

The Fourth Commandment According to the Westminster Standards

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A PERUSAL of the statements of the Westminster Confession of Faith and of the Larger and Shorter Catechisms bearing upon the fourth commandment will show that the position taken in these Standards is that of the universal and perpetual obligation of the Sabbath and that this obligation rests upon divine commandment. The commandment to which reference is made is, of course, what we know as the fourth in the decalogue. These Standards, however, imply that the Sabbath law, expressed in the fourth commandment, was not first instituted when the ten commandments were promulgated to the children of Israel at Sinai. We know that the Sabbath institution goes back to creation; we know that there is explicit allusion to the observance of the Sabbath and of divine commandment bearing upon that observance prior to Sinai. Of such facts these Standards are not forgetful, and so the language is carefully framed to include and guard these facts. Nevertheless, the law that had been instituted at creation did receive at Sinai formal enunciation and promulgation. It was included in the ten words given to Moses and written with the finger of God upon the two tables of stone.

At Sinai, then, the Sabbath law was set forth with fullness and explicitness and we do not have evidence that it had before then received similarly full and formal pronouncement. So, for our knowledge of what the content and import of the Sabbath institutions are, we are largely dependent upon the fourth commandment. What is this law or institution?

The Sanctity of the Day

First, and most elementally and centrally, it is that one day in seven is distinguished from the other six. That day is to be sanctified, and at the heart of the word *sanctify* is the idea of distinction and separation. This one day is set off, it is placed in a distinct category.

This import of the word cannot be evaded and it is to be very carefully marked, for on it depends the whole notion of what we may and must call the *sanctity* of the Sabbath.

It is not, however, the bare notion of distinction or separation that is expressed in the commandment. The command to sanctify occurs in a context. “Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God.” And it is not only in the context of the remainder of the commandment, but also in the context of the other commandments. “Thou shall have no other gods before me.” “I the Lord thy God am a jealous God.” “Thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” It is separation, therefore, to God, to the specific purpose of contemplation upon Him and specific occupation with *His* work in contrast with their own work. In this kind of distinction or sanctity the meaning of the fourth commandment resides. Abolish it, and the essence of the commandment is destroyed. There is no purpose in contending for the moral obligation of the commandment unless this sanctity is recognized and preserved, for it is the core around which all else is formed and without which all else disintegrates. Just as there is an ineradicable distinction between the six days of creation and the day of rest by which they were followed, so it is here. And it is precisely with this reminder that the commandment itself ends, “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.”

Israel truly was a holy people; they were separated unto God Jehovah. It might, then, be supposed that the sanctification of one day in seven was inconsistent with the totality of their devotion to God. Yet it is an inescapable fact that this kingdom of priests and holy nation was in the most direct way commanded to separate one day from the other six for a specific purpose. And unless our conception of devotion to God, and of time as it is related to Him, can embrace and appreciate this notion, together with the divine wisdom embodied in it, we can have no understanding of the fourth commandment.

Every Recurring Seventh Day

But second, the law or institution of the Sabbath implies that *every recurring seventh day* is to be sanctified. It is not simply a seventh of our time, not simply one day out of every seven, but it is every recurring seventh day in regular succession.

The controversy that has turned on the question as to whether or not, in the Christian dispensation, the Sabbath is the first day of the week or the seventh, and as to whether we can be said to observe the fourth commandment when we substitute the first day of the week for the seventh, has too often been allowed to obscure the central principle, namely, that every recurring seventh day was by divine ordination distinguished from every other day. The difficulty that may be encountered in determining which day of the week is the Sabbath should never be used as a subterfuge to escape from the central and straightforward import of the commandment, that every recurring seventh day is specifically holy to God. At the cost of repetitiousness, may we say, that the principle should never be perplexed or prejudices by the further question: which day in the succession of days should be accorded *that* distinction? We may not minimize the importance of this latter question. But we must not allow the difficulties that may attend this question to unsettle what is antecedent and even more central, the obligation, so far as the fourth commandment is concerned, to recognize the divine distinctiveness of every recurring seventh day. And it must be said that the position taken by the Westminster Standards, to wit, that with the advent of the New Testament dispensation there was signaled the change from the seventh day of the week to the first, in no way interferes with the strictest fulfillment of this principle in the Christian Lord's Day.

The Sabbath a Perpetual Obligation?

But some will say, "All this is conceded with respect to the meaning of the fourth commandment. But of what practical concern is that to us? The fourth commandment does not obligate the Christian." This objection we must now face.

If the fourth commandment is not binding in the Christian dispensation, then we have to take one of two positions. We have either to take the position that the fourth commandment occupies a different position from the other nine commandments in the decalogue, or to take the position that the whole decalogue has been abrogated in the Christian economy. We shall now discuss the former of these two alternatives.

If we say the fourth commandment is abrogated and the other nine are not, we must understand what we are saying. It would indeed be an amazing phenomenon that in the heart of the decalogue there should be one commandment — and one given such prominence and meticulous elaboration — that is totally different from the others in this regard that they are permanent and it is not. Surely no one will dispute that in the Old Testament the ten commandments constitute a well-rounded and compact unit. And surely no one will dispute that the Old Testament is itself throughout conscious of that fact. If the ten commandments were a loose and disjointed collection of precepts, there would be nothing very extraordinary about the supposition we are now discussing. But that is precisely what the decalogue is not. And so to establish this supposition that the fourth commandment is abrogated, when the other nine are not, would require the most explicit and conclusive evidence.

