

Editorial

A Sabbath of Rest to the Lord

by Aaron J. Cleveland

“Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a Sabbath of rest TO the Lord,” so we read in the first part of verse 2 of Exodus 35. A Sabbath of rest TO the Lord; this is how we must consider the day of rest which God has given us.

No longer do we observe the seventh day of the week as the day of rest, but the first day of the week, Sunday, or the Lord’s Day as it is referred to in Rev. 1:10. The first day of the week is now the day of rest, first of all, because Christ rose from the dead on the first day of the week. Secondly, before His ascension, Christ met with His disciples on the first day of the week. Thirdly, Pentecost, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit was on Sunday, the first day of the week. Finally, the church in the days of the apostles began to meet on the first day of the week. Today also, we ought to observe Sunday as our day of rest to the Lord. We must not fall prey to the error that we are free, in our Christian liberty, to choose whatever day we please as a day of rest. Neither must we imagine that a day of rest was a thing of the Old Testament church only, and that we are free to treat all days equally and have no day of rest at all.

In order to understand how we must observe the day of rest that has been given us, we must first understand what this day is and how it came about. The Sabbath is an institution of God in creation. In Genesis 2:2,3 we read, “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. 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.” The Sabbath was a perfect work of God in creation. Adam and Eve were brought into this rest of God.

In Exodus 20:8-11 we read the fourth commandment of the law, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” This command is grounded in God’s work of creation. We are to observe the Sabbath because “the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.” As we read in Exodus 35:2, the Sabbath day is an “holy day.” Holiness carries with it the idea of separation and consecration. The Sabbath is no ordinary mundane day. It is a special day, different from the other six, not because man has chosen this day to have some special significance, but because God said, “but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a Sabbath of rest to the Lord.”

Only with this in mind can we have a proper understanding of the day of rest. The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord’s Day 38, explains what God requires of us in the fourth commandment. In the words of the Catechism we are to “on the Sabbath, that is, the day of rest, diligently frequent the church of God, to hear His word, to use the sacraments, publicly to call upon the Lord, and contribute to the relief of the poor, as becomes a Christian.” After reading this, we may ask the question, “But I thought the Sabbath was a day of REST?” After reading this explanation of the fourth commandment it may seem that the Sabbath is no day of rest at all, but a day of work.

In order to understand that the Sabbath is a day of rest, we must know what rest really is. True rest involves work. The rest of the Sabbath involves spiritual work. First of all, it means faithfully attending the house of God, twice. Secondly it involves the hearing of the preaching of the Word of God. We come to God’s house with thirsty souls because for the past six days we have been in a “dry and thirsty land, where no water is.” (Psalm 63:1). And we leave God’s “sanctuary” having seen His “power and glory” with refreshed souls, ready to enter the desert for another six days. Thirdly, it involves our use of the sacraments, the means by which the promises of the preaching are sealed to us. Fourthly, it involves coming to God in prayer and casting our burdens and cares upon Him and asking for the grace He only can give. Finally, it involves contributing to the relief of the poor through our giving of what God has given us. This is our Sabbath rest; a spiritual work.

But what about the remainder of the day? What are we to do between services? What about after the evening service? Again, if we understand that God has sanctified this day as a day of rest we will know how we are to conduct ourselves. We do not need a detailed list of “do’s and don’ts” in order to properly observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day of rest TO the Lord. Neither will we go to the other extreme and allow ourselves every pleasure under the sun because of the liberty we have in Christ, because we have the understanding that the Sabbath is a day of rest TO the Lord.

In Isaiah 58:13,14 we read of the warning to Israel against “doing thy pleasure on my holy day.” Later in verse 13, Israel is warned against “doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words.” How applicable are these words to our day and age. The world around us goes out of its way to desecrate the Sabbath. Sunday has become the one day of the week in which the world especially seeks pleasure. No longer is it true that the world outwardly respects the Sabbath day. What a great temptation this pleasure-seeking can be to Protestant Reformed adults and young people. How we are tempted to join in with the world in their pleasure on God’s day of rest.

Along with this great temptation to use Sunday as a day of pleasure comes the error of an improper view of rest. The world does not know what true rest is. Most churches have also adopted a false view of rest. Their resting is not a spiritual rest which is only to be found in the Lord, but it is an earthly, unspiritual pleasure-seeking. It is a rest which puts all thoughts of God out of mind. This is the exact opposite of the rest we seek. Our Sabbath rest is the putting of God and His works at the forefront of our thoughts and meditation. The world seeks to put God and the terrible judgment in which they stand out of their thoughts. We, as children of God, and by His grace, seek to put God and His great work of salvation at the center of our thoughts.

God’s works and ways are so great, that he has separated a day for His own glory and for our benefit, that we might contemplate Him and His works. In this contemplation we find true rest. What a tragic thing it is then, when we are not found resting in the works of God on the Lord’s Day. When, instead of diligently frequenting the house of God to hear His preached word, we are elsewhere; on vacation away from Reformed preaching, at home in front of the TV, at the beach, or in a church where God is robbed of His glory by man-centered preaching. What a pitiful thing it is when we use this day of rest TO the Lord as a day of pleasure-seeking to ourselves.

The penalty of God to those Israelites who did not keep His Sabbath was death (Exodus 31:15). This is our punishment too. While we may not be physically stoned to death, we will surely die a spiritual death if we ignore the spiritual rest of the Sabbath.

But by God’s grace we are drawn into His rest. It is His rest, His work, of which we can only stand in amazement. It is by the death of Christ that he has earned for us the eternal rest. And this Sabbath rest is a foretaste of the eternal rest we will experience in eternity.

Originally Published in:
Vol. 57 No. 8 August 1998