



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Changing Sunday Practices
(*Sabbath*, pp. 58-65)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Changing Sunday Practices

Profound changes in American culture since the 1930s have transformed our Sundays to resemble other days of the week. What are the prospects for renewing sabbath keeping as individuals and congregations?

Prayer

Responsive Reading†

O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

O that today we would listen to his voice!

The LORD answers,

Do not harden your hearts, as in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways." Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 3:16-4:11

Reflection

With brutal honesty the biblical tradition says the people of Israel, when newly liberated by God from slavery in Egypt, were a faithless, self-centered, and complaining crew. (In this, it seems, they were a lot like us, and folks we know.)

For instance, God had just instituted sabbath and provided manna for them to eat in the wilderness, "and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey" (Exodus 16:31). Yet when they ran short of water, the people complained about Moses (and God), saying, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us ... with thirst?" Still gracious and patient, God instructs Moses to strike the rock at Horeb with his staff, and more than enough water gushes forth (17:1-7).

Great damage was done by the people's faithlessness and a deep scar would mar their relationship with the LORD. Moses would remember that location as a place of testing (*Massah*) and quarreling (*Meribah*) with God (17:7). The parallel version of this story in Numbers 20:1-13 is even more bitter, for it concludes with God denying to this unfaithful generation and Moses their passage into "the land that I have given them."

This story of *Massah/Meribah* is a spiritual mirror. Reflected in it the psalmist sees both God's mercy and our own tendency toward faithless self-centeredness. The LORD "is the rock of our salvation," yet here is the warning: "O that today [this sabbath] you would listen to his voice!" (Psalm 95:1,7). The Promised Land denied to the unfaithful transposes (in the final words of this call to worship) to God withholding "[sabbath] rest" (95:11).

The writer of Hebrews, looking into the psalmist's *Massah/Meribah* mirror once again, not only recognizes the lingering



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temptation to faithless disobedience, but also rejoices in God's promise of an eternal sabbath rest to all who believe (3:16-4:11).

Today we might use the *Massah/Meribah* mirror as we appraise the changes in sabbath practices in our own society. The mirror reminds us that God has liberated us to enjoy sabbath rest marked by joyful obedience. Yet it also shows our habit of faithless self-centeredness.

We spend less time, in Calvin's words, "resting from our work so God can do God's work in us." Jack Marcum surveys some of the changes in sabbath observance from the 1930's to the 1990's, and says, "the best explanation for why Sundays have come to resemble other days of the week is that people wanted it that way. As opportunities to take part in other activities besides worship and rest have proliferated, people, including many in the church, have embraced them."

Do some of these changes reflect our self-centeredness? Should we judge other changes to be creative, faithful responses to God's invitation to sabbath rest? The psalmist invites us to look in the mirror.

Study Questions

1. Is Sunday now like any other day of the week? How is it different? (See Figure 1, "Is Sunday Still Different?" *Sabbath*, p. 59.)
2. In what activities did members of your family participate on the last few Sundays? How does your family's activities compare with those of the Presbyterian families surveyed recently (Figure 2, "Keeping the Lord's Day," *Sabbath*, p. 60)?
3. Were Sunday activities different when you were growing up? Compare your memories with those in the intergenerational survey discussed by Jack Marcum (*Sabbath*, pp. 61-62 and back cover appendix).
4. Discuss Marcum's opinion that it may be easier "to convince people to carve out small segments of time throughout the week than to persuade them to return to more traditional Sunday behavior. That's because ... sabbath keeping has become less an institutional affair, observed weekly, and more a private matter left to personal choice" (*Sabbath*, pp. 63-64).
5. Discuss this comment by Dorothy Bass: "Only half the jobs in the American economy are Monday to Friday jobs. Often the most disadvantaged are forced to work on Saturday and Sunday.... So adaptation is necessary, but it needs to be done carefully. Two things to avoid are letting sabbath be frittered away (for when a person is forced to rest on another day, it is tempting to make excuses and not take that day fully), and keeping it alone. Sabbath is a communal venture to be shared with companions, and I hope that people would not be forced to each one take a totally different time" (*Sabbath*, pp. 78-79). How does your congregation address these issues?

Departing Hymn: "Sabbath Sings a Quiet Song"

† Adapted from Psalm 95 (NRSV).

Changing Sunday Practices

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To learn how the *Massah/Meribah* story became a spiritual mirror for evaluating sabbath observance.
2. To understand how Sunday activities have changed in our culture recently.
3. To begin to discern whether each change reflects our self-centeredness, or is a creative, faithful response to God's invitation to sabbath rest.
4. To reflect on how our congregations can help their members to observe sabbath faithfully.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 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. (If you plan to discuss question 3 together, please note that Table 1: "Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday" appears as an appendix inside the back cover of *Sabbath*.)

Begin with a Story

You may want to share a good personal memory about sabbath observance, or relate the following story from my experience: "I have fond memories of this parsonage routine on Sunday afternoons when I was growing up in the 1960's. Mom never cooked lunch; she warmed up a pot roast that she had prepared on Saturday evening. Meanwhile upstairs in the guest bedroom, Dad changed out of his preaching paraphernalia—Sunday suit and suspenders, dress shirt, and the still-fresh red rose bud from his lapel. He would give me the rose bud and ask my response to his sermon! Sometimes I had not understood it, and other times I disagreed. Those were wonderful debates of scripture, theology, and sermon illustrations—scented by Mom's pot roast, like incense wafting up from the kitchen. Our faith was to be discussed and enjoyed. The negative rules of no cooking and no work opened positive moments for talking and appreciating one another's presence."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close with a prayer asking that God will guide members' sabbath keeping and will help members to encourage one another in faithful Sabbath observance.

