

PIERRE VIRET ON THE SABBATH COMMANDMENT

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Although in studies on the Reformation there are few references to the fourth, or sabbath, commandment of the Decalogue (third commandment in the Roman Catholic and Lutheran reckoning), this commandment stirred more discussion than is usually assumed. The wrangling between Luther and Karlstadt is well known.¹ The activities of seventh-day keeping Anabaptists were noted by Luther, Erasmus, and Calvin, and inspired Capito of Strasbourg to write a book on the sabbath.² Because of the rejection of Catholic holidays, there were some who wanted to discard Sunday-keeping also. Calvin, we are told, had to face a certain Colinaeus who had totally rejected any thought of religious rest.³ The matter of required church attendance became a bone of contention in several centers of the Reformation.⁴ Perhaps the most consistent references to the sabbath commandment came at the religious debates between Catholics and Protestants. As the Protestants expounded about *sola*

¹See Andreas R. Bodenstein von Karlstadt, *Von dem Sabbat* (1524), in *Karlstadt-Schriften aus den Jahren 1523-1525*, ed. E. Hertzsch (Halle/Saale, 1956), 1: 23-47, and compare Luther's comment, "If Karlstadt were to write more about the Sabbath, even Sunday would have to give way, and the Sabbath that is Saturday would be celebrated. He would truly make us Jews in all things!" (*Against the Heavenly Prophets* [1525], in *Luther's Works* [henceforth abbrev. *LW*], 40 [St. Louis, Mo., 1959]: 94). See also *How Should Christians Regard Moses* (1525), in *LW*, 35: 164-166.

²Gerhard F. Hasel in his article "Sabbatarian Anabaptists," *AUSS* 5 (1967): 101-121 and 6 (1968): 19-28, gives an excellent account of their activities and the reaction of the mainline Reformers.

³A.-L. Herminjard, *Correspondance des réformateurs*, (1866; reprint, Nieuwkoop, 1965), 4: 27-29.

⁴Several attempts were made at Strasbourg to enforce Sunday observance. See F. Wendel, *L'église de Strasbourg* (Paris, 1942), especially pp. 43-44, and 206-207. At Geneva the *Ordonnances de campagne* also tried to impose Sunday observance. See *Calvini Opera* 10/1 (Braunschweig, 1872; reprint, New York, 1964): 51-54.

scriptura and the duty to hold strictly to what Scriptures say, regardless of human traditions and ideas, their opponents often asked coyly why the defenders of *sola scriptura* kept Sunday as their day of rest, a rest for the institution of which they could find no foundation in Scripture and which was solely a church institution. This occurred at the Zurich Disputation,⁵ the Baden Disputation,⁶ the Bern Disputation,⁷ the Lausanne Disputation⁸ and at both Pre-Reformation debates in Geneva in 1534 and 1535.⁹ John Eck used this argument with great skill.¹⁰

Commentaries on the fourth commandment present a great deal of interest since they often set in relief an author's attitude on various significant matters. They frequently treat the authority of Scripture and tradition, the relation between the OT and NT, the ecclesiological outlook of the person, and the way in which piety becomes manifest. Besides, they deal with points of social significance, such as the understanding of work and leisure, the duties of masters to servants and animals, etc.

⁵The issue of Sunday-keeping was raised during the first Zurich disputation. See Ulrich Zwingli, *Selected Works*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson (1901; reprint, Philadelphia, 1972), p. 98, n. 1.

⁶John Eck brought this matter up. See Thomas Mulner, *Die Disputacion vor den XII Orten zu Baden . . . gehalten* (Luzern, 1527), leaf 341^r.

⁷Johannes Buchstab's remark that Sunday-keeping is a thing of which the Bible says nothing evoked a lengthy answer from Bucer. See Martin Bucer, *Die Berne-Disputation*, in *Deutsche Schriften*, ed. Robert Stupperich (Gütersloh, 1960), 4: 106-111.

⁸*Actes de la Dispute de Lausanne*, ed. A. Piaget (Neuchâtel, 1929), pp. 47-48.

