

Remembering the Lord's Day

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The Dutch have called Sunday, "God's dike." In the Netherlands, the dike keeps back the threatening seas and, this, preserves the Hollanders from watery destruction. So, the Lord's Day holds back the raging waves of materialism, earthlimindedness, and pleasure-madness that threaten to engulf the Church and the Christian.

There are leaks in the dike. There are leaks in the dike among Reformed Christians, where once the Lord's Day was honored and the Sabbath remembered. It is necessary that we stop up these leaks; we certainly must not allow these leaks to be enlarged, much less co-operate in tearing the dike down.

The matter of remembering the Lord's Day is one of urgency, as the figure of a dike and the angry waves indicates. First, remembering the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, indeed, a commandment that belongs to the first table of the Law - not a minor matter, therefore.

Secondly, the day in question is the "Lord's day" according to Rev. 1:10, i.e., the day that belongs to the risen, glorious Lord Jesus Christ. In remembering, or forgetting it, we have to do with Jesus Christ Himself.

Thirdly, our remembering the Lord's Day results, by the Lord's grace, in the greatest benefit for us: rest - the pricelessly precious benefit of rest. The Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27). The good of man that God had in mind is rest. Is there anything that we need more? Everywhere, there is unrest. There is unrest in the church; there is unrest in the family; there is unrest in the soul of the believer. Apart from every other consideration, it is sheer folly to forget rest by forgetting, and even abandoning, the Lord's Day.

The importance of the Church's remembering the Lord's Day was clearly seen, and stated, by one of the fiercest enemies that the Christian religion ever had, the Frenchman, Voltaire: "If you want to kill Christianity," he said, "you must abolish Sunday" - advice that the French Revolution carried out.

A Special Day

There is one, simple truth that is fundamental to Sabbath observance - the very foundation of the dike is the Lord's Day. If this truth is confessed by the Church and if it lives in the hearts of the people of God, all will be well as regards remembering the Lord's Day. But if this truth is questioned or denied, we have not merely punched a hole in the dike, but we have demolished the dike. The basic question is this: Does Jehovah God, in the Fourth Commandment of His Law, still today set apart one day of the week as a special day; and does He still today, in the Fourth Commandment, require His people to remember this day by ceasing from their ordinary work and play, in order to devote themselves to the worship of, fellowship with, and special service of the Father of Jesus Christ?

The answer to this question is an emphatic, unequivocal "Yes". God still sets aside one day in seven as a special day for us and requires us to observe this day in a special way. In this sense, the day is holy, i.e., it is set apart from the other days by God for the special service of Himself. In this sense, we hallow the day, or keep it holy, i.e., we use it in the special way God wants us to use it, thus consecrating it to God.

God sets the day apart and requires us to remember it *in the Fourth Commandment*. Remembering the Lord's Day is not a matter of Christian liberty, i.e., something neither commanded nor forbidden by God. Rather, it is law, the law of God, just as are the matters of

having no other gods, honoring our parents, and not stealing. It is the commandment of the Redeemer to His saved people. It is a commandment that at once teaches us to know our sinful nature more and more, so that we fly to Christ for righteousness, and directs us in the way of pleasing our Deliverer and of living a happy life. It is a commandment that the thankful believer gladly obeys, as a child willingly obeys the father whom he loves.

This is fundamental! Deny this, and you pull the dike down; for if the dike of the Lord's Day is not grounded in the good, solid, divine will of God, it cannot possibly withstand the pressures of worldliness and earthlimindedness exerted against it.

Another view, steadily gaining ground in Reformed churches, is that the Fourth Commandment was wholly ceremonial - "Jewish" - and was, therefore, so fulfilled by Christ that it no longer holds for the New Testament saint. The observance of the first day of the week is merely a custom of the New Testament Church (albeit a good custom, it is usually admitted), based upon a decision of the Church itself. Use of the first day of the week for public worship is not due to any binding law of God, but to the free choice of the Church; she could have chosen some other day of the week. The keeping of the first day is strictly a matter of Christian liberty.

