The Puritan View of the Sabbath

Written by David Kranendonk

Grounded in Creation

A tradition cannot be enforced without having a ground outside itself. This was the conviction of the Puritans of the 17th century. They demanded that all practices must conform to biblical principles. Especially in worship to God, all practices are to flow from God's commands. Therefore the day of worship must have its foundation in the Word of God. Prior to the Puritan era, the Lord's Day had been observed with varying degrees of strictness; however, the underlying doctrinal grounds for Lord's Day observance had often been treated in an ambiguous way. The Puritans delineated the precise relation between the Sabbath referred to at creation and in the fourth commandment, as well as the relation between the Old Testament Sabbath and the New Testament Lord's Day. Their central argument was that the Sabbath is a perpetually binding moral ordinance rooted in creation.

The Reformers highlighted the ceremonial and typological element of the Old Testament Sabbath. As Richard Gaffin reveals, John Calvin believed the Sabbath was a type of spiritual rest, which was fulfilled in Christ. On the one hand, Calvin said that the sanctification of one day in seven is no longer binding. On the other hand, he maintained that the command to worship God privately and also publicly remains. In a sermon on Deuteronomy 5:12-14, Calvin preached that we are called to worship continually, “but because of our weaknesses, or rather, because of our laziness, it is necessary that one day be appointed.” He continued: “We are to dedicate the day entirely to him.” Thus, Calvin was a practical Sabbatarian, despite the claims of some scholars who make too great a divide between the practice of the Reformers and the Puritans. Calvin’s position was common among the Reformers.

Yet, the seeds of the Puritan doctrine of the Sabbath are found in the writings of the Reformers. Patrick Collinson notes that the first puritans drew on earlier continental sources such as Bullinger's *Decades* to support their views. They also drew from the English Reformers such as John Bradford and Hugh Latimer. The Second Book of Homilies, published in 1562, states that the Lord's day is now the Sabbath day on which all ought to cease from work and worship God, in accordance with the fourth commandment and God’s resting at creation. The teaching of a perpetually binding Sabbath is hidden in the writings of the Reformers.
The impetus to the Puritans’ progression in this doctrine was their conviction that a scriptural warrant is required for all practices of worship and their concern for the prevalence of Sabbath-breaking. Rather than immediately getting caught up in the issue of how the fourth commandment relates to today, they began where Scripture begins concerning the Sabbath: Genesis 2. As John Primus remarks, “Sabbatarian thought was Creation-centred. Theologically, this was the nerve centre of Sabbatarianism.” The puritans cleared away the doctrinal ambiguity by revealing the Sabbath’s foundation in creation.

Upon creating all things, God rested on the seventh day as an example for Adam and all his posterity. God is the eternal, all-glorious, almighty One, who never faints. Therefore, as the early puritan, Richard Greenham, wrote, in “resting” God was “shewing rather what ought to be in us, then what was in him.” That God’s resting served as an example does not render his action meaningless. Though it is human language, it indicates that God delighted in the works of His hands on that day. Yet, the primary purpose of God’s resting was that He might thereby give a pattern of one day of rest following six days of work at the very beginning of man’s existence.

God’s action is a pattern to man because He blessed and sanctified the seventh day. In Genesis 2:3 “resting” is a distinct action from “blessing” and “sanctifying.” If He had merely rested, His action would have had no relation to our daily life, in that it may have been a one time action. However, He blessed and sanctified it as well. John Owen argued that God blessed the seventh day by sanctifying it. The day had good added unto it in that God sanctified it to His own glory. “Sanctify” has the sense of setting something apart and dedicating it to God. God set the day apart from the other six days so that it might be dedicated to Him in a particular way. Since God is perfectly holy (or sanctified), this sanctification must relate to man and his activities on it. All of creation was to give glory to God at all times of every day. However, God sanctified the seventh day particularly for man, who was to dress the garden the other six days, and dedicate the seventh day exclusively to the worship of God.

