

A Suggested Way Forward

Non-sabbatarians, to state the obvious, hold a range of opinions about the Lord's day.

Speaking for myself, while I cannot say the day is a matter of a plain command, there is sufficient evidence (as I have set out) to persuade me that the first day of the week is the Lord's day, putting the day, for me, securely beyond the remit of Romans 14. I look upon the Lord's day, therefore, as the assembly-day for believers, the day when they should meet to exercise their corporate priesthood in the new covenant in harmony with other believers, the day when they are stimulated by the spiritual nourishment they enjoy under their recognised teachers within the church. I do not mean to imply that such an assembly is the only time for this ministry, but the first day is the main day for it.

Of those who do not regard the day as special in any way, some see the day sitting squarely in Romans 14, while others regard any talk at all of a day as legalistic. Despite this, the overwhelming majority (if not all) of these two groups nearly always (for whatever reason) hold their assemblies on Sunday, the first day of the week.

Faced by such a diversity of opinion, is it too much to hope for tolerance and mutual forbearance along the lines of Romans 14? I say this even though, as I have explained, in my view the day is not indifferent.

Leland certainly saw it that way:

[That] the first Christians assembled... on the first day of the week... [is] hardly admitted of a doubt, and the evidence is about as clear, that it was done voluntarily, as a matter of prudence, without any divine command; hence a disregard of the day was not esteemed a matter of offence.¹

¹ 'On Sabbatical Laws', in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*.

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By ‘a disregard of the day’, Leland did not mean ‘playing fast and loose with attendance’; he was speaking of a personal attitude before God.

In all this, I can foresee difficulties within the local church, of course, but can we not, as members of the new covenant, deal both with these and each other in love, constantly bearing in mind the overriding new-covenant principle: ‘In Christ Jesus... the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love’ (Gal. 5:6, NIV)? Yes, ‘whatever does not proceed from faith is sin’ (Rom. 14:23), and we must speak the truth, but, let us never forget, we must speak ‘the truth in love’ (Eph. 4:15). Besides which, surely we should apply the principle set out by Paul when he was writing to the Corinthians on the question of eating meat bought in the market, meat that had been stamped because it had been offered to idols? Listen to his words:

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge’. This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’. For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’ – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when

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it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble (1 Cor. 8:1-13; see also Rom. 14:13-22; 1 Cor. 10:14-33; 2 Cor. 6:3).

The issue in hand may be different, but surely the principle is constant?²

I realise that those churches that are convinced that all talk of a day is legalistic will – if they are consistent (and, as I have argued, how few there are) – such churches will deliberately meet on different days. Consequently, those believers who wish to join them will have to submit to this while privately regarding the Lord’s day themselves, and holding their own counsel about it, not being a source of dissension in the church. Likewise, the rest of the church – the majority – will have to reciprocate in showing their love and understanding to them.

Finally, addressing those who, like me, think the first day of the week is the Lord’s day, I want to suggest some principles which might help us in making the most of these precious hours each week. ‘How can I best glorify God, edify my fellow-believers, and gain most for my own soul?’ I tender my proposals, however, with my eyes open: I shall, I am pretty sure, meet the dismissive charge of ‘legalism’. Nevertheless, I will rebut the charge, and make my proposed suggestions.

As to the privileges, the delights, of the Lord’s day, let us never forget that we are talking about Christ’s day. In the words of John Berridge, Samuel Pearce and Isaac Watts: ‘It is my Lord’s own day’; it is ‘the day the Lord has made’, and ‘he calls the hours his own’.³ If we keep this in mind, we shall not go far astray in our observance of the day. It is the day the Lord gives us, the day we give to God, to Christ – when we give ourselves to him in worship and praise, to the

² Look how often Paul refers to the essential issue.

³ I am not saying these men would have dotted every ‘i’ or crossed every ‘t’ of mine.

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hearing of his word, to meeting with our fellow-saints to carry out the spiritual works involved in church life, and to enjoy to the full all the benefits of such a life. And it is the day he has *given to us* – not *taken from us* – and given to us for our spiritual benefit.

