

The Sabbath and the Most Prominent Magisterial Reformers

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

Such was the condition when the first generation of Reformers heeded their call and arose from the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church as Sunday keepers. Although they did not have a clear view of the historical development surrounding the change of the day of worship, through the study of the Holy Scriptures, they developed an understanding of the biblical meaning of the Sabbath and its observance. Their study also led them to discover that the Sunday Sabbath was a human institution, and not a day ordained by God.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the understanding the magisterial Reformers had of 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 has been extensive. From the Lutheran tradition developed the Lutheran World Federation in 1947, a global community of 140 Lutheran churches and 70 million members in 79 countries. From the Reformed tradition evolved the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1970 with 214 Reformed churches in 107 countries and a membership of over 75 million. Luther and Calvin wrote extensively about the Sabbath and influenced their successors and many other Christians. As such, their writings will be given the most attention throughout this exposition.

This paper focuses on the Reformers' views on the Sabbath at Creation, instruction of proper and improper Sabbath observance throughout the Scriptures, reasons for the abolition of the Sabbath, and finally, reasons for the change of the weekly day of worship from Saturday to Sunday. As much as possible, this research will use the primary works of the Reformers. The views of these Reformers will be dealt with chronologically, which means that, generally, the positions of the early Reformers on the various aspects of the Sabbath will be discussed first, and will be followed by those who wrote later.

The Sabbath at Creation

The Reformers' views on the Sabbath at Creation have been drawn upon mainly from Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*, which began in 1535 and lasted for nearly 10 years, and Calvin's *Commentary on Genesis*, published in 1554. This section explores the significance of God

¹ Peter Heylyn, *History of the Sabbath* (London: 1636) (Reprint ed. New York: De Capo Press, 1969) 2.6.3.

finishing the Creation, how He rested, blessed, and sanctified the Sabbath, and how this day was observed before the Fall.

God ended His work and rested on the seventh day (Gn 2:2)

Luther's exposition of the Sabbath begins by exploring the meaning of rest. The Sabbath is equated with "the rest of God."² "The Sabbath, or the Sabbath rest," he writes, "denotes that God ceased in such a way that He did not create another heaven and another earth."³ God "rested from all His work," means "He was satisfied with the heaven and earth."⁴ God "has, therefore, ceased to establish; but He has not ceased to govern."⁵

Calvin expresses God's rest similarly: 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 . . . this language is intended merely to express the perfection of the fabric of the world."⁶ 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 readily apply their minds to the Creator of the world."⁷ This means it is "a sacred rest which withdraws men from the impediments of the world, that it may dedicate them entirely to God."⁸ 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."⁹

Toward the end of his life, Calvin declares that God "wished to bring the faithful to imitate his example" of rest and affirms that the purpose of this rest was "to rest from our works when we are dead to ourselves; and allow ourselves to be governed by God's Spirit, when we live in him, and he in us."¹⁰

God blessed and sanctified the seventh day (Gn 2:3)

In discussing God's sanctification of the Sabbath, Luther observes that the Creation account does not mention that the Sabbath was made for man. He 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."¹¹ This reveals that the special purpose of the Sabbath was "making us understand that the seventh day in particular should be devoted to

²Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 1:78

³Luther, *Genesis*, 1:75. See also Luther, *Genesis*, 1:78.

⁴Luther, *Genesis*, 1:75.

⁵Ibid.

⁶John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, of *Calvin Commentaries*, trans. John King (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 1:104.

⁷Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:106.

⁸Ibid.

⁹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, of *Calvin Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 17:196.

¹⁰John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of Ezekiel*, of *Calvin Commentaries*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 12:302.

¹¹Luther, *Genesis*, 1:79.

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.”¹²

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.”¹³

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.”¹⁴

Focusing on God 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.”¹⁵ Although it is our duty to daily 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.”¹⁶ Calvin is brief about how God sanctifies the Sabbath at Creation: God “sanctifies the seventh day, when he renders it illustrious, that by a special law it may be distinguished from the rest.”¹⁷ His comments on sanctification based on other biblical passages are much more extensive.

The Sabbath before the Fall

Luther assumes Adam would have kept the seventh day sacred had he 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.”¹⁸

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.’”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 1:80.

¹⁴Ibid, 1:81.

¹⁵Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:105.

¹⁶Ibid., 1:106.

¹⁷Ibid., 1:106.

¹⁸Luther, *Genesis*, 1:79. Adam would also be involved in “hunting.” (Luther, *Genesis*, 1:82.)

¹⁹Ibid., 1:80. Adam was not to spend Sabbath in idleness. (Luther, *Genesis*, 1:82.)

²⁰Ibid.

Sabbath from Adam to Sinai

This section discusses the views of the Reformers about the Sabbath observance of Adam after the Fall, the ancient patriarchs, and the Israelites from the exodus out of Egypt till receiving the Decalogue at Sinai.

The Sabbath after the Fall

Even when Adam lost his state of innocence, God's purpose of worship on the Sabbath day did not change. Luther comments that after the Fall, 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."²¹ 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 is to be restored to us through Christ."²² 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."²³

The Sabbath and the patriarchs

Luther believes the Old Testament patriarchs had already been observing the Decalogue. Commenting about Abraham, he says, "He observed the Decalogue, the rite of the Sabbath, and the law of circumcision."²⁴ "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."²⁵

Calvin, on the other hand, is not sure the patriarchs kept the Sabbath. "It is questionable," he writes, "whether it had already been observed by the patriarchs."²⁶

The Sabbath and the wilderness before Sinai

Calvin recognizes that the Sabbath was observed just before the Law was given at Sinai. Commenting on the Lord's instructions to gather double the daily portions of manna on the sixth day so no Israelite needed to gather on the Sabbath (Ex 16:5), he remarks, "Thus the seventh day was really hallowed before the promulgation of the Law. . . ."²⁷ 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,"²⁸ Moses reinforced the importance of the Sabbath rest by instructing the people to prepare food on the sixth day for the Sabbath (Ex 16:23). "Otherwise,

²¹Ibid., 1:79, 80.

²²Ibid., 1:80.

²³Ibid., 1:81, 82.

²⁴Ibid., 5:20.

²⁵Ibid., 6:264.

²⁶John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, of Calvin *Commentaries*, trans. Charles W. Bingham (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 2:271.

²⁷Calvin, *Moses*, 2:271.

²⁸Ibid., 2:440. Translation of "Fathers" was adopted from the French version.

perhaps, they would have neglected, viz., that they should honour the seventh day by a holy rest.”²⁹

Calvin points to the seriousness of breaking the Sabbath when some Israelites went out to collect food against God’s expressed commandment (Ex 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.”³⁰

Proper Sabbath observance for Christians

The proper observance of the Sabbath was of great importance to the Reformers. They especially studied the meaning of Sabbath keeping in the light of the Decalogue, sanctification, the counsels on the Sabbath in Isaiah and Ezekiel, the attitude of Jesus and His apostles, and Paul’s experience of and counsels about the Sabbath.

The Sabbath of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:8-11)

In interpreting the Decalogue, the Reformers focused on its spiritual purpose. They especially explored Sabbath observance in the context of remembering the Sabbath, God’s rest, His sanctification of the Sabbath, and the difference between the regular working days and the seventh day.

Remember the Sabbath day

Luther sees the Sabbath as a sign of future events rather than a memorial of Creation: “All the things God wants done on the Sabbath are clear signs of another life after this life.”³¹

Calvin draws attention to the importance of remembering the Sabbath, and not forgetting its objective: “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 some stimulants to arouse them in maintaining their care and zeal for religion.”³² It is, therefore, essential to remember “the principal design of the Sabbath” is the “adumbration [standard] of the spiritual rest.”³³

God rested from His works

In discussing the reasons for proper Sabbath keeping, Luther focuses on God’s rest and our need to follow His example. He says “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.”³⁴

²⁹Ibid., 2:282.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Luther, *Genesis*, 1:80.

³²Calvin, *Moses*, 2:433.

³³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 1:426.

³⁴Martin Luther, *A Treatise on Good Works, Luther’s Works*, of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 44:71.

Luther makes it clear that the rest or pause from work in this commandment pertains to “two kinds, bodily and spiritual.”³⁵ “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, single-minded prayer together.”³⁶

The Ten Commandments also call for a “spiritual rest” 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.”³⁷ This is a rest in which “our works cease and that God alone works in us.”³⁸ 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.”³⁹ God continues until, finally, there are no more “works of man.”⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ The result is that “then there is nothing but godly happiness, joy, and peace, and all other works and virtues as well.”⁴² God considers these 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.”⁴³

It is not easy to rest from our work, except through faith. “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.”⁴⁴

Luther sees clearly that it is God’s works that sanctify the Sabbath, not our own: “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.”⁴⁵ He points out that strict Sabbath regulations in ancient Israel teach the important lesson “that there shall be in us not our works, but the works of Christ, for, as said before, it is not our doing, but what Christ has done, which redeems us.”⁴⁶

Discussing the Sabbath rest in terms of a spiritual rest, Calvin observes that this commandment rests on three points. First, “it was the design of the heavenly Lawgiver, under the rest of the

³⁵Luther, *Good Works*, 44:72.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 44:73.

³⁹Ibid., 44:77.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 44:77, 78.

⁴³Ibid., 44:78.

⁴⁴Martin Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 68, of Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 13:25.

⁴⁵Martin Luther, “The Gospel for the Festival of the Epiphany, Matthew 2[:1-12],” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 52:246.