God sanctified this day as the supreme lawgiver. The puritans stressed that man owes obedience to God as his Creator. As Creator, God stipulates to man what he ought to do. The puritan Nicholas Bound asserted that the Sabbath command “was first delivered by lively voice, namely to Adam and Eve in Paradise.” William Perkins states that the Sabbath was one of the two commands given in Eden and was an element in the covenant of works. According to the puritans, the Sabbath is a pre-fall institution. Therefore, they argue that if the Sabbath was binding on Adam in his state of innocence, it ought much more to be binding on the children of Adam who are prone to forget God. In the words of John Owen, God blessed “that individual day in the first place, and a day in the revolution of the same space of time for succeeding
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generations."14 Being grounded in the time of creation, the Sabbath is an obligation resting upon all of mankind.

The charge that the godly between Adam and Moses did not observe the Sabbath is dismissed by the Puritans. John Bunyan is atypical of the puritans when he argues that for 2000 years after creation the Sabbath was neither known nor observed.15 Greenham argues for the knowledge of the Sabbath from the patriarchs’ evident knowledge of the rest of the moral law, of which the Sabbath is part.16 Anthony Burgess says the substance of the Decalogue was publicly preached during that time.17 The evidence for or against Patriarchal Sabbath observance is inconclusive if Genesis 3 through 50 is read in isolation from Genesis 2 and Exodus 20. However, Scripture ought to be always interpreted in light of the rest of Scripture. Owen is perceptive in noting that if its institution at creation is accepted, then its practice thereafter is a given.18

By beginning in Genesis 2, the Puritans demonstrated that the Sabbath is not simply a law for the Old Testament church but for the church from the creation of man to the end of time.

Endnotes


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5
James Gilfillan,

6
Winton Solberg,
Redeem the Time: The Puritan Sabbath in Early America (Harvard UP, 1977), 32-34; see also Katz, Sabbath and Sectarianism, 1.

7
The Works of the Reverend and Faithfyll Servant of Iesvs Christ M. Richard Greenham,
A Treatise of the Sabbath (London, 1599), 321.

8
James Gilfillan,
The Sabbath, 276.

9
John Owen,

10
Ernest Kevan,
The Grace of Law (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 262.

11
Primus,
Holy Time, 148.

12
William Perkins,
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A Golden Chaine
(1595), 20; quoted in Primus, 
Holy Time
, 113

13
William Perkins,
Works

14
John Owen,
Exposition

15
The Works of John Bunyan,
Questions about the nature and perpetuity of the seventh-day Sabbath 

16
Richard Greenham,
A Treatise of the Sabboth,
307.

17
Anthony Burgess,
VindiciaeLegis 
(1646), 150; quoted in Kevan, 
Grace of Law
, 117.

18
John Owen,
Exposition

Contained in the Moral Law
In the last issue we surveyed how the Puritans understood the relationship between the Sabbath of Genesis 2 and our weekly day of rest. By grounding the weekly Sabbath in Genesis 2, the Puritans demonstrated that it was not simply a law for the Old Testament church but is for the church from the creation of man to the end of time. In this article, we go a step further and survey how they understood the fourth commandment.

The Puritans insisted that since the command concerning the sanctification of the Sabbath was included in the Ten Commandments it is a moral law. The Decalogue as a whole is a summary of the moral law which is perpetually binding on all of mankind, not just Old Testament Israel. Therefore its individual commands must also be morally binding on everyone. Regarding the morality of the fourth commandment, James Usher observed: first, to take away the fourth from the moral law, would reduce the commands to nine, “which is contrary to God’s word, (Deut. iv. 13)”; second, “this commandment … was written by the finger of God, … whereas no part of the ceremonial law was; and third, “it was written in tables of stone … to signify … [the] perpetuity of this command.” John Willison adds that the tables were placed in the ark, as a sign of the perpetual, holy demands of God. Furthermore, the Fourth commandment is positioned at the heart of the Decalogue and contains more grounds than the other commandments. It is also is pressed more and expressed in both a positive and negative command. Given this position in the decalogue, the command for a day of rest could not be dismissed or spiritualised by the Puritans.

Yet, the Puritans did allow for some ceremonial elements in the Old Testament Sabbath. Though the kernel was moral, there was a ceremonial husk surrounding it. Greenham considers Saturday observance as a ceremonial element, while the moral principle is one day in seven. The curse and rigour of the law, the ceremonies prescribed on the day, and the observance from sundown till sundown are all appendices to the moral substance. Thomas Shepard defines the moral principles as: a time for worship, a day, and “a seventh day determined.”