Confessional Proof

What proof is there, for the Reformed saint, that remembering the Lord's Day is the will of God?

First, there is the decision of an important church assembly, the Synod of Dordt. Unfortunately, it is not well known that among the other actions of this great synod was the adoption of a doctrinal statement on the Sabbath. In his *Tractaat van den Sabbath (Treatise of the Sabbath)*, Abraham Kuyper informs us that the formulation and adoption of this statement took place in about three hours on May 17, 1619. Dordt's position on the Sabbath was expressed in six points:

1. In the Fourth Commandment of God's Law there is a ceremonial and a moral element.
2. The rest on the seventh day after the creation, and the strict observance of this day with which the Jewish people were charged particularly, was ceremonial.
3. That a definite and appointed day has been set aside to the service of God, and that for this purpose as much rest is required as is necessary for the service of God and for hallowed contemplation; this element is moral.
4. The Sabbath of the Jew having been set aside, Christians are in duty bound to hallow the Day of the Lord solemnly.
5. This day has always been kept in the early Church since the time of the Apostles.
6. This day must be so considered unto the service of God that upon it men rest from all servile labors, except those required by charity and present necessitates, and likewise from all such recreations as prevent the service of God.

Secondly, there is the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 38, Question 103: "What doth God require in the Fourth Commandment? First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained; and that I, especially on the Sabbath, that is, on the day of rest, diligently frequent the church of God, to hear his word, to use the sacraments, publicly to call upon the Lord, and contribute to the relief of the poor, as becomes a Christian. Secondly, that all the days of my life I cease from my evil works, and yield myself to the lord, to work by his Holy Spirit in me: and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath."

The Catechism has a unique, beautiful slant on the Fourth Commandment. It deliberately safeguards the Reformed believer against the error of a legalistic observance of the Sabbath.

Legalism identifies obedience to the Fourth Commandment with mere external behavior, especially the behavior of doing nothing on the Sabbath. It stresses the scrupulous keeping of petty, man-made regulations, especially negative regulations. The Pharisees of Christ's day, for example, forbade the picking of grain while traveling on the Sabbath, even though it was for the satisfying of hunger (cf. Mark 2:23-28). Others thought it was unlawful to eat an egg that the hen had laid on the Sabbath. The purpose of legalism, in this observance of the Sabbath, is to earn righteousness. This was the error into which the Jews of Jesus' day had fallen and against which our Lord contended. This was the error that was prevalent in the Roman Church at the time of the Reformation and against which the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, reacted strongly in some of their writings on a proper keeping of the Sabbath.

We must appreciate and maintain the viewpoint of the Catechism. But we misunderstand and misrepresent the Catechism if we explain it to mean that in the Reformed tradition the day is disregarded; all mention of observing a day must be banned; and, therefore, our practice of Sunday-keeping is merely the liberty of the New Testament Church.

On the contrary, this creed teaches that there is a day of the week set apart from the other days; there is a special day. According to the Catechism, there is a "day of rest," a "Sabbath," distinguished from "all the days of my life." The reference, of course, is to Sunday. On this day, special behavior is required of the child of God, namely, that he rests, which behavior consists primarily of diligently frequenting the church of God. It is God Who sets this day apart, and He does so in the Fourth Commandment - it is the Fourth Commandment, after all, which the Catechism is here explaining.

We may sum up the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism thus: the Fourth Commandment still holds in the New Testament; it still sets one day apart as a day in which believers are to rest in their God, under the Word of the gospel. Because of this act of God, all days are not the same for Christians, even though we cease from our evil works all the days of our life. Because of this act of God, the Christian remembers and hallows a day. Our Lord's Day - Sunday - corresponds to the seventh day of the Old Testament; indeed, it is the New Testament Sabbath Day.