⁴⁶Martin Luther, “The Gospel for Christmas Eve, Luke 2[:1-14],” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 52:23.

seventh day, to give the people of Israel a figure of the spiritual rest, by which the faithful ought to refrain from their own works, in order to leave God to work within them.”⁴⁷ Second, “there should be a stated day, on which they might assemble together to hear the law and perform the ceremonies, or at least which they might especially devote to meditations on his works; that by this recollection they might be led to the exercises of piety.”⁴⁸ And third, “servants, and persons living under the jurisdiction of others, should be indulged with a day of rest, that they might enjoy some remission from their labour.”⁴⁹

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.”⁵⁰ However, the commandment also has other objectives—“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.”⁵¹

God separated one day free from all cares so we may contemplate His character and Creation. “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.”⁵²

The Sabbath, 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.”⁵³

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 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.”⁵⁴

God sanctified the Sabbath day

God’s sanctification of the Sabbath occupies a significant place in the writings of Luther and Calvin.

In his expositions, Luther renders the word “Sabbath” in the commandment as “holy day” or “day of rest.” He interprets the phrase “Thou shalt hallow the holy day”⁵⁵ to mean “we should

⁴⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:429.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Calvin, *Moses*, 2:437.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:429. Also see Calvin, *Moses*, 2:437.

⁵⁵Luther, *Good Works*, 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

relate ourselves to God in works.”⁵⁶ 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.”⁵⁷ 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’”⁵⁸

Luther sees the command to sanctify as having worldwide application. “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.”⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰ 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.”⁶¹ 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.”⁶²

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.”⁶³ 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.”⁶⁴

The Sabbath commandment in Luther’s *Small Catechism (Der Kleine Katechismus)* reads, “Thou shalt sanctify the holy-day [*Feiertag*].”⁶⁵ This means “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.”⁶⁶

In his *Large Catechism (Der Grosse Katechismus)* Luther elaborates, “The word holy day (*Feiertag*) is rendered from the Hebrew word *sabbath* which properly signifies to rest, that is, to

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.”

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., 44:54, 55.

⁵⁸Martin Luther, *Personal Prayer Book*, of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 43:15.

⁵⁹Martin Luther, *Against the Sabbatarians: A Letter to a Good Friend (1538)*, of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 47:92.

⁶⁰Luther, *Sabbatarians*, 47:92.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., 47:93.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism (1529)* in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolic Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans by F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1921), 541.

⁶⁶*Small Catechism*, 541.

abstain from labor.”⁶⁷ He indicates that in the Old Testament, God separated the seventh day to be a day of rest, to be regarded as holy above other days. This external observance was given to the Jews to abstain from work and to be devoted as a day of rest so people and animals could recuperate. But Christ has made Christians free from this external ritual and other Old Testament ordinances.⁶⁸

What then is the meaning of the commandment for Christians? According to Luther, it is that “we keep holy days not for the sake of intelligent and learned Christians (for they have no need of it [holy days]).”⁶⁹ We keep it “first of all for bodily causes and necessities, which nature teaches and requires; for the common people, man-servants and maid-servants, who have been attending to their work and trade the whole week, that for a day they may retire in order to rest and be refreshed.”⁷⁰

Secondly, Luther points out “that on such day of rest . . . freedom and time be taken to attend divine service, so that we come together to hear and treat of God’s Word and then to praise God, to sing and pray.”⁷¹ “The simple meaning of the commandment” is that the observance of the Sabbath “should be devoted to hearing God’s Word, so that the special function of this day should be the ministry of the Word for the young and the mass of poor people.”⁷² As to the kind of rest, it should not be “so strictly interpreted as to forbid any other incidental work that cannot be avoided.”⁷³

In the *Large Catechism*, Luther affirms, “To sanctify the holy day is the same as to keep it holy.”⁷⁴ Responding to the question of what it means to keep the Sabbath holy, he says, it is “nothing else than to be occupied in holy words, works, and life. For the day needs no sanctification for itself; for in itself it has been created holy.”⁷⁵ He adds, “But God desires it to be holy to you. Therefore it becomes holy or unholy on your account, according as you are occupied on the same with things that are holy or unholy.”⁷⁶

The next question is, how, then, does such sanctification take place? Luther answers, “Not in this manner, that [with folded hands] we sit behind the stove and do no rough [external] work, or deck ourselves with a wreath and put on our best clothes, but . . . that we occupy ourselves with God’s Word, and exercise ourselves therein.”⁷⁷ Emphasizing holiness, he says “we Christians ought always to keep such a holy day, and be occupied with nothing but holy things, i.e., daily be engaged upon God’s Word, and carry it in our hearts and upon our lips.”⁷⁸

⁶⁷Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism 1530,” in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 603.

⁶⁸Luther, *Large Catechism*, 603.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid., 605.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

During the Sabbath, it would be good to reflect on “the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer” and direct our lives in harmony with God’s Word.⁷⁹ Practicing these things makes the day holy. “At whatever time, then, this is being observed and practised, there a true *holy day* is being kept; otherwise it shall not be called a Christians’ *holy day*.”⁸⁰

In this process of sanctification, the Word of God is central. “God’s Word is the treasure which sanctifies everything, and by which even all the saints themselves were sanctified.”⁸¹ This understanding has far-reaching implications in our lives. It means that when “God’s Word is taught, preached, heard, read or meditated upon, there the person, day, and work are sanctified thereby, not because of the external work, but because of the Word which makes saints of us all.”⁸² When whatever we do is “God-pleasing or holy,” then “this commandment is in force and fulfilled.”⁸³ From this perspective, Luther concludes, “the force and power of this commandment lies not in the resting but in the sanctifying so that to this day belongs a special holy exercise.”⁸⁴ Because, without God’s Word “no holy day can be sanctified,” Luther believes “God insists upon a strict observance of this commandment, and will punish all who despise His Word and are not willing to hear and learn it, especially at the time appointed for the purpose.”⁸⁵

When discussing the Decalogue, Calvin focuses on the spiritual significance of the typical Sabbath, pointing out that the Sabbath is a sign of sanctification (Ex 31:12).⁸⁶ Here, he explores the deeper meaning of the “sum of this sanctification, viz., the death of the flesh, when men deny themselves and renounce their earthly nature, so that they may be ruled and guided by the Spirit of God.”⁸⁷ He further explains, “If our sanctification consists properly in the mortification of our own will, there is a very natural analogy between the external sign and the internal thing which it represents.”⁸⁸ This implies that “we must rest altogether, that God may operate within us; we must recede from our own will, resign our own heart, and renounce all our carnal affections; in short, we must cease from all the efforts of our own understanding, that having God operating within us, we may enjoy rest in him.”⁸⁹ Calvin’s fuller views on the Sabbath as a sign of sanctification will be discussed in his commentary on Ezekiel below.

Luther’s song of the Sabbath commandment

Luther composed a song about the Decalogue called “These Are the Holy Ten Commands.” The fourth stanza encapsulates his view on the sanctification of the Sabbath:

“Thou shalt keep holy the seventh day,
That rest thou and thy household may;
From thine own work thou must be free,

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid., 605, 607.

⁸¹Ibid., 607.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Calvin, *Moses*, 2:434.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:427.

⁸⁹Ibid.

That God his work have in thee.
Kyrioleis. [Have mercy, Lord]”⁹⁰

Six days you shall labor, but not on the seventh day

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.’”⁹¹ The Sabbath, therefore, “has to do chiefly with demonstrating inner and spiritual worship, with faith, love, prayer, etc.”⁹²

Calvin defines the work that should not be done on the Sabbath as whatever work “could have been finished yesterday, or postponed till tomorrow. . . . It was not lawful to cook food for your guests; but if an ox or an ass had fallen into pit it was to be taken out, because aid would have been too late on the morrow.”⁹³ This allowance for the 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.”⁹⁴

Observing one day in seven

Calvin outlines three reasons for observing any day of the week as the Sabbath instead of only the seventh day. First, he mentions the importance of following the example of the Creator who rested one day in every seven days. God represented this continual cessation of work to the Jews “by the observance of one day in seven.”⁹⁵ By setting a personal example, God intended “that it might be the more religiously kept. . . . For it is no small stimulus to any action, for a man to know that he is imitating his Creator.”⁹⁶

Second, Calvin perceives a connection between the symbolic significance of the number seven as the number of perfection and the continual duration of the Sabbath. “Because in Scripture it is the number of perfection, it is here selected to denote perpetual duration.”⁹⁷ There is, according to Calvin, “another probable conjecture respecting this number”⁹⁸—“that the Lord intended to signify that the sabbath would never be completed until the arrival of the last day. For in it we begin that blessed rest, in which we make new advances from day to day. But because we are still engaged in a perpetual warfare with the flesh, it will not be consummated before the completion of that prediction of Isaiah [66:23].”⁹⁹ This may indicate that the Lord used the number seven to reveal “in the seventh day, the future perfection of his sabbath in the last day,”

⁹⁰Martin Luther, “These Are the Holy Ten Commandments,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 53:279.

⁹¹Luther, *Genesis*, 6:177.

⁹²Ibid., 1:94.

⁹³Calvin, *Moses*, 2:438.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:427.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid., 1:428.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

so that His people, “by a continual meditation on the sabbath during their whole life, they might be aspiring towards this perfection.”¹⁰⁰

The third reason the “Lord ordained a certain day,” Calvin explains, was that “the people under the discipline of the law might be exercised in continual meditations on the spiritual rest.”¹⁰¹ Additional motives for appointing “the seventh day” were “either because He foresaw it would be sufficient, or in order that the proposal of a resemblance to His own example might operate as a stronger stimulus to the people, or at least to apprise them that the only end of the sabbath was to promote their conformity to their Creator.”¹⁰² Calvin concludes his reflections on the Decalogue by stating that it is important that “we retain the mystery, which is principally exhibited of a perpetual rest from our own works.”¹⁰³

The song for the Sabbath day (Ps 92:1-4)

Calvin also refers to Psalm 92, a song for the Sabbath, as significant counsel on Sabbath observance. He shows that “it is good to give thanks unto Jehovah” on the Sabbath.¹⁰⁴ 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.”¹⁰⁵ Human beings are quick to wander from God when exposed to distractions. This Psalm intends to remedy this. “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.”¹⁰⁶

The song also reveals that the Sabbath is a day to show God’s loving-kindness 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.”¹⁰⁷

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 is 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 recognise and feel his fatherly goodness, and can undertake this service with willing and joyful minds.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 3 of *Calvin Commentaries*, trans. James Anderson (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 5:493.

