

Further Discussion

Re: “What is the Lord’s Day?”

by G.Ph. van Popta

Having read Rev. G. van Popta’s series of three articles on “What is the Lord’s Day?”, I can appreciate that he had an enormous task on his hands as he surveyed all of the scriptural evidence. I benefited from the series, for example, regarding Numbers 15. I also found useful Rev. van Popta’s suggestion that we could return to the Jewish way of counting the days, and so observe the Lord’s Day as a twenty-four hour period from Saturday evening till Sunday evening. This would indeed help many people prepare for worship with a proper rest, a better frame of mind, etc. However, it did make me wonder when ministers will finish their sermon writing.

Genesis 2

At the same time it seems to me that the articles would be greatly enhanced by a more careful study of Genesis 2:3. Permit me to offer my explanation. It says, “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done.” In a perfect world, God blessed that seventh day, but not the other six. In a perfect world, He made that day holy, but not the other six.

This ought to catch our attention, for in Paradise every day would already bring perfect praise to God. For six days every stroke of the hoe, every cut of the scythe, every shake of the ripe plum tree would be completed to the glory of God. Everything Adam and Eve would do at any given time would glorify God. They had all they needed to completely serve Him. Yet God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because his own activities changed on that day. He rested rather than creating.

God wanted the seventh day to be different, or holy. What is holy is dedicated to God in a special way. This can only mean that every seventh day would be used by mankind purely for communion with God, no work taking up their thoughts and energy. On that day they would rest, as God did. It would not be a day to sin less, for there was no sin. It would be a day to stop work and dedicate the day to knowing God all the more. In this way much good spiritual fruit would come from that day, more than from the other days – this is what it means to have that particular day “blessed.”

If in the holy perfection of Paradise God had already ordained one day out of every seven for such a purpose, his act needs to weigh heavily in our discussion of the Lord’s Day. We are not now speaking of an ordinance for Old Testament Israel, but a creation ordinance that binds the entire world to worship *and rest*.

Pivotal turns in New Testament section – gospels

Further, there are a few pivotal points in the articles that deserve more thought.

In this regard I turn to the second article. I found it unusual that Rev. van Popta concedes to the Pharisees that Jesus’ disciples were actually breaking the Old Testament Sabbath by rolling heads of grain and eating. We read, “Effectively, they were harvesting and threshing.” Likewise we read that the man carrying his mat was “carrying a burden” on the Sabbath, in contradiction to Nehemiah 13 and Jeremiah 17. Regarding the first example, there is a great difference on

the one hand between taking the heads of grain that lean over the path and eating a few as one walks and on the other hand taking a threshing scythe, sledge, etc. and harvesting. Our Lord was simply freeing the Sabbath from Pharisaic oppression. His disciples were no more “harvesting and threshing” than I am when I spread peanut butter on my Sunday morning toast. Regarding the second example, both texts mentioned are about loads that were being carried in connection with commerce. They do not apply to the man skipping along with his mat.

Rev. van Popta writes that we should not “try to rationalize the matter by debating how to define a ‘burden.’” I ask, “Why not?” Rev. van Popta states that the Lord does not enter into that debate. True. I would say He goes deeper. The problem with the Pharisees was not merely their definition of a burden, but their wicked hearts. They refused to love the poor and weak on the Sabbath day. They knew nothing of the Sabbath’s declaration of freedom from slavery to sin and its effects (Deut 5:15). Salvation for them consisted in these many trifling manmade laws. So the Lord Jesus deals with the deeper issue, their rejection of the Liberator, Himself. If they would accept Him, they would discover the right framework for their service to God – not burdensome wage-earning, but joyful responsive service. Those who receive Christ as their Liberator also receive Him as their Lord; He is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). Within the context of his lordship we may certainly return to the question of what is a burden on the Sabbath. By the Spirit and Word, we know that it has nothing to do

with size, weight, or distance moved. The fourth commandment was never about the scientific definition of “work” as energy expended, but about work that is done to make a living, the work that distracts one from focussing on the Lord God all the day. The Pharisees had lost sight of this.

All of the care of body and soul shown by our Lord on the Sabbath highlights the restoration of his people – precisely the reason given for Sabbath-keeping in Deuteronomy 5. Instead of conceding to the Pharisees that Jesus was breaking the law, we ought to conclude that He was demonstrating the true meaning of the Sabbath. It was a day of life and joy. In light of this purpose our Lord made the choice to use that very day for healing. The man would have been none the worse for wear if Jesus had waited till Monday, but Jesus intentionally chose the Sabbath to heal him. Our Lord was not breaking the Sabbath law by doing so; He was precisely fulfilling the law of God!