Biblical Proof

This teaching of the creed is Biblical. For it is the doctrine of the Fourth Commandment itself. The Fourth Commandment is part of the moral law of God, and the moral law of God is perpetually valid. No more is this commandment done away with than is the commandment against taking God's Name in vain. Like any other nine, it was engraved in granite by the finger of God. If it were the case that the Fourth Commandment was entirely ceremonial, we would now have only nine commandments, not ten, and should speak of the "Ennealogue," not of the Decalogue. The Fourth Commandment, perpetually valid, requires that we remember a day to keep it holy and, in connection with this, that we cease from our work.

The New Testament scripture does not abolish the Fourth Commandment. Jesus did not abolish this commandment; nor did He have a lax view of Sabbath-keeping; in comparison with the Pharisees. This is the notion that is sometimes found in the Church, so that those who are careless about remembering the Lord's Day are regarded as good Christians, whereas those who are careful about observing the Sabbath are suspected of Pharisaism. It is true that the Pharisees charged our Lord with laxity regarding the Sabbath. They accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath (John 5:18). They said, "He keepeth not the Sabbath day" (John 9:16). But this charge was false.

What was Jesus' teaching? What was the teaching of His behavior, first of all? Where did the Sabbath Day find Him, and what did it find Him doing? Was He in the field harvesting the crops? Was He taking scenic tours of the Mediterranean? Was He in the stadium watching the Nazareth Bobcats play the Capernaum Bears at some game of ball? Not at all, but He was always in the synagogue preaching the Word; and He was always doing good to distressed saints, healing them and destroying the power of the Devil.

What was the teaching of Jesus' words concerning the Sabbath? Did He ever admit that the Pharisee's charge was true? Did he ever say, "I am come, and, therefore, the Sabbath is no more"? Not at all, but He taught that remembering the Sabbath does not consist of idleness; it rather consists of working. He taught that this work must be the worship of God and the help of the needy brother. He taught that the Sabbath was made for man, for man's great good. And He taught that he is the Lord of the Sabbath. Note well, Jesus fulfills the Sabbath, creating the perfect rest by His atoning death and resurrection. That the Sabbath is now fulfilled Jesus shows by changing the Sabbath Day from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week. Not the Church, but the Lord Jesus set the first day of the week apart as the day of rest for the New Testament people of God. The Church has no authority to change the Sabbath Day or to require believers to observe the first day of the week. The Church does not make laws; she only proclaims the will of her sovereign Lord, as that will is revealed in Holy Scripture. The Lord of the Sabbath Himself ordained the first day of the week as the day of rest for the Church come of age. He did this by rising from the dead on the first day (Luke 24:1); by meeting with His disciples on the first day prior to the Ascension (John 20:19, John 20:26); by coming back to the Church in the Holy Spirit on the first day (Pentecost was a Sunday); and by directing the apostles and the apostolic Church to gather for worship on the first day (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:1,2).

Therefore, the Spirit of Jesus Christ calls the first day of the week, "the Lord's Day," in Revelation 1:10: "I (John) was in the Spirit on the Lord's day..." This one, brief text is a mighty, a conclusive Word of God for the whole Sabbath-question. All by itself, it utterly refutes the position of Seventh Day Adventism regarding the day of rest and worship for the New Testament Church. What is of greater importance to us is that it clearly teaches that one day of the week, the day on which Jesus arose in glory, is a special day and must be especially observed by those who love the risen Lord. Even though it is certainly true that all the days of the week belong to Christ; nevertheless, it is also certainly true that one of them is "the Lord's day" in a unique sense.

The Church after the apostles saw this from the very beginning. Ignatius, the most ancient church father, wrote: "Let every one that loveth Christ keep holy the first day of the week, the Lord's Day."

How We Remember the Lord's Day

Description of the day of rest as the Lord's Day indicates how we are to remember the day. We remember it by devoting it to the Lord Jesus. We remember it by worshipping, knowing, fellowshiping with, and enjoying the crucified and risen Christ. We remember it as John did: by being in the Spirit; hearing Jesus' great Voice (the preaching of the gospel); and seeing Him (by faith) walking amidst the candlesticks (in the Church).