¹⁰⁵Calvin, *Psalms*, 5:493.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 5:494.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 5:496.

The Sabbath and the Prophet Isaiah

In his *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, Luther discusses the spiritual manner of Sabbath worship as described in Isaiah 56, 58 and 66. Calvin addresses the same passages but brings out different spiritual dimensions of Sabbath keeping.

Blessing for not defiling the Sabbath (Is 56)

In his exposition of Isaiah 56, Luther connects the Sabbath with the prophet's appeal for righteousness. Regarding Isaiah's exhortation, "Blessed is the man who does this, etc." (Is 56:2), he comments, "We see the prophet speaking about legal righteousness, commending the Sabbath to us. Blessed is he who thus permits himself to be chastised by the Law. *Who does this*, who holds on to righteousness and justice. *Who keeps the Sabbath*."¹⁰⁹ Luther perceives that Sabbath observance has a central place in the law. "The sum of the Law," he remarks, "is to keep the Sabbath and to hold out the hand to the neighbor. Sabbaths were instituted for the worship of Word and prayer. Hence we should be well disposed toward the Sabbath and then serve the neighbor"¹¹⁰

Calvin's treatment of Isaiah 56 was more extensive than Luther's. In his *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, he writes that the Sabbath "was the most important symbol of the worship of God so by that figure of speech in which a part is taken for the whole, and which is called a *synecdoche*, the Sabbath includes all the exercises of religion."¹¹¹ In order to keep it properly "we must view the Sabbath in connection with everything that attends it; for God does not rest satisfied with outward ceremony, or delight in our indolence, but demands from us earnest self-denial, that we may be entirely devoted to his service."¹¹²

Calvin notes the relationship between the Sabbath and the covenant in Isaiah 56:4— "With the 'keeping of the Sabbath,' he [Isaiah] connects obedience and adherence to 'the covenant,' and hence we may readily infer that, when he spoke hitherto about the Sabbath, he had in view not an idle ceremony but perfect holiness."¹¹³

In the Isaiah 56:6 appeal to refrain from defiling the Sabbath, Calvin sees that by focusing on the outward ritual, the people failed to properly keep the Sabbath. They "overlooked that which was of the highest importance; for, by resting satisfied with outward ceremony, they neglected the truth, that is, reformation of life. The Lord enjoined them to rest in such a manner as to keep both their hands and their minds from all crime and wickedness."¹¹⁴

Experiencing true Sabbath keeping (Is 58:13)

In his comments on Isaiah 58, Luther describes what makes the Sabbath a true Sabbath and how to experience a true Sabbath: "Sabbath is indeed a Sabbath when we abstain from our own

¹⁰⁹Martin Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah, Chapters 40-66, of Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 17:261.

¹¹⁰Luther, *Isaiah*, 17:261.

¹¹¹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 4 of *Calvin Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 8:177.

¹¹²Calvin, *Isaiah*, 8:177, 178.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 8:180.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 8:183.

works, whether they are evil or seemingly good. . . .”¹¹⁵ Proper works on the true Sabbath “consist in doing the works of God, hearing the Word, praying, doing good in every way to the neighbor.”¹¹⁶ In the context of sanctification, Luther states, “The duties of the Sabbath are to sanctify God, by hearing the Word, by means of praises and thanksgiving, etc. Then it is to be celebrated by us as a holiday.”¹¹⁷ The warning not to pollute the Sabbath is directed to people who “sanctify not God but themselves.”¹¹⁸

Luther interprets Isaiah’s call to honor the Sabbath as not going your own way, seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly: “If you act in this way, if you abstain from all the things that please you, even from your own speech, then it will be a true Sabbath, if nothing of yourself is found in you.” Therefore, “to observe the Sabbath is to abstain from all our own deeds and words that please us and to sanctify God alone in His works. ‘When consideration is given to the fact that all works are commanded by Me, then it will be a sanctified Sabbath.’”¹¹⁹

In his comments on Isaiah 58:13, Calvin explains that the meaning of “turn away your foot from the Sabbath” is much more extensive than an external observation. It embraces the “whole course of human life.”¹²⁰ Furthermore, “In this passage, he [Isaiah] points out the true observation of the Sabbath, that they may not think that it consists in external idleness but in true self-denial, so as to abstain from every act of injustice and wickedness and from all lusts and wicked thoughts.”¹²¹

Commenting on calling “the Sabbath a delight,” Calvin emphasizes, “This word, ‘delight,’ must be viewed as referring to God, and not to men; because nothing can be viewed as pleasing or acceptable to God, [other] than the observation of the Sabbath, and sincere worship.”¹²² Calvin notes that “certain classes of duties are again enumerated by him, by which he shews clearly that the true observation of the Sabbath consists in self-denial and thorough conversion.”¹²³

This leads Calvin to focus on the vital role of the will, because from the will “proceed speeches, and next actions; for we speak what we have conceived in our heart, and by speech we make known our will, and afterwards carry it into effect. Whoever then wishes to serve God in a proper manner, must altogether renounce his flesh and his will.”¹²⁴ Consequently, “we see the reason why God so highly recommends, in the whole Scripture, the observation of the Sabbath; for he contemplated something higher than the outward ceremony, that is, indolence and repose, in which the Jews thought that the greatest holiness consisted.”¹²⁵ Even though Calvin feels the literal Sabbath observance has been abolished for Christians, “the truth remains; because Christ

¹¹⁵Luther, *Isaiah*, 17:293.

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Calvin, *Isaiah*, 8:241.

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴Ibid., 8:241, 242.

¹²⁵Ibid., 8:242.

died and rose again, so that we have a continual sabbath; that is, we are released from our works, that the Spirit of God may work mightily in us.”¹²⁶

According to Calvin, Isaiah accuses those who observe only the “external ceremony of rest” of “finding their own pleasure” on the Sabbath.¹²⁷ “The legitimate use of the Sabbath must be supposed to be self-renunciation, since he is in fact accounted to cease from his works who is not led by his own will nor indulges his own wishes, but who suffers himself to be directed by the Spirit of God.”¹²⁸ This involves an “emptying out of self” that “must proceed so far that the Sabbath is violated even by good works, so long as we regard them as our own.”¹²⁹

Calvin interprets the phrase, “Then wilt thou delight in Jehovah,” (Is 58:14), as an allusion to the preceding verse, “The Lord takes the highest delight in the true observation of the Sabbath.”¹³⁰

The Sabbath and the prophet Ezekiel

Toward the end of his life, Calvin completed *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*. Here he discusses more extensively Sabbath observance as a sign of sanctification. What does sanctification mean? How does it actually work? What does it symbolize? How does it relate to God’s rest? How is it related to the grace of regeneration? What is the sign of regeneration, and in what way is the Sabbath a sacrament?

Sabbath a sign of sanctification and separation (Ez 20:12)

To highlight the Sabbath as a sign of sanctification, Calvin discusses Ezekiel 20. He notes a connection in verse 21 between the purpose of the Sabbath and sanctification and its more fundamental meaning of “separation.” The Israelites were “elected by God for a peculiar nation: and this the Prophet sufficiently expresses by the word *sanctifying*, for it means that the people were separated from the profane nations to be God’s peculiar inheritance. If any one wishes to render sanctify by one word it will be, ‘to separate.’”¹³¹

This separation was brought about, Calvin says, by the promise to Abraham, by loving His elect, by regenerating them by His Spirit, and by separating them through a mediator, “for separation cannot last unless the people be united to God; and what bond of union is there without a mediator?”¹³²

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷Calvin, *Moses*, 2:236.

¹²⁸Ibid.

¹²⁹Calvin, *Moses*, 2:436. Here we observe Augustin’s influence when Calvin adds, “rightly does Augustin remark in the last chapter of the 22d book, *De Civitate Dei* — ‘For even our works themselves, since they are understood to be rather His than ours, are thus imputed to us for the attaining of that Sabbath, when we *are still and see that He is God*; for, if we attribute them to ourselves, they will be servile, whereas we are told as to the Sabbath, *Thou shalt not do any servile work in it*’ (2:436). The heading of this chapter is “Of the Eternal Felicity of the City of God, and the Perpetual Sabbath” (2:436, n.1).

¹³⁰Calvin, *Isaiah*, 8:242.

¹³¹Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 12:300.

¹³²Ibid.

In this context, Calvin says “The Sabbath was the sign of mortification.”¹³³ It is important to remember that when we properly observe the Sabbath, God “sanctifies us; because when we remain in our natural state we are there mixed with others, and have nothing different from unbelievers: hence, therefore, it is necessary to begin by dying to ourselves and the world, and, by exercising self-denial; and this depends on the grace of God.”¹³⁴

God’s command to rest on the Sabbath was for the purpose of sanctification.¹³⁵ Calvin notes that this rest was imposed upon the Israelites “that they should each rest from their works, and so conform themselves to God’s example.” Similarly, “we are said to rest from our works when we are dead to ourselves; and allow ourselves to be governed by God’s Spirit, when we live in him, and he in us.”¹³⁶

The Sabbath a sacrament of regeneration (Ez 20:20)

In discussing Ezekiel 20:20, Calvin points out that God’s primary purpose with the Sabbath was to develop inward sanctification: “God was not satisfied by the people’s resting from their occupations, but the inward sanctification was always the chief end in view. And for this reason he also repeats again, *that they may be a sign between me and you to show you that I Jehovah am your God.*”¹³⁷

Calvin shows how Ezekiel connected the Sabbath with regeneration. When God consecrated the seventh day, His people were promised “the grace of regeneration.”¹³⁸ God is not properly worshiped by an outward rest as the Jews held. This understanding leads Calvin to see the Sabbath as a sacrament: “The Sabbath was a sacrament, since it was a visible figure of an invisible grace. And this also is expressed with sufficient clearness by the Prophet, when he says, *the Sabbath was given for a sign.* By this word, therefore, he shows that regeneration was promised to the ancient people.”¹³⁹

The Sabbath, therefore, is a pledge and sign of regeneration. “God’s promise was given, by which he bore witness to them,” Calvin says, “that if they sought from him the spirit of regeneration, the Sabbath would be really given them as a pledge and sign of it.”¹⁴⁰

As “the Sabbath was a sacrament of regeneration,” God “promises the efficacy of his Spirit, if they did not shut the door by their own impiety and contempt.”¹⁴¹ Thus “we see that sacraments are never destitute of the virtue of the Spirit unless when men render themselves unworthy of the grace offered them.”¹⁴² It is important to remember “that there is a mutual relation between faith and the sacraments, and hence, that the sacraments are effective through faith.”¹⁴³ In this light,

¹³³Ibid., 12:301.

