

LECTURE 6: THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Fourth Commandment: Sabbath day

—WCF 21:7-8, WLC 115-21, WSC 57-62

Requirements of the fourth commandment

This commandment includes two basic ideas: (1) no work on the Sabbath day, and (2) the whole day hallowed to the Lord. Some add a third concept: (3) work expected for the other six days.

The history of Israel in Scripture provides a similar pattern concerning this commandment as we have seen for other commandments: at first lax, and then later superstitiously precise.

Initial laxity:

- (Isa 56:2, 4; 58:13-14)
- Jer 17:21-23
- Ezek 20:12-13, 16, 24; 22:8, 26; 23:38
- Neh 13:15-22

Later superstitious precision:

- Christ healing invalid by pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15)
- Disciples picking grain (Matt 12:1-8 = Mark 2:23-28 = Luke 6:1-5)
- Christ healing man with withered hand (Matt 12:9-14 = Mark 3:1-6 = Luke 6:6-11)
- Christ healing crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17)
- Christ healing man born blind (John 9)
- Christ healing man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6)
- By these events and teachings, the Lord showed his approval of works of necessity and mercy on the Sabbath day (WSC 60).

Identity of Sabbath day

Positions taken

1. According to our standards the Sabbath day command continues in effect, only the day is now changed from the last day of the week to the first day of the week. Traditionally nearly all Christian denominations have recognized this change.
2. Some believe that the day has not been changed to the first day of the week, and remains at the seventh day of the week (Seventh Day Adventists, Seventh Day Baptists, Messianic believers, etc.).

3. Some believe that the Sabbath commandment itself has been abolished with the Mosaic law, and that the Christian day of worship is an entirely new institution (groups more influenced by dispensationalism, also some Calvinists).

Evidence for the Sabbath being changed to the first day of the week

Since the beginning of the Christian church various Christian writers have stated the reason for changing the day of worship to the first day of the week. Here are most of the biblical reasons that have been advanced by them.

NT evidence

- 1) Light created on the first day of the week
- 2) Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week
- 3) Jesus met disciples on the first day of the week (John 20:19, 26)
- 4) Pentecost was on Sunday in A.D. 30
- 5) Christians broke bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7)
- 6) Collections were taken on the first day of the week (1 Cor 16:1-2)
- 7) "The Lord's day" in Rev 1:10 probably refers to the first day of the week, as it does in all early Christian literature

Patristic evidence

That Sunday worship was the practice of the earliest church is evident from all available patristic evidence:

- Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 9:1-3 (ANF 1:62)

If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death—whom some deny, by which mystery we have obtained faith, and therefore endure, that we may be found the disciples of Jesus Christ, our only Master.

- *Didache* 14:1 (ANF 7:381)

But every Lord's day do ye gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure.

(The same expression, "the Lord's Day," is used in Rev 1:10, and elsewhere in the Fathers for the first day of the week; see ANF 7:381, n. 12: "If the early date is allowed, this verse confirms the view that from the first the Lord's day was observed, and that, too, by a Eucharistic celebration.")

- *Epistle of Barnabas* 15:9 (ANF 1:147)

Then we shall be able to sanctify it, having been first sanctified ourselves. Further, He says to them, "Your new moons and your Sabbath I cannot endure." Ye perceive how He speaks: Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to Me, but that is which I have made, [namely this,] when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day,

that is, a beginning of another world. Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. And when He had manifested Himself, He ascended into the heavens.

- Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67 (ANF 1:186)

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; . . . But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

- Irenaeus in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5:24 (NPNF/2 1:243)

[Concerning the controversy over the date of Easter] Among them was Irenaeus, who, sending letters in the name of the brethren in Gaul over whom he presided, maintained that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be observed only on the Lord's day.

Paul's statement in Col 2:16-17

It should be noted that Paul in Col 2:16-17 seems to be talking about the old Jewish Sabbath celebrated on Saturday (cf. the other holy days mentioned). It was optional whether believers continued to observe Saturday; however, the Lord's Day (Sunday) now took the place of the weekly day of worship.

Modern debate

For a defense of the seventh-day position, see Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (1977); he argues that the Roman pontiff led the Christian church in the second century to change the day of worship (esp. in ch. 6, "Rome and the Origin of Sunday"). This book, by the way, was his doctoral thesis at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome; he was the first non-Catholic to be admitted to this institution. He has popularized this position in "How It Came About: From Saturday to Sunday," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 4:3 (Oct. 1978), 32-40.

More recently, evangelical Protestants have contributed to this topic. See D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (1982); note R. J. Bauckham's reply to Bacchiocchi (pp. 222-45, esp. 236-38). Some of these writers take the position that the Christian Lord's Day is not the same institution as the sabbath, similar to position (2) above. For a reply from a Reformed perspective, see Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., in *Pressing Toward the Mark*, ch. 3, "A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God."

Reasons for the Fourth Commandment

- According to Exod 20:11 – the creation ordinance, following the example of God’s creating in six days and resting the seventh (which creation rest still continues, Heb 4:3-4)
- According to Deut 5:15 – the Hebrews’ redemption from Egypt and release from slavery
- According to Mark 2:27 – the good of man