Specifically, we are to observe the Sabbath by diligently attending the worship services of Jesus' Church. This, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, is the first requirement of the Fourth Commandment. Remembering the Lord's Day is diligently attending church; willful absence from church, or attendance without diligence, is the grossest violation of the Fourth Commandment. The Catechism is Biblical, here. On the first day of the week, the apostolic

church gathered for worship: to hear the Word; to break bread; to pray; to lay aside their gifts for the poor.

It should be evident that diligent church-attendance very really is obedience to the Fourth Commandment of the Law of God. As part of the first table of the Law, the Fourth Commandment demands love for God by His redeemed people - diligent church-attendance is worship, the praise of God in Jesus Christ by a thankful people. The Fourth Commandment calls the saints to rest - at church we rest by enjoying God's wonderful work in Christ by means of the Word and the Sacraments. The Fourth Commandment ends in Christ Jesus - in attending the church of God we seek fellowship with Christ (Who is present there by His Spirit and Word), and we strive to honor Him.

Attending church is a genuine remembering of the Lord's Day, if it is diligent. First, it must be an act of faith; no unbeliever can possibly remember the Lord's Day, regardless of whether he comes to church. Secondly, it must be faithful; believers are to gather every Sunday, as often as services are held. Thirdly, it must be whole-hearted; our attendance is to be eager, joyful, lively. Good church-attendance is characterized by the attitude expressed in the Psalter based on Psalm 122:

“With joy I heard my friends exclaim,
Come, let us in God's temple meet;
Within thy gates, O Zion blest,
Shall ever stand our willing feet.”

This aspect of obedience to the Fourth Commandment is threatened today. There are leaks in the dike. There are those who attend only infrequently, missing entire Sundays or consistently missing one of the services every Sunday (“oncercers”). There is the growing practice of missing the worship services, now and then, because they interfere with our pleasures, e.g., our vacation-plans. The Lord's Day is completely forgotten. It is used for traveling or for sight-seeing, just as though it did not belong to the risen Christ, but to ourselves. The strange notion is found in the Church that the Fourth Commandment may be broken occasionally. Men suppose that, if they remember the Lord's Day 51 weeks of the year, they are warranted in forgetting it 1 week. What would those same people say if others would adopt this thinking in regard to the commandment against stealing, or the commandment against murder?

“But the Lord's Day gets in the way of my pleasure,” says the man determined to enjoy his weekend vacation. Yes, the Law of God has a way of doing this. Throughout the Old Testament, the Sabbath-Commandment “interfered” with Israel's pleasures; and for this reason they broke it (cf. Isaiah 58:13 and Amos 8:5). May we bend and twist the Law to suit our pleasure? Or are we to plan our lives according to the Law and to find our pleasure in doing what it says?

Our would-be vacationer persists, “But I work hard during the year, and I need some rest.” To be sure, we need rest; and this needed rest is the rest of the Lord's house and the Lord's Word.

Another threat to diligent church attendance is formalism in worship. The minister preaches dutifully, droning on; and the people listen dutifully, wondering all the while, when will he ever be done. How do we come to church? The early Christians greeted each other with the words, “The Lord is risen!” We might say, “Lousy weather, isn't it.”

Not least of the dangers is this, that, at the church we attend, the Word of God is not preached. Attending some church (“the church of your choice”) is not necessarily obedience to the Fourth Commandment; attending some church very faithfully is not necessarily obedience to

the Fourth Commandment. For one concerned to remember the Lord's Day, the all-important question is: "What church do you diligently attend?" "Is it a church that honors Jesus by proclaiming Him as the Lord; the eternal Son of God in the flesh, the only and sovereign Savior from sin?" "Is it a church that gives the rest of God by preaching justification by faith alone and salvation by grace alone?" "Is it a church consecrated to the glory of God in teaching all of God's commandments, and upholding them by the exercise of discipline?"

