

CALVIN ON THE WEEKLY CHRISTIAN SABBATH

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As it is of the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual Commandment, binding all men in all ages, He hath particularly apointed one day in seven for a sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath. This sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the publick and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

[The Calvin-istic *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 21:7-8]

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Luther started the Protestant Reformation in 1517. However, in the year before his death the Romish Council of Trent started giving its reply, in 1545.

This resulted in the 1652 *Catechism of Trent*, which is still Rome's official doctrine even today. There, it is wrongly alleged that the weekly sabbath was not "a natural principle," alias a creation ordinance. Instead, the weekly sabbath is averred to have existed only "from the time the people of Israel were liberated from the bondage of Pharaoh."

Furthermore, Rome there even claims that the obligation to keep the weekly sabbath was destined "to cease together with the abrogation of other Jewish[!] rites and ceremonies - namely at the death of Christ." For "it has pleased the Church[!]... that the religious celebration of the sabbath day shall be transferred to the Lord's day" and the "other[!] days."¹

These "other days" are not the Old Testament Feasts instituted for Israel by God in His Word. These "other days" are Romish festivals instituted for Romanists by the Deformed Church only millennia later. As the 1542–1621 Cardinal Archbishop Bellarmine of Capua stated in his own *Catechism* anent the 'Third[!] Commandment': "Remember the festivals, to keep them holy."

Thereby, the Christian Sabbath of Holy Scripture was ignored. (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2,9; Luke 23:56–24:6; John 20:1,19, 26; Acts 2:1; 20:6–7; 1Cor 16:1–2; Heb 4:8–11 cf 10:25; Rev 1:10.) Thereby, the *Lord's day* was, and is, degraded to the level of the saints' days appointed by Mediaeval Romanism. Thereby, Jesus Christ the only–begotten Son of God the Father, was and is, rather demoted to the standing of mere mortals like "St" Teresa!

This then was, and is, Rome's answer to the Reformation. This was, and is, the reply to the Reformed Church of the Deformed Church – alias that part of the Church that refused to reform, and still refuses to reform, according to God's Word. After the light of Luther at the dawn of the sixteenth century, there followed the darkness of Trent. *Post lucem, tenebrae*. But in the merciful providence of Almighty God, the Lord's day was again destined to be illuminated by the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2–4f). *Post tenebras, Lux!*

Doubtless it was the light received by John Calvin of Geneva (1509–64) which gave the death–blow to the Romish festivals, and great impetus to God's Decalogue and to Sunday observance. Even in his famous *Institutes* – first published when Calvin was but 27 years old – he has fully seven[!] long paragraphs on the sabbath.² A brief analysis of some of this material – before we go on to other later material authored by Calvin – will now be very helpful.

In his *Institutes*, Calvin grounds the Lord's day in the weekly sabbath. Against Rome, he insists that the ordinance of the Sabbath was not instituted merely at Sinai and solely for the Hebrews. To the contrary, he insists it was instituted at creation, in the seven days of our earth's formation, and as an ordinance for the entire human race.

Observes Calvin: "Should any one expect some secret meaning in the number 'seven' – this being in Scripture the number for perfection – it may have been selected, not without cause, to denote perpetuity[!]. In accordance with this, Moses concludes his description of the succession of day and night on the same day on which he relates that the Lord rested from His works"³ (Genesis

2:1-3).

Calvin continues: "Another probable reason for the number [seven] may be that the Lord intended that the Sabbath never should be completed before the arrival of the last[!] day. We here begin our blessed rest in Him, and daily make new progress in it. But because we must still wage an incessant warfare with the flesh, it shall not be consummated until the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah : 'From one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the Lord' (Isaiah 66:23); in other words, when God shall be 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:28). It may seem therefore that by the seventh day the Lord delineated to His people the future perfection of His Sabbath in the last day, that by continual meditation on the Sabbath, they might through their whole lives[!] aspire to this perfection."

Taking the above even more simply, Calvin next further explains "that the Lord appointed[!] a certain day[!] on which His people might be trained... to meditate constantly on the spiritual rest; and fixed upon the seventh... Still, there can be no doubt that, on the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, the ceremonial part of the commandment was abolished... Christians, therefore, should have nothing to do with a superstitious observance of days."⁴

Law-hating Antinomians have ignored all of the above, except the last two sentences. Severing those two sentences from the preceding passages, Antinomians have tried to represent Calvin as here teaching that the weekly sabbath was totally abolished at Calvary.

However, law-hating Antinomians have here forgotten that Calvin loved God's Law! For the Genevan loved the non-superstitious way the Old Testament Hebrew saints had observed the weekly Sabbath. He hated only the superstitious ways in which the later Pharisees had endeavoured to keep it, after perverting it.