Then again, I note, it is not only the *Lord's day*; it is the Lord's *day*. That is, the day does not cease to belong to the Lord when church meetings close – just as if our spiritual life consists of meetings! We are not talking about 'the Lord's couple of hours', or 'the Lord's morning'; it is the Lord's *day*.

Let me stress that though we are thinking of church assemblies here, meetings (like preaching) are not the be-all and end-all of spiritual life. On the other hand, neither are they optional (Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:25).

Before I go any further, I want to address those who are finding institutional church life intolerable. The lack of spiritual fellowship and life, the boredom of endless monologue lectures (often delivered without any passion), the inability to hold stimulating spiritual dialogue,⁴ the sheer unreality of so much of the Christendom-experience, has forced them, often reluctantly, to withdraw. Adopting this stance has cost them. I can only say I have considerable sympathy – even empathy – with such believers. I cannot unreservedly condone the action, but neither can I condemn it. I say this to assure such believers that, in what I am publishing, I have not forgotten their dilemma.

Now to suggest a way forward in keeping the Lord's day.

If the principle is grasped – that it is the Lord's day – everything else falls into place. 'What would please my God upon this day? How can I gain most, in a spiritual sense, from this day?' If we think of Monday-Saturday as market days for the body, then the Lord's day is the principal market day for the soul. This is no idle picture; it is based on Isaiah

⁴ See my *Sowed*.

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55:1-3. Saints should delight to trade spiritually upon the Lord's day – and just as they rejoice when making purchases on Monday-Saturday, and eagerly show others the treasures they have found,⁵ so should their hearts warm with spiritual purchases, especially on the Lord's day. They should look for the experience of the two disciples on the Emmaus road that first Lord's day – 'Did not our heart burn within us while he talked with us on the road, and while he opened the Scriptures to us?' (Luke 24:32). Notice how they went straight back to Jerusalem (not going on to Emmaus, if that is where they originally intended to reach), to tell the others about their experience (Luke 24:33-35). The women at the tomb were instructed to go back – and quickly – and tell what they had experienced; which they did, with no dawdling on the way (Matt. 28:5-9)! The Lord's day – assemblies with the church, and with friends and family – is, or should be, the market place for the soul. In the gospel, privately and in public, individually and corporately, it is Christ who is on offer, and it is the Lord's day which is the main day upon which spiritual trading is done. Let us truly practice the priesthood of all believers.

We know the old covenant predicted the new. Take Isaiah 2:2-4:

Many people shall come and say: 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; he will teach us his ways, and we shall walk in his paths'. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

No wonder the psalmist was depressed when he was cut off from the house of God:

When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude: I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude... (Ps. 42:4).

⁵ The world knows a bargain when it sees one: "It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase' (Prov. 20:14, NIV).

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It goes without saying, of course, that the house of God in the new covenant is not a building – it is the Lord’s house, a spiritual house, his temple, which is the church of God (1 Cor. 3:9,16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16-7:1; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:5). Some of these texts apply to the individual saint, but the overall picture is of the church – which, in any case, is made up of individual believers. If we read the Old Testament texts which speak of delight at entering God’s courts – read them with the sense of the new covenant⁶ – we will have a right attitude to the Lord’s day. The Psalms are very rich in such passages. Even in their Babylonian captivity, the spiritual Jews remembered Zion, and grieved over their enforced absence from, and deprivation of, the public assembly (Ps. 137). Perhaps Psalms 74 and 84 might be regarded as the principal psalms in this matter.

Another general principle which will prove helpful in our observation of the Lord’s day is found in 1 Corinthians 14:40; namely: ‘Let all things be done decently and in order’; that is, everything should be ‘seemly, fitting’ in the church; everything should be ‘proper’ (1 Cor. 11:13), ‘worthy’ (1 Cor. 11:27,29), nothing ‘dishonourable’ (1 Cor. 11:4-5), or ‘shameful’ (1 Cor. 11:6). How incongruous it would be, say, if we left preaching which convicted us of sin, and went to the football match where we lost all sense of that conviction; or if we exchanged the sweet comfort of the gospel in order to spend an afternoon in the shopping mall – mingling with the worshippers at Vanity Fair; or stifled a rebuke from the word of God by doing the washing (laundry). It would be like putting a gold ring in a pig’s snout (Prov. 11:22) – it would be unfitting, unseemly. It would be a case of actually encouraging – inviting – the birds of the air to descend and take away the seed which has been sown (Matt. 13:4,19), or putting more rocks on the field instead of removing them (Matt. 13:5-6,20-21), or planting and cultivating thorns instead of keeping our hearts as clear of briars as possible (Matt. 13:7,22).

