

The Lord's Day

Introduction

Methodologically, today's study is different from the others we have done concerning our meetings together.

- It is a topical study, not the exposition of a single passage.
- As such, it must be considered more speculative and less normative.
- At the same time, to me it is more personal than any of the others. I share with you a conviction that Anita and I have sought to honor all of our lives, I believe with consequent blessing from the Lord.

There is wide divergence of opinion about how believers should treat the first day of the week.

- Some believers (notably the Seventh Day Adventists, but many others as well <http://www.biblesabbath.org/>) insist that we should still keep the seventh day, not the first.
- Most modern believers are at the opposite extreme, treating every day alike, but perhaps setting aside an hour or two to meet with other believers, which might be on Sunday, or even on Saturday.
- The reformers taught that we should observe the first day as a Christian sabbath, abstaining from labor and devoting ourselves to worship:

WCF 21:7-8 As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath. 8 This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

Today I want to make a case with you for this third option. Our resources are much more limited on this point than on others that we have considered. This position is not **commanded** in Scripture, but I recommend it to you as entirely **consistent** with Scripture, and something that Anita and I have found to be a great blessing in our own lives.

What is “the Lord's Day”?

The Phrase

Rev 1:10, “I was in the spirit on the Lord's day.”

This is the only instance of this phrase *η κυριακη ημερα* in biblical Greek. What does it mean?

Some (notably Bullinger) understand it as the equivalent of *ημερα κυριου* “the day of the Lord.” In their view, John here is summarizing much of what he later relates: “by means of the Spirit, I was enabled to be present in the coming Day of the Lord.” The problem with this view is that “day of the Lord” *ημερα κυριου* is such a common phrase that if John had meant to say that, he would certainly have said just that, and not made up a special term.

The adjective *κυριακος* is almost as rare, appearing in the Greek Bible only here and at 1 Cor 11:20, in the phrase “the Lord's Supper.” There, Paul uses it in a possessive sense: “you describe your meal as the Lord's Supper, but in fact each of you is only eating his own supper.” So here it would appear to be a day that the believers observed as belonging to the Lord.

Prominence of the First Day

What would that special day be? The NT singles out the first day of the week as of particular importance to the believers.

Acts 20:7 And upon the **first day of the week**, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.

1 Cor 16:2 Upon the **first day of the week** let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.

The roots of this are no doubt in the Lord's resurrection on the first day of the week, and his meetings with the disciples on that day, John 20:19-29.

The Testimony of the Apostolic Fathers

The “apostolic fathers” are the first generation of church leaders after the apostles. They wrote between AD 50 and AD 150, and in some cases were direct disciples of the apostles. They bring the two strands together, showing that the early church met on the Lord's Day, that is, the first day of the week, and not the Jewish sabbath.

Ignatius writes to the church at Magnesia (9:1),

no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of **the Lord's Day**, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death

And the Didache, an ancient description of church conduct, records (14:1),

But every **Lord's day** do ye gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving

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after having confessed your transgressions

In fact, our English word “church” derives from κυριακος as the place where believers meet on η κυριακη ημερα.

How is the Lord's Day related to the OT Sabbath?

There is one place in the OT where the Lord speaks of a day as belonging to him, and it refers to the Sabbath:

Isa 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 [thing] of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking *thine own* words: 14 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*.

His reference here is to the weekly Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. In a singular turn of phrase, the Lord describes this day as his own, holy—set apart—to him. Compare Exod 31:15,

Six days may work be done; but in the seventh *is* the sabbath of rest, **holy to the LORD**

In fact, this is the distinctive meaning of Sabbath: cessation from work. That's what שבת means, in contrast to “week” שבוע, which is derived from the Hebrew word for “seven” and refers to the seven-day duration of the week.

Its Covenantal Implications

On the one hand, the seventh-day Sabbath has particular significance to Israel, as the sign of the Sinaitic Covenant (Exod 31:13, 17):

Exo 31:13 Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a **sign** between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you. 14 Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. 15 Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. 16 Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. 17 It is a **sign** between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

This is one of a series of covenantal “signs”:

Gen 9:12-13 And God said, This is the **token** אות of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: 13 I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a **token** אות of a covenant between me and the earth.

