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What is the Lord's Day?

Part 3: Observing the Lord's Day

To develop careless worship patterns is very, very dangerous.

It's about worship

How should we celebrate the Lord's Day? By worshipping God the Father and his son Jesus Christ who brought us into Sabbath rest. Hebrews 10:19-31 teaches us that we must meet together to worship our God. In fact, Hebrews 10 teaches us that to give up meeting together for worship is sinning defiantly and making oneself worthy of excommunication and eternal death. To quit going to church – to hear the Word preached, to use the sacraments, to participate in corporate prayer, and to give Christian offerings for the needy – is the unforgivable sin. To develop careless worship patterns is very, very dangerous.

Numbers 15:30-36 makes the distinction between “unintentional sins” and “sinning defiantly.” The Lord says that anyone who sins defiantly must be cut off from his people. A man caught gathering wood on the Sabbath day is sentenced to death for despising the command to rest and for making light of the Lord's command.

This episode finds a New Testament counterpart in Hebrews 10. Verse 25 says: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” This refers to the regular gathering together for worship which we know happened on the Lord's day – the first day of the week. But now listen as we keep reading.

For if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:26-31).

Hebrews 10 alludes to deliberate sin against better knowledge. There is no sacrifice available for this sin. It will be worse for the man who quits going to church on the Lord's day than for the man caught gathering wood on the Sabbath day. It will be worse for him who quits going to church for he has trampled the Son of God under foot; he has treated as unholy the blood of the covenant that had sanctified him; he has insulted the Spirit of grace. Such a member of the church will fall into the condemning hands of the living God, and it will not go well with him.

In the words of Hebrews 6, a brother or sister who abandons the church and

no longer worships within the communion of saints – who had once been enlightened, had tasted the heavenly gift, had shared in the Holy Spirit, had tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age – such a brother or sister crucifies the Son of God all over again and subjects the Lord to public disgrace. Such members are like fields that drank deep of the refreshing rain only to produce nothing but thorns and thistles. In the end, God will curse them and burn them.

In the language of Hebrews 4, such a person will not enter God's rest; rather, he will be cut to pieces by the living and active Word of God. Like the stubborn rebels in the wilderness, they will not enter the rest of the Promised Land but will die in the desert.

The parallels between Hebrews 10 and Numbers 15 are clear. In Numbers 15 the example given as defiant sin worthy of excommunication and death is not resting on the Sabbath day. In Hebrews 10 no longer going to church is declared deliberate sin which results in excommunication and everlasting death.

And so the Lord's day is about worship. Going to church and worshipping our God. What did the early New Testament church do as it gathered for worship? It devoted itself to the apostolic teaching, celebrated the Lord's Supper, prayed, and had fellowship (Acts 2:42). We should not get hung up on the dos and don'ts. The Lord's day is not about refraining from gathering wood or lighting fires; it is about worship.

Early glimpses of Sunday worship

We have early glimpses of Christian worship from several sources. One source is Pliny's letter to the emperor Trajan. Around 112 A.D., Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia (a province in northwest Turkey), wrote to the emperor Trajan in Rome. Pliny needed guidance on the persecution of Christians, and he reported what his investigations had disclosed. Christians "met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god." They would also eat ordinary food together.

From Justin Martyr, writing about 150 A.D., we have perhaps the most complete early description of Christian worship. In his *First Apology* he writes:

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to his apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

Justin Martyr describes the worship, and it sounds very familiar. It consisted of: the Word of God (both read and preached), corporate prayer (including the psalms), Communion of the bread and wine, and offering of one's possessions.

During these early years of the Christian church, the first day of the week was a work day for labourers and slaves. As Pliny tells us, the Christians would meet before dawn to worship. After worship, they would need to go to work. This changed in 321 A.D. when Emperor Constantine

decreed that Sunday would be a day of rest, a legal holiday.

Although the civil authority decreed Sunday to be a day of rest, the church kept the focus where it was to be, namely, on the call to worship. The teaching of Christ and Paul prevented the early church from falling into a Jewish Sabbatarianism in the observance of the Sunday. But then in the sixth century, we find Cæsarius of Arles teaching that the whole glory of the Jewish Sabbath had been transferred to the Sunday, and that Christians must keep the Sunday holy in the same way as the Jews had been commanded to keep holy the Sabbath day. However, the Council of Orleans, 538, rejected this tendency as Jewish and non-Christian. This indicates that the debate about whether the Lord's day is the Old Testament Sabbath day in New Testament clothes, or a new day, is a very old debate.

