

OUR CHIEF OF DAYS

The principle, purpose, and practice of the Lord's day



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INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, many Christians talked about ‘keeping Sunday special.’ Today’s society—not to mention today’s church—seems increasingly convinced that such a concern is irrelevant. In many places people stay away from churches generally. Congregations dwindle. The vast majority of both converted and unconverted men and women appear to approach Sundays with a take-it-or-leave-it attitude. We might ask ourselves, “Why bother with Sundays?” Are there not other, perhaps better, ways of spending our time and expending our energies in the service of God? Why not abandon Sunday worship and go where and when we will find the people? Why not arrange our churches in a way that conforms to and perhaps appeals to the patterns of activity and behaviour we see in our culture and society?

Where can we even begin to find answers to such questions? How do we approach such a topic when there

are so many perspectives and opinions in existence? The issue calls forth such different views and approaches. Do we simply rehearse the various positions that one can take, and then leave each Christian to adopt the one which best suits their lifestyle and expectations? Do we choose whichever one is closest to the tradition in which we were raised? Perhaps we should just take the nearest match to the church in which we were converted, or where we are presently in membership? Do we, perhaps, consider all the positions and then try to find some middle ground between them all, on which everyone can agree? Or, do we at least agree to disagree, and then try not to disagree too much?

This short book is written out of the conviction that we do not need to trouble ourselves with such intellectual or ecclesiastical gymnastics to find the answer. We need simply to search the all-sufficient word of the living God. We must do so in dependence on the Spirit of God for the illumination of his book and the enlightening of our hearts. We might fail to realise just how broad is the sufficiency of Scripture. The word of God has a breadth and beauty that meets the deepest, greatest, and most complex needs of mankind. It addresses the issues of faith and life in a manner that is eminently practical. The psalmist knew how to order his life: "I thought about my ways, and turned my feet to your testimonies" (Psalm 119.59).

Are you faced with questions or dilemmas about the Lord's day? Are you concerned about its relevance and

value? Do you want to know what to do with it and on that day if it is, indeed, relevant and valuable? Then you need to think over your ways, and turn your feet back to the testimonies of God. The Bible has the answer—not just *an* answer but *the* answer—to such questions. Admittedly, we might not like the answer, but that is not the point. We should not come to Scripture to uphold or to attack any particular conviction or tradition. We do not use the Bible as a kind of (un)holy pick’n’mix display out of which we simply choose the goodies which most appeal to our established taste. We come to it to learn. We come to submit ourselves wholeheartedly, cheerfully, and willingly to what God has revealed of himself. We come to embrace what God has revealed to and for his people, in every aspect of our relationship to him and to each other.

We need to make Scripture the touchstone of our Christian living. We must be reflecting, acting, and going in accordance with God’s holy word. This often tempts us to despair when we see the high demands of Scripture. Perhaps we think, “I cannot do that! It is beyond me!” But that is to forget the sufficiency of grace. Consider Romans 6.17-18: a Christian is a slave to righteousness, liberated by grace to what we can call ‘evangelical obedience’. What does this mean? Simply that the law is no longer an outward taskmaster but an inward teacher, a true joy, being written on the heart of the Christian (Hebrews 10.15-16). As a result, we now obey from the heart that form of doctrine (observe, not

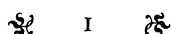
that flood of feelings or collection of vague wishes) to which we have been delivered (Romans 6.17). Obedience is a product of redemption. Unredeemed, we are unable to obey. Saved by grace, a new impulse governs and guides the new creation in Christ, as the old things pass away, and all things are made new.

It is grace we need, and grace we have, in order that we might serve God entirely. Resting on God's grace in Christ, we must not be conformed to this world – its patterns of thought, desire, and behaviour. Instead, we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12.1-2). Our aim should not be, first and foremost, to become part of a certain tradition, denomination, or group. Our aim should not be to find the balance of all the various perspectives on a particular issue. We are not trying simply to rehearse the view we have always held, or that others have held before us, though we should certainly consider the wisdom of the ages. We should all desire and pursue the binding of our consciences to the word of God alone.

It is this approach that we need to take to the issue of what is often known as 'the Lord's day'. We shall attempt to do so by studying the *principle* of the Lord's day, the *purpose* of the Lord's day, and the *practice* of the Lord's day.

A Particular Baptist pastor called John Sutcliff was part of the revitalisation of Baptist life in the eighteenth century. He was intimately involved in William Carey's development as a preacher and sending as a missionary.