Pivotal turns in New Testament section – Colossians 2

Staying in the second article, I turn to where Colossians 2:16-17 is explained. I missed any real discussion of the heresy the apostle Paul was dealing with in Colosse. Still, Rev. van Popta rightly notes that the Old Testament Sabbath belonged to the “shadows” which are fulfilled in Christ. He then states that “the Sabbath did not give way to the Lord’s Day; rather, it gave way to Christ.” He concludes, “Christ is, now, the Sabbath.” Let us note that similarly circumcision belonged to the shadows, a rite which Paul mentions in Colossians 2:11-12. Does this mean that it gave way only to Christ, and not to baptism? We confess that baptism has replaced circumcision (HC, Q/A 74). How about the animal sacrifices? They too belonged to the shadows (Heb 8:3-5). Were they merely replaced with Christ, end of the matter? No. Their truth/meaning remains valid for us in Christ (BC, 25), and therefore we are commanded, “Offer your bodies as living sacrifices... your spiritual act of worship” (Rom 12:1; cf. Heb 13:16).

When Rev. van Popta connects the Sabbath as shadow to Christ the reality, I can follow well, but when he says that “Christ is, now, the Sabbath” I have no idea how to understand that. I submit that Rev. van Popta has not completed the discussion. He should have followed through from Christ to the Lord’s Day, so that the truth and substance of the Sabbath in Christ would come to expression in the Lord’s Day. If not, the fourth commandment should no longer be read as part of the law today.

“Living off Constantinian capital”

Coming to the third article, we find that marking Sunday as a day of rest in the West is nothing more than “living off Constantinian capital for some 1600 years” (p. 228). This suggests that the day of rest was really little more than a political creation. We read, “Western society has largely been living with a Constantinian view of the Sunday” (p. 228). Earlier it was written: “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” (p. 227). I read this to mean that the church should not speak about rest on the Sunday. Interspersed with this was a description of enforced Sunday rest in sixteenth century Scotland that appears to be designed to show how misguided was such legislation (really, this is a straw man). It appears one is to conclude that treating Sunday as a day of rest has more to do with Constantine than with Scripture. Therefore, when Rev. van Popta later asked whether the Supreme Court of Canada was wrong in throwing out the Lord’s Day Act in 1985, I expected him to say they were right to do so. I was also surprised that he fully endorsed the 1970 brief of the nine Canadian Reformed ministers. Something seems inconsistent.

In response, I would point out that pitting “day of rest” against “day of worship” introduces a false dilemma. After all, “day of rest” is a term used in Lord’s Day 38 of our catechism for the Lord’s Day today, and that is based on Scripture. Further, Rev. van Popta equates “day of rest” with the “Jewish Sabbatarianism” (p. 227) which he

mentions in the next sentence. These are two very different things because they exist within a different framework. The Christian day of rest is a matter of thankful service; the Jewish Sabbath (i.e. not the scriptural Sabbath) became a matter of earning salvation. If the church is “losing its focus” whenever it speaks of a “day of rest,” then the term should be taken out of our Catechism. I hope not!

Role of conscience

Based on what I have written, I find that Rev. van Popta has not adequately dealt with the scriptural grounds regarding the Lord’s Day. The result is that he now gives too much over to the individual believer’s conscience. We then come into dangerous territory, for the sinful human heart will soon find more and more room for selfish decisions, while appealing to “personal freedom of conscience.”

As for the text of Romans 14:5 – “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” – its use is permissible in this case *only* if it has indeed been shown that the matters under discussion are purely Old Testament ceremonial matters that are entirely in the freedom of the Christian today. For it is with a view to ceremonial questions of diet and Jewish feast days that Paul writes as he does in Romans 14:15. These were matters to which there is absolutely no binding on the New Testament church. But Paul is not writing about the Lord’s Day (Rev 1:10). If then Romans 14:5 is appealed to for freedom of conscience, those who use it in regard to working on Sunday will have to go the whole way and clearly state that it is entirely in the freedom of the conscience of the Christian to work on Sunday and none shall be judged for doing so, as long as they are careful not to offend their fellow believers. I doubt that Rev. van Popta would state this, but I think it is the only legitimate position to take if Romans 14:15 is to function in the discussion.

