



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Eighth Day
(*Sabbath*, pp. 17-24)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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The Eighth Day

When they celebrated Sunday as “the eighth day,” early Christians signaled that God’s new creation had begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What practices shaped their new “Sunday” way of life? How were these practices rooted in the traditions of Second Temple Judaism, with its focus on gatherings and worship on the sabbath?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 24:1-53

Responsive Reading

This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This is a day for peace and proclamation, for rest and reflection, for working at worship instead of worshipping work.

The sabbath day is a holy day, consecrated by the Creator as a gift to creation. We are commanded to honor and preserve it.

The sabbath day is a holy day, wherein we realize that all days are God’s days; a day of rest, wherein we realize that all work is God’s work; a day of peace wherein we can realize that God is our maker and our mender, too.

Together, let us keep the sabbath.

Reflection

Jesus’ resurrection on Sunday was the catalyst for “the eighth day” innovation in the early church. The early Christians now were convinced that God’s creative activity extended beyond the seven-day week, and so the first day, Sunday, was also the eighth day of God’s work.

Their dedication of Sunday for gathering and worship grew out of the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord. “These provided not only the proof of the resurrection (for alternative explanations for the empty tomb already were emerging),” David Capes notes, “but also the lively expectation that the risen Jesus would be present with Christians as they gathered.”

The initial resurrection appearances of Jesus took place on “the first day of the week.” On Sunday, first the women, then other men disciples, discovered that Jesus’ tomb was empty (Luke 24:1-12; cf. Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; John 20:1, 11-18). Two disciples journeying to Emmaus from Jerusalem “on that same day” recognized their risen Lord when he broke bread for them to eat. Later that evening the two disciples returned to Jerusalem to share their story only to hear that the Lord had appeared to Simon, too (Luke 24:13-35). That evening, as they celebrated the good news, Jesus appeared before the entire group and commissioned them to preach repentance and forgiveness to all nations (Luke 24:36-49; cf. John 20:19-23). The gospel of John records that because Thomas was not present at this meeting, the Lord appeared at their gathering “a week later” (on Sunday) to remove that disciple’s doubts (20:24-29).



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As they gathered in homes and at the Temple (Acts 2:46; 5:42) on “the first day of the week” (e.g., Acts 20:7-12; 1 Corinthians 16:2), the disciples broke bread, prayed, interpreted Scripture, rehearsed the good news, and prepared for ministry. By the end of the first century the designation “the first day of the week,” which reflects a Jewish way of reckoning time, was replaced by a uniquely Christian term, “the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10). The *Didache* (c. A.D. 50-150) instructs, “Every Lord’s day, gather together, eat a meal, and give thanks after having first confessed your sins, that your sacrifice may be pure (14.1, Ivan Lewis translation). These Sunday gatherings probably began early among Palestinian Jewish Christians and became common practice throughout the church by the mid-second century.

Paul warned Gentile believers in Colossae not to let others force them to keep the Jewish sabbath, since it is only a shadow of things to come, while the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). Apparently, he expected Jewish Christians to continue observing the sabbath regulations, but he did not require the same of Gentiles who entered the church.

Though “growing anti-Judaism in the second century and beyond meant that some distanced themselves from Jews and their practices,” Capes notes that “through the fourth century there is ample evidence that some Christians, even Gentile Christians, continued to observe sabbath.” The Christian theologian Tertullian, in *On Prayer* (c. 205), wrote as though corporate prayer on the sabbath were commonplace, and the *Apostolic Constitutions* in the fourth century taught that both sabbath and Sunday should be kept as festivals to the Lord. “Those Christians who maintained a sabbath practice took their cue from the Lord of the Sabbath, to whom the substance of the new creation belongs.”

Emperor Constantine decreed in A.D. 321 that workers should rest on the venerable day of the Sun. Over the next centuries, Christian believers began resting on Sunday and referring to the Lord’s Day as “the sabbath,” attaching to the eighth day the significance that is given to the seventh day in the Decalogue.

Study Questions

1. What events in the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord were imitated in the disciples’ Sunday gatherings? How did those resurrection appearances set the pattern for early Christian worship?
2. Why did Christians begin to gather for worship on Sunday? For centuries after that, Sunday was a workday, not a day of rest. How did Sunday become a day of rest associated with the sabbath tradition?
3. In what differing ways have Christians over the centuries understood the relation of Sunday worship and sabbath observance? What practice might Christians follow when Sunday is not a day of rest from commerce for them?
4. How would you summarize the significance and meaning of Sunday worship?

