

CALVIN ON THE WEEKLY CHRISTIAN SABBATH (2)

Francis Nigel Lee

When Calvin was 37, he wrote his 1546 *Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*. There, in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Paul gave instructions "concerning the collection" for poor believers in Jerusalem. Such collections Paul "had already prescribed to the churches of Galatia." Now however, comments Calvin, Paul enjoined also the Corinthians that they too "should have their alms ready in time. He therefore tells them... to contribute... on the Sabbath - in other words, on the day in which they met together for worship..."

"Paul's meaning is... that one person should contribute on one Sabbath, another on another Sabbath; or even every one of them on every Sabbath, if they so wished. For he is thinking, in the first place, in terms of convenience; and secondly, that the gathering for worship, where believers rejoice in the communion of saints, could be an additional incentive to them... The Lord's day was chosen in preference to all others, because the resurrection of our Lord put an end to the shadows... Therefore that day is a reminder to us of our Christian freedom."¹

When Calvin was 41, he wrote his 1550 *Commentary on Isaiah*. There he comments on Isaiah 56:4-7 that "the sincere worshippers of God... keep the Sabbaths" and "have a place in the Church... which is not confined as formerly within those narrow limits of Judea, but is extended through the whole world." With the words "'whosoever shall keep My Sabbath'... is included the whole worship of God."

As to when and where God's Sabbath was to be kept, Calvin next comments that Isaiah "testifies that the grace of God shall be infused throughout the whole world... All men, to whatsoever nation or place they belong, are freely admitted... into the house of God... It extends to every part of the whole world. for all nations have been called to the worship of God... Christ calls the temple 'the house of prayer' with reference to that time when the Gospel had not yet been published... When the vail of the temple

was rent' (Matthew 27:51)... God began to be everywhere called upon by all peoples."²

Moreover, Calvin comments on Isaiah 58:13–14 that "nothing can be more pleasing or acceptable to God than the observation of the Sabbath and sincere worship... Men do wrong if, laying aside the commandments of God, they esteem highly those things which are of no value... God so highly recommends in the whole Scripture the observation of the Sabbath... because Christ died and rose again, so that we have a continual sabbath... The lord takes the highest delight in the true observation of the Sabbath... If we framed our life in obedience to God, we should be His delight and... He would be our delight... He brings them back to the true observation of the Sabbath, and shews that it will be well with them if they shall worship God in a right manner."³

Also in 1550, when Calvin was still only 41, his biographer and successor Theodore Beza wrote his famous work, *The Life of John Calvin*. There, Beza records that Calvin determined "that there should be no other feast-days except one in seven, which we call the Lord's day."⁴

When 44, Calvin wrote his 1553 *Commentary on John's Gospel*. There, he comments that "the resurrection of Christ is the chief article of our faith" etc. On Easter Sunday, notes Calvin, as described in John 20:1, "Mary came on the first day of the Sabbaths... Every Sabbath-day was dedicated to rest... "Now it was the first day of the Sabbaths... because it was the beginning of the week."⁵

Similarly, two years later (when 46), in his 1555 *Harmony of the Gospels* Calvin comments on the same event. There, he maintains that "the meaning is the same as in Matthew [28:1], 'In the evening which began to dawn towards the first day of the Sabbaths;' and in Luke [24:1], 'On the first day of the Sabbaths.'"⁶

When Calvin was 45, he published his 1554 *Commentary on Genesis*. There, he remarks on Genesis 2:1–3 that God "first rested; then blessed this rest, that in all[!] ages it might be sacred among men." For "God consecrated every[!] seventh day to rest[!]." Indeed, "inasmuch as it [the Sabbath] 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[!]." Calvin then concludes: "Moreover, it is to be noted that this institution has been given not to a single century or people, but to the entire[!] human race."⁷

When still 45, Calvin further published the Second Part of his 1554 *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*. In Acts 20:7, while discussing the Christian Church Meeting at Troas on the first day of the week, Calvin comments that this was 'on one day of the *Sabbaths*.' Then he adds that Paul "means either *the first day of the week... or one particular Sabbath... According to custom, that day was most suitable for holding a meeting... It would be too flat to take this to mean any day at all. For what is the point of mentioning the Sabbath, except to note the suitability and the choice of the time?*

"It is also very likely that *Paul waited for the Sabbath*, so that it would be easier for him to gather all the disciples into one place on the day before his departure... I come to the conclusion that *a solemn day, that was going to be more convenient for all, was appointed among them for celebrating the Holy Supper of the Lord*"⁸ – namely, on a Christian Sabbath [alias at a Lord's day meeting on the first day of the week]. [Emphases mine – F N Lee.]