Devotion of the Entire Day to the Lord

For the sake of this diligent church-attendance, we are to put aside the ordinary work of the other six days of the week, as well as our play. This is the Fourth Commandment: "Thou shalt not do any work" (Ex. 20:10). Already in the Old Testament the purpose of ceasing from work was clearly pointed out: "that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou" (Deut. 5:14). There is no value in not working in itself; but not working is necessary for resting the rest of the Sabbath. When the Israelite worked on the Sabbath (Numbers 15:32ff.), the sin was not that he picked up some sticks, but that he despised the spiritual rest of God, i.e., Christ and His salvation. He revealed himself to be a worldly man. This deserved, and still does deserve, the death penalty.

It is the same today. Working on the Lord's Day is destructive of diligent church-attendance. It is true that there are works of necessity that may be done! Jesus taught that one may pull an ass out of the ditch. But, as someone has said, if I have an ass that falls into the ditch every Sunday, I will either fill up the ditch or sell the ass.

The home-work of our children is included in this prohibition. Just as our ordinary work is farming or factory-work or some business or house-work, the ordinary work of the school-children is home-work; and God requires this work to be set aside in the interest of other, better things.

If obedience to this prohibition of work means financial loss and economic hardship, we should be perfectly willing to suffer such loss and hardship. Jesus Christ is not much of a lord if His Day, and the worship He claims on His Day, are forgotten on account of bread.

Similarly, spending Sunday afternoon watching the football Bears or the baseball Cubs, apart from all other considerations, is destructive of the public worship of God that is required by the Fourth Commandment. Pleasure is the great threat in our society. The world corrupts the Lord's Day, so that there is more devilry on Sunday than on all the other days of the week combined. This too is an old story. In his glorious call to proper Sabbath-observance in Isaiah 58:13, 14, the prophet begins by warning Israel against "doing thy pleasure on my (Jehovah's) holy day." If we are going to use the Lord's Day for our play, we could better work - it is the lesser of the two evils. Augustine said long ago, concerning remembering the Lord's Day, "It is better to plow than to dance."

Ordinary work and play are forbidden because they are destructive of the diligent church-attendance required by the Fourth Commandment. What one does during the rest of the Day stands intimately related to the public worship of the Lord's Day. To throw oneself into his everyday work an hour or two after the morning worship service is to cut off the lingering effect of the house of God and to drown the hope of the world to come in the cares of this life. The man who spends all of Sunday afternoon wrapped up in a ballgame cannot bring the evening sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the house of the Lord. Very likely, he will not attend the second service. The appalling drop in the attendance at the second service is largely due to the use of Sunday for the people's pleasure - gold, picnics, visiting, watching television, or relaxing at

home with a novel. If he does hurry from the end of the ballgame to church, he does not come with a heart filled with the wonderful works of God in Jesus and with affections set on the things above, where Christ Jesus sits on the right hand of God.

What Am I to Do?

The entire day is to be given over to worship; the whole day is to be devoted to the Lord Christ. This is the answer to the familiar question, "What are we do on Sunday?"

God intends that we be active; work is required. Doing nothing is not obedience to the Fourth Commandment, e.g., "sacking out" all day. Jesus showed this in John 5. He healed the lame man on the Sabbath, and, when the Pharisees objected, said, "My Father worketh hitherto and I work" (v. 17). The notion that one kept the Sabbath by doing nothing was part of the legalism of the Pharisees.

The work to be done, however, is spiritual exercises - private, personal worship of God. There is public worship, but there is also private worship. We should pray. We should read, not the Sunday newspaper, but Holy Scripture, as well as books and magazines that explain Scripture. Just as our day witnesses a sad lack in private prayer-communion with God, so also is there a serious falling off of good, solid theological reading and study on the part of all Christians. Earthliness comes in now on the floodtide. The Lord's Day is God's dike! The Synod of Dordt spoke of "hallowed contemplation" as an appropriate activity on Sunday. "Hallowed contemplation" - even the words are strange to us today. We are so busy; our minds are so full of this world; we are so adverse to an hour of quiet and solitude. Sunday is a day for thinking holy thoughts - thoughts of my sin; thoughts of my redemption; thoughts of my privileged position and calling; thoughts of the beauty of the Church; thoughts of Christ; thoughts of the glory of God.

