

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

I. A summary of Calvin’s view

1A. Calvin opposed a weekly Sabbath, but his view is similar to that of the later Puritans (WCF)

2A. For Calvin, the Sabbath Day was a type of the spiritual rest Christians now enjoy

1B. What is the spiritual rest to which the OT Sabbath Day pointed?

Spiritual rest for Christians is growing in conformity to God's will by imitating Him and "ceasing from our own sinful works" (141) [Heb. 4.9-10, but the idea is not ceasing from works for justification]. In the OT, cessation from the work of six days to observe a weekly Sabbath did involve rest from work but that rest was primarily to be used for public worship and private meditation on the promised reality that it typified (141).

2B. Christ's coming brought spiritual rest to reality, so, the weekly Sabbath type was abrogated as shadow gives way to substance [per Col. 2.16-17].

3B. Granted, the spiritual rest that we now possess in Christ is not the perfect eternal rest yet to come, but for Calvin it important to recognize that the spiritual rest that believers presently enjoy and the eternal rest of the consummation are the same in substance (142) [cf. Heb. 4.9-10].

4B. Although Christians no longer have the obligation to keep a weekly day of rest, this does not mean that the 4th commandment is nullified. Instead, the demands of the 4th are intensified and elevated. The intensification of the 4th and keeping the Sabbath means experiencing freedom from sin and newness of life by union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Spiritual rest, therefore, cannot be limited to one day of the week but is perpetual and must be a *daily practice* (142).

5B. Thus, *daily public worship is the ideal for Christians* along with daily Christian service and meditation on God's word and works (142).

6B. However, because believers are subject to sinful weakness, stated times must be set aside from worldly cares and distractions for private and public worship. The Jewish Sabbath met this need, but it passed away in the coming of Christ [Col. 2.16-17]. It also passed away because it had become a tool of legalism [Gal. 4.10]. Accordingly, the ancient church substituted the Lord's Day for the weekly Sabbath and it did so appropriately because the Lord's Day memorialized Christ's resurrection, the day that the Sabbath Day type ceased to exist (142-143).

7B. The Lord's Day still meets the need believers have for stated time set aside for private and public worship. However, Christians are free to set apart stated times of worship in any way they wish; they may set aside some other day or implement some other arrangement than a weekly day.

There is no binding requirement to keep the Lord's Day; it does not have religious significance [per Rom. 14. 5]. Keeping this day is a matter of good order for sanctification. Physical rest is extrinsic to the 4th; it is a means to the end of meditation and public worship, this end should be perpetual and thus daily (143). Still, the rest provided for servants in the 4th does remind employers to use their authority wisely and without oppression.

Summary

"The core of the fourth commandment and the essence of the Sabbath institution is that the creature should be conformed to the Creator [ceasing from sinful works], and that such imitation should express itself in a life characterized by public worship and private meditation upon God's works" (143).

Discussion Qs:

Can you see how we can say of Calvin that though he opposed a weekly Sabbath Day, he affirmed the abiding validity of all Ten Commandments?

Now, what answer might you give to the Q we asked earlier: "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?"