When 46, Calvin set out his mature views on the Christian Sabbath at some length – in his 1555 *Sermons on Deuteronomy* [5:12–15]. Here, the Antinomians are strangely silent about Calvin! For he declares: "Let us not think that the things which Moses speaks of the Sabbath day, are needless for us (Psalm 19:8–10 & Matthew 5:18)... The Apostle, in the fourth to the Hebrews [4:8b–11 cf 10:25], applies the things that were spoken of the Sabbath days to the instructions of the Christians and of the new Church..."

"We must refrain from our own business, which might hinder us from minding God's works... If we spend the Lord's day in making good cheer, and in playing and gaming – is that a good honouring of God? Nay, is it not a mockery; yea, and a very unhallowing of His name?... The shopwindows are shut in on the Lord's day, and men travel not as they do on the other days... Let us see if those which name themselves Christians, discharge themselves as they ought to do..."

"A great number think to have the Lord's day most free to follow their own business, and reserve that day for the same purpose as though there were none other day for them to appoint upon of all the week long... It seems to them, that they have nothing else to do, but to think upon their business and to cast up their accounts concerning this and that matter... They make that an occasion of withdrawing themselves further off from God... But

the world sees how all things are unhallowed, insomuch that most folk have no regard at all of their using of that day which was ordained to withdraw us from all earthly cares and affairs, that we might give ourselves wholly unto God...

"Because we be occupied too much about our own affairs on the other days, therefore we be not so much given to serve God in them as upon the day which is assigned wholly thereunto. The Lord's day, then, must serve us for a tower to mount up into, to view God's works afar off, as a time wherein we have nothing to let [alias hinder] us, or to keep us occupied, but that we may employ all our wits to consider the benefits and gracious gifts that He has bestowed upon us... But if the Lord's day be spent not only in games and pastimes full of vanity but also in things quite contrary to God, so as men think they have not kept holy the Lord's day... if the holy order which God ordained to bring us to Him be broken after that fashion: is it any wonder, though men play the beasts all the week after?

Calvin then concludes: "In respect of men's rawness, and by reason of their slothfulness, it is necessary to have one special day dedicated wholly thereunto. It is true that we be not bound to the seventh day. Neither do we indeed keep the same day that was appointed to the Jews. For that was Saturday. But to the intent to shew the liberty of Christians, the day was changed because Jesus Christ in His resurrection did set us free... That was the cause why the day was shifted.

"But yet must we observe the same order of having some day in the week... that is left to the free choice of Christians... Let us retain still the outward order, so far as is meet for us, that is to wit, of forbearing our own affairs and worldly business, that we may intend wholly to the minding of God's works, and occupy ourselves in the consideration of the good things that He has done for us."⁹

Elsewhere too, Calvin further notes that "they who profess Christianity have always understood that the obligation by which the Jews were bound to *observe the Sabbath-day*, was temporary ... I grant it indeed... as *the mark of a spiritual substance* the use of which is *still in force* – of denying ourselves; of renouncing all our own thoughts and affections; and *of bidding ourselves farewell to... all of our own employments*¹⁰ so that God may reign in us; *then* of employing ourselves in the worship of God, learning from His Word in which is to be found our salvation, and in meeting together to make public profession of our faith."¹¹ [Emphases

mine – F N Lee.]

Again, in his *Fifth French Discourse* [on the Sabbath] to the people of Geneva on the Ten Commandments, Calvin insists: "*The Sabbath should be for us a tower whereon we should mount aloft to contemplate afar the works of God, when we are not occupied nor hindered by anything besides, [so] that on Monday and the other days of the week we shall abide in the grateful remembrance of our God... It is for us to dedicate ourselves wholly to God, renouncing ourselves, our feelings, and all our affections; and then, since we have this external ordinance, to act as becomes us – that is, to lay aside our earthly affairs and occupations, so that we may be entirely free*¹² to meditate the works of God... *And when we shall have employed the Sabbath in praising and magnifying the name of God and meditating His works, we must – through the rest of the week – show how we have profited thereby.*"¹³ [Emphases mine – F N Lee.]