Responsive Reading

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

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read Hebrews 3:16-4:11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The story of *Massah/Meribah* is the background of both the responsive reading (adapted from Psalm 95)

and the scripture reading from Hebrews 3:16-4:11. The Bible's commentary on earlier biblical events is always important, but in this instance it may become complex and difficult to follow. Clarify this material by emphasizing these points:

- Exodus 17:1-7 is the original story. (Though sabbath observance is not directly mentioned here, it is prominent in the immediately preceding and similar story in Exodus 16 about God's provision of manna.)
- Numbers 20:1-13 is slightly different in saying God denied their entrance to the Promised Land as punishment for the people's (and Moses'?) lack of trust.
- Psalm 95, since it is a community call to worship, places the story (including God's denial of the Promised Land) into a sabbath worship context. Obedience to God now is expressed in joyful sabbath observance, and disobedience is exemplified by refusing to hear God's call to true worship. The promise of land is replaced by the promise of God's sharing [sabbath] rest.
- Hebrews 3:16-4:11 reflects on the original story, but also on the Psalmist's sabbath interpretation of it. Hebrews interprets sabbath rest as eternal life with God, which is already being realized in the lives of believers.

The main goal is to provide members a biblical perspective for evaluating the changes in Sunday activities in our society, as well as the past or anticipated changes in their own sabbath observance. The Massah/Meribah story, as interpreted in Psalms and Hebrews, becomes a spiritual mirror that causes us to ask: "Do our sabbath activities creatively welcome God's presence through worship and rest, or do they reflect our faithlessness and lack of trust in God?"

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to draw from their own experiences. If they have lived in Christian communities in other parts of the world, they may have very different stories to share. Make sure that members have a copy of Figure 1, "Is Sunday Still Different." Jack Marcum summarizes some similarities and differences in contemporary American society (Sabbath, pp. 58-59).
2. Members may make individual lists or a common list of Sunday activities. They may start by looking at Figure 2, "Keeping the Lord's Day," Sabbath, p. 60, to get ideas for their own list. Be sure to highlight both differences and similarities to the activities and percentages in Figure 2.
3. This question may appeal more to older members, but it should be especially illuminating when used in an intergenerational study group. (Table 1: "Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday" is printed as an appendix in Sabbath and on the following page of this lesson planner. You may want to make extra copies to share with members.)
4. If members agree that "small segments of time throughout the week" would be helpful, encourage them to brainstorm on how their group or congregation can support such activities. They might mention worship, study, or prayer meetings on weeknights; alternate worship services on Saturday evening; study and worship activities that families can enjoy on vacation times; sharing worship with shut-in members of the congregation; and so on. On the other hand, do members worry that this suggestion will fragment and dilute sabbath observance?
5. Encourage members to discuss both issues: that an entire day (if possible) should be devoted to sabbath rest, and that sabbath observance should be communal. Does your congregation support group worship, study, and celebratory rest on any time other than Sunday? Would some members of the congregation need these opportunities?

Departing Hymn

"Sabbath Sings a Quiet Song" is on pp. 44-45 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.

**Table 1. Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday
(referenced in "Changing Sunday Practices" on p. 61)**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Year of Birth</i>		<i>difference</i>
		<i>Born before 1930</i>	<i>Born after 1960</i>	
Sunday morning worship	every week	62%	51%	-11
	most weeks	22%	38%	16
	some weeks	14%	10%	-4
	never	2%	1%	-1
Sunday evening worship	every week	23%	5%	-18
	most weeks	13%	8%	-5
	some weeks	41%	28%	-13
	never	23%	59%	36
Children's activities at church	every week	43%	28%	-15
	most weeks	23%	37%	14
	some weeks	28%	30%	2
	never	6%	5%	-1
Family devotions	every week	9%	2%	-7
	most weeks	12%	6%	-6
	some weeks	49%	39%	-10
	never	31%	53%	22
Visiting shut-ins	every week	4%	0%	-4
	most weeks	5%	2%	-3
	some weeks	74%	50%	-24
	never	17%	48%	31
Fun activities as a family	every week	22%	16%	-6
	most weeks	33%	51%	18
	some weeks	42%	33%	-9
	never	3%	0%	-3
Special meal	every week	48%	33%	-15
	most weeks	37%	34%	-3
	some weeks	13%	28%	15
	never	2%	5%	3
Visiting family or friends	every week	14%	15%	1
	most weeks	29%	36%	7
	some weeks	53%	48%	-5
	never	4%	1%	-3
Lawn mowing and other yard work	every week	1%	6%	5
	most weeks	4%	24%	20
	some weeks	46%	56%	10
	never	49%	14%	-35
Attending sporting events	every week	0%	1%	1
	most weeks	4%	8%	4
	some weeks	44%	68%	24
	never	52%	23%	-29
Shopping	every week	0%	3%	3
	most weeks	1%	5%	4
	some weeks	22%	77%	55
	never	77%	15%	-62