Sunday in Reformed Scotland

Christian History tells us how the first day of the week was observed in Reformation Scotland of 1560. A bell would ring about a half-hour before the first Sunday worship service, and the service began with the second bell. The lay leader would lead the reading of Scripture, some prayers, and singing metrical psalms. This part of the service lasted an hour. The minister then entered the pulpit. After more prayers and singing the sermon was delivered, followed by more prayers, the Creed, and the benediction.

The second service was usually held in the afternoon. It was devoted to teaching from a Calvin or Heidelberg catechism, or a catechism for children. Eventually, "the Catechisms" were required to be held in every church.

Faithful attendance was greatly emphasized for both Sunday services. For example, the Aberdeen town council insisted that all city officials,

Church News

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Mission Conference

The Theological College invites all those interested to a Mission Conference to be held on Tuesday and Wednesday, May 31, and June 1, 2005. The purpose of this conference is to discuss the church's calling to do foreign missions. Two evening meetings are scheduled for the wider public. These will be held in the Ancaster Canadian Reformed Church. For more detailed information, please visit www.canrc.org/college/index.html

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their families, and their servants attend worship. In 1598, they began to fine those who missed services; husbands were responsible for their wives' attendance, and masters for their servants'. In Glasgow, a piper was threatened with excommunication if he played between sunrise and sunset on Sunday. At St. Andrews, five men were imprisoned for three hours for missing the sermon. Some churches imposed a fine for leaving a worship service early; other churches posted guards at the doors.

The Lord's Day Act

For hundreds of years in the Western world, very little commercial activity was conducted on Sundays. Besides essential services, business and trades took the day off. Sunday was considered by most as the day to go to church. Various governments even passed laws forbidding or restricting certain activities.

In the seventeenth century, the British Parliament during the reign of Charles I legislated an Act for punishing abuses committed on the Lord's day. In Canada, the Lord's Day Alliance of Canada, founded in 1888, persuaded Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier to introduce a "Lord's Day Act" in the House of Commons in 1906. It became law in 1907. The Act aimed to restrict Sunday trade, labour, and recreation. Of course, for some the first day of the week was a holiday rather than a holy day.

Until only decades ago, Western society has largely been living with a Constantinian view of the Sunday. However, society has changed drastically. We now live in a culture where business and entertainment stop for nothing, much less for religious observances. The formal shift came about in Canada on April 24, 1985 when the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the Lord's Day Act in the Big M Drug Mart case on the grounds that it contravened the freedom of religious and conscience provision in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Mr. Justice Dickson concluded that the Lord's Day Act wrongly imposed Christian morality upon non-believers.

Post-Constantine era

We live in a post-Constantine era. Western society has been living off Constantinian capital for some 1600 years. The age in which the civil governments pass laws and acts that set the Sunday aside as a day of rest are over. The parking lots of Wal-Mart and Canadian Tire are as full on Sunday as on Wednesday. How do we live as Christians

in such a society? What about the command to worship, and to diligently attend the church of God on the Lord's day? Despite the era in which we live, the command to worship on the Lord's day remains unchanged, even if the changes in society make it more difficult for us diligently to do so.

Synod of Dort, 1618-19

We ought not to think that we are the first Reformed people to struggle with the question of the Sunday. Four hundred years ago our ancestors in Holland had to deal with it. What was one allowed to do on the Sunday? All agreed that Sunday was the day for Christian worship, but besides that, how were they to observe the Sunday? It was a huge question at that time. The General Synod dealt with it and came up with this formula:

1. In the fourth commandment of the Law of God, there is a ceremonial (or temporary) aspect and a moral (or permanent) aspect.
2. The rest on the seventh day after creation and the strict observance of this day laid specifically upon the Jewish nation was temporary.

The Lord's day is about worship.

3. That a specific and stated day is set aside for worship, and along with it as much rest as is necessary for worship and holy meditation, is permanent.
4. The Sabbath of the Jews having been set aside, the Lord's day must be solemnly hallowed by Christians.
5. The Lord's day (Sunday) has always been kept since the time of the Apostles in the early catholic church.
6. This day must be so set aside for worship that men rest on it from their regular work, except what is required by charity and present

necessities, and from all such recreations that would hinder the worship of God.