One year before his death in 1564, the 54-year-old Calvin clearly states regarding Exodus 20:8–11, in his *Harmony of the Pentateuch*, that "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... The *hallowing* of the *Sabbath* was *prior* to the *Law*... Undoubtedly, what Moses has before narrated [in Exodus 16:4–29f] – that they were forbidden to gather the manna on the seventh day – seems to have had its origin from a well-known and received custom. [Emphases mine – F N Lee.]

Indeed, Calvin immediately adds that "it is not credible that the observance of the Sabbath was omitted – when God revealed the rite of sacrifice to the holy fathers [Genesis 4:3f & 8:10–21f]. But what in the depravity of human nature was altogether extinct among heathen nations and almost obsolete with the race of Abraham, God renewed in His Law."¹⁴

Finally, in the very year of his death, the 55-year-old Calvin went to his Everlasting Sabbath in heaven – very shortly after writing about the weekly Sabbath in his 1564 *Commentary on Ezekiel*. There [20:12], God had said of the Israelites: 'I gave them My Sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord Who sanctifies them.' On this very verse and those which follow it, Calvin comments: "God here commends His Sabbaths... By the Sabbath... the Israelites might acknowledge themselves separated by God – so as to experience Him for their Father in all things... The Sabbath... displayed God's

gratuitous adoption... It was, then, the greatest ingratitude to break the Sabbath... The Sabbath was the symbol of sanctification...

"From the institution of the Sabbath... God is said to have rested from His work on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2; Exodus 20:11; 31:17; Deuteronomy 5:14). Now there is no doubt that He wished to bring the faithful to imitate His example... The grace of regeneration was promised to the ancient people, when God consecrated the seventh day; and the Apostle also shows this in the Epistle to the Hebrews [4:8-11], where he treats of the true and lawful use of the Sabbath...

" *The Sabbath was a sacrament*, since it was a visible figure of an invisible grace... There is a mutual agreement in the sacraments, *by which God binds us to Himself*, and we mutually pledge *our* faith... Hence, also their foolishness is refuted who [like the Antinomians!] think the sacraments nothing but marks of outward separation... God requires *faith* on the part of His people; and *He promises* in return what He witnesses and prefigures, *by an outward sign*...

"*His Sabbaths should be sanctified*... Hence we see that sacraments are never destitute of the virtue of the Spirit – unless when men render themselves unworthy of the grace offered them... The sacraments are effective, *through faith!*"¹⁵ [Emphases mine – F N Lee.]

Ever since becoming a Bible-believing Protestant, Calvin had observed the weekly Christian Sabbath on the Lord's day – every Sunday. And now, soon after having written the above words anent Ezekiel 20:12-20 – "I gave them My Sabbaths... that they might know that I am the Lord Who sanctifies them;" and "hallow My Sabbaths"[!] – the Sabbath-hallowing Calvin died, and entered into the saints' everlasting rest (Rev. 1:10 cf 14:13).

Dear reader, when you die – will you too gain that rest?

Notes

1. *Commentary*, 1 Corinthians 16:2.
2. *Commentary*, Isaiah 56:4-7.
3. *Commentary*, Isaiah 58:13-14.
4. T. Beza: *The Life of John Calvin* (in Calvin's Tracts & Treatises, 1958, No.1, p xciii.
5. *Commentary*, John 20:1.
6. *Harmony of Gospels*, Mark 16:1.
7. *Commentary*, Genesis 2:1-3.
8. *Commentary*, Acts 20:7.
9. *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, BOT, 1987, pp 202-205.
10. *Operibus nostris universis valedicendi*.
11. J Calvin, *Opera Omnia*, VIII p 486 (cited in Fairbairn's *Typology*, pp 454f).
12. *Vaquions du tout*.
13. Cited in Fairbairn's *op cit*, pp 455f.
14. *Harmony of Pentateuch*, nd III, pp 437-440.
15. *Commentary*, Ezekiel 20:12-20