Gen 17:11 And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a **token** אות of the

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covenant betwixt me and you.

Eph 1:13-14 In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, 14 Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory. [Does not use σήμερον, the LXX translation of אִתּוֹ , but conveys the same concept.]

One the one hand, as such a “sign, the sabbath is unique to Israel.

On the other hand, the principle of one day of rest in seven antedates any of God's covenants, going all the way back to Eden:

Gen 2:2-3 And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. 3 And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.

Thus we should not be surprised to find it relevant to the church age.

It is not restricted to the Seventh Day

The most common Sabbath in Israel, and the one that is the sign of the covenant, was the weekly sabbath. But the core meaning of the term is not “seventh,” but “cessation” (that is, from work). Thus the OT uses the term in Lev 16:31 and 23:32 to describe the Day of Atonement. This holy day fell on 10th day of the 7th month, and thus would rotate through the days of the week over the course of years. The critical thing about the Sabbath was not that it fell on Saturday, but that it was a cessation from work, a day set apart to the Lord, which he could describe as “my holy day.”

Rest Defines the Week

Remarkably, the NT regards the week is defined, not as a period of seven days, but as a period of days marked off by rest.

Hebrew uses different words to refer to the Sabbath (שבת a “cessation,” that is, of work) and the week (שבוע, a “seven,” a period of seven days). The Greek of the LXX makes the same distinction: “Sabbath” שבת is translated σαββατον (a transliteration of the Hebrew term), while “week” שבוע is translated by the standard Greek term for week, εβδομας (from επτα “seven”). Both Philo and Josephus, Greek-speaking Jews contemporary with the NT writes, clearly distinguish between σαββατον “sabbath” and εβδομας “week.”

What is striking is that the Greek NT never uses εβδομας. Every instance of the word “week” in the NT is in fact σαββατον. For the early Christians, the unit of time intermediate between a solar day and a lunar month was a set of days marked off by a sabbath, that is, a day of cessation, of abstaining from labor. This strongly suggests that they observed some sabbath, either the Jewish seventh-day sabbath or the day “Lord's Day” on the first day of the week.

Does God still have “my holy day”?

John recognized one day as distinctively the Lord's. All our evidence indicates that this was the first day of the week. It seems likely that this reflects a principle that transcends the covenant of Sinai. But why the shift from the seventh day to the first day? Why not simply retain the Jewish sabbath? I think the reason is very simple, but very profound. It has to do with the relation between labor and rest.

God rested after his week-long work of creation.

Israel's law showed them God's requirements, and challenged them to keep them in order to be pleasing to God:

Lev 18:5 Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them:

The deal was: labor first, then attain to life. Their week reflected this. But in fact, their labor never brought them rest. God could look back on his “good” work and rest, but they always failed.

The law was never intended to bring righteousness, but to show people that a right relation with God could never come through their efforts. In Christ, “the just shall live by faith” (Hab 2:4).

Rom 4:5 to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.

Now we understand that the rest of salvation does not result from our works; it leads to them.

Eph 2:8-10 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus unto good works**, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Tit 3:5-8 5 Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; 6 Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; 7 That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8 This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which **have believed** in God **might be careful to maintain good works**. These things are good and profitable unto men.

We, saved by grace, rest before entering into our work. The Lord's holy day, the symbol of our fellowship with him, now begins our week, rather than ending it.

How did the Believers treat the Lord's Day?

Recall Rev 1:10, “I was in the spirit on the Lord's day.”

Elsewhere in Rev, John uses this expression to describe a state of consciousness in which his attention is drawn from the present physical world to perceive spiritual realities.

4:2 And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.

17:3 So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a

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scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.

21:10 And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,

So in ch. 1, being in the spirit, he receives his vision of the Lord.

We may be tempted to say that this state is something exceptional, reserved for John because of his apostolic calling and his role as a prophet.. But repeatedly the Scriptures command us to pray “in the spirit”:

Jude 1:20 But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying **in the Holy Ghost**,

Rom 8:15 For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the **Spirit** of adoption, whereby [**in which**] we cry, Abba, Father.

1 Cor 12:3 Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by [**in**] the **Spirit** of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by [**in**] the **Holy Ghost**.

