

## *The Question Stated*

The Lord's day is a New Testament term (Rev. 1:10). But what is it? Was John talking of a prophetic day – the day of the Lord – or the first day of the week? And if he was referring to the first day of the week, known by believers as 'the Lord's day', was it a day which was subject to a command or a thing indifferent (Rom. 14:1-6)? Or what?

These questions, surely, are of interest to all believers who want to live worthily of Christ, and enjoy the full liberty he has wrought for them in the new covenant. But we have to be honest: among such believers, there is a genuine difference of opinion about 'the Lord's day'. Clearly, each individual believer needs to be sure in his own mind about the matter, and he needs to be clear as to how he should react to other believers who, though they are as concerned as he is to enjoy new-covenant life to the full, nevertheless take a different view to him over 'the Lord's day'.

So here you have it, reader. I am writing primarily for those who are persuaded that the believer is not under the law of Moses, but under the law of Christ. To put it another way: I am writing primarily for those who, turning away from their old existence under the old killing letter (Rom. 6:14-15; 7:4-6; 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:6-9; Gal. 2:19; 5:18), locked in a round of rules, traditions and conventions of men, are seeking to enjoy a life of liberty in the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1) under the law of Christ. This certainly describes me. So I am writing to explore whether or not the believer should keep the Lord's day according to apostolic command and/or practice, or whether it is a day indifferent. Indeed, is it a day of the week at all?

Let me start with one who thought it was a matter of indifference, optional. Reader, what do you think of this hymn by Joseph Hart?

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*Some Christians to the Lord regard a day,  
And others to the Lord regard it not;  
Now, though these seem to choose a diff'rent way  
Yet both, at last, to one same point are brought.*

Hart, of course, was paraphrasing Romans 14:5-6, taking the apostolic principle of tolerance over indifferent matters and applying that principle to the first day of the week. Hart went on:

*He that regards the day will reason thus –  
'This glorious day our Saviour and our King  
Perform 'd some mighty acts of love for us.  
Observe the time in mem 'ry of the thing'.*

Hart then spoke further of the believer who observes the day:

*Thus he to Jesus points his kind intent  
And offers prayers and praises in his name;  
As to the Lord above his love is meant,  
The Lord accepts it; and who dares to blame?  
  
For, though the shell indeed is not the meat,  
'Tis not rejected when the meat's within;  
Though superstition is a vain conceit,  
Commemoration surely is no sin.*

But what of the believer who does *not* observe the day? Hart again:

*He also, that to days has no regard,  
The shadows only for the substance quits;  
Towards the Saviour's presence presses hard,  
And outward things through eagerness omits.  
  
For warmly to himself he thus reflects –  
'My Lord alone I count my chiefest good;  
All empty forms my craving soul rejects,  
And seeks the solid riches of his blood'.  
  
'All days and times I place my sole delight  
In him, the only object of my care;  
External shows for his dear sake I slight,  
Lest ought but Jesus my respect should share'.*

Hart concluded thus:

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*Let not th'observer, therefore, entertain  
Against his brother any secret grudge;  
Nor let the non-observer call him vain;  
But use his freedom, and forbear to judge.*

*Thus both may bring their motives to the test;  
Our condescending Lord will both approve.  
Let each pursue the way that likes him best;  
He cannot walk amiss, that walks in love.*

And this, of course, is the nub of the question. Is the believer's observance of the Lord's day a matter of biblical obligation, of apostolic practice, or is it not, but is a matter of indifference?

It is this very point that I want to look at. This volume is my attempt at working out a biblical position on this vexed but vital question. Does it need to be said? I do not claim to have solved all problems connected with the subject! Perhaps I have not yet seen all the questions! And among those I have seen, I confess I still have difficulty in finding answers for some of them. I know I have weak links in my chain of argument, and I will admit as much as we meet them. I find – as with prophecy – it is easier to see what is wrong with another man's system than to put forward a complete and consistent view of my own. So, reader, if you are reading this with the hope it will solve every problem, untie every knot, clear up every difficulty, you are going to be seriously disappointed. I merely offer this work as my best contribution to an understanding of an important issue. I meant it when I called it 'a modest proposal'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harking back to sabbatarians for a moment, they, of course, can present an impressive array of scriptures to make their case; impressive, that is, until one realises that when they cite those scriptures, they pay little or no regard to the fact that they come from scriptural passages which deal with two contrasting covenants – one of them being a temporary shadow for Israel which Christ fulfilled and, therefore, rendered obsolete and thus abolished. In doing this, sabbatarians are playing a similar game to the Fathers, and look where that ended up: the ruin of the church by priestcraft, clegcraft, sacramentalism, sacerdotalism, the veneration of

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Having said that, nevertheless I hope my work might do some good, for all its obvious weaknesses. I have tried to write simply (but not simplistically). I hope I might be able to shed a little light in a dark corner, and provoke informed thought and debate. In particular, I write for those who, like me, are trying to work their way out of the legal mesh on the sabbath in which we were born and in which we were raised, the tangling coils of which we still have to struggle with,<sup>2</sup> as we press towards the enjoyment of the full liberty in Christ which arises, of course, not in the letter, but in the Spirit. To change the picture: if this ‘modest proposal’ is but a feeble, flickering candle, it may help others as they traverse a dark and slippery place or two in their effort to reach the sunlit uplands of the new covenant.

A word or two on how I propose to go about my work. As a preliminary step, I want to show that the first believers had stated days for meeting; indeed, that they had at least one stated meeting-day each week, irrespective of which day it might have been. I will then show that this stated day was always the first day of the week. The next step will be to look at Revelation 1:10 and show that by the time John wrote his book (which I take to be late), believers had begun to call the first day of the week ‘the Lord’s day’. I will then show the connection between Christ and the day. Then I will consider what I call ‘three difficult passages’. Finally, I will suggest a way forward – my ‘modest proposal’.

One final word of introduction. In the following pages, I will be looking at particular passages, verses and even individual words. This, of course, is absolutely right and necessary. But do not miss the wood for the trees. To change

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buildings and all the rest! In short, Christendom. Sabbatarianism in the new covenant is a disaster.

<sup>2</sup> This will be best appreciated by those born in the UK, especially if they are over ‘a certain age’, not excluding many who were born to non-believing parents. I am speaking of those (and there are many, though fewer today) who dismiss any move from ‘the English (Scottish, Ulster, Welsh) Sunday’ towards ‘the continental’ variety.

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the metaphor: keep in mind the big picture. In Scripture, there is a clear contrast between the atmosphere of Israel in the old covenant and the churches<sup>3</sup> in the new covenant. The greatest error of all sabbatarian writers is that they miss the big picture, talk to us in old-covenant terms, and try to impose the killing letter on us. They should get a grip on John 1:17 and let that verse – and all the others which tell us the same thing (Romans 3:21 – 7:6, 2 Corinthians 3, Galatians and Hebrews, for instance) – get a grip on them, and so govern their theology and their practice. Too often they let their covenant theology govern their view of Scripture. The consequences are sad, even dire.

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<sup>3</sup> I will continue to talk about ‘churches’, even though I would like to drop ‘church’ and use *ekklēsia*. But I feel I ought to continue to use the language familiar to the overwhelming majority. I say this because ‘church’, today, is largely part and parcel of institutional Christianity – Christendom. And Christendom has done much harm, over many centuries, to the cause of Christ in general, and to the individual believer in particular – to say nothing of the appalling affect it has had on unbelievers. See my *Gadfly; Deceit*.