This view on the morality of the Sabbath embroiled the Puritans in debate with those Anglicans who differed from them. The point of difficulty was that moral law must be a reflection of the natural law. Natural law is known by all, regardless if they have God’s word, and is grounded in the character of God. However, the Sabbath can only be known by divine revelation, and even if it was given to Adam, it was given after, not when, he was created. Therefore some Anglicans concluded it was based on the arbitrary will of God, and not perpetually binding.

In reply to these charges, the Puritans affirmed the Sabbath’s moral nature and its roots in what William Ames calls “natural moral law.” Ames reasoned as follows: “Natural reason dictates that
some time be set apart for the worship of God.” In ordaining religions activities, God ordained “a certain time as a necessary circumstance.” Therefore, “that some particular day should be set apart for the more solemn worship of God is a natural moral law.” “Positive law” decrees this is to occur at least once in seven days. This decree “has the same force and reason” as those who flow from natural law in that it “fixes” that which natural reason “approximates”.6 In response to those that were unconvinced by this argument, the puritans added that, even if the Law would be purely positive, it may still be perpetually binding due to the sovereign will of God.7 This reasoning was typical of the Puritans who argued that the positive command clarifies what is naturally known.

The divide between positive law not absolutely required by the character of God and natural law is further lessened by John Owen. He makes clear that all law is given by God. A “law of nature” is “a law given unto our nature” by God.8 Purely positive laws are not based on the character of God. However, a moral law may appear positive due to the darkened understanding of the natural man. The fourth command is cast in a positive form, but the basis is moral due to the necessity of worship and the hebdomadal (sevenfold) revolution of time. As a result, the command is “moral-positive.” God’s goodness is displayed in recording in tables of stone his law, which depraved man had lost sight of.9 Jonathan Edwards builds on this view, noting that God must consider the Sabbath to be the fittest time for worship, based on the “universal state and nature of mankind.” Hence, the command is as moral as the other commands, which are founded on “the fitness of things themselves,” even if the natural man does not perceive its fitness.10

Being based on creation and contained in God’s moral law, the fourth command must remain binding throughout time. The reason it appears less moral than the other commands is only due to the darkened nature of man’s understanding. This doctrine was the foundation of the practical Sabbath observance of the Puritans. They could delight in the Lord’s Day as a divine institution, on which man is to perform the most delightful activity possible – worship to the divine Creator of the world and re-Creator of His church.

Endnotes


4 Richard Greenham, Works
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(London, 1599), 311.

5
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, vol. 3,
Theses Sabbaticae
(Ligonier: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), 57-59.

6
William Ames,
The Marrow of Theology

7
Jonathan Edwards,
Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath
[article online]; available from members.aol.com/RSIGRACE/; accessed 25 February 2000.

8
John Owen,
Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews

9
John Owen,
Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews
, vol. 2,355, 408.

10
Jonathan Edwards,
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From Sabbath to Lord’s Day
If the command is to keep the seventh day holy, why do we keep the first day of the week holy? If Israel was to keep it holy in remembrance of how they were delivered from Egypt, does this command still apply to us? Is this not a command only for the Old Testament? These questions may be very contemporary, but are not new. The puritans grappled with them. The two previous articles have indicated that the Puritans were convinced that the command concerning the Sabbath is rooted in creation and part of the moral law. The natural conclusion is that this command must remain in force until the end of time.

The Puritans were convinced that if the Old Testament truth concerning the Sabbath were taken seriously, the New Testament church must continue to observe it. In response to those who spiritualised it for the New Testament era, Jonathan Edwards states: “this is an absurd way of interpreting the command, as it refers to Christians. For if the command be so far abolished, it is entirely abolished.”

Their key argument for the Lord’s day is that the specific day in the seven day cycle may be altered by the authority of God himself. The fourth commandment does not specify which day must be kept. Exodus 20:9-10a says: “Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God.” On the surface the “seventh day” man appear to refer to the seventh day of the week. However, Edwards asserts that it “implies no more, than that after six days of labour, we shall, upon the next to the sixth, rest and keep it holy.” The Jews rightly considered the fourth commandment to refer to the last day of the week because the last day of the week had already been instituted at creation as the day on which they were to observe the Sabbath. Thus, the morality of the command is not destroyed with the change of day.