The question for the hypothesized farmer or any other person caught in these proposed dilemmas must be, “Am I doing this for the Lord?” That is a question for every day, but it is particularly the question to ask on the Lord’s Day. And since we are to rest,

how can one claim work for the Lord on that day, unless the nature of the work clearly fits the categories covered by the Lord in Matthew 12? Here it may be noted that these were not new categories (mercy, necessity, and religion), but drawn out of the Old Testament by Christ Himself.

Being very concrete in conclusion, I would be far more cautious than Rev. van Popta in endorsing Sunday ball games. I have room for such things, but using the word “absolutely” and calling this “communion of saints stuff which

flows out of the Sunday” (p. 229) is too absolute and provides *carte blanche* for much more. The selfish heart would rather turn to entertaining type activities than the pursuit of the knowledge of God and the practice of godliness. Parents should be able to answer their children’s questions about what is permitted or not permitted on Sunday in their household simply by saying: “We have six days to do that already. We want this day to be different. It is a special day for the Lord. We will find the most personal pleasure when

we use this day according to its purpose, to grow in the knowledge of the Lord.” Let’s be careful not to allow selfish thinking to determine our ethics about the Sunday. I think that everything on that day should, as much as possible, remind us that God has asked for one-seventh of our time to particularly draw our hearts to Him. Let nothing stand in the way of this.

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Note: See next issue for Rev. van Popta’s response.



From time to time Clarion will publish longer responses to articles received. The decision as to which responses to publish will rest with the Editor.

Press Release of Classis Alberta held June 7, 2005 in Taber

On behalf of the convening church at Taber, Br. Wayne Veenstra called the meeting to order. He welcomed the delegates of the churches of Classis Alberta. He also welcomed Br. Harry Halma and Rev. Eric Fennema as observers from the Trinity URC at Lethbridge. It was also noted that an invitation had been extended to the Monarch FRC, but observers were unable to attend.

The following items were remembered concerning life in the churches since the last meeting of the churches of this classical resort: the departure of Rev. Eikelboom to Tasmania, and the departure of Rev. Lodder to Cloverdale. It was also noted with thankfulness that Rev. Poppe is soon to arrive in Coaldale.

Br. Veenstra opened the meeting with the reading of 2 Corinthians 5:11-21; he led in prayer and invited the assembly to sing Psalm 25:2.

The brothers of the convening church reported that the credentials are in good order. All *primi* delegates were present except from the churches at Immanuel, Providence, and Barrhead. Classis was declared constituted. The

following officers were suggested and took their place: Chairman: Rev. J. Louwse, Vice-chairman: Br. Harry Noot, Clerk: Rev. R. Bredenhof. It was noted that Rev. Slomp is absent because he is in Ontario to attend the FRC Synod, and that Rev. Aasman and Rev. Tiggelaar are on sabbatical for the summer months. The agenda was adopted after some small additions and changes.

A report from the Committee for Financial Aid for Students of the Ministry was received with thankfulness.

Three proposals from the Providence Church in Edmonton amending Classis Alberta regulations were adopted. The proposals were: change of kilometre rate, invitation of FRC and URCNA observers, and documentation for release of minister and approbation of call. Thankfulness was expressed to the Providence council for their work done on these changes. By proxy Rev. Aasman volunteered to send out the updated classis regulations.

Rev. Fennema spoke some words of appreciation for the relationship that is gradually developing between the two federations. Rev. Bredenhof reciprocated in an appropriate manner.

An appeal was dealt with in closed session.

There was a request from church at Coaldale re: approbation of call of Rev.

Poppe. All the documents were found to be in good order, and the call was approbated. Rev. Slomp was delegated to speak on behalf of the churches of Classis Alberta at the installation of Rev. Poppe.

The chairman asked whether the ministry of the office-bearers is being continued, whether the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured, and whether there is any matter in which the consistories need the judgment and help of classis for the proper government of the church. All churches of the classis answered, “Yes, yes, and no.”

Appointments: Convening church for the next classis will be Barrhead, on October 4, 2005. Suggested executive officers for the next classis will be: Chairman: Rev. Aasman, Vice-chairman: Rev. Louwse, Clerk: Rev. Tiggelaar.

Some brothers made use of the question period. Thankfulness was expressed by the church at Coaldale for pulpit supply received. The chairman judged that brotherly censure was not required. The Acts and Press Release of Classis were adopted after some minor changes. The chairman asked the assembly to sing Psalm 122:1 and 3, led in thanksgiving prayer, and closed the meeting.

For Classis Alberta, June 7, 2005
Harry J. Noot, vice-chairman at that time