Accordingly, Antinomians have here overlooked Calvin's clear teaching that the *sabbaticality* of the Fourth Commandment - its 'every-seven-days-ness' as well as its 'restfulness' - is moral and unabolishable. They have confused this with Calvin's correct *caveat* that the 'Saturdayness' of Old Testament practice was not moral but ceremonial, and was indeed abolished at Calvary. In one word - they have wrongly concluded that at Calvary the entirety of the Fourth Commandment was abolished - together with the then-fulfilled 'shadows' of the various laws of Moses.

But even the 27-year-old Calvin protests against such a mis-

interpretation. For he next immediately proceeds to describe cases which "ought not to be classed with ancient shadows, but are adapted to every age." He insists that, even after the Calvary fulfilment of the Old Testament Sabbath and the abrogation of the Sabbath as held by the Jews on Saturdays, "there is still room among us [Christians] first to assemble on stated[!] days for the hearing of the Word" and "to give our servants and labourers relaxation from labour. It cannot be doubted that the Lord provided for both in the Commandment of the Sabbath"⁵ – "the Apostles[!] having retained[!] the Sabbath[!]" for the "poor of the Christian community."⁶ (1Cor 16:1–2; Heb 4:9–11; 10:25; 13:15–20f.)

Calvin elaborates on this. He does so by quoting from "Deuteronomy in the following terms: 'the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant – [so] that thy man-servant and thy maid-servant may rest as well as thou' (Deut 5:14). Likewise in Exodus (23:12): 'That thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy handmaid and the stranger may be refreshed.' Who can deny that both are equally[!] applicable to us[!] as to the Jews?"

Well, the Antinomians both ancient and modern 'can deny' and do so deny it! Yet not Calvin – no, not even when still in his twenties. Indeed, on behalf of all consistent Christians everywhere, he himself then asks about religious assemblies on stated days and about the need of relaxation from daily labour. Questions Calvin: "Who can deny that both are equally[!] applicable to us[!] as to the Jews?"

Calvin then further explains: "Religious meetings are enjoined us by the Word of God. Their necessity, experience itself sufficiently demonstrates. But unless these meetings are stated, and have fixed[!] days allotted to them, how can they be held? We must, as the Apostle expresses it, do all things decently and in order (1Cor 14:40) [cf 16:1–2]. So impossible, however, would it be to preserve decency and order without this politic arrangement, that the dissolution of it would instantly lead to the disturbance and ruin of the Church."

Calvin next asserts that "the reason for which the Lord appointed a Sabbath to the Jews is equally applicable to us," namely Bible-believing Christians. Consequently, "no man can assert that it is a matter with which we have nothing to do. Our most provident and indulgent Parent has been pleased to provide for our[!] wants, no less than for the wants of the Jews... Why

should we not adopt the rule which the will of God has obviously[!] imposed upon us?"

The Genius of Geneva next attacks the Antinomians. He declares that "some restless spirits are now making an outcry about [and against] the observance of the Lord's day. They complain that Christian people are [being] trained in Judaism, because some observance of days is retained. My reply is those days are observed[!] by us[!] without Judaism, because in this matter we differ widely from the Jews. We do not celebrate it with most minute formality... but we adopt it as a necessary[!] remedy for preserving order." ⁷

Correctly, concedes Calvin, "Paul informs... the Romans that it is superstitious to make one day differ from another (Romans 14:5). But who, except those restless men [the Antinomians], does not see *what* the observance *is* to which the Apostle refers? Those persons had *no* regard to that *politic* and *ecclesiastical* arrangement... They dreamed that, by their [mere] *cessation* from labour, they were cultivating the *mysteries*...

"It was, I say, against *this* preposterous observance of days that the Apostle inveighs – and *not* against that *legitimate* selection which is subservient to the peace of Christian society. For, in the churches established by him, this was the use for which *the Sabbath was retained*. He tells the Corinthians to set *the first day* [of every week] apart for collecting contributions... (1Cor 16:2)." [My emphases throughout – F N Lee.]

Calvin's next two sentences are crucial but are frequently misquoted out of context. Consequently, we now present those sentences and ourselves emphasise their key words, before going on to state the Antimonian perversions thereof and before, thereafter, ourselves refuting those perversions.

Calvin declares: "If superstition is dreaded, there was more danger in *keeping* the *Jewish Sabbath* than [in keeping] the *Lord's day*, as *Christians now do*. It being expedient to overthrow superstition, the *Jewish* holyday was *abolished*... As a thing *necessary* to *retain* decency, order and peace *in the Church* [of the Lord Jesus Christ], *another day* was *appointed* for *that purpose*."

In the last two sentences much use has been made by Antinomians of Calvin's careful statement that "the Jewish holyday was abolished." However, little use have they made of his equally careful statement two lines later that "another day was appointed for that purpose." Calvin does not here claim that the weekly Sabbath as such was abolished. He only claims that "the *Jewish*

Sabbath" (on Saturdays) alias "the *Jewish* holyday was *abolished*."