¹³⁴Ibid.

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Ibid., 12:302.

¹³⁷Ibid., 12:311.

¹³⁸Ibid., 12:302.

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 12:303.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 12:311.

¹⁴²Ibid., 12:311, 312.

¹⁴³Ibid., 12:312.

Calvin indicates that the Sabbath as a sign of sanctification becomes effective only through faith of the individual.¹⁴⁴

The Sabbath and Christ

For insights into proper Sabbath observance, Calvin extensively discusses the attitudes of Christ and His disciples regarding the Sabbath—Christ preaching in the synagogue, the disciples’ plucking ears of grain to eat, and the healing of the sick on the Sabbath.

Christ’s visit to the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4:16)

Calvin presents Christ’s visit to the synagogue in Nazareth and His exposition of Isaiah as an example of “the true and lawful method of keeping *the Sabbath*” for Jews as well as Christians.¹⁴⁵ He explains the way Jews were to keep Sabbath: “When God commanded his people to abstain from working on that day, it was not that they might give themselves up to indolent repose; but, on the contrary, that they might exercise themselves in meditating on his works.”¹⁴⁶ For Christians, this means “our manner of observing it is the same with that of the Jews: the people must assemble to hear the word, to public prayers, and to the other exercises of religion.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, “it was for this purpose that the Jewish Sabbath was succeeded by the Lord’s Day.”¹⁴⁸

Disciples’ plucking ears of grain to eat (Mt 12:1-8; Mk 2:23-28; Lk 6:1-5)

From the incident of the disciples’ plucking, on the Sabbath day, ears of grain to eat, Calvin assumes that Christ permitted His disciples to break the Sabbath. Calvin lists five arguments that Christ presents in defense of His disciples, showing the freedom Christ brought from the Jewish way of Sabbath observance of total idleness.

In the first argument, Christ defends His disciples by referring to the example of David who was allowed by the high priest, Ahimelech, to use part of the holy bread for his men and him (1 Sm 21:6). Calvin reasons, “If David’s necessity excused him, the same argument ought to be admitted in the case of others. Hence it follows, that the ceremonies of the Law are not violated where there is no infringement of godliness.”¹⁴⁹ This meant that plucking grain on the Sabbath to satisfy their hunger did not jeopardize godliness or reverence to God.

In the second argument, Calvin points to the priests who are not condemned for doing all kinds of work related to worship on the Sabbath. If the temple sanctifies works dealing with the outward service, “the holiness of the true and spiritual temple has greater efficacy, in exempting its worshippers from all blame, while they are discharging the duties of godliness.”¹⁵⁰ This applies to the disciples because “the object which the disciples had in view was, to present to

¹⁴⁴For more on Calvin’s view of sacraments, see Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 12:312.

¹⁴⁵John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, of Calvin Commentaries, trans. William Pringle. (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 16:227.

¹⁴⁶Calvin, *Evangelists*, 16:227.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 16:48. Here Calvin says, “Now Christ takes for granted that David was free from blame, because the Holy Spirit bestows commendation on the priest who allowed him to partake of the holy bread.”

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 16:49.

God souls which were consecrated by the Gospel.”¹⁵¹ Calvin concludes, “Christ, by an allusion to *the temple*, affirmed that whatever was connected with his personal holiness was not a transgression of the Law.”¹⁵²

The third argument Calvin finds in Christ’s statement in Matthew 12:7, “If you had known . . . ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.” Here Christ uses the words “mercy, by figure of speech, for offices of kindness,” and “sacrifices” to “include the outward service of the Law.”¹⁵³ Calvin explains that “external rites are of no value in themselves. . . . Besides, God does not absolutely reject them, but, by a comparison with deeds of kindness, pronounces that they are inferior to the latter in actual value.”¹⁵⁴ Applied to the disciples’ situation, Christ does not blame them for breaking the Sabbath, because “while God trained his people in the rudiments of the Law, it was far from being his design to kill wretched men with famine.”¹⁵⁵

The fourth argument of Calvin’s is built on Christ’s statement, “For the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mt 12:8). Calvin remarks that here Christ declares “he has received authority to exempt his followers from the necessity of observing the Sabbath. *The Son of man*, (he says,) in the exercise of his authority, can relax the Sabbath in the same manner as other legal ceremonies.”¹⁵⁶

Calvin finds the fifth argument in Mark 2:27, “The Sabbath was made for man.” He notices that God appointed the Sabbath for man’s benefit. The Pharisees saw the disciples engaged in “a holy work, they saw them worn out with the fatigue of the journey, and partly with want of food; and yet are offended that, when they are hungry, they take a few grains of corn for the support of their wearied bodies.”¹⁵⁷ Calvin asks “Is this not a foolish attempt to overturn the purpose of God when they demand to the injury of man that observation of the Sabbath which he intended to be advantageous?”¹⁵⁸

Christ healing on the Sabbath

In one instance, Christ healed a man with a withered hand in the synagogue (Mt 12:9-13). In response to the Pharisees’ question about whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, Christ replied, “If any man’s sheep had fallen into a ditch, no person would have hindered it from being taken out: but in proportion as a man is of more value than a sheep, so much the more are we at liberty to assist him.”¹⁵⁹ From this response, Calvin concludes, “If any man should relieve the necessity of brethren, he did not, in any degree, violate the rest which the Lord has enjoined.”¹⁶⁰ Therefore, “nothing could be more unreasonable than to pronounce a man, who imitated God, to

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Ibid., 16:50.

¹⁵³Ibid., 16:49, 50.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 16:50.

¹⁵⁵Ibid.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 16:50,51.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 16:51.

¹⁵⁸Ibid.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 16:53.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 16:53, 54.

be a transgressor of the Sabbath.”¹⁶¹ If rescuing a sheep in the ditch is lawful, then doing well on the Sabbath is justified.

In another instance, Christ demonstrated His power and grace by curing, on the Sabbath, a woman afflicted with a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years (Lk13:10-17). Offended, the ruler of the synagogue commented that there were six days to heal, and that the Sabbath day was not one of them. Calvin presents Christ’s reaction: “If it be lawful on the Sabbath to perform the offices of humanity to cattle, it is ridiculous to imagine that the due observance of it will prevent assistance from being granted to the children of God.”¹⁶² Addressing his adversaries, Christ continues, “You . . . who are so scrupulous about observing the Sabbath, venture to loose oxen and asses, and lead them away to watering. And why may not I be permitted to perform a similar office of kindness to the elect people of God.”¹⁶³ Christ’s healings, therefore, are in no way out of harmony with proper Sabbath observance.

Calvin’s last example is the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. Rejecting the charge of breaking the Sabbath, Christ says, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (Jn 5:17). Calvin comments that Christ “does not reply that the Law about keeping the Sabbath was temporary, and that it ought now to be abolished; but, on the contrary, maintains that he has not violated the Law, because this is a divine work.”¹⁶⁴ He further explains that “it is only from their own works that men are commanded to abstain; and, accordingly, circumcision—which is a work of God, and not of men—is not at variance with the Sabbath.”¹⁶⁵ Therefore, he adds that what “Christ insists upon is this, that the holy rest which was enjoined by the Law of Moses is not disturbed when we are employed in works of God.”¹⁶⁶ He concludes that Christ “excuses not only his own action, but also the action of the man who carried his bed; for it was an appendage, and—as we might say—a part of the miracle, for it was nothing else, than an approbation of it.”¹⁶⁷

The reason the Law commands people to abstain from their own works, Calvin states, is not to interrupt or hinder “the works of God,” but to give way “to them alone Consequently, he who does not, on the Sabbath, allow a free course and reign to the works of God, is not only a false expounder of the Law, but wickedly overturns it.”¹⁶⁸ Calvin then defines the meaning of the Sabbath rest: “The *Sabbath* or *rest* of God is not idleness, but true perfection, which brings along with it a calm state of peace.”¹⁶⁹ When “God *put an end to his works*, (Gen. ii. 2;) . . . he means that, after having completed the formation of the world, God consecrated that day, that men might employ it in meditating on his works.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶¹Ibid., 16:54.

¹⁶²Ibid., 16:156.

¹⁶³Ibid.

¹⁶⁴Calvin, *John*, 17:195.

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., 17:195, 196.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 17:196, 375.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., 17:196.

¹⁷⁰Ibid.