⁹On the 1534 debate see H. Neff, *Les origines de la réforme à Genève* 2 (Geneva, 1968): 500-502, and Claude Roset, *Letres certaines . . . avec la dispute faicte l'an 1534* (Geneva, 1535), pp. 47-50. On the 1535 debate, see Th. Dufour, *Un opuscule inédit de Farel* (Geneva, 1886), pp. 201-240. See my article "Sunday in the Pre-Reformation Disputations in French Switzerland," *AUSS* 14 (1976): 265-277.

¹⁰"Therefore it thus is clear that the Church is older than Scripture, and Scripture would not be authentic without the Church's authority. . . . Scripture teaches: 'Remember to hallow the Sabbath day; six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath day of the Lord your God.' etc. Yet the Church has changed the Sabbath into Sunday on its own authority, on which you have no Scripture." *Enchiridion*, ed. & trans. F. L. Battles (Pittsburgh, 1976), p. 12.

1. *Viret in Comparison with Other Reformers*

Pierre Viret's ideas on the fourth commandment are found in his *Instruction chrestienne*, published in Geneva in 1564. In order to appreciate his originality and his analytical capacity, we should first sketch the stance of the main Reformers on this topic. In general, they adopted the Augustinian mystical understanding of the sabbath rest, i.e., our rest as a symbol of the rest which we have received already from Jesus Christ and which we will receive in a still greater manner from him in the eschatological consummation. To that they added the moral dimension, namely, that we stop our work so that God may do his saving work in us.

In this common Protestant approach there is, therefore, no special sanctity attached to any day of the week. This view was quite different from the most common Catholic teaching, held since the days of the great masters of Scholasticism, that Sunday is the Christian sabbath, to be kept holy according to the prescriptions of the Decalogue.

Because Luther could not find any support in natural law for the keeping of the seventh day, he concluded that it was purely a Jewish commandment. A day is not holy intrinsically, he explained, but it becomes holy by the use that is made of it. Besides, the keeping of a day of rest guarantees rest for the servants who otherwise would be exploited to death. Philip Melanchthon, too, emphasized the natural and moral requirement of setting aside a time for public worship.

At Strasbourg, Bucer was the advocate of a much more sabbatarian concept of Sunday-keeping. In his *De Regno Christi*, he refers with approval to the thought of reenacting the provisions of the Pentateuch for sabbath-keeping by rulers who sincerely wish the kingdom of Christ to be established in their realms. We know that the Protestant ministers at Strasbourg made a strong, but vain effort to have Sunday observance enforced by the magistrates.

More than any other of the Reformers, Calvin emphasized the vital significance of the day of rest for personal spiritual growth as well as its necessity for public worship. The sabbath was both a sign and a promise of salvation, an excellent and unique mystery that Christ is found in the sabbath. For Calvin, the sabbath as a sign of sanctification was very important. On the other hand, while in the 1536 *Institutes* he had upheld the commandment as an

expression of the principle of equity—a point of great importance in understanding his treatment of the commandments—, he later placed less and less emphasis on the value of the sabbath commandment as a safeguard of the servants' welfare. This concept was due to his hermeneutical principle that the commands of the first table rule man's relationship with God and those of the second table man's relations with one another. Calvin reasoned that since the fourth commandment is a part of the first table, it cannot have much to say about the master-servant relationship.

It is rather interesting that all those Reformers made only casual reference to the relation between Sunday and the resurrection. Since all days were considered to be equally holy, there was obviously no need to find the motive of a special holiness for the first day of the week. For that reason, one should note that this connection is drawn very vividly in Erasmus's *Symbolum*, where a contrast is made between God's rest after creation and Christ's rest after his crucifixion which commends to us the evangelical Sunday.

2. *The Introduction of Viret's Argument*

Viret's large volume is written as a dialogue between two young men, Timothy and Daniel, a device which betrays the humanistic bent of the author. As to the literary value of the dialogue, we may say that it is not a blinding success. Timothy merely asks the right questions, and his friend Daniel gets easily carried away into rather ponderous and wordy elaborations. Viret, however, shows real skill in bringing up meaningful images drawn from nature, life, and history.