Moreover, Calvin is here clearly referring to the "*keeping*" of the *Lord's day*, as *Christians* now do." Indeed, in the place of the abolished Jewish Saturday, Calvin clearly states it is "*necessary to retain*" for "*order and peace in the Church*" precisely "*another day*" – viz Sunday – which was *appointed* for *that purpose*" (of 'sabbathness').

"It was not," Calvin then further explains, "without a reason that the early Christians substituted what we call the Lord's day for the Sabbath. The resurrection of our Lord being the end and accomplishment of that true rest which the ancient Sabbath typified, this day by which types were abolished serves to warn Christians" etc.^b (Matt 24:20; 28:1; Mark 16:1,9; Luke 23:56–24:6; 24:26–33f; John 20:1–19; 20:26; Acts 2:1; 20:6–11; 21:4,27; 28:14; 1Cor 16:1–2; Heb 4:8–11; 10:25; Rev 1:10; 14:13f.)

Calvin then repudiates "the false prophets who in later times instilled Jewish ideas into the people, alleging that nothing was abrogated but what was ceremonial in the commandment. This they term, in their language, the taxation of the seventh day." Now those "false prophets" alleged that within those "Jewish ideas" of the Pharisaical perversion of the Sabbath – "the moral part remains – viz, the observance of one day in seven. But this is nothing else than to insult the Jews by changing the day, and yet mentally attributing to it the same sanctity, thus retaining the same typical distinction of days as had place among the Jews" (in contradistinction to the godly Old Testament Hebrews).

Especially from the above words, Antinomians attempt to argue that Calvin abolished all distinction between Sunday and the other days of the week. In context, however, it is clear Calvin merely means that Sunday is not to be kept in the way which legalistic Judaists kept Saturday, especially between the time of Malachi and that of the Pharisees.

For Calvin does not here say Christians should not keep Sunday the way the Ancient Patriarchs kept (or should have kept) their Sabbath before the giving of the Decalogue to Moses on Mount Sinai (Gen 2:1–3; 8:6–12; Job 1:5; 2:13; Ex 5:4f; 7:25; 16:28f). Nor does Calvin say Sunday should not be kept the way the godly Hebrews kept (or should have kept) the Sabbath from the time of Moses until the time of Malachi (Ex 20:8–11; Neh 13:15–22; Isa 56:4–7; 58:13–14; Jer 17:19–27; Mic 8:5). Calvin here instead condemns the way Pharisaical Jews had been

keeping the Sabbath after the time of Malachi (Matt 12:1-8; Luke 13:10-17; John 7:19-23; etc).

This is why Calvin now concludes his paragraph: "We must be careful... to observe[!] the general[!] doctrine - viz, in order that religion may neither be lost nor languish amongst us, we must[!] diligently attend on our religious assemblies, and duly avail ourselves of those external[!] aids which tend to promote the worship of God" (Acts 20:6-7; 1Cor 16:1-2; Heb 4:8-11; 10:25; Rev 1:10).

Notes

1. H J W Legerton: *The Church of Rome and the Lord's Day*, Lord's Day Observance Society, London, 1957, pp 5-9.
2. *Institutes*, II:8:28-33.
3. *Institutes*, II:8:30.
4. *Institutes*, II:8:31.
5. *Institutes*, II:8:32.
6. Thus P Fairbairn: *The Typology of Scripture*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, n.d., p 452.
7. *Institutes*, II:8:33.
8. *Institutes*, II:8:34

[To be concluded]

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13. Dabney, discussing "God's Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy" in his *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, pages 282-3, refers to the French Amyraldians as "Hypothetic Universalists."
14. Richard A Muller: has written several important books on post-Reformation Reformed theological matters. I am quoting here from page 38 of his *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 1: Prolegomena.
15. Muller: op. cit. page 19.
16. Ibid. page 18

CORRESPONDENCE [Continued from page 40]

wished to have it. Moreover, we would be delighted to see you at our meetings and conferences and have you share in our activities.

We have no wish to influence you unduly, as clearly you have given much thought to the study of baptism. Nevertheless, we do have a considerable amount of literature relating to the subject and we would be only too pleased to send some of this to you. In particular, I would recommend the book "God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace" by Herman Hanko and I am taking the liberty of enclosing a photocopy of the Introduction for your perusal.

Thank you for so kindly sending a copy of the China Prayer Letter. It is to the glory of God that the church in that land has survived so many years under Communism - and not only survived but wonderfully grown. Christians in the West frequently get asked about the state of the church in China but are often unable to give a satisfactory answer. The leaflet provides a very useful insight and helps to counter that ignorance.

May our gracious and sovereign God richly bless all your work and labour in His service (Hebrews 6:10).'