

Weekly Encouragement

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Do we Keep the Lord's Day?

By Peter Eng

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There are those who say we need to keep the Jewish Sabbath (such as the Seventh-Day Adventists), and there are those who simply ignore God's desire for us to rest from work one day in seven. There is some confusion among Christians who do not set apart the Lord's Day (Sunday) as the day of worship and rest. They confuse the doing away of the Jewish Sabbath as the doing away of the Christian Sabbath (the Lord's Day).

The NT explains to us that keeping the Jewish Sabbath is no longer a requirement among Christians. "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day." ([Col 2:16](#)).

The first Christians were Jews. Many Pharisees came to believe in Jesus after his resurrection. But old habits die hard. The Pharisees who were converted continued in Jewish practices such as circumcision,

abstaining from pork and other food, kept the Jewish religious festivals like the Passover, and the Jewish Sabbath.

The Apostle Paul was explaining to the Gentile Christians not to be intimidated or to feel subjected to the judgment of these converted Pharisees who could not see God's grace to the Gentiles except through Jewish categories. It is therefore clear that we should not feel under compulsion to keep the Jewish Sabbath. But we do the text injustice to read this as referring to the Lord's Day.

There are some verses in the NT that some read as a total abrogation of the rest day, and not just of the Jewish Sabbath. The argument is as follows. There are several places where the Ten Commandments are listed, and the fourth commandment (Sabbath) is consistently left out ([Matt 19:18-19](#); [Rom 13:9](#)).

The flaws of this argument are: (1) This is an argument from silence. The fact that it is not listed does not mean it is abrogated. (2) The silence is natural. We do not have a listing of all the Ten Commandments. In these texts, we have a listing of commandment number five onwards. The first four commandments were not listed. Yet many would be consider ridiculous to say that the first three commandments are also abrogated. Namely: we can now have other gods (1st commandment), or that we can have idols (2nd commandment), or that we can take God's name in vain (3rd commandment). The commandments listed were about interpersonal matters, so there is an expected silence about keeping the Sabbath which is not interpersonal. (3) The NT writers had to

use care when communicating this subject. If they suggest that the Sabbath should be kept, people would immediately think they were referring to the Jewish Sabbath. So they avoided the use of the term Sabbath on account of misunderstanding, and instead consistently used "the first day of the week."

Another verse often cited to show that there is no need to keep the Lord's Day is [Rom 14:5](#). "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."

We should see if this is a replicate of the common problem of the early church, that ex-Pharisees were having trouble with all the liberties Gentile Christians had. Before this statement, Paul said, "One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables." It is common for Jews who live in a Gentile context to temporarily adopt a vegetarian diet because this would prevent them from inadvertent contamination and thus break the dietary laws, or eat food offered to idols. (Remember Daniel and his three friends?) Paul summarized the topic thus, "He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God." ([Rom 14:6](#))

Paul was talking about the Jewish Sabbath, and Jewish practices as a carryover into the Christian faith. He was not saying that to set aside the Lord's Day was irrelevant.

We point out in our previous deliberation that there was no alternative tradition among Christians for keeping of the Lord's Day.

When we look at the practices of the early church we see a down-to-earth approach to keeping the Lord's Day. This is nowhere more apparent than the meeting at Troas. "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight." ([Acts 20:7](#)) Depending on which reckoning was used, the

first day of the week could be from Saturday 6pm to Sunday 6pm; or Sunday 6am to Monday 6am; or Sunday 12.01am to 11.59pm. It was more likely that this was Saturday night from 6pm onwards.

The Christians met to break bread. On account of the need for Paul to leave in the morning, he kept on preaching till midnight. This was a long meeting, and it was at night.

There were many slaves among the first Christians. It is quite apparent that slaves do not have the luxury of declaring they want a day-off every week. There is also no suggestion that the early church made this an issue. They did not demand a day off. Instead they worked around the limitation by meeting in the night. This means there was greater opportunity for the slaves to come to the meeting when they were done with their day's work.

I also found the words of Pliny the Roman Governor of the Province of Bithynia to be highly instructive. Speaking of Christians he said, "... they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to (do) any wicked deeds, never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of good food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind." (Around 110 AD).

This description came from a Roman governor charged with the task of arresting and even executing Christians tells us that Christians met very early in the morning before there was light. They sang hymns [antiphonally](#) in praise of Christ as God. They recited an oath of some sort. When we look at the content of the oath it suggests Ten Commandments applied to local demands for ethical behavior. They then dispersed and reassembled to break bread. The timing of Christian gathering early in the morning before light, again suggests to us that it was at a time when slaves could join in the worship.

It is quite apparent that the early Christians never had the luxury of keeping the Lord's Day fully as the Jews could. There was a realistic side to keeping the Lord's Day. It was not so absolute that they had to insist on it as though it was the essence of the Christian faith.

Conclusion

Our discussion started with creation. God utilized his own cessation from creation after six days to express to us that we want all humankind (not limited to believers), to rest one day in seven. This was more fully explained to the Jews when they became a nation ([Exod 20](#)). When Jesus came he reminded us he is the Lord of the Sabbath. He had the authority to do what he wanted with it. This is followed by his resurrection on the first day of the week. And though we do not have a clear command to make a switch to the first day of the week, there is consistent testimony that was the only day that Christians used.

The day of rest was a blessing, a gift from God that went back to creation. But it is also a day that looks to the future. This is necessary to complete our discussion.

The author of Hebrews tells us we have not entered into God's final rest. "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God." And he makes a clear reference God's rest at creation "for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his." And then he exhorts us, "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience." ([Heb 4:9-11](#)).

Hebrews represents the final redemption of Christ for all creation in the concept of rest. At the original creation, God did the work of creation and ended with rest. In God's re-creation of the world, in the redemption of Christ, we will also end in rest.

The rest to which we Christians commit ourselves on the Lord's Day is a foretaste of the rest to come. Did not Jesus himself invite us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and

burdened, and I will give you rest." ([Matt 11:28](#))?

The worship on our day of rest is a precursor to the wonderful rest we will have in the New Heaven and the New Earth. On the scale of a lifetime, and not of the week, we labor now as we do six days a week, so that we will finally arrive at the day of rest.

In our rest, we will no longer toil. We will no longer need to prove our worth to anyone. We will no longer need to live by the sweat of our brow. We return to something better than Eden.

Let us value the blessing of Sabbath that God has given his people. In times past, it was the Jewish Sabbath. In our day, it is the Christian Sabbath. And in the day to come, we will enjoy the eternal Sabbath. Then we will enjoy praise without end, the day without night, joy without sorrow, and holiness without the alloy of sin.

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