⁶ As we should. See my *Psalm 119*.

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Furthermore, I suggest a good rule in deciding what is acceptable on the Lord's day arises from the application of this biblical principle found in 1 Corinthians 14:40: It is not what others do which must be my guide, but: What is fitting? What is most conducive to giving due praise, honour, glory and worship to God upon his day? What is most suited to help me get the most spiritual profit from this day? What will most promote my spiritual activity as a priest of Christ? Of course, I should not want to *offend* other saints (Rom. 14:1-23; 15:1-6), so I must be careful about what I do and say – but an even better question to ask is: How can I best *edify* other believers? What will bring most edification to them? How best can I promote my own and their progressive sanctification?

And there is another – subtle, but vital – point to consider: the Lord's day is not only a day for preaching; it is also a day for assembly worship and fellowship, the exercise of the mutual priesthood we enjoy as believers. We are to cultivate the felt sense and enjoyment of our position in Christ, and we are to worship God. Now preaching is a vital part of all that and leads us into it, but it is not the end in itself. It is not enough to hear sermons, only.⁷

Again, I notice that many churches, today, especially in the USA, but more and more in the UK, are content with one assembly each Lord's day; they claim to worship God throughout the day, and so do not need to attend a meeting to sanctify the Lord in their hearts. I am not persuaded of this – but accepting it for sake of argument, will such people agree to hold their one meeting at, say, 2pm? If not, why not? What am I getting at? I suspect that such people would find a meeting between 2 and 5pm acting as a serious impediment to their plans – their socialising,⁸ their entertainment and dining plans. In other words, I am asking what is the *real* purpose of the Lord's day for such people?

⁷ See my *Sowed*.

⁸ This is not always the same as enjoying spiritual fellowship!

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In glory, the spirits of just men (and women) made perfect (Heb. 12:22-24) enjoy the presence and worship of God sinlessly; we, however, are limited by our sin, by the flesh. They are in heaven; we are on earth. But... God in giving us the Lord's day, in giving us the assemblies of his saints, has bestowed on us the privilege of enjoying a sweet foretaste of heavenly bliss. We cannot go to heaven, but once a week – the Lord's day – heaven comes down to us. Can we not view the day in that light? It is not fanciful. The passage in Hebrews teaches us that we join in fellowship, not only with the local saints, but with the glorified saints too. Angels take an interest in what goes on here below (1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 1:12). I would like to ask those 'saints' who find a whole day too much to devote to God – will they really enjoy heavenly glory? Do they really want *eternal* fellowship and worship? Do they mean it when they sing about it and express their desire to be there? Why, then, do they want only one spiritual meal in the Lord's house upon the Lord's day?⁹ For those who want to anticipate the glories to come, and the worship of the saints in that place – and so enter a little more fully into it while on earth, as they meet with God's people – a reading of Revelation will give an indication of what sort of things might profitably occupy us on the Lord's day.

As I have shown, Paul commanded the churches to collect money, for the relief of poor saints, on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:1-2). Now in 2 Corinthians 9:12 he calls this work a 'service' – *leitourgia* – which means a priestly service, a word connected with prayer and sacrifice offered to God. We might say, a sacred work. Hence I think we are justified in applying the word 'sacred' to the day – it is the Lord's day, we engage in sacred duties on that day. Hence Anne Steele's hymn:

*Great God, this sacred day of thine,
Demands our souls' collected powers;*

⁹ I acknowledge, of course, that local circumstances may preclude more.

