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THE MAGISTERIAL REFORMERS AND THE SABBATH

P. Gerard Damsteegt



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Introduction

At the dawn of the sixteenth century, Christians were challenged to faithfully keep the many holy days or festivals instituted during the Middle Ages by the dominant Roman Catholic church.¹ Faithful church attendance on these days was required and considered obligatory for salvation, being a means to obtain grace. The biblical day of worship, the Sabbath, was considered Jewish, while Sunday had taken on a sabbatical character and was observed with great strictness as the Lord's day. Believers were expected to refrain on that day from many types of activities and any deviation from these requirements made them subject to ecclesiastical discipline. A growing number of voices were dissatisfied with this situation and protested to no avail.

Such was the condition when the first generation of Reformers began their attempts to reform the church. These Reformers arose from the bosom of the Roman Church as Sunday keepers. Although they did not have a clear view of the historical development of the change of the day of worship, it was through their study of the Holy Scriptures that they developed an understanding of the biblical meaning of the Sabbath, especially how to observe this day. The study of the Sabbath in the Scriptures also led them to discover Sunday as a human institution, not a day ordained by God.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the understanding of the magisterial Reformers about the Sabbath. The local rulers or magistrates supported these Reformers. The most important magisterial Reformers were Martin Luther (1483–1546), founder of the Lutheran Church; and John Calvin (1509–1564) and Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), founders of the Reformed tradition. Luther was supported by Frederick the Wise, Calvin by the city council of Geneva, and Zwingli by the city council of Zurich. The influence of these Reformers is very extensive. From the Lutheran tradition developed the Lutheran World Federation, a global community of Lutheran churches, founded in 1947 with 140 member churches in 79 countries with over 70 million members. From the Reformed tradition evolved the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, formed in 1970, with 214 Reformed churches in 107 countries with a membership of over 75 million. As Luther and Calvin wrote extensively on the Sabbath, and their books and tracts influenced their successors and many other Christians, their writings will be given the most attention.

This paper deals with the Reformers' views on the purpose or function of the Sabbath (Sunday), reasons for the abolition of the

¹ Peter Heylyn, *History of the Sabbath*, 2 vols. (London, 1636; repr. New York: De Capo Press, 1969), 2.6.3.

seventh-day Sabbath, and how the change of the weekly day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday took place. As far as possible the research will use the primary works of the Reformers. The views of these Reformers about the Sabbath will as far as possible be dealt with in the light of the chronological development of their thoughts. First Luther's views will be discussed, then Calvin's views, and finally Zwingli's views.

Luther and the Sabbath

The Purpose of the Sabbath

The very first time Luther commented on the Sabbath was in his *First Lectures on Psalms*, which he wrote as a young teacher at Wittenberg in 1515. For Luther, still under the influence of Catholic theology, Sabbath refers simply to Sunday. In these lectures Luther laments that so many attend church only because it was the expected custom to do so. As a result of this habit "the Sabbaths of Christ are defiled" by "slavish, carnal, worldly, and devilish works of sin."² To direct believers to a deeper spiritual experience on the day of worship Luther explains the purpose of the Sabbath in the light of God's resting on and sanctifying that day.

God Rests on the Sabbath

Early in life Luther became very concerned about the customary way many Christians participated in the weekly church services because their aim was to earn salvation. In discussing proper observances on the weekly day of rest in his *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), Luther focuses on the importance of God's example of rest for human beings. Says he, "in Hebrew 'sabbath' means a festival or rest." Because "God rested on the seventh day and ceased from all his works which he had created . . . he commanded that man also should celebrate the seventh day, and that we should cease from our works which we do on the other six days."³

As to the meaning of this rest, Luther makes it clear that the rest or pause from work in this commandment pertained to "two kinds, bodily and spiritual."⁴ "The bodily celebration or rest" means "that we put aside the work of our hands and rest from our labor so that we may gather in church, see mass, hear God's word, and offer common,

² Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms* (1513–1515), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 10:437. Hereafter *Luther's Works* will be abbreviated as LW.

³ Luther, *Good Works* (1520), LW 44:71.

⁴ Ibid., 44:72.

single-minded prayer together.”⁵ Next he calls for a “spiritual rest” in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:10–11) in which we “not only cease from our labor and trade but much more—that we let God alone work in us and that in all our powers do we do nothing of our own.”⁶ This rest is a rest in which “our works cease and that God alone works in us.”⁷ To achieve this goal, God will destroy our own works as well as the old Adam in us. This takes place as God “sends us suffering and unrest to teach us to have patience and peace”⁸ and this continues until finally there are no more “works of man.”⁹ This is what it means, “to observe the day of rest and keep it holy. It is then that a man ceases to rule his own life, then that he desires nothing for himself, then that nothing disturbs him: God himself leads him.”¹⁰ The result is that “then there is nothing but godly happiness, joy, and peace, and all other works and virtues as well.”¹¹

In order to rest from our work one needs faith. In his *Commentary on Psalm 68* (1521), Luther writes, “it requires great skill to recognize God’s work and to let Him work in us, so that all our work will in the end be God’s and not our own. This is the proper celebration of the Sabbath, to rest from our own works and to be full of God’s works. All this is effected in us through faith, . . .”¹² The strict Sabbath regulations of ancient Israel teach an important lesson. In the sermon on *The Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany* (1522) Luther points out that these ordinances reveal that Sabbath keeping is done only through the works of Christ. “There shall be in us not our works,” he said, “but the works of Christ. . . it is not our doing, but what Christ has done, which redeems us.”¹³

God Sanctifies the Sabbath

God’s sanctification of the Sabbath occupies a significant place in the writings of Luther. He points out that God considers His works “so great that he commands us not only to keep the day of rest, but also to hallow it or regard it as holy.”¹⁴ In his *Treatise on Good Works* Luther renders the word “Sabbath” in the commandment as “holy day” or “day of rest.” He interprets the phrase “Thou shalt hallow the

⁵ Luther, *Good Works*, 44:72.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 44:73.

⁸ Ibid., 44:77.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 44:77–78.

¹² Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 68* (1521), LW 13:25.

¹³ Luther, *The Gospel for Christmas Eve, Luke 2[:1–14]* (1522), LW 52:23.

¹⁴ Luther, *Good Works*, LW 44:78.

holy day”¹⁵ to mean “we should relate ourselves to God in works.”¹⁶ These works of the commandment are “plain and perceptible” and are called “divine service, such as hearing mass, praying and hearing a sermon on holy days.”¹⁷

In his sermon *The Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany*, Luther sees clearly that it is God’s works that sanctify the Sabbath, not our own. He remarks, “if you bear the holy cross and must suffer much because of such faith and witness, so that you have to risk body and life, goods and honor, friends and favor, then this is the true way to observe and sanctify the sabbath, for what you do is not of yourself, but entirely God’s work within you. . . .”¹⁸ In other words, this commandment “teaches how a person should govern his actions toward God, that is, in worshiping. It says: ‘You shall sanctify the Day of Rest.’”¹⁹ The Sabbath commandment in Luther’s *Small Catechism* (*Der Kleine Katechismus*, 1529) reads, “Thou shalt sanctify the holy-day [Feiertag].”²⁰ Here he describes sanctification as “We should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.”²¹

God Sanctifies the Creation Sabbath

Luther’s views on the Sabbath at Creation and sanctification are most fully developed in his *Lectures on Genesis* which began in 1535 and lasted for nearly 10 years. In discussing God’s sanctifying the Sabbath in Genesis 2:3, Luther points out that the Creation account did not mention that the Sabbath was made for man but for Himself. Luther says, “God blessed the Sabbath and that He sanctified it for Himself. . . . He did not sanctify for Himself the heaven, the earth, or any other creature, but the seventh day He did sanctify for Himself.”²² This view has implications for the special purpose of the Sabbath. Its object was “making us understand that the seventh day in particular

¹⁵ Luther, *Good Works*, LW 44:54. The footnote to this text reads, “Luther uses the term *feyrtag* (in modern German *Feiertag*) here and in his catechisms. It means not only holy day, but also has connotations of a holiday, a day of rest, and festivity. By not using the word sabbath Luther shows that to a Christian the rather restrictive and legalistic sabbath has been superseded by the more joyous and festive Sunday.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44:54–55.

¹⁸ Luther, “The Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany, Matthew 2[:1–12]” (1522), LW 52:246.

¹⁹ Luther, *Personal Prayer Book* (1522), LW 43:15.

²⁰ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (1529), in *Triglott Concordia: The Symbolic Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1921), 541 (hereafter *Concordia*).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Luther, *Genesis* (1535–1536), LW 1:79.

should be devoted to divine worship. For ‘holy’ is that which has been set aside for God and has been removed from all secular uses, Hence to sanctify means to set aside for sacred purposes, or for the worship of God.”²³

Connecting sanctification with Creation, Luther explains, “man was especially created for the knowledge and worship of God. . . . On the seventh day He wanted men to busy themselves both with His Word and with the other forms of worship established by Him, so that we might give first thought to the fact that this nature was created chiefly for acknowledging and glorifying God.”²⁴

Connecting sanctification with rest, Luther says, “This is what the Sabbath, or the rest of God, means, on which God speaks with us through His Word and we, in turn, speak with Him through prayer and faith.”²⁵ The Sabbath, therefore, “has to do chiefly with demonstrating inner and spiritual worship, with faith, love, prayer, etc.”²⁶

The command to sanctify has far-reaching implications for the way the day of rest should be kept. In a letter “Against the Sabbatarians” (1538) addressed to a friend, Luther wrote, “The true meaning” of the commandment is “that we on that day should teach and hear the word of God, thereby sanctifying both the day and ourselves.”²⁷ He further explains, “everything depends completely on this, that we sanctify the day. This is more important than celebrating it. For God does not say: You shall celebrate the holy day or make it a Sabbath—that will take care of itself.”²⁸ God “is far more concerned about the sanctifying than about the celebrating of it. And where one or the other might be or must be neglected, it would be far better to neglect the celebrating than the sanctifying, since the commandment places the greater emphasis on the sanctifying. . . .”²⁹ In contrast, “the Jews, however, lay greater emphasis on the celebrating than on the sanctifying (which God and Moses do not do) because of the additions they have made.”³⁰

Luther considers sanctification as the most important function of the Sabbath: “But the sanctifying—that is, the teaching and preaching of God’s word, which is the true, genuine, and sole meaning of his commandment—has been from the beginning and pertains to all the world forever.”³¹

²³ Luther, *Genesis* (1535–1536), LW 1:79.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:81.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:94.

