

Gaffin on “*Calvin and the Sabbath: The Controversy of Applying the 4th*” (CFP, 1998)

Introduction

Because our Lord regarded the 4th so highly, Gaffin states, “it would seem, then, that complacency in the matter of keeping the Lord’s Day is to be explained...by the failure to reckon adequately with the relevant Biblical teaching” (9). Moreover, many people justify neglect of the Lord’s Day by appealing to Calvin, but what he teaches on the Sabbath is somewhat ambiguous. This book is an attempt to do justice to Calvin’s views, to evaluate them in the light of Scripture, and in so doing to “rekindle an appreciation of the splendor of the Sabbath idea in God’s word and an awareness of continuing obligation to the fourth commandment” (10).

For both concision and clarity, we will work mainly with Gaffin’s last chapter of summary and evaluation (141-163). The entire book is worth consideration to gather nuances together with support for Gaffin’s treatment of Calvin in light of Scripture.

I. A summary of Calvin’s view

1A. Calvin opposed a weekly Sabbath, but his view is similar in practice to the later Puritans

Sermon on Deut. 5.12-14 (Gaffin, 109-114): the Sabbath day has been in part a figurative way for showing that men cannot properly worship without dedicating themselves to him in such a way that they separate themselves from the world...to assemble that they might hear the Law.

If we turn Sunday into a day for living it up, for our sport and pleasure, indeed how will God be honored in that?

There is a large group which thinks that Sunday exists for the purpose of enabling them to attend to their own affairs...the rest glut themselves... Sunday is nothing more than a retreat...in which they stand aloof from the church...the majority hardly care about the usage of this day which has been instituted in order that we might withdraw from all earthly anxieties, from all business affairs, to the end that we might surrender everything to God.

...let us realize that it is not only for coming to the sermon that the day of Sunday is instituted, but in order that we might devote all the rest of the time to praising God... Thus we ought to observe Sunday as if from a high tower in order that we might climb upon it to contemplate the works of God from afar, in a way in which we are neither impeded by nor occupied with anything else.

When we benefit from Sunday, “we will surrender to him all the rest of our time...” otherwise “all the rest of the week is degraded...”

Closing the sermon: ...we have the external order...for the purpose of enabling us to set aside our affairs and earthly business in order that, abstaining from everything else, we might meditate on the works of God and be trained to recognize the favors which God bestows on us... And when we have spent Sunday in praising and glorifying the Name of God and in meditating on his works, then, throughout the rest of the week, we should show that we have benefited from it.

Discussion Q: how could Calvin affirm the binding character of the 10 for all time (47), deny the relevance of a weekly Sabbath, and call for the right use of Sunday within a sermon on the 4th?

Some Dutch writers think the explanation for this has to do with the opposition to the Reformation on the part of Rome on one hand and on the part of the Anabaptists on the other (25). Rome had an excessive legalistic observation of days and the Anabaptists worked on Sunday with extreme liberty. So, some think Calvin unwittingly contradicts himself. Others think his views developed over the time of his writings. Gaffin argues that these answers do not handle Calvin’s writings properly. Although we must grant this point, the reformers had much bigger fish to fry than ceremonial days and the Sabbath. They gave high regard to the Lord’s Day but due to the dominance of the great questions of the Reformation (*sola gratia* and *sola scriptura*) that consumed their entire lives, the study of the Sabbath was marginalized (144).