Eph 6:18 **Praying** always with all prayer and supplication **in the Spirit**, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

John 4:23-24 But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall **worship** the Father **in spirit** and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. 24 God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must **worship** him **in spirit** and in truth.

Does this mean simply to pray “by means of” the Spirit? Or is there a special condition of being “in the spirit” from which we are to offer our prayers?

Our minds are liable to distraction by the things of the world. The Savior often withdrew to find solitude for his communion with the Father:

Luke 6:12 And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.

Mark 1:35 And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.

Matt 14:23 And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. = Mark 6:46 And when he had sent them away, he departed into a mountain to pray.

He commands us,

Matt 6:6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

I suggest that being “in the Spirit” is a mental attitude in which we shut out the thoughts of the world and focus our attention on the Lord, yielding our thoughts to him so that he can guide them. In prayer, we wait on him so that he can form our prayers:

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Rom 8:26-27 Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. 27 And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

In my own experience, it is best cultivated by meditating on a passage of scripture, filling my mind with it until everything else is pushed out.

We ought to pray without ceasing, in every phase of our lives. But John felt it necessary to set apart one day in particular for spiritual exercises. He called this day, "the Lord's Day." It belongs to, and is focused on, the Lord. This day is when we "gather unto [his] name," Matt 18:20. Our weekly schedules are very crowded, and it is tempting to say, "I need Sunday to be with my family, or to shop, or to catch up on my work." But for John, the main focus of this day was not family or shopping or work. It was to be "in the spirit," communing with God.

Caveat Passages

When it is suggested that we no longer need to observe a special day each week, three NT passages frequently come to mind.

Rom 14:1-6 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. 2 For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. 3 Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. 4 Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. **5 One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.** 6 He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.

Gal 4:8-11 Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. 9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? **10 Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.** 11 I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.

Col 2:16-17 Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, **or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath** days: 17 Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

Using these verses to justify treating Sunday like just another day off ignores the broader context of the NT. They are part of a continuing debate among early believers concerning the relation between Judaism and Christianity. As Acts 15 shows, some early Jewish believers felt that Gentiles had to become Jews before they could be Christians. Note that Col and Rom mention the dietary restrictions along with the temporal ones, while Gal links "days" with "months and times and years," clear reference to the full range of Jewish calendrical observances. Thus understood, the main theme of these

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texts isn't whether or not to observe a special day; it's whether to keep the Jewish customs.

The texts from Galatians and Colossians appear to discourage holy days, but that was because of the risks posed to believers in those places by Judaizing teachers. Pay careful attention to Rom 6:5, “let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind” This tells us two things:

1. We can't legislate special days as a matter of orthodoxy. Paul expects these positions to coexist under the greater unity of the body of Christ.
2. Our position is to be based on full persuasion, not convenience. It is not enough to say, “It's inconvenient for me to set a day aside for the Lord, so I won't do it.” Paul views the question as important, one that we need to study out and on which we need to have well-grounded convictions.

Israel's law was designed for a people that was both political and social. They were expected to structure their civil society to accommodate their spiritual practice (as Nehemiah did when he enforced the Sabbath in Jerusalem after the return from Babylon). Christianity is designed for a pilgrim people living in societies whose calendars sometimes do not make room for a particular day of worship. Perhaps this is why the NT does not mandate a specific day. But our society does, and we have found great blessing in setting aside the Lord's day, as John did, to be “in the Spirit” and focus on fellowship with the Lord.

Notes

“Week” in the OT and the NT

Hebrew uses different words to refer to the Sabbath (שבת a “cessation,” that is, of work) and the week (שבוע, a “seven,” a period of seven days). Note that the distinctive characteristic of the Sabbath is not that it is at the end of the week, but that one does no work on it. This is confirmed by the use of the term in Lev 16:31; 23:32 to describe the Day of Atonement, which could fall on any day in the week.

Greek also has distinct words: σαββατον (a transliteration from the Hebrew, common in the LXX) and εβδομας (from επτα “seven”).

What is striking is that the Greek NT never uses εβδομας. Every instance of the word “week” in the NT is in fact σαββατον. For the early Christians, the unit of time intermediate between a solar day and a lunar month was a set of days marked off by a sabbath, that is, a day of cessation, of abstaining from labor.