²⁷ Luther, “Against the Sabbatarians: A Letter to a Good Friend” (1538), LW 47:92.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

The Sabbath Through History

In his writings Luther discusses Sabbath observance throughout history. The next section describes his comments on Sabbath observance before and after the Fall, in the patriarchal era, and during the millennium.

The Sabbath Before the Fall

Luther believes that Adam kept the seventh day sacred and would have continued keeping it if he had not sinned. “On this day,” he writes, Adam “would have given his descendants instructions about the will and worship of God; he would have praised God; he would have given thanks; he should have sacrificed, etc. On the other days he would have tilled his fields and tended his cattle.”³²

Sanctification is an important function of this day. “On the Sabbath day,” Luther says, “men would have conversed about the immeasurable goodness of the Creator; they would have sacrificed; they would have prayed, etc. For this is the meaning of the verb ‘to sanctify.’”³³ With this sanctification of the Sabbath, he sees a connecting link to the future “immortality of the human race.” Immortality would have been achieved as follows: “Adam would have lived for a definite time in Paradise, according to God’s pleasure; then he would have been carried off to that rest of God which God, through the sanctifying of the Sabbath, wished not only to symbolize for men but also to grant to them. Thus the physical life would have been blissful and holy, spiritual and eternal.”³⁴

Luther did not elaborate on the kind of sacrifices Adam would have offered. Most likely they would have been thank offerings of the produce from his cultivating of the land.

The Sabbath After the Fall

When Adam lost his state of innocence, God’s purpose of worship on the Sabbath day did not change. After the Fall, Luther comments, Adam “kept this seventh day sacred” and “instructed his family, of which the sacrifices of his sons Cain and Abel give the proof. Therefore from the beginning of the world the Sabbath was intended for the worship of God.”³⁵ Now, living in a world of sin and death, Luther sees that the Sabbath command brought hope. It is because this “command remains for the church, it denotes that spiritual life

³² Luther, *Genesis*, LW 1:79. Adam would also be involved in “hunting” (ibid., 1:82).

³³ Ibid., 1:80. Adam was not to spend the Sabbath in idleness (ibid., 1:82).

³⁴ Ibid., 1:80.

³⁵ Luther, *Genesis*, LW 1:79–80.

is to be restored to us through Christ.”³⁶ Summarizing the purpose of the Sabbath, he says, “the real purpose of the seventh day” is “that the Word of God be preached and heard.”³⁷

The Sabbath, the Patriarchs, and the Decalogue

Luther believes that the Old Testament patriarchs observed the Decalogue. Commenting about Abraham, he says, “he observed the Decalogue, the rite of the Sabbath, and the law of circumcision.”³⁸ “The saintly patriarchs were constant and diligent in teaching and praying” he writes, but “especially on the Sabbath the people came together for preaching and the common prayer of the church.”³⁹

Instead of calling attention to the Ten Commandments where the Sabbath is referred to as a memorial of Creation, Luther sees this day as a sign of eternal life. He points out, “All the things God wants done on the Sabbath are clear signs of another life after this life.”⁴⁰ Here Luther goes beyond the biblical text when he views the Sabbath as a foreshadowing of the future life.

In comparing the days of work with the day of rest in the commandment, Luther remarks, “ ‘Six days you shall labor and do all your work,’ that is, care for your property. ‘But on the seventh day you must keep the Sabbath, rest and listen to the voice of the Lord your God.’ ”⁴¹

The Sabbath During the Millennium

Luther believes that there will be a Sabbath during the coming millennium. The millennium begins, he states, when the “days of the earth will come to an end and everything will come to an end, and there will follow days of heaven, that is, eternal days, which will be Sabbath after Sabbath, when we shall not be engaged in physical labors for our subsistence; for we shall be like the angels of God (Mark 12:25).”⁴² The transition at the beginning of the millennium he compares with the replacement of an old garment with “festal garments.” “In the same manner God also cleanses us from sins and frees us from death. This is the work of the six days of this world. But when these are past, when we have entered into His rest, then our torn and filthy garment will be changed into the garment of the eternal Sabbath (cf. Heb. 4:3–9).”⁴³

³⁶ Luther, *Genesis*, LW 1:80.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:81–82.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5:20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6:264.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:80.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6:177.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2:129–130.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, LW 8:67.

The Abolition of the Sabbath

Although Luther has written many praiseworthy things about the Sabbath, he believes that Christians should not observe the Sabbath as a literal day of rest on the seventh day of the week. Christ has abolished the Jewish Sabbath and Christians have been delivered from the Jewish ceremonies and laws. Here we see the influence of Luther's anti-Jewish Roman Catholic upbringing.

Although Luther is influenced by the Roman Catholic understanding of the Sabbath, his discussion on the abolition of the Sabbath is also shaped by his exposure to literature of Christians who, by confining themselves to the Bible only, concluded that the Sabbath is still valid for believers. The following section deals with Luther's main arguments for the abolition of the Sabbath, including the Sabbath as ceremonial and a shadow, all days as equal and not holy, the ten commandments as part of the Mosaic law, love having priority over the Sabbath, and evidence from Christ's earthly ministry.

The Context of Luther's Earliest Views on the Abolition of the Sabbath

Early in 1525 Luther published his treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets* that contains many of his views on the abolition of the seventh-day Sabbath. This book was a specific response against *Von dem Sabbat und gebotten feyertagen* (1524), a widely published treatise⁴⁴ on the importance of the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments for Christians by the Sabbatarian⁴⁵ theologian Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. In it Karlstadt points out that the Sabbath commandment is for "the whole people of God,"⁴⁶ not simply for the Jews. He brings out that the Sabbath is to be celebrated through a spiritual as well as physical rest and argues that we must grant our neighbors, brothers, servants, and the poor their leisure, as well as our horses, oxen, donkeys, and all other beasts of labor to be idle and free and to celebrate.⁴⁷ Karlstadt gives many examples of the widespread desecration of the Sabbath by the Christian community who fail to consider its holiness.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Von dem Sabbat und gebotten feyertagen* was first published in 1524. Editions of the treatise were published in Jena, Augsburg, Strasbourg, and Constance, while three reprints were known: Andreas Carlstadt, *The Essential Carlstadt: Fifteen tracts by Andreas Bodenstein (Carlstadt) from Karlstadt* (1524), trans. and ed. E. J. Furcha (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1995), 317.

⁴⁵ Luther, *Table Talk*, LW 54:51, n. 172.

⁴⁶ Karlstadt, *Regarding the Sabbath and Statutory Holy Days*, in *Essential Carlstadt*, 321.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 320–324.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 324–327.

The Sabbath Is Ceremonial and a Shadow

Replying to Karlstadt's treatise, Luther argues that not everything in the Ten Commandments, which he considers part of the law of Moses, is applicable to Christians. The Ten Commandments contain two ceremonial laws, namely those concerning images and the sabbath, that have been "abrogated in the New Testament."⁴⁹ He shows the ceremonial nature of the sabbath commandment as follows: "For St. Paul (Col. 2[:16–17]), speaks frankly and clearly, 'Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come.'"⁵⁰ He comments, "Here Paul expressly abrogates the sabbath and calls it a shadow now past since the body, which is Christ himself, is come."⁵¹ Luther finds additional evidence for the abolition of the Sabbath in Galatians 4:10–11, where "Paul calls it lost labor to observe days and seasons, among which is also the sabbath," and in the prophecy of Isaiah 66:23, "From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath," which shows that "there shall be a daily sabbath in the New Testament, with no difference as to time."⁵² Luther states "we must be grateful to Paul and Isaiah, that they so long ago freed us from the factious spirits. Otherwise we should have to sit through the sabbath day with 'head in hand' awaiting the heavenly voice, as they would delude us."⁵³ He adds, "if Karlstadt were to write more about the sabbath, even Sunday would have to give way, and the sabbath, that is, Saturday, would be celebrated. He would truly make us Jews in all things, so we also would have to be circumcised, etc."⁵⁴

In his interpretation of Colossians 2:16–17, Luther fails to mention that the Bible distinguishes between two kinds of sabbaths. One kind refers to the annual ceremonial sabbaths connected with the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:4–39). These sabbaths pointed forward to and foreshadowed events fulfilled in the life and ministry of Christ (see, e.g., 1 Cor 5:7; 15:20). The other kind of sabbath is the weekly seventh-day Sabbath, which is not a shadow but points back to Creation and constitutes a memorial of it. As Paul makes clear, the sabbaths he

⁴⁹ Luther, *Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40:93.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* See also Luther, *Moses*, LW 35:165.

⁵² Luther, *Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40:93. Already in 1520 he commented on Isaiah 66:23 that, instead of saying "one holy day shall follow another," one can turn it around and say, "all days are workdays" (Luther, *Good Works*, LW 44:72).

⁵³ Luther, *Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40:93–94.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 40:94.

refers to are shadows pointing forward (Col 2:17). He is not referring to the weekly Sabbath that stands as a memorial of Creation, as stated in the fourth commandment of the Decalogue (Exod 20:8–11).

