



Research Report

Number 1, 6 September 2006

The Moral Dimension of the Fourth Commandment

Barry R. Harker, PhD

The first annual celebration of Ten Commandments Day in the United States of America and beyond on 7 May 2006 highlights the divisions in Christendom in relation to the perpetuity of the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue. In this report, I will advance arguments for the perpetuity of the Fourth Commandment based upon its indubitable moral dimension.

The weekly Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment directs our attention to the fact of Creation and all the attendant responsibilities for humanity that flow from recognition of the Creator and our place in Creation. We worship God precisely because He is the Creator: "O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker" (Psalm 95:6). The Sabbath commandment encapsulates our obligation to worship God and gives direction to that worship. As long as Creation stands, we are to remember the Sabbath as God's designated sacred memorial of Creation: "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18). God will not modify His expressed will. His law is eternal (Psalm 119:89, 152, 160).

The perpetuity of the Sabbath commandment is confirmed when we examine its moral dimension. God's moral law of Ten Commandments governs the obligations that we rightfully owe to God and to our fellow humans. Moral law tells us how we ought to behave in relation to others. Even those who reject a divine basis for morality and who seek to establish morality on a rational basis alone recognise that morality is focussed on appropriate behaviour in the public context. For example, David Aspin, an educational

philosopher, asks what it is to be moral and answers by stating that morality is concerned with the regulation of interpersonal transactions by adherence to a set of principles that are universalizable, over-riding, other-regarding, and significantly related to human harm and welfare.¹ In God's moral law, we can also detect such principles as due respect for authority and truth.

It is moral for us to obey the first four commandments because God, who is the Creator and thus superordinate to His Creation, has rightfully commanded all to acknowledge Him as God (Exodus 20:3), worship Him exclusively (Exodus 20:4-6), respect His name and holiness (Exodus 20:7) and remember to keep the Sabbath holy in order to preserve our knowledge of His works and our faith in Him (Exodus 20:8-11). The remaining six commandments deal with our duty to others.

Significantly, the Fourth Commandment links the first three commandments with the last six commandments. Sabbath observance not only preserves faith in God and submission to His will but it also touches our duty to man and animals and even to ourselves. By commanding rest, it protects our lives and health, protects the lives and health of employees, and protects the health of working animals. By allowing for reflection, worship, fellowship and service, the Sabbath takes us out of ourselves and helps us to keep life in its proper perspective. The Fourth Commandment is universal in obligation, over-riding in its importance, other-regarding in its focus, and significantly related to the promotion of human welfare and the avoidance of harm to others. It also encourages due respect for God's authority and loyalty to truth. The Sabbath commandment is saturated with morality.

Of all the commandments, the Sabbath commandment is the only one that identifies the God who is giving the commandments, His authority for doing so, and the legitimate extent of that authority. The Sabbath is placed at the centre of the Ten Commandments because it is crucial to the authority of the Decalogue and because it binds the two tables of the law together by containing obligations to both God and man. When observed as God intended, it is the one commandment that provides the conditions under which an increase in holiness can take place. The Sabbath commandment is one of Scripture's brightest jewels.

One nineteenth century Protestant author captures the uniqueness of the weekly Sabbath in these words: "The Sabbath, as we have seen, was a part of the moral law. There it not only had a place, but it gave a meaning and motive to it. With that Christianity cannot interfere. "Yea, we establish the law." Never is it represented to be part of the ceremonial economy. It is not a type of anything but itself. It is archetype and antitype. With nothing can it exchange...But the Sabbath is the Sabbath, and nothing but the Sabbath can it be. It owed a particular construction to Judaism; it owes a specific application to Christianity. But to no dispensation owes its existence, or authority, or right. It is from the beginning. It is the parent of dispensations. It is the root of religions. "Its tabernacle is in the sun."²

The Sabbath is incontestably moral and the suggestion that it is a shadow of things to come and supplanted by Jesus Christ in Colossians 2:14-17 is not defensible. Jesus,

looking forty years into the future in relation to the destruction of the temple in 70 A. D., upheld the sacredness of the Sabbath in Matthew 24:20. Isaiah, looking beyond this world to the realm of eternity, stated in Isaiah 66:22, 23 that the weekly Sabbath would continue to be observed as a focal point for the worship of God.

The apostle Paul did not meet with Jews on the Sabbath day simply in order to preach to them but because he understood the binding nature of the Fourth Commandment. If Paul is not undoing the Sabbath obligation in Colossians 2:14-17, then there is no reason to assume that the Sabbath meetings recorded in Acts, in which Paul participated, are simply an opportunity for him to preach. If a demonstrably moral commandment such as the Fourth Commandment is abrogated in Colossians 2:14-17, then there is no reason to hold any moral commandment in esteem after Calvary. A commandment that can be abrogated was never moral in the first place. By its very nature, the Decalogue is immutable.

If God placed the Sabbath commandment in the centre of His moral law, saturated with morality, then its time component also has a moral dimension. God blessed the seventh day of Creation week and made this week the model of all weeks to follow. It is the act of Antichrist to think to change times and laws (Daniel 7:25). The time element of the Sabbath is inextricably bound up with its place in Creation week. The Sabbath follows the six days of God's labour in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and that fact is confirmed in Exodus 20:8-11. That the time element of the Fourth Commandment applies exclusively to the seventh day of the Creation week is shown conclusively in these passages. Both the days of labour and the sanctified day of rest and worship are identified by their order in Creation week and eternally bound to it. We honour God truly by remembering His Creatorship on the day that is described as "the sabbath of the LORD thy God" (Exodus 20:10).

¹ D. Aspin, "Ethical Aspects of Sport and Games and Physical Education," Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, Vol. 9, July 1975, pp. 57, 58.

² Richard Winter Hamilton, LL.D., D. D., in "The Christian Sabbath," by Ministers of Different Denominations, pp. 339, 340. London: The Religious Tract Society, 1856, reproduced in Source Book for Bible Students, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington, D. C., 1927, p. 503.