The Sabbath and Paul

Calvin illustrates proper Sabbath keeping with Paul's visits to the synagogue in Antioch (Acts 13:14). Here he emphasizes the importance of the Sabbath as a time to assemble together "lest their rest should be unprofitable and sluggish."¹⁷¹ Calvin assumes the Sabbath is a type of the future rest of believers. In describing the Sabbath service, he remarks, "The institution of the Sabbath had another end also, that it might be a figure of the spiritual rest, when as the faithful, being dead to the world and the flesh, abandon their own will, and cease from their works."¹⁷²

Calvin sees a deeper significance of the Sabbath in Colossians 2:16, 17 where he quotes Paul as saying "Sabbaths were shadows of those things of which Christ is the substance."¹⁷³ Here the apostle declares that "if the outward rest was nothing but a ceremony, the substance of which must be sought in Christ."¹⁷⁴ This signifies that Christ is "the real substance of the truth" and "this is contained not in one day, but in the whole course of our life, till, being wholly dead to ourselves, we be filled with the life of God."¹⁷⁵

Finally, Calvin comments on the Sabbath rest in the epistle to the Hebrews. He points out that "true rest is brought to us by the Gospel" (Heb 4:3), and that "the genuine reason of the Commandment," is "that we should rest from our works 'even as God from His.' (Heb. iv. 10.)"¹⁷⁶ Calvin mentions that Paul shows "the true and lawful use of the Sabbath, and refutes the gross supposition with which the Jews were imbued, that God was properly worshipped by an outward rest. (Chap. iv.5)."¹⁷⁷ Believers should always remember this important function of the Sabbath.

Improper Sabbath observance

Luther has much to say about the way people defiled the Sabbath, both in the Scriptures and in his time. His insight into sin, sanctification and righteousness by faith, and the place of works in people's lives gave him profound insights into how the Sabbath should be observed. Calvin also speaks about defiling the Sabbath, but much less than Luther does.

Works that defile the Sabbath

During his lifetime, Luther notices that many attend church only because it is the expected custom or tradition. As a result "the Sabbaths of Christ are defiled" by "slavish, carnal, worldly, and devilish works of sin."¹⁷⁸ He calls for abstaining from our works, "whether they are evil or seemingly good, whether it is guzzling, etc., whether it is hearing Mass or observing

¹⁷¹John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1 of *Calvin Commentaries*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 18:513.

¹⁷²Calvin, *Apostles*, 18:513.

¹⁷³Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 12:301.

¹⁷⁴Calvin, *Moses*, 2:435.

¹⁷⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:429.

¹⁷⁶Calvin, *Moses*, 2:435.

¹⁷⁷Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 12:302.

¹⁷⁸Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 10:437.

ceremonies.”¹⁷⁹ He says, “Observe how they fettered us to hearing the Sunday Mass, thus to bind us to works good in appearance. Before breakfast we committed spiritual fornication, after breakfast physical fornication. Thus the most disgraceful acts were perpetrated on the Sabbath, and yet it was all done with a show of godliness and by observing the ceremonies.”¹⁸⁰

Luther is especially critical of his contemporaries who outwardly observe the Sabbath while inwardly defiling it. From his experience in Catholicism, he recalls, “This was precisely our former view with regard to the Sabbath, when we refrained from manual labor but then fell into every intoxication of luxury, into fornication, etc.”¹⁸¹ Regarding those involved in fasting, he says, “the fasters considered themselves holy because of their fasting. They fasted in accordance with their own will. This is what it means to turn the foot from the Sabbath [Isa. 58:13].”¹⁸² To do one’s will instead of God’s will includes “not only in gross sins on the Sabbath, as formerly we were accustomed to committing, such a guzzling and whoring, but even in the choicest and most glamorous works. For no will is good except God’s, who alone is good. Very plainly He condemns these endeavors of theirs, even though they look so good.”¹⁸³

Calvin sees the seriousness of defiling the Sabbath when he deals with the Israelite who was stoned because he went out on the Sabbath collecting sticks (Nm 15:32-36). By this punishment the obligation of the Sabbath was sanctioned so that it might henceforth be held in greater reverence.”¹⁸⁴ “By this severity God testified how much stress He laid upon the observance of the Sabbath.”¹⁸⁵ The penalty for the man was greater because it was not a sin of ignorance but willful transgression. “From the punishment,” Calvin says, “we may infer that the criminal himself had not erred through inadvertence, but in gross contempt of the Law, so as to think nothing of subverting and corrupting all things sacred.”¹⁸⁶

From this incident, Calvin concludes that it is the government’s responsibility to protect the Sabbath against desecration. He reasons that if government leaders “inflict punishment upon murder, adultery, and theft, they should also vindicate worship of God: for it is to be observed that the man was not stoned by a mere unreflecting impulse, but by the direct command of God.”¹⁸⁷

Sinning against the Sabbath commandment

Luther explains how his contemporaries transgress the Sabbath command. On the one hand, he denounces those who desecrate the Sabbath by their open sins and immorality.¹⁸⁸ On the other hand, he rebukes “that other crowd, who listen to God's Word as to any other trifle, and only from custom come to preaching, and go away again, and at the end of the year know as little of it

¹⁷⁹Luther, *Isaiah*, 17:293.

¹⁸⁰Ibid.

¹⁸¹Ibid., 17:292.

¹⁸²Ibid.

¹⁸³Ibid., 17:293.

¹⁸⁴Calvin, *Moses*, 3:97.

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

¹⁸⁶Ibid.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., 3:98.

¹⁸⁸Luther, *Large Catechism*, 607.

as at the beginning.”¹⁸⁹ This class of people is in serious danger “for hitherto the opinion prevailed that you had properly hallowed Sunday when you had heard a mass or the Gospel read; but no one cared for God's Word, as also no one taught it.”¹⁹⁰ However, the situation among church goers of his time was no better. He says, “now, while we have God's Word, we nevertheless do not correct the abuse; we suffer ourselves to be preached to and admonished, but we listen without seriousness and care.”¹⁹¹ Strongly admonishing these Christians, Luther states, “Know, therefore, that you must be concerned not only about hearing, but also about learning and retaining it in memory, and do not think that it is optional with you or of no great importance, but that it is God's commandment, who will require of you how you have heard, learned, and honored His Word.”¹⁹² Finally, Luther includes in the list of Sabbath transgressors “those fastidious spirits . . . who, when they have heard a sermon or two, find it tedious and dull, thinking that they know all that well enough, and need no more instruction.”¹⁹³

Inappropriate Sabbath attire

According to Luther, people can also desecrate the Sabbath by wearing inappropriate clothes to church. Toward the end of his life, Luther becomes convinced that on the Sabbath day we should not appear in “the ordinary, everyday garments we wear when doing household chores but festal apparel suitable on days of rest and on the Sabbath as neater clothing for the body.”¹⁹⁴

Sabbath and the millennium

Describing the Sabbath during the millennium, Luther says 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)”¹⁹⁵ Luther compares the transition at the beginning of the millennium 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).”¹⁹⁶

Sabbath is abolished

Although Luther and Calvin have written many praiseworthy and complementary things about the Sabbath, they are both convinced that Christians do not need to observe the seventh-day Sabbath as a literal day of rest. Christ has abolished the Jewish Sabbath. Christians have been delivered from the Jewish ceremonies and laws, and can now use any day as a Sabbath to worship God. These prominent Reformers presented the following Scriptural passages as evidence that the Sabbath commandment of the Old Testament has been nullified. Their successors and members of these respective traditions adopted similar reasoning.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 607, 609.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 609.

¹⁹¹Ibid.

¹⁹²Ibid.

¹⁹³Ibid.

¹⁹⁴Luther, *Genesis*, 8:66.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 2:129, 130.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., 8:67.

Testimony of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:8-11)

The magisterial Reformers find in the Ten Commandments evidence that the Sabbath command is not applicable to Christians.

Luther calls attention Exodus 20:[1], where God himself speaks, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.’”¹⁹⁷ He concludes, “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.”¹⁹⁸ Luther, therefore, considers the Ten Commandments as belonging solely to the Law of Moses.

If his conclusion is correct, what is the relevance of the Mosaic Law for Christians? Luther replies that Christians only accept Moses’ laws when it is in harmony with the New Testament and natural law: “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.”¹⁹⁹ 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.”²⁰⁰

Additionally, Luther is not convinced about which day is the seventh day. In opposing those promoting the keeping of a literal Sabbath of the Decalogue,²⁰¹ Luther questions the lack of evidence concerning which day is the seventh. He says, “How do they propose to prove that Saturday is the seventh day?”²⁰²

For Calvin, 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 Sabbath” which was “peculiar to the Jews,” but only for a time.²⁰³ The reason for the temporary nature of the Sabbath, he notes, was that “it was a legal ceremony shadowing forth a spiritual rest, the truth of which was manifested in Christ.”²⁰⁴ 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.”²⁰⁵ “Spiritual rest is the mortification of the flesh; so that the sons of God should no longer live unto themselves, or indulge their own

¹⁹⁷Luther, *Moses*, 35:165.

¹⁹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰⁰*Ibid.*

²⁰¹“Table Talk Recorded by Veit Dietrich,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1958), 54:51, 52.

²⁰²*Table Talk*, 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.”

²⁰³Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:106.

²⁰⁴*Ibid.*

²⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 1:107.

inclination.”²⁰⁶ Therefore, “so far as the Sabbath was a figure of this rest, . . . 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.”²⁰⁷

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.”²⁰⁸ He adds, “the eternity of the Law must not be extended beyond the fullness 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.”²⁰⁹

Furthermore, Calvin does not see much importance for the Church to strictly adhere 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.”²¹⁰

End of the Law of Moses

Another argument for the abolition of the Sabbath was that the Sabbath ceased when ancient Israel lost their land. Luther calls attention to God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants that they would receive the land of Canaan “forever” (Gn 13:14, 15). The laws God gave Moses to govern the nation would remain valid 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.”²¹¹

Testimony of Isaiah

Luther points out that Isaiah prophesied that the Sabbath of the Jews would be abolished at the first advent of Christ, which would herald the beginning of a daily Sabbath. He interprets Isaiah 66:23 as follows: “‘From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath,’ that is, there shall be a daily sabbath in the New Testament, with no difference as to time.”²¹² He adds, Isaiah declared “that the seventh day, or, as I call it, Moses’ adaptation of it, will cease at the time of the Messiah when true sanctification and the word of God will appear richly.”²¹³ At that time “all will be sheer Sabbath, and there will no longer be any particular seventh day with six days in between. For the sanctifying of the word of God will enjoy full scope daily and abundantly, and every day will be a Sabbath.”²¹⁴ He paraphrases Isaiah’s text, saying, “This is as though he

²⁰⁶Ibid.