Similarly, Luther fails to grasp fully the historical context of Galatians 4:10–11. The issue Paul dealt with was the conflict caused by the Judaizers who infiltrated the churches in Galatia, teaching that the Gentiles had to keep all the Mosaic laws, including circumcision, as necessary for salvation (cf. Acts 15:5). Thus Paul argues that Gentiles do not need to “observe days, and months, and times, and years” mentioned in the Mosaic laws in order to be saved. These were required under the Old Testament dispensation, but are no longer binding in the New Testament era.⁵⁵

Christians May Rest on Any Day Because All Days Are Equal

After the removal of the ceremonial part of the sabbath command that deals with the specific time to rest, the general instruction to rest still remains, which is part of natural law. The view that Christians may rest on any day is supported by Luther as follows: “it is not necessary to observe the sabbath or Sunday because of Moses’ commandment. Nature also shows and teaches that one must now and then rest a day, so that man and beast may be refreshed. This natural reason Moses also recognized in his sabbath law, for he places the sabbath under man, as also Christ does (Matt. 12[:1–13]) and Mark 3[:2–5].”⁵⁶ Luther concludes, “For where it is kept for the sake of rest alone, it is clear that he who does not need rest may break the sabbath and rest on some other day, as nature allows.”⁵⁷

Luther believes that all days are equal. As evidence that Christians “should bind themselves to no day” he cites Galatians 4:10–11 and Colossians 2:16–17.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, he considers it proper to set aside special days so people could take time off to sanctify them. In his

⁵⁵ As Craig S. Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 361 n. 1368, observes, Paul’s language is general enough to encompass both Jewish and Gentile religious observances.

⁵⁶ Luther, *Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40:97. Already in 1522 Luther uses the phrase “The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:8) to show that “Christ spoke that word because his disciples had the power to break the Sabbath” (Luther, *Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament* [1522], LW 36:240). As Christ’s disciples are children of God, therefore “every Christian too is lord over the sabbath, rather over all human commandments, teachings, and ordinances” (ibid.). This means “we hold and shall continue to hold that we are lord over all papal and human teachings and commandments; it is for us to determine whether we will follow them or not” (ibid.).

⁵⁷ Luther, *Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40:97.

⁵⁸ Luther, “The Third Commandment” (October 22, 1525), in *Sermons on the 2nd Book of Moses*, chap. 20, in *Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar, 16:478, trans. Denis Kaiser (hereafter abbreviated WA).

Lectures on Isaiah (1527) he explains, “Among the godly all days are equal, but for the sake of the Word and prayer certain days are chosen for the sake of those who cannot sanctify every day, although we ought to sanctify every day.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, as Luther assumes that sanctification is not related to the seventh day, he concludes that the seventh day does not concern non-Jews, or Jews beyond the advent of the Messiah. This implies that one can “rest, celebrate, and keep the Sabbath on whatever day or at whatever hour God’s word is preached.”⁶⁰

The Ten Commandments Belong to the Mosaic Law

In the sermon “How Christians Should Regard Moses” (1525), Luther states that the introduction to the Decalogue, “‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage’” (Exod 20:1), makes clear that the Sabbath command is not applicable to Christians.⁶¹ He adds, “This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt, but only the Jews.”⁶² This means that the Ten Commandments belong solely to the Law of Moses.

The relevance of Moses’ Law for Christians is that they only accept Moses’ laws where it is in harmony with the New Testament and natural law. Luther explains, “We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver—unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law. Therefore is it clear enough that Moses is the lawgiver of the Jews and not of the Gentiles.”⁶³ God has given Jews and Christians different signs. “He has given the Jews a sign whereby they should lay hold of God, when they call upon him as the God who brought them out of Egypt. The Christians have a different sign, whereby they conceive of God as the One who gave his Son, etc.”⁶⁴

Luther also failed to notice the uniqueness of the Ten Commandments compared to the Mosaic law. The differences between these laws are as follows: The Ten Commandments were spoken

⁵⁹ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah*, LW 17:293.

⁶⁰ Luther, *Sabbatarians*, LW 47:93.

⁶¹ Luther, *Moses*, LW 35:165.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. Already in 1523 Luther argued that New Testament Christians live in harmony with natural law: “. . . since Moses in no wise pertains to us in all his laws, but only to the Jews, except where he agrees with the natural law, which, as Paul teaches, is written in the hearts of the Gentiles (Rom. 2:15)” (*Lectures on Deuteronomy* [1523], LW 9:81). This means, “whatever is not written there we should include among the ceremonies that were necessary for the people of Moses but free for us, as also the Sabbath is” (ibid., 9:81–82).

⁶⁴ Luther, *Moses*, LW 35:165.

by God (Deut 4:12–13), written “with the finger of God” on tablets of stone (Exod 31:18; 24:12), and placed in the ark of the covenant located in the Most Holy Place of the earthly sanctuary (Exod 40:20). This law, also called the “royal law,” points out sin (1 John 3:4; Rom 3:20; 7:7) and is the standard in the final judgment (Eccl 12:12–13). This law is “perfect” (Ps 19:7), is to stand fast “for ever and ever” (Ps 111:7–8), and was not abolished by Christ (Matt 5:17).

Besides the moral law, God gave to Moses other laws to regulate in great detail all the ceremonial services associated with the sanctuary of the nation of Israel. This law is described by Paul as the law “contained in ordinances” (Eph 2:15). It is also called the Mosaic Law because, unlike the Ten Commandments, it was written by Moses in a book and placed beside the ark. These typical ceremonies met their antitypical fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Having fulfilled their purpose, the ceremonial laws are no longer applicable to “the Israel of God” under the new covenant (Dan 9:26–27; Gal 6:15–16).

Failure to make this distinction between the weekly Sabbath of the moral law and the seasonal sabbaths of the ceremonial law led Luther to consider the Sabbath of Creation to be abolished as an OT Jewish law that had lost its validity for Christians.

Lack of Evidence for the Seventh Day

In Luther’s *Table Talk* “On the Observance of the Sabbath” in the fall of 1532 he responds to those who think it necessary to keep the Sabbath of the Decalogue, suggesting that there is a lack of evidence about which day of the week is the seventh day. He says, “How do they propose to prove that Saturday is the seventh day?”⁶⁵

Here Luther shows his unfamiliarity with the history of Sabbath and Sunday. We know that there has been no interruption in the weekly cycle since the time of Christ.⁶⁶ The virtually unanimous consensus among Christians that Christ died on Good Friday and was resurrected on the first day of the week (Sunday) places the Sabbath on the seventh day (Saturday) when He rested in the grave.

⁶⁵ Luther, “On the Observance of the Sabbath,” *Table Talk*, LW 54:52. Luther adds: “For the Jews themselves must take their appointed day from us Christians. It’s nothing but spite and envy. Besides, it has not yet been established whether Christ died on a Saturday or a Friday. Pomeranus has written best about this matter, yet it can’t be settled or demonstrated” (ibid.). These talks are not written by Luther, but were conversations of Luther recorded by some of his close friends.

⁶⁶ On Pope Gregory XIII’s calendar reform of 1582 in which Thursday, October 4, was followed by Friday, October 15, a change of date without any interruption of the weekly cycle, see “Gregorian Calendar,” *ODCC*, 705.

Love Has Priority Over the Sabbath Command

In his *Lectures on Galatians* (1535) Luther introduces the argument that the Sabbath is abolished because love takes precedence over the Law. Paul mentions that the Law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:14). This means that love has priority over the Sabbath. As an example he mentions that God showed “how important love always was to Him; for He wanted the Law and all its ceremonies always to yield to love.”⁶⁷ The Old Testament indicated this “when David and his companions were hungry and did not have anything to eat, they ate the holy bread, which, according to the Law, not laymen but only priests were permitted to eat (1 Sam 21:6).”⁶⁸ In the New Testament the disciples “violated the Sabbath by plucking ears of grain (Matt 12:1). And according to the interpretations of the Jews, Christ Himself violated the Sabbath by healing the sick on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14).”⁶⁹ From these examples Luther concludes, “love is much to be preferred to all laws and ceremonies, and that God does not require anything of us as much as love toward our neighbor.”⁷⁰

The Jews Lost the Land of Israel

In his *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545) Luther presents additional arguments on the abolition of the Sabbath. One of them was that when ancient Israel lost their land the Sabbath ceased. God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants was that they would receive the land of Canaan “forever” (Gen 13:14–15). The laws God gave Moses to govern the nation would remain in force as long as they possessed the land. However, when conditions changed and the Israelites lost the land, it deeply affected the Jewish economy, including the Sabbath. “Therefore,” Luther says, “when the land ceases to be and is lost, the Law also ceases, so do the kingdom, the priesthood, the Sabbath, circumcision, etc.”⁷¹

Evidences from Christ’s Earthly Ministry

In his *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (1537) Luther cites incidents in the ministry of Christ as additional evidence that the Sabbath had been abolished. He assumes that Christ in His earthly ministry sometimes broke the Sabbath and, at other times, kept it. This seemingly contradictory behavior Luther explains as follows: “The

⁶⁷ Luther, *Galatians* (1535), LW 27:55.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Luther, *Genesis*, LW 2:362.

Lord occupied a position between the Old and the New Testament, or between the rule established by Moses among the people of Israel and that which He was to establish after His death through the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Gospel.”⁷² Therefore, sometimes “Christ is Mosaic in His attitude. He observes many phases of the Law. He is circumcised; He sacrifices in the temple; He goes to Jerusalem three times a year for the feast; . . . orders the lepers to show themselves to the priests as the Law demanded.”⁷³ On other occasions “Christ follows the New Testament in many respects.”⁷⁴

When the Pharisees accused Christ’s disciples of plucking ears of grain on the Sabbath, Luther notes that Christ defended them, “thereby violating the Sabbath, and said: ‘The Sabbath does not concern Me. I am its Lord, and the Sabbath cannot lord it over Me’ (Matt. 12:1–8). Thus we see that Christ sometimes keeps the Sabbath and sometimes breaks it (John 5:16).”⁷⁵ When Christ tells the Jews that He is Lord of the Sabbath, He “does not act as a pupil of Moses, but as one who now belonged to the New Testament, where Moses’ Law was to be abrogated and a new spiritual order was to be established in the entire world by means of the Gospel message. . . .”⁷⁶ Luther points out that “Christ observes and disregards the Law of Moses at will. . . . If He chooses to follow Moses, it is right. If He prefers not to do so, it is not wrong; for He owes the Law nothing, since He is Lord of the Law and the Sabbath. He has the right to follow His own will and pleasure, for He is king and baron.”⁷⁷

The Change of the Sabbath

In dealing with Luther’s view on the change of the Sabbath, attention will be given to the Reformer’s perspectives on the agent of change, the reasons for the change, and the time of the change.