Permissible, requisite work on the Lord's Day includes "works of charity," i.e., good works of love for our neighbor, especially our fellow saints. The Heidelberg Catechism mentions contributing to the relief of the poor, or almsgiving, as an important aspect of church-attendance. There are other ways to help the needy. Jesus healed them. We can call on old folks languishing at home or in institutions. We can visit, or have over, the lonely saints. We can comfort the distressed. The Church is full of needy, if we only open our eyes.

On Sunday evenings, delightful Christian fellowship can be enjoyed - and practiced as a duty. Then, we do not discuss our daily jobs, all the restaurants we have gone to, the pennant race, or the many faults of the other members of the congregation; but we speak together about the Lord Christ. Isaiah 58 expressly warns us against "speaking thine own words."

On the Lord's Day, there should be family worship. There is public worship. There is private worship. There is also family worship. The Fourth Commandment is a family commandment. It is addressed by God to the head of the home, the husband and father: "...in it (the Sabbath Day) thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter..." The father is responsible for the obedience of his house. He is to rest, with the family. Historically, the Lord's Day has been a bulwark for the family among Reformed and Presbyterian people.

Let there be family worship, especially in view of the threats to family life today. The family should discuss the sermon. (This is not the same as tearing the sermon to pieces or criticizing the preacher.) This family should read and study the Bible together. Parents should teach the children their catechism. How I love to hear a child say at the catechism class, "My Dad (or Mother) told me the story." The family should sing together.

There is so much to do on Sunday that the day is too short. "How long is the Lord's Day?" some have asked. Give the Lord a full day; it is the Lord's Day, not the Lord's hour. Really, this is an ominous question. It sounds suspiciously like the question of the Jews in Amos 8:5: "When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? And the Sabbath, that we may set forth wheat?" Nobody talks like this about his vacation: "Oh, when will it be over?" Such questions about the Lord's Day indicate a leak in the dike in my own soul - worldliness is pouring in. The man who remembers the Lord's Day, the man who tastes something of the rest of Christ talks differently: "Oh, when will the eternal Sabbath Day dawn?"

Still, our obedience to the Fourth Commandment is, at best, imperfect. We do not have perfect faith in Christ our Rest; we do not come to church with that zeal for God's glory and with that thankfulness for His work in Jesus that we ought to have; we often hear the Word coldly - yes, and we preachers often preach it so; our use of the Sacraments and our prayers are often habitual; our thoughts are profane; our conversations are worldly; when all is said and done, on a Sunday evening, the most that can be said of our Sabbath observance is that we did nothing. The Fourth Commandment teaches us our misery, so that we fly to Christ for righteousness.

But the Lord Who justifies also sanctifies, so that we do have a beginning of obedience to the Fourth Commandment. This beginning, although small, is a victorious beginning. We do rest in Christ by faith on the Lord's Day. This then becomes the power by which we live and work the other six days of the week, ceasing from our evil works and yielding ourselves to the Lord to work by His Spirit in us. Thus, we begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

Ours is a joyful Sabbath keeping. The Lord's Day is not a dreary day. It is not true of us what Thomas Babington Macaulay acidly (and unjustly) said of the Puritans and their Sabbath observance: "The Puritans opposed bear-baiting on Sunday, not because it gave pain to the bears, but because it gave pleasure to the people."

Rather, our experience is that expressed by the hymn:

"Day of all the week the best,
Emblem of eternal rest."

Our experience is that promised by the prophet long ago, in Isaiah 58:13, 14:

"If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honorable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it."

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