²⁰⁷Ibid.

²⁰⁸Calvin, *Moses*, 2:443, 444.

²⁰⁹Ibid.

²¹⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:431.

²¹¹Luther, *Genesis*, 2:362.

²¹²Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*, of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 40:93.

²¹³Luther, *Sabbatarians*, 47:93.

²¹⁴Ibid.

[Isaiah] were trying to say, ‘It will be the sabbath every day, and the people will be such that they make no distinction between days. For in the New Testament the sabbath is annihilated as regard the crude external observance, for every day is a holy day,’ etc.”²¹⁵ Instead of saying “one holy day shall follow another,” Luther says that one can turn it around and say “all days are workdays.”²¹⁶

Although Luther believes that all days are equal and need to be sanctified, he considers it correct to set aside special days so people could take time off to sanctify them. 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.”²¹⁷ We, therefore, “observe such holidays [Lord’s Day, Easter, Pentecost, etc.],” Luther says, “to preserve the ministry of the Word, so that the people may gather on certain days and at certain seasons to hear the Word, to learn to know God, to have Communion, to pray together for every need, and to thank God for His spiritual and temporal blessings.”²¹⁸

Calvin interprets Isaiah 66:23 as showing the distinction between the nature of the spiritual worship under Christ’s reign and the nature of the carnal worship under the Law.²¹⁹ Here we have “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.)”²²⁰ 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”²²¹

Testimony of the Gospels

The Gospels not only provided the Reformers insights into Sabbath observance, but also gave evidence of the abolition of the Sabbath. Luther is convinced that both Christ and His disciples demonstrated that by breaking the Sabbath they revealed that the seventh day Sabbath was abrogated.

Christ breaks the Sabbath

In Christ’s earthly ministry, Luther notices incidents of Him both breaking and keeping the Sabbath. He explains this seemingly contradictory behavior: “The 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.”²²² Therefore, at times “Christ is Mosaic in His attitude. He observes many phases of the Law. He is circumcised; He sacrifices in the temple; He goes to

²¹⁵Martin Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 47:91-93. See also *Sabbatarians*, 47:91-93.

²¹⁶Luther, *Good Works*, 44:72.

²¹⁷Luther, *Isaiah*, 17:293.

²¹⁸Luther, *Galatians*, 26:412.

²¹⁹Calvin, *Isaiah*, 8:438.

²²⁰*Ibid.*, 8:439.

²²¹*Ibid.*, 8:438.a.

²²²Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 22:223.

Jerusalem three times a year for the feast. . . orders the lepers to show themselves to the priests as the Law demanded.”²²³ On other occasions “Christ follows the New Testament in many respects.”²²⁴ Luther uses the following statements of Christ to show that He has abolished the Sabbath: “The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mt 12:8), and “The Sabbath was made for man” (Mk 2:28).

Christ is Lord of the Sabbath (Mt 12:8; Mk 2:28)

When Pharisees accused the 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).”²²⁵ 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.”²²⁶ 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.”²²⁷

Luther uses the same incident to prove that the disciples had the power to abolish the Sabbath. He interprets Christ’s reply to the Pharisees that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath saying “Christ spoke that word because his disciples had the power to break the Sabbath.”²²⁸ Just as Christ’s disciples are children of God, “every Christian too is lord over the sabbath, rather over all human commandments, teachings, and ordinances.”²²⁹ 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.”²³⁰

In contrast to Luther, Calvin does not think Christ abolished the Sabbath at this time. He explains that although Christ asserted 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.)”²³¹ Thus, according to Calvin, the Sabbath was abolished only at the time of Christ’s death.

The Sabbath was made for men (Mk 2:27)

The Gospel of Mark mentioned an additional argument Christ used against the Pharisees. Christ’s response, “The Sabbath was made for men [sic.]” (Mk 2:27), is interpreted by Luther in his understanding of justification by faith. He says, “Here the righteousness that consists in the observance of days, even of the Sabbath, is rejected. ‘I do not care,’ He says, ‘for a greater one is

²²³Luther, *Sermons on John*, 22:223.

²²⁴Ibid.

²²⁵Ibid.

²²⁶Ibid.

²²⁷Ibid.

²²⁸Luther, *Isaiah*, 36:240.

²²⁹Martin Luther, *Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament, of Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 36:240.

²³⁰Luther, *Both Kinds*, 36:240.

²³¹Calvin, *Evangelists*, 16:51.

here' (Matt. 12:6), that is, the Sabbath does not justify, but faith in Christ does. To believe that the Sabbath justifies is to believe something contrary to the truth."²³² Again, Luther describes the observance of a specific day, the Sabbath, without faith as meaningless.

Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, argues that the Sabbath was made for our needs, as our needs dictate: "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."²³³

Furthermore, he says "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."²³⁴ This means that the Sabbath is not only subject to us in case of "extreme necessity," but also in "ordinary daily necessity."²³⁵

Christ abolished the ceremonial nature of the Sabbath

Calvin stresses that Christ's advent abolished the ceremonial nature of the Sabbath: "But all that it contained of a ceremonial nature was without doubt abolished by the advent of the Lord Christ. For he is the truth, at whose presence all figures disappear; the body, at the sight of which all the shadows are relinquished."²³⁶ Calvin also says, "He [Christ] is the true fulfillment of the sabbath. Having been 'buried with him by baptism, we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, that being partakers of his resurrection, we may walk in newness of life.'"²³⁷

Testimony of Paul

In his commentaries on Romans, Galatians, and Colossians, Luther finds further arguments for the abolishment of the Sabbath at the time of Christ. Calvin's arguments are taken from Luther's commentaries on Colossians and Hebrews.

Sabbath is not part of the natural law (Rom 2:15)

From his study of the writings of Paul, Luther concludes that there are several commandments among the Ten Commandments that are ceremonial and no longer obligatory for Christians. One is the command against images; the other is the command for Sabbath observance. Here is how Luther arrives at his position.

The contemporary context of the removal of images from the churches and their subsequent destruction by supporters of the Reformation directed Luther to a study of the prohibition against images. His investigations led him to conclude that the Law does not forbid images but the worship of images. The command to destroy images is a part of the Mosaic Law that is ceremonial and not applicable to New Testament Christians who live in harmony with natural

²³²Martin Luther, *Lectures on Titus*, of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 29:7.

²³³Ulrich Zwingli, "Liberty Respecting Food in Lent," a sermon, in *The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli Together With the Selection From His German Works*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel M. Jackson, trans. Henry Preble, (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1522; New York: Knickerbocker, 1912), 81.

²³⁴Zwingli, *Latin Works*, 1:82, 83.

²³⁵*Ibid.*, 1:83.

²³⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:429.

²³⁷*Ibid.*

law. He writes, “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).”²³⁸ 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.”²³⁹ Thus, according to Luther, both the command against the making of images and the keeping of the Sabbath are ceremonial aspects of the Ten Commandments that should no longer be observed.

The Law with the Sabbath is limited to Christ’s first advent (Rom 6:14; Gal 3:24)

In his discussion of the Law and Sabbath keeping, Luther distinguishes between two types of righteousness: active righteousness and passive righteousness. He defines active righteousness as “all righteousness of my own or of the divine Law,” and passive righteousness as “the righteousness of grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of sins.” “I embrace only that passive righteousness,” he says, which is “the righteousness of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, which we do not perform but receive, which we do not have but accept, when God the Father grants it to us through Jesus Christ.”²⁴⁰

From the perspective of active and passive righteousness, Luther describes the role of the Gospel. When he meets a person who is “contrite, oppressed by the Law, terrified by sin, and thirsting for comfort, then it is time for me to take the Law and active righteousness from his sight and to set forth before him through the Gospel, the passive righteousness which excludes Moses and the Law and shows the promise of Christ.”²⁴¹

Here Luther reveals the radical impact of Christ’s grace in contrast to the Law. Through the acceptance of the Gospel, “a man is raised up again and gains hope. Nor is he any longer under the Law; he is under grace, as the apostle says (Rom. 6:14): ‘You are not under law but under grace.’ How not under law? According to the new man, to whom the Law does not apply.”²⁴² “For the Law had its limits until Christ, as Paul says . . . (Gal. 3:24): ‘The Law, until Christ.’ When He came, Moses and the Law stopped. So did circumcision, sacrifices, and the Sabbath. So did all the prophets.”²⁴³

Observing days, months, seasons and years is futile (Gal 4:10)

In Galatians 4:10, Luther sees another argument against the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath. Commenting on the futility to “observe days and months and seasons and years,” he rejects “the interpretation of nearly all theologians of his time that this passage refers ‘to the astrological days of the Chaldeans.’”²⁴⁴ He says, “Paul is instructing the conscience. Therefore he is speaking, not about the Gentile practice of observing days, etc., something that pertains only to

²³⁸Martin Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy, of Luther’s Works*. ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 9:81.

²³⁹Luther, *Deuteronomy*, 9:81, 82.

²⁴⁰Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, of Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 26:6.

²⁴¹Luther, *Galatians*, 26:6.

²⁴²*Ibid.*, 26:7.