The Church Changed the Sabbath to Sunday

In his early writings and still under Catholic influence, Luther’s views on the change of the day of worship were that the Old Testament Sabbath was changed to Sunday and Sunday adopted the character of the Sabbath. In 1520 he remarks “that in Hebrew ‘sabbath’ means a festival or rest. . . . This same ‘sabbath’ has been changed into Sunday for us, and the other days are called working days. Sunday means a

⁷² Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John” (1537), LW 22:223.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 22:224.

day of rest, or a day of celebration, or a holy day.”⁷⁸ He is convinced that Sunday was not instituted by “God’s command” but by the church. The celebration of Sunday “is a necessity and is ordained by the church for the sake of the imperfect laity and the working class so that they may also come [to hear] the word of God.”⁷⁹

Regarding the correctness of the change from Sabbath to Sunday, Luther appeals to tradition. When some Christians emphasized that the Sabbath has not changed but still needs to be observed, he addresses this in a sermon on “The Third Commandment,” October 22, 1525 stating that the Sabbath is for Jews and Sunday for Christians. However, Luther concedes, “if someone wants to make the Sabbath a necessary commandment as being a work required by God, he has to keep Saturday and not Sunday, for Saturday and not Sunday is commanded to the Jews.”⁸⁰ But he continues, the longstanding tradition of Christians keeping Sunday is clear evidence of the correctness of their position. He asserts, Christians “have kept Sunday so far and not Saturday because Christ has arisen on Sunday. Now that is a certain sign that Sabbath does no longer concern us, yes even the entire [law of] Moses. Otherwise we would have to keep Saturday. And that is great and strong evidence that the Sabbath is abolished. For in the entire New Testament we find no place that [teaches that] we Christians are commanded to celebrate the Sabbath.”⁸¹

Why Sunday Was Selected

Luther believes that for having divine services, one day is no better than another, and as these services should be held on a daily basis, it would be preferable that believers meet on one day a week. He says, “Although all days are free and one [day] is as the other, it is nevertheless useful and good, yes very much necessary, that one day is celebrated, it may be on the Sabbath, Sunday, or on another day, for God wants to lead the world purely and reign it peacefully.”⁸² The question arises why Protestants assemble for worship on Sunday. In his *Large Catechism* (1530) Luther replies that this is done to preserve harmony in the church. He points out that it is difficult to have daily public worship services because as “the masses cannot give such attendance, there must be at least one day in the week set apart. But since from of old Sunday [the Lord’s day] has been appointed

⁷⁸ Luther, *Good Works*, LW 44:71.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 44:72.

⁸⁰ Luther, “The Third Commandment” (1525), WA 16:478. See also William M. Landeen, *Martin Luther’s Religious Thought* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1971), 196.

⁸¹ Luther, “Third Commandment,” WA 16:478. See Landeen, *Martin Luther’s Religious Thought*, 196.

⁸² Luther, “Third Commandment,” WA 16:478.

for this purpose, we also should continue the same, in order that everything be done in harmonious order, and no one create disorder by unnecessary innovation.”⁸³ Although no specific date is given when the change occurred from Sabbath to Sunday, it indicates that the change took place in the early church.

The Day of Rest Not Confined to a Specific Day Nor Needed for Justification

From 1530 on Luther, no longer confines the keeping of a day of rest to Sunday. The *Large Catechism* states that this rest “is not so restricted to any time, as with the Jews, that it must be just on this or that day; for in itself no one day is better than another; but this should indeed be done daily.”⁸⁴ In his *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther appeals to the spirit of Christian freedom and the need to preserve orderly behavior the way these days are to be observed, not like the New Testament Judaizers and “the papists” who perform these works to obtain righteousness. He explains: “We do not burden consciences with these observances; nor do we teach, as did the false apostles and as do the papists, that they are necessary for justification or that we can make satisfaction for our sins through them.”⁸⁵ “Their purpose,” Luther remarks, “is that everything be done in the church in an orderly way and without confusion, so that external harmony may not be disturbed; for in the spirit we have another kind of harmony.”⁸⁶

With these convictions on the change of the Sabbath and that Sabbath observance has nothing to do with justification, righteousness, or salvation, it is not surprising that Luther becomes very concerned when a movement of Christian Sabbath keepers emerges in Moravia and Austria in the middle 1530s. He calls these Sabbath keepers “foolish” and designates them with a new name as “Sabbatarians.” “In our time, he says, “there arose in Moravia a foolish kind of people, the Sabbatarians, who maintain that the Sabbath must be observed after the fashion of the Jews. Perhaps they will insist on circumcision too, for a like reason.”⁸⁷ He calls these Sabbatarians “apes” of the Jews.⁸⁸

In several regions Sabbatarians practiced circumcision and, consequently, they were called “Judaizers.” Luther says, “I hear that in Austria and Moravia some Judaizers are today advocating both the Sabbath and circumcision.”⁸⁹ The responsibility for this new

⁸³ Luther, *Large Catechism* (Concordia, 605).

⁸⁴ Luther, *Large Catechism* (Concordia, 605).

⁸⁵ Luther, *Galatians*, LW 26:411.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Luther, *Genesis* (1536-1537), 2:361.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 2:362.

⁸⁹ Luther, *Genesis* (1538-1539), LW 3:77.

movement he puts on the Jews and the lack of preachers of the Gospel. He remarks, "In Moravia they have circumcised many Christians and call them by the new name of Sabbatarians. This is what happens in those regions from which preachers of the gospel are expelled; there people are compelled to tolerate the Jews."⁹⁰

Towards the end of his life, Luther reports that in Austria these Sabbatarians "have tried to force men to observe the law of circumcision, as though they could not be saved unless they were circumcised."⁹¹

Calvin and the Sabbath

The Purpose of the Sabbath

Calvin's views on the purpose of the Sabbath and its relevance for the observance of the Lord's day first focus on God's actions of resting, blessing, and sanctifying the Sabbath at Creation. The subsequent discussions deal with Calvin's insights into the meaning of rest in the Sabbath commandment of the Decalogue, the call to remember this day, and the need to labor six days. Finally, the relevance of a spiritual rest for God's people under the New Testament will be considered, together with general principles about how to observe the "spiritual rest" of the Sabbath.

God Rests, Blesses, and Sanctifies the Sabbath at Creation

Calvin's views on the Sabbath at Creation have been drawn upon mainly from his *Commentary on Genesis* published in 1554. Calvin expresses God's rest in similar language as Luther did in 1535. Although God is constantly at work in sustaining the world, "God ceased from all his work, when he desisted from the creation of new kinds of things . . . [so] this language is intended merely to express the perfection of the fabric of the world."⁹² To understand the kind of rest God intended for humanity, it is important to keep in mind "the design of the institution"; "God did not command men simply to keep holiday every seventh day, as if he delighted in their indolence; but rather that they, being released from all other business, might more

⁹⁰ Luther, "Table Talk Recorded by Anthony Lauterbach and Jerome Weller" (1537), LW 54:239.

⁹¹ Luther, *Genesis* (1544-1545), LW 7:152. Ibid., n. 13, the editor wrote: "One of the leaders of the Sabbatarian or 'Judaizing' faction of Anabaptists in Austria was Andrew Fischer, who had died ca. 1540."

⁹² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (1554) in *Calvin Commentaries* (22 vols.), trans. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-1856; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 1:104 (hereafter the Calvin Translation Society edition of Calvin Commentaries is abbreviated as CTS).

readily apply their minds to the Creator of the world.”⁹³ This means it is “a sacred rest which withdraws men from the impediments of the world, that it may dedicate them entirely to God.”⁹⁴ Thus the nature of God’s rest was “not idleness, but true perfection, which brings along with it a calm state of peace. . . . God consecrated that day, that men might employ it in meditating on his works.”⁹⁵

Focusing on God’s blessing the seventh day, Calvin says “that benediction is nothing else than a solemn consecration, by which God claims for himself the meditations and employments of men on the seventh day.”⁹⁶ Although it is the business of our life daily to reflect on the character of God, to prevent that “men should prove less sedulously attentive to it than they ought, every seventh day has been especially selected for the purpose of supplying what was wanting in daily meditation.”⁹⁷

Calvin is brief about the manner in which God sanctifies the Sabbath at Creation. He “sanctifies the seventh day, when he renders it illustrious, that by a special law it may be distinguished from the rest.”⁹⁸ His comments on sanctification in connection with other passages (Isa 58:13 and Ezek 20:12, 20) are much more extensive.⁹⁹

God Rests in the Sabbath Commandment of the Decalogue

Discussing the Sabbath rest in terms of a spiritual rest in the various editions of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin observes that the Sabbath commandment of the Decalogue rests on three causes that were not abolished. These three causes that remain relevant for Christians he lists as the need for a spiritual rest, a day of worship, and a time of rest for servants. As to the first cause, Calvin states, “under the rest of the seventh day the Lord wanted to give the people of Israel a figure of the spiritual rest, which is that the faithful should rest from their own works in order to allow God to work in them.”¹⁰⁰

⁹³ Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:106.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 1 (1553), trans. William Pringle, CTS 17:196.

⁹⁶ Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:105.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:106.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 4., trans. William Pringle, CTS 8:177-183, 241-242; Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of Ezekiel*, vol. 2 (1565), trans. Thomas Myers, CTS 12:301-312.

