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– Liberated.

Sunday, Glorious Day of the Lord

A resource

Occasion

This resource has been drawn up for two reasons. The first is that, as has happened more often in history after the Reformation, disagreement has arisen about the relationship between the fourth commandment and the Sunday and about the consequences for this relationship with respect to the observance of the Sunday. The second reason is the backdrop to this disagreement, namely, the changing spiritual climate in our country into a secularized and multi-religious society. The economical and social developments (internationalization, globalization, and technology) have great influence on our national culture. This resource is intended to help the churches to renew the Christian conviction with regards to the rest and the celebrating of the Sunday in The Netherlands of the twenty-first century.

Introduction

We, as Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, know ourselves to be under the authority of the fourth commandment as it stands within the whole of the Ten Commandments and of the instruction of Holy Scripture. It is in partly because of this commandment that we celebrate the Sunday as the day of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus

Christ. It is our desire to understand more and more of how the Sunday is granted to us in Him unto redemption and sanctification for the whole of our lives.

1. Section of instruction

1. From Sabbath to Sunday

In the same way that Israel celebrated the Sabbath throughout the ages, so the Christian church has received the Sunday as day of the Lord. Jesus Christ calls himself "Lord, also of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). He has completed the obedience to God and the sacrifice for sin. On the first day of the week He arose from the dead. God's great works in the completion of creation and in the liberation of the people from slavery were the motives for the celebration of the Sabbath. In Christ God decisively furthers the history of his redemption. God's great work in the resurrection of the Son from the dead is now an additional motive for the celebration of the Sunday.

In the New Testament the first day of the week stands in the light of Christ's appearances to his disciples (John 20:19, 26). The first Christian congregation gathered every day in the temple and in the houses (Acts 2:46). The first day of the week takes form in the assembly by listening to the instruction of the apostles, the breaking of bread (Acts 20:7), and in laying gifts aside (1 Cor 16:2).

Later this is called "the Day of the Lord" (Rev 1:10), the name that the Christian church later gave to the Sunday. That is why we call the Sunday the "glorious" day "of the Lord." [Translator: there is a play on words here in Dutch. "Heerlijk" is etymologically "Lordly, of the Lord" and in meaning "glorious."]

2. The day and the days of the Lord

In the New Testament the celebration of the Sunday is not connected to the fourth commandment of God's law with so many words. Each day and the whole of life are sanctified by Christ. He who celebrates a certain day as a feast day does so to honour God (Rom 14:6). In the New Testament world, the Sunday was first an ordinary work day. This day soon received its specific colour through the assemblies of Christ's congregation both in the morning and in the evening.

Christ is the fulfilment of the whole law (Matt 5:17) and He takes up God's commandments in his teachings about the kingdom. The great commandment of love and perfection gives strength to life following in the footsteps of the Master. The gospel account tells us how He observed the Sabbath according to the commandment and participated in the assemblies in the synagogue. In the course of the gospel one would not expect the celebration of the seventh day to change until Jesus had died and

his body was resting in the grave on Sabbath. It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead which clarifies the new with respect to the old.

Just like the other commandments, the fourth commandment comes to us in Christ. In his person and in the unity of the Scriptures the church wants to understand what the observance, the sanctification, and rest on the day of the Lord means. In the freedom of the Spirit we want to do justice to the temporary, the lasting, and the new aspects in the will of God in respect to the fourth of the Ten Commandments.

3. *The temporary, lasting, and new aspects*

God wants to give his creatures rest and allow them to catch their breath (Exod 23:12). He wants to free them from the cramp of working under the curse. The creation-motive (Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:11) is reinforced by the redemption-motive (Deut 5:15). Man, animal, and land are allowed to share in the rest that God gives them to enjoy.

