

At least the ten commandments are God's revelation, aren't they? (3)

"Honor the sabbath, to keep it holy" – the third commandment. But "the sabbath" is Saturday. How dare Christians move worship to Sunday! By whose authority? If the ten commandments are **God's eternal law**, who dares to change them? Seventh Day Adventists and Seventh Day Baptists worship on the sabbath, on Saturday. Do they take the Bible more seriously than we do?

The first centuries: Both days observed. The move to worship on Sunday cannot be derived from the New Testament. In the first century most Christians were Jewish, and many continued to worship on the sabbath (Luke 23:56, Acts 16:13). Some believers met on both Saturday and Sunday. Some texts mention only Sunday. Before his arrival in Corinth Paul directs the congregation to set aside contributions "on the first day of every week" (1 Cor 1:16). And Acts 20:7 states: "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread...."

As Christianity spread to Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Asia Minor, **both days** continued to be observed, and at times conflicts arose. Colossians records such a conflict over whether a particular day of worship is a new law: "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath" (2:16).¹

It took the early church about three hundred years to make the move to Sunday.² The shift was helped by a civil law promulgated by the Roman Emperor, Constantine I, on March 7, 321. He decreed **Sunday** to be a day of rest from work. Although this was a civil ruling, Christians welcomed the freedom it gave them to worship on Sunday.

The Reformation. Augsburg Confession 28 takes up the question of the day of worship as a law among believers and comes down on the side of Christian freedom:

"Inasmuch as it is contrary to the gospel to establish such regulations as necessary to appease God and earn grace, it is not at all proper for the bishops to compel observation of such services of God. For in Christendom the teaching of **Christian freedom** must be preserved, namely, that bondage to the law is not necessary for justification, as Paul writes in Galatians 5[:1]: 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.' ...

"How, then, should **Sunday and other similar church ordinances** and ceremonies be regarded? Our people reply that bishops or pastors may make regulations for the sake of good order in the church, but not thereby to obtain God's grace, to make satisfaction for sin, or to bind consciences, nor to regard such as a service of God or to consider it a sin when these rules are broken without giving offense."³

¹ *Festival...new moon...sabbath* = annual, monthly, and weekly observances.

² *From Sabbath to Lord's Day. A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation.* Ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

³ Augsburg Confession 28: 50-53; *Book of Concord* (Tappert: 89-90; Kolb/Wengert 98.). Bolding added here and below for emphasis.

In his Large Catechism Luther writes the following about the sabbath:

“In the Old Testament, God set apart **the seventh day**, appointed it for rest, and commanded it to be kept holy above all other days. As far as outward observance is concerned, **the commandment was given to the Jews alone**. They were to refrain from hard work and to rest, so that both human beings and animals might be refreshed and not be exhausted by constant labor....

“Therefore, according to its outward meaning, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which **we are set free through Christ**.”⁴

Again, Luther on the sabbath in *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*:

“**It is not necessary to observe the sabbath or Sunday because of Moses’ commandment**. Nature also shows and teaches that one must now and then rest a day, so that man and beast may be refreshed. **This natural reason Moses also recognized in his sabbath law, for he places the sabbath under man**, as also Christ does (Matt. 12 [:1ff.] and Mark 3[:2ff.]). For where it is kept for the sake of rest alone, it is clear that he who does not need rest may break the sabbath and rest on some other day, as nature allows. The sabbath is also to be kept for the purpose of preaching and hearing the Word of God.”⁵

The ten commandments today. What kind of law is the third commandment? Divine or human? Is it ceremonial or moral? Some say that Paul’s statement: “For Christ is the end of the law” (Rom 10:4), means that Christ is the end of **the ceremonial law** of the Old Testament, but **not the moral law** and that therefore Christians are free from ceremonial laws but not the moral law, especially the ten commandments. Gerhard Forde on the **third commandment**, among others:

“Unable to rhyme Matt. 5:17-18 with Rom. 10:4, the dogmatic tradition has experienced nothing but trouble over the law. When one does not see that ‘heaven and earth’ do pass away in the eschatological fulfillment anticipated and grasped by faith, and that just such fulfillment *is* the end and the goal, **Paul and Matthew are at irreconcilable odds**. Unable to grasp this fulfillment as end, the tradition for the most part had to indulge in what was strictly forbidden by both Matthew and Paul: tampering with the content of the law to arrive at a compromise. The result was the idea that in Christ the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were abrogated (thus throwing a sop to Paul’s claim that Christ was the ‘end’ of the law) while the ‘moral’ law was not (thus supposedly satisfying Matthew’s claim that not one iota or dot would pass away until ‘the end’). But that is patent nonsense which only confuses the issue further and completely obscures the eschatology involved. **Neither Testament makes that kind of distinction between ceremonial and moral law**. Indeed, it seems that in most instances, ruptures of the ceremonial law are more serious than those of the moral law. Furthermore, the tradition was left with the problem of deciding just what was moral or ceremonial. **Are the first three commandments, for instance, moral or ceremonial?** One might, of course, as happened most generally, try to settle on the decalogue as the moral law. But **there is a**

⁴ Large Catechism, First Part: 80-82, *Book of Concord* (Tappert: 375-78; Kolb/Wengert, 397).

⁵ *Luther’s Works* 40:98.

good deal in the Old Testament and the New outside the decalogue which might also qualify as moral and ethical material of the highest quality. Who is to decide?⁶

Moreover, all of the moral law in the New Testament, including 'love your enemies,' is found elsewhere in the world of the time. Nothing is *sui generis* and implicitly revelation. Again, Forde:

"Law belongs to earth, not to heaven. It is natural, not supernatural. It is a servant, not a master. That is why Luther did not speak of law as something static and unchangeable. Laws will and must change in their form as the times demand. Luther, for instance, refused to grant eternal status even to the laws of Moses. They are strictly 'natural,' he said, not unlike the common law of any nation. **Men on this earth simply don't have access to eternal laws."**⁷

⁶ Forde, "Justification and This World," *Christian Dogmatics*. Eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 2:447.

⁷ Gerhard Forde, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1972) 111.