¹⁰⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French edition*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 141; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), 2 vols., trans. John Allen, Seventh American Edition (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 2.8.28 (1:426). Hereafter the 1559 translation of the

Second, Calvin wrote, God “wanted there to be a fixed day on which they might come together to hear the law and to practice its ceremonies.”¹⁰¹ Third, God “wanted to give a day of rest to servants and laborers who are under someone else’s power so that they might have some relaxation from their labor.”¹⁰² Although the Sabbath has been abolished, because of these three reasons the commandment “ought not to be set among the former shadows but are equally fitting for all ages.”¹⁰³

In the light of other biblical passages Calvin concludes, “this figure of spiritual rest had the principal place in this precept.”¹⁰⁴ On the subject of spiritual rest Calvin has much to say. He explained, “we are to seek our rest in him. This will then come to pass, if we clearly abjure our wicked desires . . . and, if we desist from all unclean works of our flesh, that is, which bring wickedness to birth in our nature out of our concupiscence”¹⁰⁵ Continuing to show the true meaning of the Sabbath, he says, “All works of this sort are servile. From them the law of the Sabbath bids us cease, that God may dwell in us, may effect what is good, and rule us by the leading of his Holy Spirit, whose kingdom imparts peace and tranquility to the conscience. This moreover is the true Sabbath, whose type and, as it were, shadow, the Jewish Sabbath was.”¹⁰⁶ The purpose of the Sabbath, therefore, is “that, being dead to our own feelings and works, we may meditate on and exercise ourselves for the kingdom of God, and that we may practice this meditation by the means He has ordained.”¹⁰⁷

Remember the Sabbath Day

The call to remember the Sabbath, Calvin points out, is that believers should not forget its objective. It is essential to remember that “the principle design of the Sabbath” is the “adumbration [standard] of the spiritual rest.”¹⁰⁸ In his *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (1564), Calvin says, “The object of this Commandment is that believers should exercise themselves in the worship of God; for we know how prone men are to fall into indifference, unless they have some props to lean on or

Institutes will be abbreviated as JA.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 141.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 141.

¹⁰⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), trans. Ford L. Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 23.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 140.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* (1559), 2.8.29 (JA 1:426).

some stimulants to arouse them in maintaining their care and zeal for religion.”¹⁰⁹

Six Days You Shall Labor But Not on the Seventh Day

Calvin defines the work that should not be done on the Sabbath, as whatever work “could have been finished yesterday, or postponed till to-morrow. . . . It was not lawful to cook food for your guests; but if an ox: or an ass had fallen into a pit it was to be taken out, because aid would have been too late on the morrow.”¹¹⁰ This allowance for alleviation of suffering is the reason why “Christ declares that ‘the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath,’ (Mark ii. 27,) since God does not require more than was useful or necessary for keeping the people in the exercise of piety.”¹¹¹

The Sabbath, a Spiritual Rest for God’s People (Hebrews 4:6, 9, 10)

In his *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (1549), Calvin discusses the Sabbath in connection with a rest that remains for God’s people. This rest, he remarks, is related to God’s rest at Creation (Heb 4:4). “The true rest of the faithful, which is to continue for ever, will be when they shall rest as God did. And doubtless as the highest happiness of man is to be united to his God, so ought to be his ultimate end, to which he ought to refer all his thoughts and actions.”¹¹² The rest that remains for God’s people is “that there is a sabbathizing reserved for God’s people, that is, a spiritual rest; to which God daily invites us.”¹¹³ The experience of him who has entered into His rest and ceased from his works as God did from His (Heb 4:10), Calvin says, “is a definition of that perpetual Sabbath in which there is the highest felicity, when there will be a likeness between men and God, to whom they will be united. Now this conformation the Apostle teaches us takes place when we rest from our works.”¹¹⁴ The result will be “that man becomes happy by self-denial. For what else is to cease from our works, but to mortify our flesh, when a man renounces himself that he may live to God. . . . that he should abstain from his own works, so as to give place to God to work.”¹¹⁵ This then is the true Sabbath rest for God’s people. “But

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Moses*, 2:433.

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Moses*, 2:438.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (1549), trans. John Owen, CTS, 22:96.

¹¹³ Ibid., 22:98.

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul* (1549).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

through inbred corruption this is never the case, until we rest from our own works.”¹¹⁶

Describing the abolition of the external features of Sabbath keeping, Calvin commented that in showing the kind of sabbathizing that remains for God’s people, Paul attempted to show the Jews that the true design of the Sabbath is not the external rite. Thus, “by teaching them that the rite had a reference to something else, he gradually withdraws them from their superstitious notions” that by outward resting on the Sabbath you will be justified and saved.¹¹⁷ Therefore, “the main object of the precept was not external rest or earthly worship,” but “by looking on Christ,” one perceives “that the external rite was abolished by his coming; for when the body appears, the shadows immediately vanish away. Then our first business always is, to teach that Christ is the end of the Law.”¹¹⁸

Calvin interprets the commandment of “rest” as a ceremonial ordinance: “The ordinance of rest was a type of a spiritual and far higher mystery, and hence that this Commandment must be accounted ceremonial.”¹¹⁹ However, the commandment has also other objectives because “God took the seventh day for His own and hallowed it, when the creation of the world was finished, that He might keep His servants altogether free from every care, for the consideration of the beauty, excellence, and fitness of His works.”¹²⁰

God separated one day free from all care to contemplate God’s character and Creation. This is imperative “since our minds are fickle, and apt therefore to be forgetful or distracted, God, in his indulgence providing against our infirmities, separates one day from the rest, and commands that it should be free from all earthly business and cares, so that nothing may stand in the way of that holy occupation.”¹²¹

This day, therefore, should be used for believers to learn about faith. Calvin says that as it was important for the ancient Israelites to meet together and grow in religious knowledge and faith, “we have an equal necessity for the Sabbath with the ancient people, so that on one day we may be free, and thus the better prepared to learn and to testify our faith.”¹²²

This spiritual interpretation of the Sabbath shows the relevance of the Decalogue for Christians. Therefore, although “the sabbath is abrogated, yet it is still customary among us to assemble on stated

¹¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul* (1549)

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul* (1549), 22:99.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Moses*, 2:437.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

days for hearing the word, for breaking the mystic bread, and for public prayers; and also to allow servants and labourers a remission from their labour.”¹²³

The Song for the Sabbath Day (Psalm 92:1–4)

In his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (1557) Calvin mentions Psalm 92, a song for the Sabbath, as giving significant counsel on how to observe the day of rest. He shows that “it is good to give thanks unto Jehovah” on the Sabbath.¹²⁴ The Sabbath day “is not to be holy, in the sense of being devoted to idleness, as if this could be an acceptable worship to God, but in the sense of our separating ourselves from all other occupations, to engage in meditating upon the Divine works.”¹²⁵ Human beings are quick to wander from God when exposed to distractions. The message of this psalm intends to remedy this, Calvin says, which tells us “we need to be disentangled from all cares if we would seriously apply ourselves to the praises of God. The Psalmist then would teach us that the right observance of the Sabbath does not consist in idleness, as some absurdly imagine, but in the celebration of the Divine name.”¹²⁶

In addition, the song reveals that the Sabbath is a day to show forth God’s lovingkindness in the morning, and His faithfulness in the night. The Psalmist “means that beginning to praise the Lord from earliest dawn, we should continue his praises to the latest hour of the night, this being no more than his goodness and faithfulness deserve. If we begin by celebrating his goodness, we must next take up the subject of his faithfulness.”¹²⁷

Finally Calvin shows how the Psalmist calls on the faithful to express thanks that the Lord had made them glad. Here again Calvin repeats that the Sabbath was not “a day of idleness but a season when we should collect our whole energies for meditation upon the works of God. He intimates, at the same time, that those are best qualified for celebrating the praises of God who recognize and feel his fatherly goodness, and can undertake this service with willing and joyful minds.”¹²⁸

The Sabbath Before Sinai

In contrast to other Reformers, Calvin, commenting on the Sabbath in history, is not sure about the observance of the Sabbath

¹²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.32 (JA 1:429). See Calvin, *Moses*, 2:437.

¹²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (1557), vol. 3, trans. James Anderson, CTS, 5:493.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5:494.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5:496.

by the ancient patriarchs. “It is questionable,” he writes, “whether it had already been observed by the patriarchs.”¹²⁹ However, Calvin recognizes that the Sabbath was observed just before the Law was given at Sinai. Commenting on the Lord’s instructions to gather twice the daily portions of manna on the sixth day so no Israelite needed to gather on the Sabbath (Exod 16:5), he remarks, “Thus the seventh day was really hallowed before the promulgation of the Law. . . .”¹³⁰

Regarding the beginning of this practice, he says, it “seems to have had its origin from a well-known and received custom; whilst it is not credible that the observance of the Sabbath was omitted when God revealed the rite of sacrifice to the holy Fathers.”¹³¹ Moses reinforced the importance of the Sabbath rest by instructing the people to prepare food on the sixth day for the Sabbath (Exod 16:23), so “otherwise, perhaps, they would have neglected, viz., that they should honour the seventh day by a holy rest.”¹³²

Calvin points to the seriousness of breaking the Sabbath when some Israelites went out to collect food against God’s expressed commandment (Exod 16:27–29). He states, “the obligation of the Sabbath was set at nought by them, nay, they sought to profane the day which God had hallowed, so that it should in no wise differ from other days.”¹³³

The Abolition of the Sabbath

Like Luther, Calvin was also influenced by the Roman Catholic understanding of the abolition of the Sabbath as ceremonial. The following section deals with Calvin’s main arguments for the abolition of the Sabbath, such as that the Sabbath is ceremonial and a shadow, that Christ’s death abolished the Sabbath, that Christians celebrate a perpetual Sabbath, that the seventh day is no longer relevant, and that one day is not holier than other days.

Context of the Abolition of the Sabbath

The context of Calvin’s position on the Sabbath of the Decalogue is very similar to that of Luther and is related to the Roman Catholic position. He argues that the ceremonial part of the commandment dealing with the seventh day is gone, but that the moral part of observing one day in seven remains. Describing this view, Calvin writes that the Roman Catholic doctors “have in the past filled the poor

¹²⁹ Calvin, *Moses*, 2:271.

¹³⁰ Calvin, *Moses*, 2:271.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 2:440. Translation of “Fathers” was adopted from the French version.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 2:282.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

populace with a Judaic opinion which does not distinguish between Sunday and the Sabbath in any way except that the seventh day . . . was abrogated, but nevertheless one day must be kept (according to the law).¹³⁴ He comments, “This is just saying that they only changed the day to spite the Jews but still remained in the superstition which St. Paul condemns, which is that observing this day had a secret meaning as it did under the Old Testament.”¹³⁵ In the discussion below it will be seen that Calvin agrees that some of the ceremonial aspects of the Sabbath command have been abolished, but gives a deeper spiritual interpretation of these aspects for Christians while at the same time rejecting the idea that the moral obligation of the Sabbath requires that Christians worship on Sunday or on one day in seven.

