the churches. Increasingly questions are raised: What is so important about the Lord's Day that we cannot work and are not allowed to do our shopping? Has the Christian Church the right to impose her views regarding the Lord's Day upon a secular society? Is this emphasis on Lord's Day observance just a sentimental attachment to a past tradition, or is it more than that? Within the churches we cannot ignore these questions and it is our duty to respond to them. It is obvious that we cannot deal with all these issues in this editorial, for space will not allow it. This time we will concentrate on the very crucial question of the relationship between the New Testament Lord's Day and the Old Testament Sabbath.

The Sabbath: A Creation Ordinance?

The traditional Reformed view is that the Old Testament Sabbath was instituted by God as a day of rest and of worship, after He had completed his work of creation. In this connection reference is made to Genesis 2:2f.: *"And on the seventh day God ended his work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all his work which He had made."* And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: Because that in it He had rested from all his work, which God created and had made. However especially in our days, there are a number of Reformed theologians who question the validity of this viewpoint. They stress that the word "Sabbath" is not mentioned in this text. It only says that God sanctified the seventh day and rested on it, while no special reference is made to a commandment *for man* to keep this day as a day of rest. We hear of the Sabbath for the first time in the narrative of Israel's journey through the wilderness. When God provided the people with manna, it is mentioned in passing that no manna would come down on the Sabbath Day. Hence they had to gather a double amount of it on the previous day (Cf. Ex. 16:5, 23ff.). From this evidence, the above mentioned theologians have concluded that God gave the Sabbath as a day of rest to Israel at this time. The commandment to keep the Sabbath Day was explicitly given a short time later, when the Lord spoke from Mount Sinai in the law of the ten commandments (Ex. 20:8-11). In this view it is strongly emphasized that the Sabbath was God's gift to Israel and not to all mankind!

Personally I cannot agree with this viewpoint. True, it should be granted that the idea of the Sabbath is not mentioned *in* Scripture until the events took place which are described in Ex. 16. Moreover, there is no evidence whatsoever that any of the ancient peoples in the Near East had even the remotest knowledge of the Sabbath-institution. Yet some biblical data points, in my opinion, to the fact that God indeed had given the Sabbath as a creation ordinance. First of all we should notice that the fourth commandment clearly instructs us why the Sabbath Day should be remembered, for we read in Ex. 20:11: *"For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath Day and hallowed*

it." Apparently the commandment for man to rest on the seventh day is rooted in the fact that God rested after the six days of creation. Moreover, the word "remember" at the beginning of this commandment (vs. 8) points to something that already existed previously, before the decalogue was given at Mount Sinai. It is rather farfetched to think that this would imply that Israel should remember how God had given the Sabbath approximately one week before, at the time when the first manna had come from heaven (Ex. 16)! Does not the commandment itself explicitly connect the remembering of the Sabbath Day with the fact that God had set apart the seventh day at creation? A final argument may be found in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, when He says: "*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath; Therefore the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath*" (Mark 2:27, 28). Here the Lord went back beyond the Sabbath as established in the Mosaic Law. He spoke of the Sabbath as made for man in general — not just Israel or God's people. It was its role for mankind as a whole that He emphasized. In this the Lord pointed back beyond Mount Sinai, to the Garden of Eden.¹

God the Creator of heaven and earth gave the Sabbath to man for two purposes. First of all, man should rest from all his labours on this day, just as God had rested from His creation activity. This principle is clearly stated in the fourth commandment and reiterated throughout the Old Testament. It is nothing short of desecrating the Sabbath if work is done during this special day (Cf. Ex. 31:14f). Consequently, it is only possible to hallow the Sabbath Day by deliberately abstaining from all work (Cf. Jer. 17:24). On the other hand, the Sabbath is not simply a day of rest; it is especially a day set apart to the honour of God. Hence, the Scriptures speak repeatedly of *God's Sabbath* (Cf. Ex. 31:13; Lev. 19:3, 30; Isa. 56:4; Ez. 20:12, etc.). This means that this day is really His. It rightfully belongs to Him alone. The Lord has claimed the Sabbath Day in order that man might worship Him. This is the day of a holy convocation (Lev. 23:3v; Cf. Isa. 1:13), in which people gather together to give praise unto the Lord (Ps. 92:1) and bring special sacrifices (Num. 28:9f). The Law of Moses emphasizes that whosoever keepeth the Sabbath Day also has reverence for the house of God (Cf. Lev. 19:30; 26:2). In the light of all this, it is obvious that God had instituted the Sabbath also as a special day of worship.

The Sabbath as a Sign of the Covenant

So far we have considered the Sabbath as a creation ordinance. However, we should also observe that the Sabbath had a special place within God's covenant with his people Israel. This becomes especially clear to us, when we keep in mind that the Sabbath is designated several times as a "covenant sign" (Ex. 31:16f). God commanded Moses to say to the people: "*Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever...*" (Cf. also Ez. 20:12, 20). What does it mean, when we find the Sabbath spoken of as a sign of the covenant? We should remember that the Lord graciously had added to his covenant certain covenant signs, e.g. circumcision (Cf. Gen. 17:11), the Passover (Cf. Ex. 13:9) and the Sabbath. The purpose of these signs was twofold: on one hand they reminded the people of Israel of the faithfulness of the Covenant God and on the other hand they reminded them of their continuing obligations to Him. As far as the Sabbath is concerned, it meant that God promised his people that on this special day He would bless them (Cf. Isa. 56:6, 7) and show them that He had sanctified them as his peculiar people (Cf. Ex. 31:13; Ez. 20:12, 20). However, the Lord also demanded in the Sabbath commandment that they would keep his day according to his precepts. If they would be negligent in this matter, they would in fact break God's covenant — a sin so serious in the eyes of the Lord that He demanded it to be punished by death (Cf. Ex. 31:14).