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*May we employ in work divine
These solemn, these devoted hours.*

But it is little use waiting until ‘these solemn, these devoted, sacred hours’ arrive, before we prepare ourselves for the duties of the day. We ought to anticipate wherever possible – so that we may clear away all weekly rubbish before the day arrives. I do not advocate a slavish, legalistic spirit – just sanctified commonsense. The Hebrews had to prepare for the sabbath (Ex. 16:22-30), and Paul wanted the Galatians and Corinthians to get ready to donate money – so should we get ready for the Lord’s day. If we reach the Lord’s day without previous thought, little wonder that we will not get the best – nor give our best – on the day itself. What sort of things might we do? Is there any food which could be prepared in advance? Is the house tidy? I ought to get to bed at a reasonable hour the night before so that I can rise in good time and in good order and in good spirits. To creep to the assembly half awake, hungry through lack of breakfast, spiritually cramped through having skimped prayer and Bible reading – or missed it altogether – how can that be right? Satan will attack us; Satan will attack the Lord’s day; why should we forge his weapons for him? Some saints lie abed this sacred day – as though they begrudge God his day – how eagerly they arise in the week to take up their recreations and occupations. Does the Lord deserve anything less than our best?

I can hear the charge of legalism. I reject it. I am appealing for what I see as obedience to Christ’s law, and obedience from the heart.

So I am one with Berridge and Pearce when I sing – yes, sing – their words:

*I bless his name and hail the morn;
It is my Lord’s own day;
And faithful souls will surely scorn
To sleep the hours away.*

David certainly made it his practice to rise to worship early in the morning (Ps. 57:7-8; 63:1-2; 108:1-2). There are many

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references to the worship of God in the morning (Ps. 5:3; 55:17; 59:16; 88:13; 119:147). How much more should such desires and commitments apply to the Lord's day!

Isaac Watts struck mostly the right note when he penned this:

*Sweet is the work, my God, my King,
To praise thy name, give thanks and sing;
To show thy love by morning light,
And talk of all thy truth at night.*

*Sweet is the day of sacred rest,¹⁰
No mortal care shall seize my breast;
Oh, may my heart in tune be found,
Like David's harp of solemn sound.*

*My heart shall triumph in the Lord,
And bless his works and bless his word;
Thy works of grace, how bright they shine!
How deep thy counsels, how divine!*

*Then shall I share a glorious part
When grace has well refined my heart;
And fresh supplies of joy are shed,
Like holy oil, to cheer my head.*

*Sin, my worst enemy before,
Shall vex my eyes and ears no more;
My inward foes shall all be slain,
Nor Satan break my peace again.*

*Then shall I see, and hear, and know
All I desired or wished below;
And every power find sweet employ
In that eternal world of joy.*

The Lord's day should be – it is – the best of all days. I would like to be in such a spiritual frame, that I always found it to be so. I would like to belong to a church where I found it so. Then when at last I reach eternal glory, what I find myself doing there will not be entirely strange to me.

¹⁰ I do not agree with Watts here. It is, in fact, a day of sacred 'work'.

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The Lord's day, I admit, can be regarded in a wearisome, legalistic way – and has often been so regarded – a day of deprivation and mere duty. This is sad; it is wrong. It should be anticipated and enjoyed as the best day of the week, a sweet foretaste of heaven. The question we should ask is not: 'What can I *not* do on this day? What pleasures do I have to forego?' Rather, we should ask: 'What glory can I give to God today? What pleasure and joy can I find on this day?' We should look forward to pleasure in the worship of God in company with other believers, our brothers and sisters in Christ. After all, since God takes pleasure and delight in his people's worship (John 4:23-24), should we – who are 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4) – should we not find a corresponding pleasure in such spiritual activity? 'Like father, like son', surely is not out of place here. This is the right approach to the Lord's day – to think of the pleasure it affords the child of God, the kindness of God to provide such a day for his people – the sheer privilege of being a saint, and having this day fully to rejoice in the Lord, to profit from his word, and to enjoy sweet, spiritual fellowship with his people.

Above all, the Lord's day should be a day of the heart. The mind should be clear and convinced on the issues involved, yes, and the will should be determined. Above all, however, the heart should want and love the pleasures of the day. The Lord's day should be, for us, the warmest of warm days!