²⁴³*Ibid.*

²⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 26:410. Luther states that he adopted Jerome’s view who “understands the passage simply and correctly a referring only to the Jews” in Jerome, *Commentarius*, 403-404 (Luther, *Galatians*, 27:295).

the body, but about the Law of God and the observance of days, months, etc., according to the Law of Moses.”²⁴⁵ Paul, he continues, “is speaking about religious days, months, and seasons, which the Galatians were observing, on the basis of instruction by the false apostles, as a means of obtaining justification.”²⁴⁶ “For Moses had commanded the Jews to observe religiously the Sabbath, the new moon, the first and the seventh month, three set seasons, or festivals—namely Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths—the Sabbatical Year, and the Year of Jubilee.”²⁴⁷ Luther states, “Now the Galatians had been forced by the false apostles to observe these same rites as something necessary for righteousness. This is why he [Paul] says that they have lost grace and Christian liberty, and have turned back to the slavery of the weak and beggarly elements.”²⁴⁸ The cause for this tragic situation of the Galatians was that “they had been persuaded by the false apostles that these laws had to be observed; that when they were observed, they granted righteousness; but that when they were neglected, they bought damnation”²⁴⁹

Then Luther reveals how Paul sets the Galatians free: “But Paul does not permit consciences to be bound by the Mosaic Law in any way, but everywhere he sets them free from the Law.”²⁵⁰ In reviewing Galatians 4:10, 11, Luther mentions the futility of keeping a literal seventh-day Sabbath: “Here Paul calls it lost labor to observe days and seasons, among which is also the sabbath.”²⁵¹

Love takes precedence over Sabbath keeping (Gal 5:14)

Luther points out 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.”²⁵² 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).”²⁵³ 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).”²⁵⁴ From these examples, Luther concludes “that 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.”²⁵⁵

²⁴⁵Ibid.

²⁴⁶Ibid.

²⁴⁷Ibid., 26:410, 411. Luther, quoting Jerome, says, “‘Days,’ he [Jerome] says, as Sabbaths and new moons; ‘months,’ however, as the first and seventh month; ‘seasons,’ as those in which they came to Jerusalem three times each year; ‘year,’ however, as the seventh, the year of release, and the fiftieth, which they called the year of jubilee” in Jerome, *Commentarius*, 403-404 (Luther, *Galatians*, 27:295, 296).

²⁴⁸Ibid., 26:411.

²⁴⁹Ibid.

²⁵⁰Ibid. As evidence, he lists Gal. 5:2; Col. 2:16; Luke 17:20.

²⁵¹Luther, *Heavenly Prophets*, 40:93, 94,

²⁵²Luther, *Galatians*, 27:55.

²⁵³Ibid.

²⁵⁴Ibid.

²⁵⁵Ibid.

The Sabbath is ceremonial and a shadow (Col 2:16, 17)

Luther, in his response to the book, *Von dem Sabbat und begotten feyertagen*, a 1524 treatise on the Sabbath by the Sabbatarian²⁵⁶ theologian Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, argues that the Decalogue does indeed contain ceremonial laws that have been abolished for Christians: “It is not true that there is no ceremonial or judicial law in the Ten Commandments. Such laws are in the decalogue, depend on it, and belong there.”²⁵⁷ He supports his argument with the ceremonial nature of the Sabbath saying, “For St. Paul (Col. 2), 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.’”²⁵⁸ “Here Paul expressly abrogates the sabbath and calls it a shadow now past since the body, which is Christ himself, is come.”²⁵⁹

Commenting on Colossians 2:17, Calvin mentions that the Sabbath “was a ceremonial precept,”²⁶⁰ and that Paul taught the outward Sabbath rest was “nothing but a ceremony, the substance of which must be sought in Christ.”²⁶¹ Christ is “the real substance of the truth,” Calvin says, 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. “Christians therefore ought to depart from all superstitious observance of days.”²⁶²

Calvin rejects the view that the ceremonial part of Sabbath is gone, but the moral part remains. Those who hold to that view are “false prophets, who in past ages have infected the people with Jewish notion, affirming that nothing but the ceremonial part of this commandment, which, according to them, is the appointment of the seventh day, has been abrogated but that the moral part of it, that is, the observance of one day in seven, still remains.”²⁶³ What they are doing “is only changing the day in contempt of the Jews, while they retain the same opinion of the holiness of a day.”²⁶⁴ This implies that “the same mysterious signification would still be attributed to particular days, which they formerly obtained among the Jews.”²⁶⁵ Those who hold to this view are worse than Jews. He states, “For those who adhere to it, far exceed the Jews in a gross, carnal, and superstitious observance of the sabbath; so that the reproofs, which we find in Isaiah, are equally applicable to them in the present age, as to those whom the Prophet reproofed in his time.”²⁶⁶

²⁵⁶*Table Talk*, 54:51. See also Footnote 172.

²⁵⁷Luther, *Heavenly Prophets*, 40:93.

²⁵⁸*Ibid.*

²⁵⁹*Ibid.* See also Luther, *Moses*, 35:165. Luther stated further, “There follow two additional arguments based on Gal 4:10 and Is 66:23 and a statement against Karlstadt.”

²⁶⁰Calvin, *Moses*, 2:435.

²⁶¹*Ibid.*

²⁶²Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:429.

²⁶³*Ibid.*, 1:432.

²⁶⁴*Ibid.*

²⁶⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶⁶*Ibid.*

Although 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.”²⁶⁷

There remains a rest for God’s people (Heb 4:6, 9, 10)

Calvin discusses the rest for God’s people in relation 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.”²⁶⁸ 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.”²⁶⁹ 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.”²⁷⁰ The result will be “that man becomes happy by self-denial. For what else is [it] 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.”²⁷¹ This, then, is the true Sabbath rest for God’s people. “But through inbred corruption this is never the case, until we rest from our own works.”²⁷²

In exposing 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.²⁷³ 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.”²⁷⁴

The change of the Sabbath

In dealing with the change of the Sabbath, attention will be given to the Reformers’ views of the agent of change, the reasons for the change, the time of the change, the way Sunday keeping differs from Sunday observance, and the attitudes toward Sabbath keepers.

The agent of the change from Saturday to Sunday

According to Luther, the instrument that changed the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday seems to be the church. He remarks, “Since from of old Sunday [Lord’s day] has been

²⁶⁷Ibid., 1:429.

²⁶⁸John Calvin, John, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, of *Calvin Commentaries*, trans. John Owens (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 22:96.

²⁶⁹Calvin, *Hebrews*, 22:98.

²⁷⁰Ibid.

²⁷¹Ibid.

²⁷²Ibid.

²⁷³Ibid., 22:99.

²⁷⁴Ibid.

appointed” for public worship.²⁷⁵ Calvin mentions that the apostles made the change.”²⁷⁶ Later pointing out that “the ancients . . . substituted what we call the Lord’s day in the room of the Sabbath.”²⁷⁷ Presumably, he equates the apostles with the ancients.

Reasons for changing from Saturday to Sunday

The importance of the Lord’s Day as Christ’s resurrection day

Because of the significance of Sunday to the Christian church as the day of Christ’s resurrection, the Reformers continued to observe it as the Lord’s Day—the day they had inherited from their Roman Catholic upbringing.

Luther brings out that throughout the centuries “Christians . . . have until now kept Sunday, not Saturday because Sunday is Christ’s resurrection day.”²⁷⁸

In reply to the question, “why was the Lord’s day chosen?” Calvin 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.”²⁷⁹ Later he writes, “For since the resurrection of the Lord is the end and consummation of that true rest, which was adumbrated [foreshadowed] by the ancient sabbath, the same day which put an end to the shadows, admonishes Christians not to adhere to a shadowy ceremony.”²⁸⁰

Church tradition of Sunday worship

Although Luther believes that one day is no better than another for divine services, and that services should be held on a daily basis, he says Protestants assemble for worship on Sunday to merely preserve harmony in the church. He stresses that it is difficult to have daily public worship services because “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 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.”²⁸¹

Breaking the superstition of the Jewish Sabbath

Calvin assumes “the probability” that the Apostles kept the seventh-day Sabbath at first, but later set it aside for the Lord’s Day.²⁸² Among the Jews, Sabbath keeping had become part of a system of righteousness by works, which revealed their superstitious belief that not keeping the Sabbath would cost them their salvation. To counteract this superstition, the apostles presumably shifted the weekly day of worship from the Saturday to Sunday, the day Calvin thought was the Lord’s Day (Rv 1:10).²⁸³ Calvin concludes, “Now, whereas it was expedient for the destruction of

²⁷⁵Luther, *Large Catechism*, 605.

²⁷⁶Calvin, *Corinthians*, 20:68.

²⁷⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:431.

²⁷⁸ *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*,” Weimar, no. 16 (1899), 478 transl. and quoted by William M. Landeen, *Martin Luther’s Religious Thought* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1971), 196.

²⁷⁹Calvin, *Corinthians*, 20:68.

²⁸⁰Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:431.

²⁸¹Luther, *Large Catechism*, 605.

²⁸²Calvin, *Corinthians*, 20:68

²⁸³*Ibid.*

superstition, the day which the Jews kept holy was abolished; and it being necessary for the reservation of decorum, order, and peace, in the Christian Church, another day was appointed for the same use.”²⁸⁴ This appointed day was Sunday.

The time of the changing of Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday

Luther does not give a specific date or time for the change of the Sabbath from the seventh-day to Sunday, the first day of the week. He simply mentions “But since from of old Sunday [the Lord’s Day] has been appointed.”²⁸⁵

Calvin’s view on when the change of the Sabbath took place is that at first the apostles kept the Sabbath because it was a day to which they were accustomed. But later on, the apostles made a change. At the time Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth, Calvin indicates that the believers still kept the seventh-day Sabbath because the collection for the saints in Jerusalem took place on the Sabbath (1 Cor 16:1). He comments, “The clause rendered *on one of the Sabbaths*, (*kata mian sabbatwn*) 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.”²⁸⁶ 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.”²⁸⁷ Calvin further disputes Chrysostom’s view that “the term Sabbath is employed here to mean the *Lord’s day*, (Rev. i. 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.”²⁸⁸

From 1 Corinthians 16:2, Calvin infers 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 should be appointed for holding sacred assemblies, as they cannot be held every day.”²⁸⁹

Sunday observance differs from Sabbath observance

Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and their immediate successors agreed that although Christians should take time to assemble together to attend divine services, they need not be confined to a specific time or a strict rest like the Jews and their Sabbaths, for no day is preferred above another.