In the long introduction to the section on the commandments, Viret asserts that the law of God is the only true rule by which all good and holy policy should be regulated. It is the true Christian ethics, the true Christian politics, the true Christian economics, far superior to the words of Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, or Cicero.¹¹ By its precepts, the Christian rulers should guide their activities and their government, for otherwise one may expect nothing but utter confusion. We find ourselves, therefore, in the mainstream of

¹¹*Instruction chrestienne en la doctrine de la loy et de l'evangile . . . le tout divisé en trois volumes* (henceforth abbrev. IC) (Geneva, 1564), p. 255.

Reformed social and moral thought. The Ten Commandments are the tool with which a ruler can erect the kingdom of Christ.

Viret begins the discussion of the fourth commandment by presenting the meaning of the first word of the commandment, "Remember," a point to which little attention is given by other commentators of that time.¹² He reminds us that no commandment is introduced in a more solemn way than this one, since God himself said: "Remember." He also makes note of the fact that no other command was brought to the attention of the Israelites more forcefully or more often than the sabbath commandment, since the restoration of true sabbath-keeping was part of all great reform movements. Yet, Daniel admits, this precept raises more questions than any other. Why is a command about ceremony included in the moral law, and, just as disturbing, why was it included in the first table? Those puzzling questions compel us to recognize that it contains some higher secret than what is immediately apparent.

This leads Viret to state what is the key theme in all Reformation commentaries, namely, that this precept is kept when we stop our own work in order to allow God to work in us.¹³ Thus, the observance of the sabbath day becomes a sacrament, a sign of regeneration and sanctification. The fourth commandment is, therefore, also the proper sequel to the first three: The first tells about what knowledge of God we must have; the second and the third, about the proper public confession we must make in both our works and words; and the fourth, by what means that knowledge can be communicated. Melancthon also, in his *Loci*, had tried to relate functionally the commandments of the first table, stating that "the first commandment speaks of the heart; the second of the tongue; and the third of ceremony."¹⁴ Luther, in the *Treatise on Good Works*, speaks of the "pretty golden ring these three commandments and their works make of themselves, for they all act within the sphere of the first commandment."¹⁵

Another aspect of the sabbath commandment which Viret mentions is its role in the spreading of the knowledge of the true

¹²*IC*, p. 410.

¹³*IC*, p. 417.

¹⁴*Loci* (1555), ed. C. L. Manschreck (New York, 1961), p. 95.

¹⁵*Treatise on Good Works*, in *LW*, 44: 79.

God; but in dealing with this matter, Viret cannot resist engaging in a bit of polemic about Roman worship in a foreign tongue.¹⁶ When God has made such a clear provision to provide a message, Rome has made it a sound that cannot be understood.

Viret, who calls the sabbath a sacrament, next compares it with a Christian sacrament, baptism, which has essentially the same significance of dying and being born again to a new life. "When we live in the spirit of our baptism," he states, "we keep the fourth commandment."¹⁷

3. *Questions about the Hallowing of the Day*

The dialogue format allows Viret to pass rather abruptly from one topic to another. So, at that point Timothy, the questioner, asks a series of questions about the hallowing of the day. He wonders how time can be sanctified. He further questions the point of man's sanctifying a day already sanctified by God, and he cannot understand why one day only should be sanctified. Viret reminds his reader that the commandments speak of sanctifying the *day* of rest, rather than rest as such. A period of time is sanctified when it is totally dedicated to holy pursuits. The idea is a commonplace Protestant sabbath interpretation. His argument reveals, however, Viret's concern with exegesis, with the need to be true to the biblical text. His approach is systematic and academic, a fact which stands out boldly when one compares it, for instance, with Luther's deep emotion in the *Treatise on Good Works* as he talks of dying to sin through the discipline of the flesh with fastings and exercises determined by the ebb and flow of the pride and lust of the flesh.¹⁸

Timothy's questions on the sanctifying of time provide Daniel, Viret's mouthpiece, with the opportunity to engage in a little controversy again. This time he castigates the popish holidays, celebrated in a pagan way, since each Sunday is dedicated to the feast of some mortal. A satanic plan indeed, he exclaims. He asks himself why Satan has instituted so many holidays, and he replies

¹⁶IC, p. 413.

¹⁷IC, p. 414.