As we read the Old Testament we do not find any warrant for discrimination between the fourth and the other nine. Nor indeed do we find any intimation in the Old Testament that in the Messianic age the Sabbath law would cease. If any commandment is emphasized it is the fourth. Obedience to it is a mark of faithfulness and severe retribution follows its breach. The text we are about to quote epitomizes the Old Testament outlook and emphasis. “If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” (Isa. 58:13-14). If there had been in the Old Testament some evidence that would create a presumption in favour of discrimination, if there

had been even something that would justify a strong suspicion that in the Messianic age the Sabbath law would no longer bind, then, of course, even slight confirmation from the New Testament might clinch that suspicion and warrant the inference that the fourth commandment had been abrogated. But no such suspicion is created and the evidence is altogether against such a supposition.

So nothing short of compelling and conclusive evidence from the New Testament would warrant the position that the fourth is to be discriminated from the other nine.

Abrogated in the New Testament

When we come to the New Testament, do we find such evidence? A good deal has sometimes been made of the alleged silence of the New Testament. It must be admitted that the argument from silence may be made to appear very plausible. But it will have to be said at the outset that an argument from silence is not the compelling and conclusive evidence that would in this case be required. In the Old Testament we have continuous and accumulating emphasis upon the Sabbath law that in no way suggests any distinction in the matter of morality between the fourth commandment and the other nine. Indeed, as we found, the emphasis upon the fourth mounts to a degree that constitutes the very opposite presumption. It is with that manifold of emphasis that we are placed on the threshold of the New Testament economy. Silence on the part of the New Testament will not fulfill the exigencies of the kind of evidence required for abrogation.

We must not, however, conclude that the New Testament exhibits the silence alleged. It is not necessary now to enter into a detailed discussion of the implications of all the allusions found in the four gospels to the Sabbath. We need not deal in detail with the implications inherent in our Lord's attitude to the Sabbath. The proper insight and care should show that in the very rebuke that our Lord gave to the unwarranted accretions and impositions with which pharisaic tradition had obscured and perverted the Sabbath institution, there is implicit the same kind of sanction for the Sabbath law in itself as there is in similar episodes of His example and teaching for other commandments. Suffice it to refer to the one

affirmation of His, “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28).

The Sabbath Made for Man

In this affirmation, contrary to much glib but wanton appeal to it, there is not the least hint that the Sabbath law was about to be abrogated. What Jesus was combating on this occasion was the travesties of application by which the Jews had made void the law of God. Jesus’ unsparing condemnation of those artificialities that had turned a beneficent institution into an instrument of tyranny no more argues the abrogation of the institution itself, than does His condemnation of the traditions by which the Jews had made void the fifth commandment argue for the abrogation of the fifth (cf. Mark 7:8-13). If His condemnation and correction of the tradition by which the Jews of His day had made void the Word of God in the fifth commandment in no way relieves but rather reinforces the divine obligation of this commandment itself, so His statement with reference to the Sabbath quoted above furnishes no support for the abrogation of the fourth commandment. But let us examine Mark 2:27-28 more closely.

“The sabbath was made for man.” Of course, when it is said that it was made, there is but one meaning, namely, that God made it. It is not a device of human expediency or utility. It is a divine creation. It is God’s day. The reasonable inference is that this is an allusion to the primeval institution as recorded in Genesis 2:2-3. We know that the Sabbath institution existed prior to the promulgation of it at Sinai. So the making of it referred to by our Lord cannot reasonably refer simply to the giving of the law at Sinai. And since we must go back to something that antedates Sinai, what is there that more naturally or perfectly suits the allusion than that referred to in Genesis 2:2-3?

It was “made for man.” Perhaps the fact that Jesus says it was made for man and not simply for Israel has sometimes been unduly pressed to establish the universality of the Sabbath law. But recoil from exaggeration must not be allowed to obscure the real force of what is meant. The Sabbath, after all, was made for *man*, and in that word *man* there inheres a reference to what man’s very nature as man

and man's highest need as man require. When we bear in mind that the point of time referred to in the making of the Sabbath antedates all ethical distinction, we are constrained to find in this simple statement confirmation of the universality of the obligation and blessing of the Sabbath institution.

Jesus' Lordship and the Sabbath

But Jesus in this passage also asserts His own Lordship over the Sabbath. "The Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath." The title Son of man is distinctly Messianic and points to the dominion which He in His capacity as the Messiah exercises. It is in His capacity as the Son of man that He exercises this Lordship over the Sabbath. And this simply means that, within the universal Lordship and authority that is His as the one to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been committed, the Sabbath has its proper place and function. Abolition of it is, as B.B. Warfield says, "as far as possible from the suggestion of the passage."

Further we must observe that Jesus says "*even* of the Sabbath." The presence of the word *even* serves to show the extent of Jesus' Lordship. This Lordship is so comprehensive that it even includes the Sabbath, and surely such an emphasis discloses the high conception of its sanctity and authority Jesus entertained.

Finally, the reason assigned for this Lordship over the Sabbath is the fact that the Sabbath was made for man. It was for the sake of man that Jesus came into the world, it was for man's sake that He died and rose again, it is for man's sake that He is exalted as the Messiah to supreme mediatorial sovereignty. But it was also for man's sake that the Sabbath was made. If then, it was for man's sake that Jesus came, and suffered, and died, and rose again to ascend up where He was before, is it possible that that which was made for man – the Sabbath – should be annulled and abrogated by that which He became and did for man's sake? There is complete congruity between His Messianic work and Lordship on the one hand and the Sabbath ordinance on the other. They both serve the same purpose. And so His Lordship embraces the Sabbath institution, embraces it too for the purpose of preserving it, confirming it and blessing it. He is Lord of the Sabbath too.