

The Christian Sabbath Examined, Proved, Applied, Chapter 4

The Different Grounds of the Law and the Sabbath

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Much of the confusion surrounding the Sabbath is based on a poor understanding of the moral principle which underlies the Sabbath, and the different foundations of the ordinance. In the Bible there are basically four different grounds or reasons that undergird God's laws. (1) Some laws are based directly upon God's nature and character. An example is the command, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex. 20:16). This command is founded upon the fact that God is truth (Jn. 14:6) and cannot lie (Num. 23:19). Laws that are based on God's nature *cannot* change, for God never changes. (2) Other laws have their ground in God's created order before the fall. These laws have abiding validity prior to the second coming and final state. This category includes all creation ordinances (e.g., monogamous heterosexual marriage, the covenant headship of the husband and submission of the wife, the dominion mandate, labor, and the weekly sabbath). These laws are permanent and universal until the end of the world,¹ after which time they will no longer apply (Mt. 22:30; Heb. 4:3-11). (3) Another category is that of positive law. These are commands of God which are grounded solely on the fact that God says that man must obey them. An example is the command to Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). There was nothing intrinsically evil regarding the forbidden fruit; it was wrong to eat it *solely* because God said it was wrong. (4) Some laws are based on unique and temporary circumstances and thus automatically expire when those circumstances no longer exist. This category would apply to the ceremonial law and laws specifically tied to the Old Testament land of Israel (e.g., jubilee, cities of refuge, levirate marriage). Although these categories are not mutually exclusive (e.g., ceremonial laws are positive laws with a distinct typological purpose), they are helpful in understanding Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath and the change from the seventh day to the first day of the week.²

The Sabbath has a moral aspect and a positive aspect, and is a creation ordinance. It is moral in the sense that all men have a natural and perpetual obligation to worship God. Men must worship God, not just because God says so, but also because He is worthy of worship. The reason that man is only to worship the one true God and nothing else is because only God is infinite in perfection; His nature requires it. The Sabbath is also a creation ordinance; therefore, it is a creational imperative. Although wicked men deny it, man was created with a need to rest one day in seven, to recuperate from the week's toil, to reflect on the creative and re-creative

¹ "We might expect that the radical change in the human situation caused by the entrance of sin and its resulting miseries would have had the effect of abrogating, or at least modifying, the basic creation ordinances which had been given to man in his state of integrity. This, however, is precisely what we do not find...the fall did bring revolutionary changes into man's life; yet these ordinances are still in effect and they indicate that the interests and occupations which lay closest to man's heart in original integrity must still lie close to his heart in his fallen state. Conditions and circumstances have been revolutionized by sin, but the basic structure of this earth, and of man's life in it, has not been destroyed. There is identity and continuity" (John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957], pp. 42, 44).

² For an excellent discussion of the different types of law and the Sabbath, see A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p. 281 ff.

work of God in Christ; to receive religious instruction, and to worship God both in public and in private. The institution of the Sabbath has its ground in the very fabric of creation, including man's nature.

The Sabbath also has a positive element. The day of the week in which man is to rest and worship God is grounded upon His revealed will. God could have chosen any day He desired, yet before Christ's resurrection He chose the seventh day, Saturday; and after the resurrection He chose the first day, Sunday. While it is true that both days follow the creative and re-creative work of God, God, if He desired, could have created the world in a millisecond or in seven years. "That a certain portion of time should be set apart for rest from labour is by experience found to be, on physiological and moral grounds, highly desirable. That some movement of the creation of the world and of the resurrection of Christ, and that some permanent and frequently-recurring type of the rest of heaven, should be instituted, is eminently desirable for man, considered as a religious being. But that all these ends should be combined and secured by one institution, and that precisely one whole day in seven should be allotted to that purpose, and that this one day in seven should be at one time the seventh and afterward the first day of the week, is evidently a matter of positive enactment, and binds us as long as the indications of the divine will in the matter remain unchanged."³

Understanding the positive aspect of the Sabbath is important for two reasons. First, it explains how God could change the day from the seventh to the first day of the week while retaining the true meaning and moral-perpetual aspect of it. Certain heretical groups (such as the Seventh-day Adventists) do not understand this positive element and thus mistakenly believe that there was something intrinsically moral about the seventh day itself. Thus, they foolishly argue that not even Christ Himself could change the day. James Durham understood this distinction: "Consider in this question, that there is a great difference between these two, to say the seventh day sabbath which the Jews kept, is moral, and to say the fourth command is moral. The one may be, and is abolished, because another is brought in its room. The other, to wit the command, may stand, and does stand, because it ties morally to a seventh day, but such a seventh day as the Lord should successively discover to be chosen by him; and *though the seventh is changed, yet one of seven is still reserved.*"⁴ Second, it explains why acts of necessity and works of mercy are permitted on the Sabbath. God has chosen one day of every seven for the human race to rest and worship Him. If the worshiping of God is moral and the particular day is positive, then in a *serious* emergency such as a flood, warfare, forest fire or major earthquake, the day of public worship and rest could even be postponed until a more appropriate time (e.g., Monday or Tuesday) without guilt.⁵ This point is important, for if the day itself was moral and not positive, then the postponing of rest and worship for an emergency or necessity could logically be considered the violation of a lesser moral command in order to obey a greater moral command (such as saving life). But the Bible does not approve of ethical relativism or situation ethics in any form. Thus, when Christ says to the Pharisees, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Mt. 12:7),

³ Hodge, pp. 282-83.

⁴ Durham in Coldwell, p. 4; emphasis added.

⁵ The author is *not* saying that the public worship of God and the sanctifying of the Lord's day (the first day of the week) are optional. The point is that if one is required to work extremely hard on that day because of a foreign invasion, that working is *not* a violation of a moral law, for God does not give people the option of violating His moral law for any reason. Moral laws are based on God's nature and character and thus can never be violated without insult to God. But God can allow the violation of a positive law, for a positive law is only based on His spoken word and not His nature. God can revoke positive law at any time and make any exceptions that He pleases, for His nature is not contradicted in the process.

He was rebuking them for elevating a positive command (the observing of a certain day) over a moral command (to preserve human life). They clung to the outward form yet completely missed the essential meaning.

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