¹⁸*Treatise on Good Works*, in *LW*, 44: 74-75.

that it is to reduce man to idleness and provide him with both the temptations and the time to destroy himself in taverns, gambling dens, and bordellos. Thus, the day of God is dedicated to the gods of the flesh, Bacchus and Venus, and to Mars, the god of fights.¹⁹

The opposition to holidays was general among the Reformers. Luther, e.g., in the *Treatise on Good Works*, expresses the wish that "in Christendom there were no holidays except Sundays, and that we made all the festivals of Our Lady and the Saints fall on Sundays."²⁰ At Strasbourg, Bucer questioned the value of most holidays because they were of pagan origin, and for a time he forbade their celebration.²¹ Perhaps the best-known instance of the Protestant opposition to the many feasts of the church was the edict of the Consistory at Geneva on November 16, 1550, prohibiting all festivals except Sunday, which it described as God-ordained.²²

The fact that the command to rest on the seventh day includes also an order to work on the six other days gives Viret an opportunity to include in his polemic an attack on monastic life, which, according to him, is the choice of a life of idleness under the pretense of dedicating oneself to God.²³ To those who allude to the many Jewish holidays, Viret replies that they did not really interfere with labor, for they came after the spring work and after the autumn harvest was completed, and therefore one could rest with good reason.

At that point Viret recognizes, however, the right of the church to institute some holidays, a notion which he defends by the example of Jesus, who took part in the celebration of the Feast of Lights, a celebration that was not appointed by God.²⁴ This admission is rather interesting in view of the strong Reformed tradition of opposition to any ritual that is not clearly specified in Scriptures, and on this point Viret and Calvin do not fully agree.

¹⁹*IC*, p. 417.

²⁰*IC*, p. 153.

²¹*Wendel*, pp. 206-207.

²²*The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, ed. P. E. Hughes (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1966), p. 130.

²³*IC*, p. 418.

²⁴*IC*, p. 420.

4. *Creation and the Day of Rest*

The dialogue turns next to the relationship of creation to the day of rest, a topic that receives very scant or no attention in other discussions of the fourth commandment by the Protestant Reformers.²⁵ Viret reminds us of how little attention most people lend to the thought of the Creator. Aristotle himself denied creation, yet belief in creation is the foundation for accepting some of the most important doctrines of the church. It leads to faith in one God only, in his ownership of all things. It compels us to accept God's freedom to do what he wants with his own creatures, and therefore it conditions man to refuse to be scandalized by believing in the doctrine of predestination. How philosophers could miss the concept of a Creator is a puzzle for Viret, but it represents the normal result of a refusal to step beyond reason. Yet, the world is full of images of the Creator, "since the whole world is nothing more than a great temple of God filled with images, self-portraits of God."²⁶ At that point Viret becomes very lyrical as he ponders what might happen if ploughmen, astronomers, physicists, and philosophers could properly read the great book of nature.

The Change of the Day

Viret now faces a corollary question: "Do not Christians need to be reminded of Creation?"²⁷ If the answer is that the sabbath has been abolished, then what right do they have to keep another day? If there really is a need for a day of worship, why could not the Christians have kept the day specified in the commandment? There is no question in his mind about the need of a day set apart for public worship. If it were to be discarded, the church would come to naught. Then why did the day have to be changed?

He offers several reasons for the change of the day. It was important, for instance, to publicize the fact that Christians no longer expect the Messiah.²⁸ It was indispensable also to separate Christianity from the Jewish superstition of attributing holiness to

²⁵IC, pp. 422-423.

²⁶IC, p. 423.

²⁷IC, p. 426.

²⁸IC, p. 428.

a certain portion of time.²⁹ Furthermore, it was perhaps the only way to be set free from the outward celebration of the day of rest.³⁰ In this line of reasoning we are reminded of Calvin's argument: "Because it was expedient to overthrow superstition, the day sacred to the Jews was set aside."³¹ But, in this case, how then can Sunday be sacred? The sacredness is not derived from the entity itself, Viret argues, but from its sacred use, very much like common bread and common wine become sacred when used for communion.³²