Luther’s early position on the change of the day of worship is that the Old Testament Sabbath has been changed to Sunday, and Sunday has adopted the character of the Sabbath. 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 day of rest, or a day of celebration, or a holy day.”²⁹⁰ Later on, Luther did not confine himself specifically to Sunday.

²⁸⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:430, 431.

²⁸⁵ Luther, *Large Catechism*, 605.

²⁸⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, of *Calvin Commentaries*, trans. John Pringle (Edinburg: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-56; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 20: 68.

²⁸⁷ Calvin, *Corinthians*, 20:68.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 20:68, 69.

²⁹⁰ Luther, *Good Works*, 44:71.

According to Luther, to keep a day of 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.”²⁹¹

These days are observed in the spirit of Christian freedom and to preserve orderly behavior, unlike the New Testament Judaizers and “the papists” who perform these works to obtain righteousness. Luther 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.”²⁹² “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.”²⁹³

Luther’s view of the manner in which Sundays and other holy days ought to be kept is seen in a tract of counsels to pastors where he says people should be taught that the reason for observing them is “to learn the Word of God. If one wishes to do manual labor, he may do so in his own way. For God requires observance of these church ordinances by us only on account of the teaching, as Paul says in Col. 2 [:16].”²⁹⁴

Expressing a similar sentiment, Zwingli does not consider the seventh day more holy than the rest of the weekdays. 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.”²⁹⁵ 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.”²⁹⁶

Zwingli’s attitude to common work on Sabbath is that it is “lawful on the Lord’s day, after divine service, for any man to pursue his labors.”²⁹⁷ 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 usual to be done in harvest time), to transfer the solemnity and rest of the Lord’s day, or Sabbath, to some other day.”²⁹⁸

²⁹¹Luther, *Large Catechism*, 605.

²⁹²Luther, *Galatians*, 26:411.

²⁹³Ibid.

²⁹⁴Philipp Melancthon, “Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 40:298. Although Philipp Melancthon is the author of this publication, “Luther’s ideas underlie the whole and some passages reflect his pen. Because of the endorsement of it by Luther, and the fact that he not only wrote the preface but made revisions in later editions, the work is generally included in the works of Luther” (40:266).

²⁹⁵Zwingli cited in Daniel Augsburger, “Calvin and the Mosaic Law,” Thesis, University of Strasbourg, 1976. 225.

²⁹⁶Augsburger, 255.

²⁹⁷Robert 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.

²⁹⁸Zwingli cited in James A. Hesse, *Sunday, Its Origin, History, and Present Obligation, Considered in the Bampton Lectures*. (London: John Murray, 1866), 352.

In response to the question, “why do we not assemble 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 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.”²⁹⁹ However, he admits that for many, this is 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?”³⁰⁰ This implies that they should keep following the almost universal tradition among Christians of assembling on Sunday, which they assume is the Lord’s Day.

Calvin does not see much importance in the strict adherence to a seven-day week cycle for the day of worship. This day could come in six days, in seven days, or in eight days. He says that churches may select any day for their services, as long as they observe discipline and order and avoid being superstitious about the need to keep a specific day.³⁰¹

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 responds 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.”³⁰²

Others argued that Paul teaches that Christians are not to be judged by their observance of holy days because they are a shadow of something in the 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 to be weak in faith he who “esteems one day above another” (Rom 14: 5). Calvin replies that Paul used these arguments against New Testament, 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.”³⁰³ 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 of reverence for the mysteries formerly represented by it.”³⁰⁴ He continues, “This preposterous distinction of days the Apostle strenuously opposes; and not that legitimate difference which promotes the peace of the Christian Church.”³⁰⁵ 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.”³⁰⁶

²⁹⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:430.

³⁰⁰*Ibid.*

³⁰¹*Ibid.*, 1:431.

³⁰²*Ibid.*, 1:430.

³⁰³*Ibid.*, 1:430, 431.

³⁰⁴*Ibid.*

³⁰⁵*Ibid.*

³⁰⁶*Ibid.*

Attitudes to Christians observing a literal Sabbath

The magisterial Reformers strongly oppose Christians who are convinced that the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments is not ceremonial and still needs to be observed.

In comparing Saturday with Sunday, Luther admits that if one believes that God commands observance of the Sabbath, one has to keep it. He states, “Whoever would make a binding command out of the Sabbath as an act demanded by God, must keep Saturday and not Sunday. For Saturday is commanded [to] the Jews and not Sunday.”³⁰⁷ However, the longstanding tradition of Christians keeping Sunday clearly evidences the correctness of their position. He asserts, “Christians . . . have until now kept Sunday, not Saturday because Sunday is Christ’s resurrection day. This is surely a sure sign that the Sabbath, yes, indeed, all of Moses does not concern us, or we would have to keep Saturday. And this is a great and strong proof that the Sabbath is abolished. For we cannot find a place in the entire New Testament where Christians are commanded to keep Sabbath.”³⁰⁸

When Karlstadt published his book on the importance of the Sabbath, Luther expresses great concern over its impact on the Protestant Reformation: “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 that we also would have to be circumcised, etc.”³⁰⁹

When confronted with Christian Sabbatarians, Luther frequently responds that they must keep the whole law of Moses. This refers to “those who insist on the Sabbath ought to be circumcised as well. It would be another matter if they wished for certain reasons to change the Lord’s Day into the Sabbath and otherwise left it free. But when they say, ‘You must observe this,’ we deny it and reply, ‘Then go ahead and observe all of it!’”³¹⁰

Luther argues that the Sabbath command is so different from all others of the Decalogue that it shows it was meant for the Jews. “The others are general and are all taught by nature, just as a prince gives a general command to all his subjects and then gives special commands to his individual aides. So the Sabbath is special and applies only to the Jews.”³¹¹

As a movement of Christian Sabbath keepers emerged in Moravia and Austria, Luther becomes very concerned and calls these people “foolish” and designates them, as “Sabbatarians:” “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.”³¹² These Sabbatarians he calls “apes” of the Jews.³¹³

³⁰⁷Landein, *Religious Thought*, 196.

³⁰⁸Ibid.

³⁰⁹Luther, *Heavenly Prophets*, 40:94.

³¹⁰*Table Talk*, 54:52.

³¹¹Ibid.

³¹²Luther, *Genesis*, 2:361.

³¹³Ibid., 2:362.

In several places, Sabbatarians practiced circumcision and, consequently, were called “Judaizers.” Luther says, “I hear that in Austria and Moravia some Judaizers are today advocating both the Sabbath and circumcision.”³¹⁴ He places responsibility for this new movement on the Jews and the lack of preachers of the Gospel: “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.”³¹⁵

In Austria these Sabbatarians, Luther reports, “have tried to force men to observe the law of circumcision, as though they could not be saved unless they were circumcised.”³¹⁶

Conclusion

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

One of these traditions that did not get corrected was the belief that Sabbath was Jewish and was abolished at Christ’s first Advent. One reformer, Karlstadt, perceived, more than any of the Reformers, the continued importance of Sabbath worship practices for Christians. Yet even he was not willing to call on all Christians to reject Sunday as a day of worship and return to worship on Saturday as the day of worship. However, he seems to have privately kept the biblical seventh-day Sabbath.

The Reformers, however, successfully dispelled the Catholic idea that Sunday was the day of worship for Christians instituted by divine appointment in place Saturday, and that 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 they left the particular day up to the magistrates and the church. In their opinion, it could be any day because there was no day that was holy; all days were the same. Sunday, however, remained the day of choice as it was the generally accepted practice.

Another successful reform the Reformers developed was liberating Sunday from the Catholic view that Sunday worship was obligatory and an integral part of obtaining grace and the righteousness necessary for salvation. Because of its similarity to the Jewish attitude towards the Sabbath, the Reformers strongly rejected the concept of righteousness by works through compulsory worship on Sunday and by refraining from all work, in compliance with the Ten Commandments. As divine law does 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 in worshipping on Sunday, the Lord’s Day as they called it.

³¹⁴Ibid., 3:77.

³¹⁵“Table Talk Recorded by Anthony Lauterbach and Jerome Weller,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 54:239.

³¹⁶Luther, *Genesis*, 7:152. The editor writes: “One of the leaders of the Sabbatarian or ‘Judaizing’ faction of Anabaptists in Austria was Andrew Fischer, who had died ca. 1540” (Footnote 13).

The last significant reform the Reformers promoted was the proper and holy observance of the day of worship, in the light of the Scriptures. True, the Reformers did not see the necessity of going back to observing the seventh-day Sabbath, but in their close study of the Bible, they made major progress in finding out how to sanctify the Sabbath. Instead of following the Catholic traditions of the Middle Ages and keeping the day of worship as a day of idleness, abstaining from any type of work, and attending church and mass, they carefully studied the biblical passages of Genesis, the Ten Commandments, the sabbatical passages in Isaiah, Ezekiel, the Gospels, and the Pauline epistles to find out how to sanctify the day dedicated to the special worship of God. The majority of their writings on the Sabbath were devoted to the proper and improper keeping of the Sabbath. Very little was written about the correct day of worship. Except for discussion with some Sabbatarians, their writings focused on gaining a closer relationship with God through faith and not through personal works. The day of worship was a day on which believers should assemble together, praising His name, hearing the proclamation of the Word, studying His Word and discovering how God could work in their hearts, emptying themselves from their own works, letting God be in control of their lives, and finally in ministering to their neighbors. This experience was part of the important process of sanctification, so that the world would see that the worship of the divine Savior was a sign that the Lord sanctifies and regenerates believers. This truly was the great contribution of the magisterial Reformers to the Protestant Reformation through their works on the Sabbath. Unfortunately, this dimension of the Reformation and its blessings was not treasured by their followers in later centuries and has largely been lost.