3.1 We see the temporary aspect of the fourth commandment in the seventh day, in the opportunities of the Promised Land, in the claim of God's law on Israel's society, and in the regulation with respect to the Sabbath which the Lord commanded of his people. In this way too, the law has led Israel to the Saviour. The Scriptures also call the Sabbath a shadow of things to come, while Christ is the substance (Col 2:17). The one Promised Land gave temporary expression to the rest. The Christian church in the world is now a sojourning church. Not always or everywhere in the world are Christians in a position to make the day of rest and the Sunday coincide.

3.2 There are also lasting aspects of the fourth commandment. We see those first of all in how labour and rest

alternate. We see these further in the assemblies before the Lord on the day of rest and the feast days. And thus in letting go of one's own achievement and living from the generous hand of God. Already at the completion of the world we hear how God rested from his work of creation in six days (Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:11). The Lord Jesus adds that the Sabbath is made for man (Mark 2:27). He Himself makes this evident in the proclamation of the gospel. He also makes it evident in acts of healing and liberation for the children of Israel, also on the Sabbath. They especially belong to the rest which can be found in Him and to which He invites God's people (Matt 11:28-12:21).

3.3 The new aspect in Christ's resurrection is that no longer the seventh day, but the first day of the week comes into the spotlight. In Him the true rest can be found (Matt 11:28-30). He is our Sabbath. The whole life of sinners is freed from the burden of sin and guilt by Him. Light shines over all the days of the week and over all the peoples of the world. The coming of his kingdom will give us everlasting Sabbath peace (Heb 4:9). Hence we pray: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20).

4. *Sunday, day for the church*

The lasting aspects of the fourth commandment can take shape from the new aspect which came in Christ. The command to rest from one's own work and exertion needs to be made concrete. Especially on Sunday we learn to find rest in the accomplished work of our Creator and in the accomplished suffering of our Saviour. The first day of the week gains form in Scripture proceeding from his resurrection. The living Lord gathers his congregation around Him on that day. He sends her out from that day into every day life in order to let the light shine.

The assemblies of the congregation are in line with Israel's "holy assemblies" on the Sabbath.

We are encouraged not to "forsake the assembling of ourselves," all the more in the light of the approaching judgment of the day of the Lord (Heb 10:25). The "today" of God's voice which calls to repentance applies to every day when the Word is sounded (Heb 4:1-13). His voice is heard especially as often as the Holy Scriptures are read aloud in the assemblies and proclaimed. Christ is the Lord of his church which He gathers in one body.

We want to do justice to the actual resting and remembering of God's works. We do so when we celebrate the Sunday and give room to the meetings of the congregation on that day. As Christian church we know ourselves to be called to thankfully accept the gift of this day of rest and to use it optimally to God's honour. Should this room be taken from us, the Sunday remains a sign of the desire to serve the Lord in full freedom.

We encourage each other to keep this day free from professional labour as much as possible and from any other activity which keeps us from the worship service of the Lord, from meeting as a congregation, and from the rest which characterizes this day. The fourth commandment is done justice when God's people enjoy this day of the Lord by distancing themselves from their ordinary activities (Isa 58:13).

5. *The congregation as Christ's body*

The double command of love is the summary of the law and the main theme of all commandments (Matt 22:27-40; Rom 13:8-10). Loving God as the highest commandment takes shape in the gathering of the congregation with her Lord. In the assemblies, the congregation presents herself to Him who is her Head.

Love of the neighbour finds expression in the will to come together as congregation which may be called the body of Christ. This command urges us not to

forsake our assemblies, but to exhort one another in that respect (Heb 10:25). Not one member can be missed in the whole of the body (1 Cor 12:12-31). The celebration of the Sunday binds the members together to form the one body, in which we are baptized in one Spirit (1 Cor 12:12-13).

6. Sunday and society

The Reformed Churches in The Netherlands have always thankfully accepted the free Sunday as it has come to us in Europe by God's providence. The Dutch people have, however, abandoned the way of faith in God and appreciate the Sunday primarily as a free day. Now that the legislator offers more room to work on the Sunday, so decreasing civil protection of this day as a day of the Lord, publicly and unanimously, with word and deed, we want to testify to the gospel of Christ. This implies the following:

6.1 pointing to the Creator of all that lives who has given the rhythm of working and resting to people who are created in his image;

6.2 testifying to the Saviour who frees lost people from the power of sin and brings us together in his congregation;

6.3 praising the Spirit who wants to renew damaged people after the image of Christ and guides us to the renewal of heaven and earth.