Servants and the Weekly Day of Rest

The discussion turns now to what is commonly called the third use of the sabbath commandment: the protection of a weekly rest for the servants. Here Viret's reasoning is quite original. Instead of stressing the suffering and economic loss that result when servants cannot rest properly, he emphasizes human rights. The right of servants to celebrate the day of rest is based upon their creation in the image of God, he declares.³³ They have, therefore, the same right to religious instruction as their masters. Thus, the fourth commandment is closely linked with the proclamation of human dignity. (This was also the argument used for requiring church attendance of all, whether masters or servants, in the 1547 country-church ordinances at Geneva.)³⁴

Animals and the Weekly Day of Rest

But, Timothy asks, how can this argument lead to justifying the demand for the rest of animals, a stipulation that concludes the sabbath commandment?³⁵ After all, animals were not created in the image of God. Viret gives several reasons in response: First, by not working farm animals on the sabbath, the servants who take care of them are also free to worship. In the second place, by being more

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰IC, p. 430.

³¹*Institutes* (1559) 2.8.33.

³²IC, p. 429.

³³IC, p. 431.

³⁴*Calvini Opera*, 10/1: 51.

³⁵IC, p. 432.

humane toward animals, we will be better amenable to the equity that should exist between men. Finally, by reflecting upon God's care for animals, we are led to reflect upon his interest in man. Incidentally, Erasmus also had paid attention to this facet of the commandment.³⁶

Strangers and the Weekly Day of Rest

There is still a major problem left, however: Why are strangers required to keep the day of rest? If they are unbelievers, why should they be subjected to a religious ordinance? How can there be a spiritual rest, when there is no spiritual interest? How, indeed, can a sacrament be shared with unbelievers? Viret's answer gives an important reflection of his view of religious freedom: "If we do not stop evil where God has given us the power to do it, we share in it. For if an idolater, a blasphemer, an adulterer, a gourmand, a drunkard, a gambler, or any others have the license to live in idolatry, to blaspheme, to commit adultery, to drink and gamble, and to do all sorts of evil things in their own country, it does not follow that we must endure such where God has given us power and authority to prevent it. For if we tolerate that the land which God gave us should be polluted and defiled, it will never stop asking vengeance from God."³⁷ We recognize here the Bucerian tone of the passage, with its demand for the enforcement of Sunday observance.³⁸

In a sermon of June 1555, two years after Servetus's execution, Calvin considered also the problem of giving the sacrament of Sunday to strangers, who obviously cannot and may not share in the divine rest. Calvin said that in this case the command to the Gentiles was not for their sake, but for the sake of God's children. If cattle and strangers were required to respect the sabbath, rebels to God's truth must not be allowed to flourish among God's people. Even passers-by must be stopped. Making allusion probably to an illustrious passer-by, Servetus, he adds, "If anyone hears a transient

³⁶*Symbolum*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Leclerc (1706; reprint, Hildesheim, 1962), 5: 1189.

³⁷*IC*, p. 433.

³⁸*Opera Latina*, ed. F. Wendel (Paris, 1950), 15: 81.

blaspheme, if he mocks God and that is tolerated and his deed is covered up, is it not profanation?"³⁹ He attacks violently also the idea of allowing papists a place where they might celebrate what he calls "their idolatries and superstitions." It is interesting, however, that in his commentaries on the Pentateuch, Calvin does not say a word about the possibility of restoring the death penalty for Sunday-breaking.⁴⁰

5. *Conclusion*

What does this study reveal concerning Viret? He is a careful exegete, following carefully all the details of the text. He is also a very systematic interpreter, who considers all the problems a doctrine may raise. This leads him to give much attention to specific issues, such as the relationship of the commandment to creation and the importance of this doctrine for Christians.

Viret is much more polemical in his treatment of the commandment than are the other Reformers. Furthermore, he is well trained in the methods of logic and is usually very clear and readable, although at times his care in examining every detail becomes a bit tiresome.

On the whole, Viret is more academic than inspiring. He writes and talks like a teacher rather than a pastor. In so doing, however, he provides one of the fullest and most systematic discussions of the fourth commandment that stems from the Reformation period.

³⁹*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, in *Calvini Opera*, 26: 207.

⁴⁰*Calvini Opera*, 24: 583. See also "Answer to Dutchman," in *ibid.*, 9: 589.