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## "On The Lord's Day"

- Re 1:10

It has always been assumed, regardless of whether a church is Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant, that the official day of meeting is Sunday. While there may also be other days that a church might meet together (perhaps Bible study on Wednesday evening, or small group on Thursday evening), these meetings are often seen as secondary or optional. It is the meeting on Sunday that is normally considered mandatory. But why?

Interestingly, there is no command to meet together as a church on Sunday, although one might assume as much based on the perceived importance of it. Instead, the basis upon which most churches meet on Sunday is that meeting on Sunday was the practice of the early church.

Luke records in Ac 20:7: "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." Many who do not subscribe to NT patterns for church practice object to viewing Luke's words as normative for the church. Luke's words are purely narrative (it is argued) and do not have prescriptive force. Besides, this is the only place in Scripture that records the church meeting on Sunday. Even if we were to subscribe to NT patterns, one mention of meeting on Sunday does not constitute a pattern.

In answer to this it must be admitted that this is indeed the only place in Scripture that expressly states that the church met together on Sunday. On the other hand, it must be stated with equal force that this is the only place in Scripture that specifically records on which day the early church met together.

It is true that Luke is recording narrative in Acts; it is not true, however, that Luke is recording mere narrative. One of Luke's purposes for writing is to instruct the early churches in apostolic teaching. Luke records only those events that would best accomplish this goal. Moreover, it is not so much the number of references to this or that practice that establishes a pattern. Rather, it is the way in which the practice is presented. True, Luke mentions the practice only once; but his one mention betrays an assumption that this was an on-going practice. Luke says literally, "On the first day of the week, having come together to break bread." The Greek shows more than the NIV conveys. Luke's point is not simply that the church met together, and incidentally this week it happened to be on Sunday. Rather, Luke's statement is more accurately rendered as, "On the first day of the week, when we came together to break bread," hence implying an inextricable link between meeting together as a church and meeting together on Sunday.

Paul lends credence to the idea that this was a widely held practice when he writes: "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made" (1 Co 16:2). Again, Paul assumes that his churches are meeting together on Sunday. If the practice were one of preference, and if not all churches subscribed to meeting on Sunday, Paul's words would make little sense. In that case, it would be more appropriate to give the churches instructions to take this collection on whatever day they chose to meet. As it is, Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church are the same as he gave to

his other churches (1 Co 16:1).

Another significant passage relevant to this issue is Re 1:10. Here John tells us, "On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit." The Greek behind the translation "Lord's Day" is literally "the Day belonging to the Lord." Various interpretations have been posited as to the meaning of this phrase, including Sunday as the day the church meets together, the future (eschatological) "Day of the Lord" which embraces the period of time just prior to the second coming, and the annual Easter observance of the resurrection.

The word translated "belonging to the Lord" (*kuriakos*) occurs only here and one other place in the NT. The other instance is 1 Co 11:20 where Paul refers to the "Lord's Supper" (literally, "the Supper belonging to the Lord"). The significance of this word appearing in only these two instances cannot be missed. The Lord's Supper was, in the first century, the purpose for the church meeting (see the chapter entitled "In Remembrance Of Me"). Likely, the reason that the Supper was called the *kuriakon deipnon* ("the supper belonging to the Lord") is precisely because the day for eating the Supper was itself called the *kuriakon hēmeran* ("the day belonging to the Lord").

But why was it called the Lord's Day? There are several possible reasons for this. However, as we shall see, it is probably due to a combination of reasons.

First, the first day of the week was the day Christ rose from the dead (Mt 28:1; Mk 16:2; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1). It would be natural for the early Christians to commemorate the resurrection by meeting together on the day of their Lord's resurrection. Second, according to many writings of the post-apostolic era, it was the belief of the early church that Christ's second coming would occur on the same day of the week that he arose from the dead. In fact, the participation of the Lord's Supper was, in essence, a plea for the second coming (see the chapter referenced above). Since the purpose of the meeting was to partake of the Lord's Supper and to issue this plea, it makes good sense to conclude that the reason the early church met on Sunday was to celebrate the resurrection and to petition Christ to return on that very day! Obviously, there must have been much excitement and anticipation in the early church meetings; for, in the minds of the early Christians, each Lord's Day meeting could very well have been the last Lord's Day meeting!

Having shown that Sunday (the Lord's Day) was a significant day in the lives of the early believers, are we therefore to conclude that the Lord's Day is to be seen as a Sabbath day of rest? Some have equated the Lord's Day of the NT with the Sabbath day of the OT. Since the Sabbath (Saturday) was a day of rest for Israel, the Lord's Day (Sunday) must then be a day of rest for the church. Many churches, based on this assumption, do not allow their members to do ordinary work on Sunday, whether office work or yard work. Other churches go so far as to prohibit recreational activities such as tennis or golf! Is it proper to do these things on the Lord's Day? More importantly, is Sunday the Christian Sabbath?

It needs to be said that if Sunday is the Christian Sabbath then all OT Sabbath prohibitions would apply. However, there is no evidence whatever that Sunday became the Christian Sabbath in the NT. In the first place, Sunday was not even a day off in the Roman empire during the first century. Nor was it a day off in Israel. No Christian who wanted to keep his job would have been able to take this day off week after week.

Second, 1 Co 11 gives evidence that the meetings for the Lord's Supper were held in the evening (indeed, "supper" [*deipnon*] means "the evening meal"). Paul accuses the Corinthians of not "waiting" for the poor to arrive (11:21-22, 33) before they partook of the Lord's Supper. This makes

sense only if the poor were delayed by employment constraints while the wealthy were not. That this is a typical, regular Lord's Day meeting of the church is evident from such passages as v 18: "In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church . . .," and v 20: "When you come together."

Third, no NT writer ever equates the day of the meeting of the church with the Sabbath. In fact, any time a question of Sabbath keeping does crop up, it is always treated as something not to be bothered with. Paul tells us in Col 2:16: "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." If someone wants to keep the Sabbath, that's okay by Paul: "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. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord" (Ro 14:5-6); it's just not necessary, that's all. It must also be pointed out that the Sabbath keeper is here called the "weak" Christian: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (v 1).

Fourth, beyond his concessions toward the weaker brother, Paul opposed the enforcement of any kind of Sabbath keeping when he wrote: "You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (Ga 3:10-11). Insistence on keeping a Sabbath can reflect a gross misunderstanding of the relationship between law and grace in salvation.

Fifth, historically the Protestant Reformers (along with Augustine and Aquinas) unanimously denied that the Lord's Day was in any sense a Sabbath. They felt it would be as wrong to perpetuate the Sabbath as it would any of the other Mosaic requirements. While the opinions of the Reformers pale in comparison to those of the Apostles, it is interesting to note that these theological heavy-weights had little use for the Lord's Day as a Sabbath. The idea that the Lord's Day should be a Sabbath is a fairly recent development, promoted by the English Puritans of the seventeenth century.

To summarize our findings, the early church met together on Sunday, the "Lord's Day," not because it was the Christian Sabbath, but because it was the day of the Lord's resurrection. The early Christians celebrated the resurrection every week, not just once a year! Moreover, they met together with the anticipation that each Lord's Day could be the day of his return. Theirs was a practice deeply rooted in theology. The claim made by most church renewal proponents that, since the NT nowhere commands meeting together on Sunday it is therefore optional, seems shallow and whimsical in comparison. On the other hand, this might well explain why there is such a lack of excitement and second-coming anticipation in most meetings of the institutional church. Again, we see that when an apostolic pattern is abandoned, so too is the theology it is based upon.

- S.A. and E.S.

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