The Sabbath of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8–11)

Among the first of Calvin’s comments on the Sabbath of the Decalogue are those found in the first edition of his *Institutes* (1536). He states: “Observance of the Sabbath is related both to piety and to the worship of God, since it has been included under the first table, and is called the ‘hallowing of the day.’”¹³⁶ He quickly indicates that the fourth commandment was given to the Jews to teach them how to worship God until it was abolished at the coming of Christ. He wrote, “There is absolutely no doubt that this precept was a foreshadowing, and joined upon the Jews during the era of ceremonies, in order to represent to them under outward observance the spiritual worship of God.”¹³⁷

This view of the Sabbath was not new. In the 1541 French edition of the *Institutes* Calvin points out that this understanding originated with the educated elite of the early church. “The early church doctors were accustomed to call it ‘shadowy’ because it contains external observances of the day which, like the other [Old Testament] figures, have been abolished by the coming of Christ.”¹³⁸ Christ “by His presence, makes all the figures disappear. He is the Body because of which the shadows are abandoned. He is, I say, the true fulfillment of the Sabbath.”¹³⁹

Later Calvin explains that the Sabbath of the Decalogue is temporary because it represents a type of a future reality. He indicates that the Law given to Moses included “a new precept concerning the

¹³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 145. See also *Institutes* (1536), 24; *Institutes*, 2.8.34 (JA 1.432).

¹³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 145.

¹³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), 23.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 140–141.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

Sabbath” which was “peculiar to the Jews,” but only for a time.¹⁴⁰ The reason for the temporary nature of the Sabbath was that “it was a legal ceremony shadowing forth a spiritual rest, the truth of which was manifested in Christ.”¹⁴¹ Calvin states that when we hear that the coming of Christ abolished the Sabbath, we need to distinguish “between what belongs to the perpetual government of human life, and what properly belongs to ancient figures, the use of which was abolished when the truth was fulfilled.”¹⁴² He says, “Spiritual rest is the mortification of the flesh; so that the sons of God should no longer live unto themselves, or indulge their own inclination.”¹⁴³ Therefore, “so far as the Sabbath was a figure of this rest, I say, it was but for a season; but inasmuch as it was commanded to men from the beginning that they might employ themselves in the worship of God, it is right that it should continue to the end of the world.”¹⁴⁴

Discussing the Sabbath commandment in the light of the eternal nature of the Decalogue, Calvin remarks: “Whatever was spoken under the Law as eternal, I maintain to have had reference to the new state of things which came to pass at the coming of Christ.”¹⁴⁵ He adds, “the eternity of the Law must not be extended beyond the fulness of time, when the truth of its shadows was manifested, and God’s covenant assumed a different form . . . since assuredly what was peculiar to the Law could not continue to exist beyond the day of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁶

Calvin focuses primarily on the theological aspect of Sabbath rest, but neglects to comment on the reason why God commanded this rest for humanity. The commandment clearly states that human beings should rest so that they would have time to remember their Creator because “in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is.” And because as the Creator of the world He completed this work of creation and rested on the seventh day, “the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it” (Exod 20:11). As the Lord rested after six days of work, having created the world as our habitat, so human beings, who are created in His image, are commanded after six days of work to “remember the Sabbath,” by resting and reflecting on the work of their Creator. It is only the last day of the creation week, the seventh day, that God blessed and hallowed, not any other day. Therefore God appointed this day as a

¹⁴⁰ Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:106.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:107.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Calvin, *Moses*, 2:443–444.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

commemoration day to remember the activities of Christ as Creator, not a shadow or ceremony that was abolished and ended with the death of Christ at Calvary.

The Sabbath Is Ceremonial and a Shadow (Galatians 4:8–11; Colossians 2:16, 17)

Already in his first edition of the *Institutes* (1538) Calvin states that when Christ came, “who is the light of shadows and the truth of the figures, it [Sabbath] was abolished, like the remaining shadows of the Mosaic Law, as Paul clearly testifies (Gal. 4:8–11; Col. 2:16, 17).”¹⁴⁷

Commenting on Colossians 2:17 in his final edition of the *Institutes* (1559), Calvin mentions that Christ is “the real substance of the truth,” which signifies that Christ as the essence of the truth is not limited to a single day, but affects our whole life till we are dead to self and filled with God’s life.¹⁴⁸ “Christians therefore ought to depart from all superstitious observance of days.”¹⁴⁹ The Sabbath “was a ceremonial precept.”¹⁵⁰ Paul taught that the outward Sabbath rest was “nothing but a ceremony, the substance of which must be sought in Christ.”¹⁵¹

Like Luther, Calvin fails to see the clear distinction between the Ten Commandments, spoken and written with God’s own finger on tablets of stone and placed inside the ark, and the Mosaic Law that was written by Moses in a book and placed beside the ark.

The Sabbath Was Abolished at Christ’s Death (Matthew 27:51)

In contrast to Luther, Calvin does not think that Christ abolished the Sabbath when He defended His disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1–8). He explains in his *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (1553), that although Christ asserted that He is “Lord of the Sabbath, yet the full time for its abolition was not yet come, because the veil of the temple was not yet rent, (Matt. xxvii. 51).”¹⁵² Thus at the moment of Christ’s death the Sabbath was abolished.

Christians Celebrate a Perpetual Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23)

In his *Commentary on Isaiah* (1551) Calvin interprets Isaiah 66:23 as an argument for the abolition of the literal Sabbath by showing the

¹⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), 23.

¹⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.31 (JA 1:429).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Calvin, *Moses*, 2:435.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, CTS 16:51.

distinction between the nature of the spiritual worship under Christ's reign and the nature of the carnal worship under the Law.¹⁵³ Here is "a contrast between the Sabbath and festivals which were celebrated under the Law, and the perpetual Sabbath which we have at the present day (Heb iv. 9–10)."¹⁵⁴ Now, "under the reign of Christ there shall be a constant and uninterrupted solemnity; for there are not fixed and stated days of sacrifices on which we must go to Jerusalem, or offer anything in one place or in another; but our oblations, festivals, and rejoicings are continued from day to day in unbroken succession."¹⁵⁵

The Meaning of the Seventh Day for Christians

Calvin offers several interpretations regarding the relation of the Sabbath to the seventh day in his earlier editions of the *Institutes*. First he states, "it is probable that, because in scripture this number signifies perfection, it was chosen in this place to denote eternity. . . ."¹⁵⁶ Next, he says that "one could also offer another probable conjecture about this, which is that by this number the Lord wanted to signify that the Sabbath of the faithful will never be perfectly fulfilled until the last day."¹⁵⁷ This indicates that "we begin it here, and pursue it daily but, because we still have a continuous fight against our flesh, it will not be fulfilled until Isaiah's saying comes true, when he says that in the kingdom of God there will be a continual eternal Sabbath, that is, God will be all in all (Isa 66[:23]; 1 Cor 15[:28])."¹⁵⁸ Therefore "it might seem that by 'the seventh day' the Lord wanted to give His people a figure of the perfection of the Sabbath at the last day, in order to make them aspire to this perfection with a continuous zeal throughout this life."¹⁵⁹

Calvin does not perceive that Hebrews 4:9, 10 cannot be used as an argument that the weekly Sabbath, commemorating Christ as the Creator in the fourth commandment, has been replaced by a perpetual spiritual rest in Christ. In addition, Isaiah 66:23 indicates that, on the new earth, God's people will continue to worship "from one sabbath to another." Calvin's assumption that this means "God will be all in all" has no basis in the text and is no argument for the abolition of the weekly Sabbath.

For those who would like to have "a more simple" explanation, Calvin points out "that the Lord ordained a day on which under the pedagogy of the law the people practiced meditating on and exercising

¹⁵³ Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah* (1551), CTS 8:438.

¹⁵⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah* (1551), CTS 8:439.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8:438a.

¹⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 142.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

themselves for the spiritual rest which has no end.”¹⁶⁰ This means “that He chose the seventh day, either because He thought it was enough, or indeed in order to incite the people to keep this ceremony by offering them His example, or rather to show them that the Sabbath had no other purpose than to make them like their Creator.”¹⁶¹

Calvin’s reluctance to call for a specific day of the week as a rest day is associated with his fear of bringing Christians again under a yoke of bondage. He says, “I do not fix on the number seven in order to subject the church to some bondage, because I would not condemn the churches which have other solemn days for assembling, provided that there is no superstition; as there is none when one considers only the maintaining of discipline.”¹⁶²

In his final edition of the *Institutes* (1559), Calvin does not see much importance for the Church to adhere strictly to a seven-day weekly cycle for the day of worship. He says, “I do not lay so much stress on the septenary number, that I would oblige the Church to an invariable adherence to it; nor will I condemn those churches which have other solemn days for their assemblies, provided they keep at a distance from superstition. And this will be the case, if they be only designed for the observance of discipline and well-regulated order.”¹⁶³

This explanation of the time element of the Sabbath commandment needs to be seen in the light of Calvin’s personal spiritual experience with the Sabbath. Thus he states that the truth of the commandment “is not satisfied with one day but requires the whole course of our life until, being completely dead to ourselves, we are filled with God’s life. From this it follows that Christians ought to have nothing to do with all superstitious observance of days.”¹⁶⁴ This reveals Calvin’s great fear that the recent converts to Protestantism, who were formerly Roman Catholics, would return to their previous superstitious behavior of obtaining righteousness by their works if they would feel obliged to keep regularly a weekly day of rest.

One Day Is Not Holier Than Other Days

From his earliest writings Calvin argues that one day of the week is not holier than another day. He explains that the keeping of Sunday as the Lord’s day is not because Sunday is more holy. The Sabbath rest “applies to the Lord’s Day which we now observe,” he stresses, and it “was not established for us to hallow it before all others, that

¹⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 142.