This formula gives good guidelines. But how do we work it out practically?

Getting practical

We need to keep in mind what the Lord's day is about, namely, worship – diligently attending the church of God to hear God's Word. Everything we do on the Lord's day, and even Saturday, ought to enhance our worship. What does that mean?

It means not staying out late Saturday evening, ensuring that we get a good night's rest Saturday night. In fact, I would not mind if, when it came to the Lord's day, we thought in terms of Saturday evening to Sunday evening. That would tend to keep us in our homes Saturday evening where we could, as families, do some singing and other holy exercises of godliness in preparation for the great event of corporate worship on the morrow. We think of Sunday as beginning at midnight and ending at midnight. I wonder why? In the Bible, a day was comprised of the period between sundowns. Is that not a better view? Here we can learn from the early church. Before and during the early middle ages, as with the Jewish Sabbath, the observance of the Christian Sunday began with sundown on Saturday and lasted till the same time on Sunday. This method of reckoning the Sunday from sunset to sunset continued in some places down to the seventeenth century. Would it not be great to do back to that? Would it not be great if we were all in our homes Saturday evening preparing for Sunday morning?

On the Lord's day we diligently attend the services and participate fully in the worship. And it's not just a matter of going to church with the rest of the day being ours to spend in selfish pursuits. The rest of the day, between the services and after, ought to be characterized by what we were doing in

church. It's the Lord's *day*, not the Lord's *hours*. The Sunday should be of one peace. Since we worship with the communion of saints, it only makes sense that the other activities we are engaged in reflect that. It is good to visit one another. It is good to perform works of mercy: inviting the lonely into our homes, visiting in a hospital or care facility, or singing in an old age home to give just a few examples.

When we are on vacation, the call to diligently attend the church of God follows us. We make plans for our vacations. Let's factor into those plans the call to attend church to submit ourselves to the faithful proclamation of the gospel.

Despite the era in which we live, the command to worship on the Lord's day remains unchanged.

What about working on Sunday? As much as possible, we need to stay away from Sunday work because of the command to assemble together in corporate worship. Working during the stated times for worship keeps one from worship; working before or after worship does not put one in a positive frame of mind for worship. Worship is not easy to do; it takes effort and focus.

This can be a bit of a mine-field. In our society, it becomes increasingly difficult for everyone to stay away from Sunday work all the time. Dort said: "This day must be so set aside for worship that men rest on it from their regular work, except what is required by charity and present necessities." Most people will agree with that; however, in one congregation there will be different opinions on what is a work required by charity or by present necessities. What one considers work that needs to be done on Sunday another says is non-essential work. Let me give an example.

A farmer has his crop cut, lying in the field ready to be harvested. He cut it Saturday and plans to harvest it Monday. He wakes up early Sunday morning and the weather forecast is 100% chance of a terrible driving rain, and maybe hail. What does he do? Does he let the rain and hail ruin the crop or does he harvest it? One farmer will say it is irresponsible to let the crop go to ruin, and he will harvest it. Another will let it lie there and plow it under Monday morning. Who is right? I think the whole matter of personal conscience comes into play here. But, as Paul said in Roman 14:5, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."

What about Sunday recreations? For instance, would it be appropriate to attend a football or baseball game on Sunday? No. That would detract from our Sunday focus, which is worship and communion-of-saints activities. Further, we are being entertained by those who have disobeyed the command to worship. Why would we even want to be there that very day?

What about playing a baseball game after church with a group of young people? Absolutely. That is communion-of-saints stuff that flows out of what we are about on Sundays.

May we go shopping on Sundays, or out for lunch to a restaurant after church? We ought not to do that. First, it's out of character with what the Lord's day is about; but also, we are implicating ourselves in the sin of those who disobey the universal call to worship (Ps 96).

Should there be a Lord's Day Act?

Was the Laurier government of 1907 correct in proclaiming the Lord's Day Act? Was the Supreme Court wrong in throwing it out in 1985? I would answer "Yes" to both questions.¹ Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, which summarizes the Bible's teaching on the responsibilities of the civil government, would lead us to answer affirmatively to both questions. Beginning in about the

middle of the first paragraph, we say in our confession:

Their task of restraining and sustaining is not limited to the public order but includes the protection of the church and its ministry in order that the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honoured and served by everyone, as He requires in his Word.