We want to uphold the Sunday to the honour of the living Lord and as day of the Christian congregation. We also stand up for maintaining the Sunday as a day of collective rest. From the first beginning, the God of Israel has involved also the staff, the foreigner, and the animals in the day of rest (Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14). We also desire to give form to the celebration of the Sunday in such a way that it displays an attractive picture of rest with God and communion with each other. It is our prayer that this example and

witness will invite also our neighbour to Christ. In our daily work, in our leisure time, and on the Sunday we want to testify of Christ Himself by finding rest in Him. That is how we, united on the confession of Lord's Day 38 of the Catechism, want to do justice in this time and our circumstances to God's purpose with the fourth commandment and the Sunday.

2. Practical-ethical section

2.1 In a society with mobile phones, laptops, traffic jams, internet, and e-mail, people are rushed. Time spent in labour and leisure flow over into each other in spite of the shortened working week. It is thus high time that we go back to learn from the Creator who made labour and leisure. Christ is Lord of redeemed slaves and of the day of rest.

2.2 Life and work continue to be subjected to the curse of the fall into sin (Gen 3:15-19). Also in a highly developed economy and society, work remains toil for many (Eccl 1:3). Education exerts great pressure on younger and older people. For this reason, it is healthy that the Creator introduced a day of rest into the rhythm of the week (Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:8-11; 23:12). In line with God's example and command we are to come to rest, learn to enjoy and look back on accomplished work. In this way God is honoured as the one who accomplishes all work. All depends on his blessing, not our performance.

2.3 The rest comes first (laying aside of labour) and then the celebration follows. God accomplished his work of creation and thus laid the foundation for the Sabbath. Jesus Christ accomplished the work of redemption and thus laid the foundation for the Sunday. He creates time to come to rest in his nearness. His commands, also to rest, are not heavy (1 John 5:3; Matt 11:30). Thus we learn to long for the perfect rest (Heb 4).

2.4 The Lord commanded that staff, animals, and the land also share in the rest. This rest has implications for the Dutch people, society, and the economy. God is concerned with the recreation (true re-creation) of his world. In word and deed the church shall testify of rest with the Creator, Redeemer, and Renewer of all that lives.

2.5 By resting we make clear that we realize that we have been freed from slavery, also from our own sins, performances, and economical laws. By celebrating the Sunday we give expression to the recognition that Christ is Lord also of the day of rest (Mark 2:28). When He says "Do not be anxious about the day of tomorrow," this applies certainly for the Sunday (Matt 6:34). On the day of rest we learn to enjoy his care, just as Israel learned it through the gift of manna.

2.6 Although the Old Testament had few direct prescriptions for the forms of worship on the Sabbath, this celebration is given form. For example, in the presence of the "tabernacle of meeting" and the offers, in the "holy convocations" of the people, and later in the synagogue. Jesus was accustomed to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). In the New Testament Christ appears to disciples and women after his resurrection. They assemble on the first day of the week (John 20; Acts 20), which is called "Day of the Lord" by the congregation (Rev 1:10).

2.7 Christ calls us to his congregation, which is his body. The congregation does not consist of individuals, but is the body of Christ, through the power of the Spirit comprised of many members. When the Redeemer calls us to his congregation there is no room for individualism.

2.8 In the convocation the congregation presents itself as the body that puts itself in the service of Christ. In the worship service she presents herself as people to

her God in all seriousness to enter God's rest (Heb 4). In line with the example of the early church we too need the second worship service to enjoy the Sunday as a whole and as congregation. If absenteeism of the second service becomes more common place, the congregation should be instructed and motivated to take part.

