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Reformation
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Keeping the Sabbath—John Calvin's Teaching on the Fourth Commandment

From the Geneva Catechism (ca. 1560)

168. *Let us come to the fourth commandment.* Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: But the seventh is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor the stranger that is within thy gates: 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.

169. *Does he order us to labor on six days, that we may rest on the seventh?* Not absolutely; but allowing man six days for labor, he excepts the seventh, that it may be devoted to rest.

170. *Does he interdict us from all kind of labor?* This commandment has a separate and peculiar reason. As the observance of rest is part of the old ceremonies, it was abolished by the advent of Christ.

171. *Do you mean that this commandment properly refers to the Jews, and was therefore merely temporary?* I do, in as far as it is ceremonial.

172. *What then? Is there any thing under it beyond ceremony?* It was given for three reasons.

173. *State them to me.* To figure spiritual rest; for the preservation of ecclesiastical polity; and for the relief of slaves.

174. *What do you mean by spiritual rest?* When we keep holiday from our own works, that God may perform His own works in us.

175. *What, moreover, is the method of thus keeping holiday?* By crucifying our flesh,—that is, renouncing our own inclination, that we may be governed by the Spirit of God.

176. *Is it sufficient to do so on the seventh day?* Nay, continually. After we have once begun, we must continue during the whole course of life.

177. *Why, then, is a certain day appointed to figure it?* There is no necessity that the reality should agree with the figure in every respect, provided it be suitable in so far as is required for the purpose of figuring.

178. *But why is the seventh day prescribed rather than any other day?* In Scripture the number seven implies perfection. It is, therefore, apt for denoting perpetuity. It, at the same time, indicates that this spiritual rest is only begun in this life, and will not be perfect until we depart from this world.

179. *But what is meant when the Lord exhorts us to rest by His own example?* Having finished the creation of the world in six days, He dedicated the seventh to the contemplation of His works. The more strongly to stimulate us to this, He set before us His own example. For nothing is more desirable than to be formed after His image.

180. *But ought meditation on the works of God to be continual, or is it sufficient that one day out of seven be devoted to it?* It becomes us to be daily exercised in it, but because of our weakness, one day is specially appointed. And this is the polity which I mentioned.

181. *What order, then, is to be observed on that day?* That the people meet to hear the doctrine of Christ, to engage in public prayer, and make profession of their faith.

182. *Now explain what you meant by saying that the Lord intended by this commandment to provide also for the relief of slaves.* That some relaxation might be given to those under the power of others. Nay, this, too, tends to maintain a common polity. For when one day is devoted to rest, every one accustoms himself to labor during the other days.

183. *Let us now see how far this command has reference*

to us. In regard to the ceremony, I hold that it was abolished, as the reality existed in Christ (Col. 2:17).

184. *How?* Because, by virtue of his death, our old man is crucified, and we are raised up to newness of life (Rom. vi.6).

185. *What of the commandment then remains for us?* Not to neglect the holy ordinances which contribute to the spiritual polity of the church; especially to frequent sacred assemblies, to hear the word of God, to celebrate the sacraments, and engage in the regular prayers, as enjoined.

186. *But does the figure give us nothing more?* Yes, indeed, we must give heed to the thing meant by it; namely, that being engrafted into the body of Christ, and made His members, we cease from our own works, and so resign ourselves to the government of God.