Now the outward form of these signs of the covenant was typical of the Old Testament dispensation. Most likely we have noticed this especially with regard to circumcision and the Passover. These signs were in a way characteristic of the Old Testament period: They fitted into the ceremonial mould of the law of Moses. However, when the New Testament era arrived with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the ceremonial, shadowy elements of these covenant signs disappeared. Yet these signs, as such, continued to exist, although in a different form! Circumcision changed into baptism

and the Passover into the Lord's Supper. Thus baptism and the Lord's Supper may be rightly called the covenant signs of the New Testament dispensation.

In this light it will not surprise us that the same happened to the Old Testament Sabbath. The Sabbath institution in itself is permanent, as being a creation ordinance and part of the law of the ten commandments. However, at the same time the Sabbath is clearly embedded in the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. We may think e.g. of the important role that the Sabbath commandment played in the regulations for the Israelites feast days (Lev. 23), for the Sabbath Year (Lev. 25:1-7) and for the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8ff.). All these ceremonial shadows had to disappear when the New Testament dispensation came in. This is what the apostle Paul stressed in Col. 2:16f., where he wrote: *"Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect to any holy day, or of the new moon, or of **the Sabbath days; Which are a shadow of things to come**; but the body (or: the fulfillment; the reality) is of Christ."* These words clearly indicate that the Old Testament Sabbath is a sign, a shadow of that which has been fulfilled in the New Testament era with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, the shadowy form of the day had no value any more for the New Testament Church and could be abolished. The Sabbath institution could be changed into a new form appropriate to the new age and the new covenant.

The Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day

The New Testament makes it indeed clear that the Old Testament Sabbath has been changed into the New Testament Lord's Day. This change took place gradually: The Lord Jesus celebrated the Sabbath Day during his earthly ministry (Cf. Luke 4:16ff.) and so did the apostles in the early years of the Christian Church (Cf. Acts 13:14ff.). However, particularly after the Holy Spirit had begun to work among the heathens, the question came up as to what elements of the Jewish religion should be observed by heathen Christians. The council of the apostles in Jerusalem decided on this matter and stated: *"For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication; From which if you keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well"* (Acts 15:28, 29). We see that the Sabbath is conspicuously absent in this list. This is the more remarkable when we realize that since the time of the Exile the Sabbath was considered to be the most distinctive element of the Jewish religion!

The reason behind this was that the Apostolic Church gradually replaced the Sabbath as the day of rest and of worship by the first day of the week. This is evident from several words of Scripture. In Acts 20:7 we find that the church in Troas had come together on the first day of the week to hear the word of God and to break bread. Apparently Paul had arrived in Troas on the previous Monday, and had waited for this opportunity to address the entire congregation. According to 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2 the same apostle had requested that both in Galatia and in Corinth, the church, on the first day of the week, should take a collection for the needy church in Jerusalem. Most likely Paul alludes in those verses to an established practice to set aside money for the service of the Lord on the first day of the week. Since it was to be brought on the Lord's Day, the new day of worship, probably it was collected at the worship service and not at the home of the Christians. We know for certain that in the early church it was customary to bring offerings to the church on the Lord's Day. A final reference to the first day of the week is found in Rev. 1:10, where John writes: *"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day..."* The term which is used in the original indicates that the (risen) Lord owns this day: It rightfully belongs to Him alone. The word "the Lord's Day" is used several times in some of the earliest Christian writings of the second century. It appears there as a *"technical term in fairly widespread use, designating the first day of the week as the Christian day of regular corporate worship."*¹²

The first day of the week is called the day of the (risen) Lord. The reference to the day of Easter is obvious. On that day the Lord Jesus Christ had completely finished his work of redemption. On that day He had conquered the last enemy — death and the grave. Now He could enter into his rest, the rest of his glorious exaltation. He sanctified this day of his resurrection by meeting with his Church on this day in the upper room. It is not without significance that the Evangelists stress that the risen Lord appeared to his disciples on the first day of the week (Cf. Luke 24:1, 36; John 20:1, 19). John emphasizes this fact the most when he writes: *"Then the same day at evening, being the first day of*

the week..." (John 20:19) and when he explicitly states that exactly a week later the Lord again appeared to his disciples (vs. 26). When the risen Lord visited his Church on the day of the resurrection, He sanctified that day as the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10). Hence the observance of the fourth commandment by the New Testament church should not stand any longer in the shadow of the Old Testament. This would happen if we would still celebrate the Lord's Day on a Saturday. For us the light of the resurrection of Christ shines through the fourth commandment and brings this commandment to its consummation. Let us therefore celebrate the Day of the Lord, that is the Christian Sabbath, from this perspective.

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¹ John L. Mackay, The New Testament Sabbath, in: *Clarion*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 9, 1987) p.8 (Previously published in: *The Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, September 1986).

² R.J. Bauckham, The Lord's Day, in: D.A. Carson, Editor, *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day*, Grand Rapids, 1982, p.231.