¹⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.34 (JA 1.431).

¹⁶⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 143.

is, to count it more holy. For this is the prerogative of God alone who has honored all days equally [Rom. 14:5].” The Lord’s day “was established for the church to gather for prayers and praises of God, for hearing the Word, for the use of the sacraments [Gal. 4:8-11; Col. 3:16].” He considers this implies that “The better to devote all our effort, singlemindedly to these tasks, we are to stop all mechanical and manual labor, and all pursuits which have to do with the conduct of this life,” and “if we drink that Word wholeheartedly (as is fitting) and through it mortify the works of the old man, not only on festal days but every day continuously do we hallow the Sabbath; and, because we are here so commanded, we begin to celebrate Sabbath after Sabbath.” In summarizing, Calvin concludes, “it is not by religion that we distinguish one day from another, but for the sake of the common polity. For we have certain prescribed days not simply to celebrate, as if by our stopping labor God is honored and pleased, but because it is needful for the church to meet together on a certain day . . . that all things may be done according to order and without disturbance [1 Cor. 14:40].”¹⁶⁵

In replying to the question that if there is no distinction of days, why should Christians not assemble every day? Calvin writes, “I would really like that and indeed, the spiritual wisdom well deserves to have some hour of the day planned for it.” However, as it is unlikely that “daily assembling” can be achieved “because of the weakness of a number of people, and love/charity does not allow them to be constrained further, why not follow the reasoning which has been shown us by God?”¹⁶⁶

Next Calvin deals with people who “are raising a tempest today because of Sunday.” Their objections are that “Christian people” are held in the bondage of Judaism “since they retain some observance of days.” Calvin replies, “I answer that we observe Sunday without Judaism, because there is a great difference between us and the Jews. For we do not observe it as a strict religious duty, as a ceremony in which we think a spiritual mystery is contained, but we use it like a necessary remedy to keep good order in the church.” They countered, “St. Paul denies that Christians ought to be judged about the observance of days, since that this is a shadow of future things (Col 2[:16ff]), and for that reason he fears that ‘he labored in vain among the Galatians since they still observed days’ (Gal 4[:10–11]). And to the Romans he affirms that it is a superstition for someone to distinguish between one day and another (Rom 14[:5]).” Calvin again comes back by stating that these early believers “were not refraining from manual work because it hindered them from being occupied

¹⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), 24.

¹⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 143–144.

with meditating on God's word but because of a mad devotion, since they imagined that in resting they were doing God a service." Consequently "Paul cries out against that perverse teaching, and not against the lawful ordinance which is set up to maintain peace in the company of Christians. For the churches which he had built up kept the Sabbath in this way, which he shows in assigning that day to the Corinthians to bring their alms to the church (1 Cor 16[:2])." The consequences of this behavior were that "Christians abandoned the day observed by the Jews (since that was necessary in order to eliminate superstition), and because it was necessary to keep order, polity, and peace in the church they put another day in its place."¹⁶⁷

Calvin's argument that one day is not holier than other days is based on his understanding of three texts: Romans 14:5, Galatians 4:10–11, and Colossians 2:16–17. In these texts Calvin sees Paul's rejection of the Mosaic laws in which he includes the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments. Calvin fails to understand that in each of these texts Paul addresses a particular issue that plagued the New Testament Christians of the first century—the conflict with some Jewish Christians who insisted that the Gentile Christians needed to keep all the Old Testament Mosaic laws including circumcision, the new moon festivals, the ceremonial festival days connected to the sanctuary services, and the special food and drink practices connected to these feasts in order to be saved.

In congregations that Paul established, the apostle strongly condemns those Judaizers who infiltrated these churches and desired first to make Jews out of these Gentiles before they could experience salvation. However, in established churches that Paul did not raise up and visit his tone is different. In writing to Christians in Rome he pleads for tolerance between the conflicting factions. If there are Jewish Christians who still want to continue to observe these Old Testament ceremonial laws, they may do so, but they should in no way judge believers who do not observe the ceremonial feast days or refrain from foods offered to idols. Here Paul pleads for tolerance in those practices (Rom 14:2–6) because these matters are not salvation issues but concern "doubtful disputations" (Rom 14:1). However, Paul does not tolerate Jewish Christians who try to compel Gentile Christians to adopt Jewish ceremonial practices because these have been abolished by the death of Christ on the cross.

As a result of not understanding this major controversy that affected New Testament churches, Calvin mistakenly includes the Ten Commandments with the seventh-day Sabbath among the things that were abolished for Gentile Christians. When Calvin concludes from his

¹⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* (1541), 144.

study of the Bible that one day is not holier than other days he overlooks the very Sabbath command which states that the Lord God blessed the seventh day Sabbath and made it holy (Exod 20:11). It is striking that no other day in Scripture was blessed and sanctified (or made holy) but the seventh day.

Calvin, like the other major reformers, called Sunday the “Lord’s day” because it was assumed that John the Revelator received his vision on the first day of the week, the day when Christ was resurrected (Rev 1:10). However, if one follows strictly the *sola Scriptura* principle of interpretation and confines oneself to the Bible only, it will be seen that the Lord calls the Sabbath “My holy day” (Isa 58:13) and that Christ is “Lord also of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28), which shows that the seventh-day Sabbath is the Lord’s day, not Sunday, the first day of the week. The earliest extrabiblical mention of “the Lord’s day” to Sunday as a weekly observance appears to be in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* written toward the end of the second century.¹⁶⁸ Not until circa 325 did Sunday as a weekly observance become known officially by that name for the Catholic body of Christians, when Sylvester, the bishop of Rome, declared the day of the Sun to be “the Lord’s day.” Protestant Reformers and their successors adopted this Catholic tradition as part of their belief system without questioning it.

The Change of the Sabbath

In dealing with Calvin’s understanding on the change of the Sabbath, attention will be given to the Reformer’s perspectives regarding who changed the day of rest, why Sunday was selected, how Sunday observance differs from Sabbath keeping, and why the Sabbath commandment is no longer connected to a specific day.

The Apostles or Ancients Changed the Sabbath to Sunday

Calvin assumes that the change of the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday took place in the early New Testament community. At first the apostles kept the Sabbath, because it was a day they were already used to, but later the apostles made the change. At the time Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth, Calvin indicates in his *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (1546), that the believers still kept the Sabbath because the collection for the saints in Jerusalem took place on that day (1 Cor 16:1). He comments, “The clause rendered *on one of the Sabbaths*, (*kata mian*

¹⁶⁸ For a discussion of later references to “the Lord’s day,” see Kenneth A. Strand, “The ‘Lord’s Day’ in the Second Century,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), 346-351. On the date of the Acts of Peter see *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2:275, 283.

sabbatōn) Chrysostom explains to mean—the *first Sabbath*. In this I do not agree with him; for Paul means rather that they should contribute, one on one Sabbath and another on another; or even each of them every Sabbath, if they chose.”¹⁶⁹ He explains, Paul “has an eye, first of all, to convenience, and farther, that the sacred assembly, in which the communion of saints is celebrated, might be an additional spur to them.”¹⁷⁰

Calvin disputes Chrysostom’s view that “the term Sabbath is employed here to mean the *Lord’s day*, (Rev. 1. 10,) for the probability is, that the Apostles, at the beginning, retained the day that was already in use, but that afterwards, constrained by the superstition of the Jews, they set aside that day, and substituted another.”¹⁷¹

Calvin infers from 1 Corinthians 16:2 about the regular nature of Sabbath keeping at that time, that “believers have had a certain day of rest from labour—not as if the worship of God consisted in idleness, but because it is of importance for the common harmony, that a certain day, [the first day] should be appointed for holding sacred assemblies, as they cannot be held every day.”¹⁷²

In his final edition of the *Institutes* (1559), Calvin credits the ancients for the change of the day of worship. He points out “the ancients . . . substituted what we call the ‘Lord’s day’ in place of the Sabbath.”¹⁷³ Most likely, here he equates the apostles with the ancients.

Calvin’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 16:2 cannot be sustained by sound exegesis. His conclusion, from Paul’s instruction that every believer put aside on the first day of every week an offering to be collected at some future time, that the apostles changed the weekly day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday reads into the text a historical scenario for a change of day that is not there.

Why Sunday Was Selected

A reason for the change of the day of worship is related to the importance of Christ’s resurrection day. In replying to the question, “Why was the Lord’s day chosen?” Calvin, assuming that this day is Sunday, answers, “Now the Lord’s day was made choice of, chiefly because our Lord’s resurrection put an end to the shadows of the law. Hence the day itself puts us in mind of our Christian liberty.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2 (1546), trans. John Pringle, CTS 20:68.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid., 20:68–69.

¹⁷³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.34 (JA 1:431).

¹⁷⁴ Calvin, *Corinthians*, CTS 20:68.

Furthermore, Calvin assumes that an important factor in setting aside Sabbath for the Lord's day was because of the "superstition of the Jews regarding the Sabbath."¹⁷⁵ Among the Jews, Sabbath keeping had become a part of a system of righteousness by works, which revealed their superstitious belief that, by not keeping the Sabbath, people would lose their salvation. To counteract this superstitious attitude that affected the early Christians, the apostles, presumably, shifted the weekly day of worship from the Sabbath to Sunday.¹⁷⁶

Sunday Observance Differs From Sabbath Observance

In response to the question "Why do we not rather assemble on every day, so that all distinctions between the days will be removed?" Calvin has a positive response. In harmony with his understanding that the Bible teaches that there are no specific holy days in the New Testament, he notes, "I sincerely wish that this were practised; and truly spiritual wisdom would be well worthy of some portion of time being daily allotted to it."¹⁷⁷ However, he admits that for many this was not an option. Therefore, "if the infirmity of many persons will not admit of daily assemblies, and charity does not permit us to require more of them, why should we not obey the rule which we have imposed upon us by the will of God?"¹⁷⁸ This implies that they should keep following the almost universal tradition among Christians of assembling on Sunday.