Yet, the Puritans did not allow the day of Sabbath observance to become an arbitrary choice. Shepard states that “the seventh determined and appointed of God for holy rest” must be observed. He proceeds to argue that it must be either the first or last day of the week, because otherwise one would break the week into two working units of less than 6 days: an action which is contrary to the call to work six consecutive days. Regardless of the validity of Shepherd’s limitation of the Sabbath to the first or last day of the week, his contention that God must determine which day it is remains valid. Dennison argues that the medieval theologians as well as the earlier reformers placed much weight on tradition; but the Puritans sought divine appointment for the Lord’s Day, as the first day of the week.
The question now remains: What is the change of day from the last to the first day of the week based on? In reply the Puritans begin by stating that Christ, as “Lord of the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:28), appointed the change of day. Thomas Watson remarks that Revelation 1:10 calls it the Lord’s Day “because of the Lord’s instituting it, and setting it apart” just as the Lord’s Supper is so called due to Christ’s institution of it. [5] Verses 19 and 26 of John 20 indicate that the Lord Jesus appeared to the disciples on the first day of the week. Christ also poured out his Spirit on Pentecost, which was the first day of the week (Acts 2:1). Christ’s other appearances may have been on the Lord’s Day although Scripture does not state this explicitly. These appearances of Christ sanction the gatherings of the disciples on the first day of the week.

That the first day of the week was observed in apostolic times, presupposes a divine command. The Lord Jesus commanded the disciples to teach “whatsoever I have commanded you.” Shepard declares it blasphemy to think that the disciples taught more than Christ commanded. [6]

As to how Christ commanded: first, he taught them many things after his resurrection (Acts 1:1-3); and second, he promised the Spirit who would lead the disciples “into all truth” (John16:13). Thus, all that the apostles taught was by divine command. Acts 20:7 states: “And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them.” On this verse, Shepard notes that this was a general church gathering for the purpose of “holy duties.” The text seems to indicate a special gathering on the first day of the week was common.

In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul exhorts: “Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.” Ames notes that the gathering on the first day appears to be “something long since accepted by the disciples of Christ.” [8]

Furthermore, verse one sets this exhortation in the setting of a binding command in that there Paul speaks of having “given order”. Since the Apostles taught the Christians to observe the Lord’s Day and all the apostles taught was of divine command, the observance of the Lord’s Day was a divine command.

The divine command is rooted in the significance of the resurrection of Christ. Here again, the puritans go back to creation, viewing it as an analogy of Christ’s resurrection. [9] John Owen outlines how Christ ushered in a new age based on his “work of a new creation.” On the first day of the week, Christ “rested from his works, in and by his resurrection.” Thus, just as God’s resting on the day after creation indicated it was the day on which the Jewish Sabbath was to be observed, so also in the New Testament, Christ’s resting on the day after recreation was the day on which the Christian Sabbath was to be observed. [10]

As Adam was to rest and delight in the works of creation; so the church is to rest and delight in the work of Christ.
By shedding the light of creation on the fourth commandment, the Puritans clarified the doctrine of the Sabbath as a moral ordinance binding on the New Testament age. If one day following six working days was ordained by God to be a day of rest and worship of him when Adam was in the state of innocence, this ordinance must apply to all of Adam’s fallen descendants. Basing itself upon creation, the fourth command must remain binding throughout time. The reason it appears less moral than the other commands is only due to the darkened nature of man’s understanding. The change of the day of Sabbath observance to Sunday is upon a divine principle which reflects that of creation. Therefore the Lord’s Day is required by the fourth commandment. This doctrine was the foundation of the practical Sabbath observance the Puritans are known for. They could delight in the Lord’s Day as a divine institution, on which man is to perform the most delightful activity possible: worship to the divine Creator of the world and re-Creator of His church.


[4] cf. James T. Dennison, 31; see also Jonathan Edwards: “The precept in the fourth command is to be taken generally of such a seventh day as God should appoint, or had appointed.”

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