Departing Hymn: “This Day at Thy Creating Word”

The Eighth Day

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Luke 24:13-35	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how Sunday worship practices imitate the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.
2. To reflect on differing ways in which Christians have understood the relation of Sunday worship and sabbath observance.
3. To appreciate the significance and meaning of Sunday worship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sabbath (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Anticipate a Story

Usually we begin the lesson with a story. But this time, we'll anticipate a story, or a collection of stories.

In the previous two lessons we have noticed that the sabbath day reminded the people of Israel of their formative stories—of God's resting on the final day of the creation of the world, of their rescue and exodus from Egypt, and of God's care for them in the wilderness by providing manna and water.

Gatherings for worship on Sunday—whether we call it “the first day of the week,” “the eighth day,” or “the Lord's day”—should remind Christians of our formative stories too. Which stories are those? We will share together in our scripture reading Luke's collection of them.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close this time of prayer.

Scripture Reading

Ask four members to read Luke 24:1-12, 13-35, 36-49, and 50-53 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The reflection begins by discussing the significance of calling Sunday “the eighth day.” This phrase is not in the Bible, but occurs in the following passage from *The Epistle of Barnabas*, a Christian teaching document probably written in Alexandria, Egypt about A.D. 130:

[God says] I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. And when He had manifested Himself, He ascended into the heavens. (*Barnabas* 15:8b-9 [Roberts-Donaldson translation])

Sunday is usually called “the first day of the week” in the New Testament, according to the Jewish way of marking time in which Saturday is the seventh day of the week and the day for sabbath rest. Revelation uses the phrase “the Lord’s Day,” which became common among Christians (1:10).

The significance of Sunday gatherings for the first Christians is evident in Luke 24:1-53. Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to his disciples as they were gathered together, interpreted Scripture to them, broke bread for them, rehearsed the good news, and commissioned them to proclamation and ministry of the gospel. After discussing the accounts in Luke 24, members may want to reflect on the brief passages that describe the first disciples’ Sunday activities (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 20:7-12; and 1 Corinthians 16:2). Recall that these activities occurred on a “work day” for those early Christians.

The story of how Christians came to see Sunday as a day of rest in fulfillment of the sabbath law is very long and complex. The lesson highlights three ways that Christians through the fourth century related sabbath to Sunday worship: (1) an early practice of adding Sunday worship to the keeping of Jewish sabbath on Saturday, (2) a practice of other Christians to worship on Sunday but not observe the Jewish sabbath, and (3) a later practice of combining sabbath rest with Christian worship on Sunday. The latter practice became widespread only after Sunday was declared a day for rest from commerce in the Roman Empire.

Study Questions

1. Members may mention praying, reading and teaching of scripture, sharing fellowship meals and the Lord’s Supper (or Communion), witnessing, reflecting upon the good news of Jesus’ resurrection, and preparing for proclamation and ministry. From other passages we learn that the early church added praising God, singing songs, giving alms, and preaching.
2. Christians remembered and imitated the post-resurrection appearances of their Lord, which occurred on “the first day.” After the Roman Emperor Constantine, who converted to Christianity, decreed in A.D. 321 that “the day of the Sun” would be a day of rest from commerce, Christians gradually combined with their Sunday worship practice the observance of sabbath rest.
3. Some worshiped on Sunday and observed the sabbath on Saturday. Others worshiped on Sunday, but did not observe the Jewish sabbath. Later, many Christians celebrated sabbath rest on Sunday. In answering the second question, members might consider two cases: (1) societies in which some other weekday is an official religious holiday (such as Muslim societies in which Friday is a day of worship), and (2) situations in which an individual must work on Sunday.
4. Christians celebrate and proclaim the resurrection of their Lord, who is now free to join and lead their gatherings. They proclaim that God, through Jesus’ life and resurrection, has begun a new creation. Sunday is the appropriate day for worship, since Jesus rose from the dead on “the first day.” So, by worshipping on Sunday they proclaim that they are followers of Jesus Christ.

Departing Hymn

“This Day at Thy Creating Word” is on pp. 46-47 of *Sabbath*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.