2.9 In church education it is necessary to make clear the interconnectedness of: a) God's command and willing obedience thereof; b) the congregation which assembles and being a living member thereof; and c) the choice of career and personal responsibility. We need the proclamation of the Word and the communion of saints to develop a Christian lifestyle.

2.10 When, due to economic and social pressure, Sunday labour increases, it is necessary to point out to each other the need for rest from our own exertion and our complete dependence on God's blessing. Work which is in service of the gospel (Matt 12:4-5) and works of compassion (Matt 12:6-7) can be necessary. This offers us also the opportunity to give form to the following of Christ. Under what circumstances (professional) labour is necessary shall be determined in Christian liberty. Such consideration shall take place by listening to God's Word, with prayer for wisdom and asking for advice. Isaiah 58:13 can serve as a practical directive and basis.

2.11 The danger of regular Sunday labour is that one is no longer used to the rhythm of Sunday rest, that one does not have the energy to attend even one worship service, and that you isolate yourself from congregational life. This makes a life of prayer even more necessary in order to receive dedication to the Lord of life and of his congregation. It is also good that the congregation supports those who, on account of their labour, have to work. This is possible through

prayer and personal attention for each other. In determining the moment of worship, times when they are able to attend are taken as much into account as possible.

2.12 Sunday labour which is accepted for increased returns is to be rejected, as is all love of money (1 Tim 6:9). "No one can serve two lords. You cannot serve God and Mammon" says Jesus our Lord (Matt 6:24).

2.13 The law of the Lord is a guideline of thankfulness for the redemption in Christ. The fourth commandment helps us – in labour and rest – to receive the sanctification of our whole life. The Holy Spirit fills the congregation as a temple. There sinners receive the power to live to God's honour all the days of the week.

2.14 Christ redeemed the Sabbath from human laws which place a burden on the day of rest. Developing a pattern of Sunday sanctification requires creativity: to discover what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rom 12:2). It requires love so that we can be a hand and a foot to each other in this.

2.15 In judging each other and speaking about each other it is good to use a "lifestyle of patience and mercy." It is not the outer marks of Sunday labour which are determinative. One must judge the motives, on account of which one decides with respect to Sunday labour. In this context the following words of the Lord Jesus are redeeming: "If you had known what this means 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the son of man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt 12:7-8).

2.16 In the training in faith it is important to develop a personal and shared lifestyle. Household rules can assist us in finding rest and peace on the day of the Lord. Household rules are agreements among adults, in which clarity is given concerning choices with respect to lifestyle relevant to the

celebration of the Sunday (e.g., homework, media, and types of recreation). The room which the Spirit wishes to make in our hearts may not be put under pressure by our busyness. At the same time God has given the day of rest for the enjoyment of leisure and recreation. Household rules are agreements which are taught to children as a way of personally giving form to the Sunday rest. Thus the younger generation can learn how to give shape to Sunday rest in a responsible way.

2.17 One aspect of celebrating the Sunday is to lay aside all trust in ourselves and our own work. Only Christ is able to redeem us from the slavery of the curse and of the power of sin. Repentance from dead works is a turning to the living God.

2.18 A powerless and joyless celebration of the Sunday has to do with a small faith that fails to find its power in Christ as Lord. However, a living faith in Christ, the Living One, will lead to fervent and joyous celebration of the day of his resurrection.

2.19 Focusing on the accomplished work of Christ and the renewing power of the Spirit implies for the day of rest: doing everything which serves a joyous celebration of the day of the Lord and leaving aside doing those things which break this down.

2.20 Society has become estranged from the Sunday as day of rest. The Sunday as day of the church is primarily a matter within the boundaries of the congregation and the homes. The congregation of Jesus Christ shall seek ways and means to reach out to the neighbour and to invite him or her to taste something of this real rest. To those who come to faith in Christ and desire to join the congregation, we want to explain why this day is so valuable to us and show how we celebrate the Sunday with joy (cf. 2.15).