Everything we do on the Lord's day ought to enhance our worship.

Even without the famous twenty-two words of Article 36 (see footnote), and recognizing that this sentence first speaks about how the civil government must protect the church from persecution, our confession also points the civil government towards its responsibility to see that the church can do its God-given task. The civil government labouring in the physical sphere can only do things by passing laws. It does not work in the spiritual sphere; it does not have the task of promoting the gospel. Rather, it should – as God's minister (Rom 13) – enact a law restricting work and recreation on the Lord's day so that the church can fulfil its task in the world which is to call *all* people to worship our great God and Saviour.

¹ I would agree completely with the brief that nine Canadian Reformed ministers sent to the Ontario Law Reform Commission on the subject of Sunday Observance Legislation in 1970. The brief was published in *The Canadian Reformed Magazine (CRM)* of 1970 as follows:

The undersigned, all serving the Canadian Reformed Churches as ministers of the gospel, respectfully submit the following brief to the Ontario Law Reform Commission on the subject of Sunday Observance Legislation.

BINDING PRINCIPLES:

1. The local Canadian Reformed Churches are governed by their consistories according to the rules laid down in the Church Order, of which we enclose a copy for your reference (Acts General Synod Orangeville 1968, pages 118-127). We feel compelled to draw your attention to the Church Order (of the Canadian Reformed Churches) and in particular to Articles 67 and 68 which as a matter of course obligate our churches to:

- (a) observe the Sunday, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost
- (b) hold two worship services on the Sunday.

2. The doctrine of the Canadian Reformed Churches to which all communicant members have to subscribe by their Profession of Faith is formulated in the Doctrinal Standards (also known as the Three Forms of Unity), the Confession of Faith (also known as the Belgic Confession), the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. (For your reference we enclose a copy of the *Book of Praise* containing the text of the Three Forms of Unity, pages 2 – 110.) The Canadian Reformed Churches subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity as containing the doctrine of the Old and New Testament (The Word of God). These Creeds therefore do not contain obsolete theories, but are still the standards for our faith and life.

3. We would like to stress what the Canadian Reformed Churches profess (in Article 36 of the Confession of Faith) concerning the Magistracy [then follows Article 36 of the Belgic Confession – GvP].

4. Further we draw your attention to what the Canadian Reformed Churches profess in Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism as an explanation of God's requirement in the fourth commandment of the Law of God [then follows Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism – GvP].

Having thus explained what we believe to be the will of God regarding the day of rest and also what, according to the Word of God, is the duty of the Government, we now come to the...

PRACTICAL EFFECTS:

1. The Canadian Reformed community has (regardless of any legislation dealing with Sunday observance in existence or to be brought into existence) no alternative but to strictly observe the binding principles enunciated above.

2. However, the undersigned are painfully aware of the great threat to the religious and social welfare of the Canadian Reformed community, posed by any lack of Sunday Observance Legislation.

3. As for the economic aspect, we wish to point out that changes in the Lord's Day Observance Legislation to a more "open Sunday" would result in unequal opportunities for our people. Those who, on the ground of the above mentioned articles of our Doctrinal Standards, would refuse to work on Sundays would without doubt lose their jobs and thus not have equal opportunities with other Canadians who would not object to working on Sundays. Thus they would be denied a right which has been guaranteed to them in the Canadian Bill of Rights. Briefly, as for example, we believe no Sunday Observance Legislation will result in

- (a) seven day work weeks for all business enterprise based on a five day shift schedule.
- (b) limiting the job market for persons who abide by the binding principles stated above.
- (c) disrupting the peace and quiet proper Sunday observance deserves.
- (d) further destroying any remnant of a deterrent remaining that contributes to preserving a good family life.

CONCLUSION:

We therefore respectfully submit that a strict Sunday Observance

Legislation is essential to our community and the community at large. We also wish to point out the important duty of the Government to protect the interests of the minority in any matter. The Government is under no obligation to enact legislation by which everyone is compelled to observe the Sunday as set out in our Doctrinal Standards, but it has the God-given duty by its legislation to render it possible for all who wish to observe the Sunday as stated above, to do so unhindered. With the exception of essential services (e.g. medical care) a strict enforcement of Sunday observance is not detrimental to the community at large regardless their creed, but can make a very strong contribution to the moral, spiritual, and social well-being of the whole nation. Dated this 28th day of April, 1970.

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