Calvin does not see much importance in strictly adhering to a seven-day weekly cycle for the day of worship. This day could come in six days, in seven days, or in eight days. He says that churches could select other days for their services as long as they observe discipline and order, and avoid being superstitious about the need to keep a specific day.¹⁷⁹

Calvin strongly denies contentions by some that by keeping the Lord's day Christians are affected by Judaism, because they continue to observe specific days. He replies that the Lord's day observance is quite different from the way the Jews celebrated Sabbath. "We celebrate it not with scrupulous rigour, as a ceremony which we conceive to be a figure of some spiritual mystery, but only use it as a remedy necessary to the preservation of order in the Church."¹⁸⁰

Others argued that Paul teaches that Christians are not to be judged in observing holy days because they are a shadow of something in the

¹⁷⁵ Calvin, *Corinthians*, CTS 20:68.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.32 (JA 1:430).

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.34 (JA 1:431).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 2.8.32 (JA 1:430).

future (Col 2:16–17). Furthermore, Paul is “afraid lest” he has labored in vain because they continued to “observe days” (Gal 4:10–11). In Romans he considers one to be weak in faith who “esteems one day above another” (Rom 14:5). Calvin believes Paul used these arguments against judaizing believers who “did not observe them [days] for the sake of political and ecclesiastical order; but when they retained them as shadows of spiritual things, they were so far guilty of obscuring the glory of Christ and the light of the gospel.”¹⁸¹ Their problem was trying to obtain salvation by works, which means that they did not “rest from their manual labours, as from employments which would divert them from sacred studies and meditations; but from a principle of superstition, imagining their cessation from labour to be still an expression of reverence on or reverence for the mysteries formerly represented by it.”¹⁸² He continues, “This preposterous distinction of days the Apostle strenuously opposes; and not that legitimate difference which promotes the peace of the Christian Church.”¹⁸³ It was this principle of superstition that Paul wanted to uproot. In this light “there was more danger in the holy days of the Jews, than in the Lord’s days now observed by Christians.”¹⁸⁴

Calvin concludes, “Now, whereas it was expedient for the destruction of superstition, [that] the day which the Jews kept holy was abolished; and it being necessary for the preservation of decorum, order, and peace, in the Christian Church, another day was appointed for the same use.”¹⁸⁵ This appointed day was Sunday.

The Sabbath Command Is No Longer Connected to Any Specific Day

Calvin states that as far as the specific day is concerned, “the sabbath is abrogated, yet it is still customary among us to assemble on stated days for hearing the word, for breaking the mystic bread, and for public prayers; and also to allow servants and labourers a remission from their labour.”¹⁸⁶

Zwingli and the Sabbath

Due to Zwingli’s much shorter life than Luther or Calvin, because of his death on the battlefield as a chaplain for the army of the city of Zurich, his literary production is less, including his writings on the

¹⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.33 (JA 1:430–431).

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.8.32 (JA 1:429).

Sabbath. The following thoughts on the abolition and change of the Sabbath are similar to Luther, his contemporary.

The Abolition of the Sabbath

Zwingli stresses that the Sabbath was made for our needs as our needs dictate. He says, “The Sabbath is in the power of man, not man in the power of the Sabbath. In a word, the Sabbath and all time are subject to man, not man to the Sabbath.”¹⁸⁷ In addition, he notes “that it is not the intention of Christ that man should not keep the Sabbath (for us Christians Sunday is ordained as the Sabbath) but where our use or need requires something else the Sabbath itself not only other times shall be subject to us.”¹⁸⁸ This means that the Sabbath is not only subject to us in case of “extreme necessity,” but also in “ordinary daily necessity.”¹⁸⁹

The Change of the Sabbath

Expressing a similar sentiment as Luther, Zwingli does not consider the seventh day as holier than the other days of the week. He remarks: “The Sabbath is in no way better or holier than the other days, when considered alone. It is sanctified only when we are holier on that day.”¹⁹⁰ He adds: “For God did not hallow that day so that he might please us with festivities or leisure but on the contrary so that we might be freed from the daily drudgery and might consider God’s kind deeds with thankfulness, hear his law and Word, praise Him, serve Him and finally care for the neighbor.”¹⁹¹

Zwingli’s attitude to common work on the Sabbath is that it is “lawful on the Lord’s day, after divine service, for any man to pursue his labors.”¹⁹² He thinks that even individual churches could move this day to any other day if the circumstances so demand. He says, “that it is lawful, and permitted to each church, when necessity urges (as is

¹⁸⁷ Ulrich Zwingli, “Liberty Respecting Food in Lent,” A Sermon, April 16, 1522 in *The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli Together with the Selection from His German Works*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson, trans. Henry Preble (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1912), 1:81.

¹⁸⁸ Ulrich Zwingli, *Latin Works* 1:82–83.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:83.

¹⁹⁰ Ulrich Zwingli, *H. Zwinglis Sämliche Werke* 13.16, ed. E. Egli et al., *Corpus Reformationum* (Berlin, 1905; Leipzig, 1908/1939; Zurich, 1955), quoted in Daniel Augsburg, “Calvin and the Mosaic Law” (D.Sc.R. thesis, University of Strasbourg, 1976), 255.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Robert Cox, *Sabbath Laws and Sabbath Duties Considered in Relation to Their Natural and Scriptural Grounds, and to the Principles of Religious Liberty* (Edinburgh: Maclachlan and Stewart, 1853), 287.

usual to be done in harvest time), to transfer the solemnity and rest of the Lord's day, or Sabbath, to some other day."¹⁹³

Conclusion

Growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, there were many erroneous concepts the Reformers carried with them the rest of their lives despite the great progress they made in the quest to reform and purify the church from unbiblical traditions about the Sabbath day.

One of these traditions that did not get corrected was that the seventh-day Sabbath of the Decalogue was Jewish. They mistakenly believed that the Ten Commandments were a part of the Mosaic Law. The biblical texts for the abolition of the seventh-day Sabbath that most Reformers used were Romans 14:5, Ephesians 4:10–11, and Colossians 2:16–17. The requirement to rest on the seventh day as part of the Sabbath commandment was seen as ceremonial and they spiritualized the commandment. Even though the *time* of physical rest was considered ceremonial, there continued to be a *spiritual rest* for Christians. One reformer, Karlstadt, perceived more clearly than any of the other Reformers the continued importance of a Sabbath rest for Christian worship practices. Yet even he was not willing to call on Christians to reject Sunday as a day of worship and return to worship on Saturday as the biblical day of worship, although he seems to have kept the Bible Sabbath privately.

Most Reformers agreed that the change of the observance of the Sabbath from the seventh day to Sunday, the first day of the week, took place in the early church. But there was no unanimity about when precisely this change took place. Some held that Christ initiated the change, while others suggested it was done by the apostles, or later church leaders. Several reasons lay behind the choice of Sunday as the day for weekly worship by the magisterial Reformers: (1) it was the traditional day of rest; (2) it was the most convenient day of the week for worship; and (3) it was known by Christians as the Lord's day in commemoration of Christ's resurrection. However, in view of the fact that there was no biblical mandate that Sunday be the day of worship for Christians, and since the Reformers believed that no day is holier than another, theoretically at least, Christians could adopt any day for worship.

The Reformers were successful, however, in dispelling the Catholic idea that Sunday was the day of worship for Christians instituted by divine appointment in place of the Sabbath and that

¹⁹³ Zwingli, cited in James A. Hessey, *Sunday, Its Origin, History, and Present Obligation, Considered in the Bampton Lectures* (London: John Murray, 1866), 352.

Sunday holiness was commanded by the Decalogue for Christians. The Reformers were convinced that Sunday was a human institution. They supported the idea of a weekly day of worship, but the particular day was left up to the magistrates and the church. In their opinion it could be any day because all days were the same. Sunday, however, remained the day of choice since worshipping on that day was the generally accepted practice.

An important advance made by the magisterial Reformers was the liberation of worship on Sunday from the Catholic view that it was obligatory as an integral part of obtaining the grace and righteousness necessary for salvation. The Reformers strongly rejected the idea that righteousness could be derived through worshipping on Sunday and avoiding all work in compliance with the Ten Commandments. They saw too many similarities to the Jewish attitude toward the Sabbath. Since the divine law did not require Sunday worship, and righteousness is only obtained by faith in the righteousness of God and His Son, there is no special virtue to be earned by worshiping on Sunday, “the Lord’s day” as they called it.

The Reformers attempted to liberate the keeping of the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments from the stigma of righteousness by works as in the Jewish and Catholic traditions by teaching that the seventh-day Sabbath was abolished and Christians may celebrate any day of the week as a day of rest. However, they overlooked the important biblical teaching that obedience to God’s law with its observance of the seventh-day Sabbath is a memorial of creation and redemption. Keeping the Sabbath is the result of our relationship to God, our thankfulness for Christ as our Creator and Redeemer, and His gift of salvation to the repentant sinner—not the sinner’s means of earning salvation.

One final point: the Reformers promoted the purpose of and proper way to observe the day of worship in light of the Scriptures. They may not have seen the necessity of going back to the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath but, in their close study of the Bible, they made major progress in discovering how to keep the Sunday sabbath holy. Rather than following the Catholic traditions of the Middle Ages that focused on Sunday as a day of idleness, abstaining from any type of work and attending church and mass, the Reformers saw it as a day particularly suited to reflecting on God and drawing closer to Christ. Very little was written about the correct day of worship. Except for some discussions that Luther had with Sabbatarians, their writings focused on how to draw nearer to God through faith, not through personal works. The day of worship was a day on which believers should assemble together, praise God’s name, hear the proclamation of the Scriptures, study His Word, discover how God could work in

their hearts, emptying themselves of their own works and letting God be in control of their lives, and how they could minister to their neighbors. This experience was all a part of the important process of sanctification so that the world would see that the worship of the divine Savior was the sign that the Lord sanctifies and regenerates believers. This truly was a great contribution of the magisterial Reformers to the Protestant Reformation. Unfortunately, this dimension of their reforms, with its resultant blessings, was not treasured by their followers in later centuries and has largely been lost.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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