When he wrote to his fellow believers about the Lord's day, he could write with this assurance: "You love that sacred day; it is dear to your very souls."¹ I hope that, in considering this topic, you will come to that same point, to the refreshing and rejoicing of your own soul.



THE PRINCIPLE OF THE LORD'S DAY

Where do we get the idea of the Lord's day, or even the idea of a Sabbath day at all? Is the idea of a Sabbath day an Old Testament idea, bound up with the Old Testament laws and no longer applicable today? Are we not under grace, rather than law? Is this not one of the things that has passed away?

If we consider the biblical data, a very different picture emerges from the one that is often assumed.

ESTABLISHED AT CREATION

The idea of one day in seven being set apart ('sanctified') by and for God predates the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. The Sabbath is one of three so-called 'creation ordinances'. The meaning of this is simple. While still in the created state of innocence, a condition of perfect and sinless communion with the holy God, three great matters were ordained by God and so established for

man. One was marriage (Genesis 2:20-25). A second was work or labour (Genesis 2:15). The third (and one which realises a degree of its significance in the context of the ordinance of labour) is that of a sabbath--a rest. There is a close link between the ordinance of work and the ordinance of the Sabbath: God's sovereignty is established over both our strength and our time. This link is reaffirmed in the fourth commandment.

The day God made

We read in Genesis 2:1-3 that "the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it,¹ because in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made." The idea of rest is not one of weariness or inactivity, but of God ceasing from the particular work of creation.

From the beginning, then, God established by divine act a rest of one day in seven. He patterned that rest in himself. He did not establish it for men as under law, or under grace, as it were, but for men as men. In the words of Robert Louis Dabney, "the professed Christian has two reasons for observing the Sabbath: every human being has one."² This is the foundation of all our understanding of and dealing with the Lord's day.

It is worth noting that the first Sabbath was the first

full day of Adam and Eve's existence. "Behold the dignity of the Sabbath!" exclaims Sutcliff:

How honourable in its origin! Let us look back to the garden of Eden. There we find this sacred day. Take a view of our first parents in a state of innocence. They began their lives, by keeping it holy to God. They gave the first fruits of their time, to their creator.³

Their first day of life was spent on a day that God blessed and sanctified, in which he rested from his creative work. They spent their first full day on earth focused on the Lord God.

Bread from heaven

Consider also a passage such as Exodus 16:22-30, about the gathering of the manna, that special bread from heaven which the Lord provided to sustain the Israelites in the wilderness:

And so it was, on the sixth day, that they gathered twice as much bread, two omers⁴ for each one. And all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. Then he said to them, "This is what the Lord has said: 'Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.'" So they laid it up till morning,

as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. Then Moses said, "Eat that today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none." Now it happened that some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found none. And the Lord said to Moses, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? See! For the Lord has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day." So the people rested on the seventh day.

All this was the case long before the Ten Commandments were given at Sinai. God expected the people to observe the Sabbath, and it was observed, before he gave the Law. Manna was provided, and was to be gathered, on six days. Any manna that was kept overnight on those days bred worms and stank, being intended for that day alone. However, the manna collected on the sixth day remained good, and was able to be eaten on the seventh day. As the people struggle to come to terms with the commandments and laws of God (v28) as a free people, a succession of increasingly explicit revelations is given. God is making provision for the Sabbath to be kept: "the Lord has given you the Sabbath" (v29). In Egypt's slavery there could be no rest, but the redeemed nation is expected to observe that

which God ordained, from creation, for all men. Observe also here that once more the Sabbath works out in both Creator and creature. Man's activity is patterned in God. As at the first man rested as God rested, so here God refrains from his customary labour of manna-provision, and the people rest from their customary labour of manna-collection.

The right foundations

If we come to this whole issue as Bible-believing Christians, it is very easy to overlook one vital fact: we have assumed that creation is true. The sabbath ordinance is founded upon a conviction of the literal truth of the creation account. For that we neither need nor should make any excuse. It is literal truth, it is recorded history, and is to be believed as literal truth and recorded history. We see almost in passing the dangerous effect of evolutionary teaching, and other denials or 'reworkings' of the biblical record, in both the world and the church. A denial of the biblical doctrine of creation often (though not necessarily) goes hand-in-hand with resistance to the idea of one day in seven set apart for God. The connection between the two is obvious: if there was no seven day creation, there need be no pattern of resting every seven days. To do away with the Genesis record deprives us of a foundational appreciation of and provision for our humanity. It strips us of the essence of our created humanity as labouring,