**The Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy**

Q. 115. WHICH IS THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT? (WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM)

A. The fourth commandment is, Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy 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.

Q. 116. WHAT IS REQUIRED IN THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT?

A. The fourth commandment requires of all men the sanctifying or keeping holy to God such set times as he has appointed in his Word, expressly one whole day in seven; which was the seventh from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, and the first day of the week ever since, and so to continue to the end of the world; which is the Christian sabbath, and in the New Testament called the Lord's day.

Q. 117. HOW IS THE SABBATH OR THE LORD'S DAY TO BE SANCTIFIED?

A. The sabbath or Lord's day is to be sanctified by an holy resting all the day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercises of God's worship: and, to that end, we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.
Q. 118. WHY IS THE CHARGE OF KEEPING THE SABBATH MORE SPECIALLY DIRECTED TO GOVERNORS OF FAMILIES, AND OTHER SUPERIORS?

A. The charge of keeping the sabbath is more specially directed to governors of families, and other superiors, because they are bound not only to keep it themselves, but to see that it be observed by all those that are under their charge; and because they are prone oftentimes to hinder them by employments of their own.

Q. 119. WHAT ARE THE SINS FORBIDDEN IN THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT?

A. The sins forbidden in the fourth commandment are, all omissions of the duties required, all careless, negligent, and unprofitable performing of them, and being weary of them; all profaning the day by idleness, and doing that which is in itself sinful; and by all needless works, words, and thoughts, about our worldly employments and recreations.

Q. 120. WHAT ARE THE REASONS ANNEXED TO THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT, THE MORE TO ENFORCE IT?

A. The reasons annexed to the fourth commandment, the more to enforce it, are taken from the equity of it, God allowing us six days of seven for our own affairs, and reserving but one for himself, in these words, Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: from God's challenging a special propriety in that day, The seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: from the example of God, who in six days made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: and from that blessing which God put upon that day, not only in sanctifying it to be a day for his service, but in ordaining it to be a means of blessing to us in our sanctifying it; Wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Q. 121. WHY IS THE WORD REMEMBER SET IN THE BEGINNING OF THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT?

A. The word Remember is set in the beginning of the fourth commandment, partly, because of the great benefit of remembering it, we being thereby helped in our preparation to keep it, and, in keeping it, better to keep all the rest of the commandments, and to continue a thankful remembrance of the two great benefits of creation and redemption, which contain a short abridgment of religion; and partly, because we are very ready to forget it, for that there is less light of nature for it, and yet it restrains our natural liberty in things at other times lawful; that it comes but once in seven days, and many worldly businesses come between, and too often take off our minds from thinking of it, either to prepare for it, or to sanctify it; and that Satan with his instruments much labor to blot out the glory, and even the memory of it, to bring in all irreligion and impiety.
General Principles

DIFFICULTIES. 4 MAIN DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING AND APPLYING THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

1. The Sabbath’s institution.

2. The Sabbath’s observance.

3. The Sabbath’s abiding validity.

4. The early church’s inattention to the fourth commandment.

CELEBRATING THE SABBATH

Exodus 23:12—
Psalm 92 (cf. Isa. 58:13)—
Mark 3:2-5; Luke 13:11-17—
Mark 2:27—

FILLING THE SABBATH

Exodus 31:13; Lev. 19:3; Isa. 56:4—
Psalm 92—
Numbers 28:9-10—
Lev. 19:30; 26:2—
2 Kings 4:23—
Lev. 23:3; Numb. 28:25—

DISTORTING THE SABBATH—THE GROSS DISTORTION

Amos 8:5; Isa. 58:3; Neh. 13:15-22—
Exodus 31:12-17—

Lev. 25:8-9—

Neh. 13:18; Ezek. 20:13—

**ONE MORE DISTORTION – THE REFINED DISTORTION**

Lev. 23:3 (cf. vv. 7-8)—

Ezek. 20:18-30—

Joshua 6:15-20 and 2 Kings 4:23 (cf. Exodus 16:29)—

**Specific Applications**

**Preliminary Assessment.** From the above, we can locate these similarities between Sunday and Sabbath:

1. Both days possess a special character. The Sabbath points back to creation or liberation, Sunday to the resurrection of Christ.
2. Both days are feast days. Sunday celebration, which commemorated Christ’s resurrection and deliverance from sin, extends and expands Israel’s deliverance from Egypt.
3. Both days have worship in a central place. From ‘holy assemblies’ to synagogue worship to modern church services.
4. Both days can be violated in similar ways. People become enslaved to their own work and are unable to set aside a day for celebration.

**One Day or Every Day?** Calvin argues that the Sabbath was given for three reasons: to depict spiritual rest, to preserve ecclesiastical order and to provide relief to workers. Just as Israel was to observe a complete rest externally, so we should rest inwardly, putting to death our own will and allowing God to work in us. Christ, who is the full reality ending all Old Testament shadows, is no longer satisfied with one day, but wants the full span of our lives. Only because of human weakness do we still observe one day instead of seven as our Sabbath. Since the larger society has no time for such widespread worship, we must reserve at least one day. But the begging question is; why is one in seven a sign of weakness, especially if God rested one day in seven?

Calvin’s understanding, first of all, over-spiritualizes the Sabbath in emphasizing only our spiritual rest from evil works, thereby neglecting the external features, such as rest from physical work. The spiritual essence of the fourth commandment does exist apart from the physical rest, but within it. The ‘ordinary’ physical rest, by which we catch our breath and praise God, is in itself a spiritual enjoyment. Calvin’s understanding, secondly, eliminates the special character of weekdays to do God-glorifying, though perhaps menial labor. We have six days to do our work — that is Yahweh-serving too!

**Ceremonial and/or Moral?** Calvin’s understanding of the Sabbath is rooted in an earlier theological distinction between the literal and allegorical meanings of biblical expressions. Allegorical interpretation seeks deeper, spiritual meanings for ordinary, earthly events — e.g. Rahab’s red cord foreshadows
Christ’s blood. For the most part, Calvin denounced this tradition with his sober exegesis. But here he capitulates, perhaps under the influence of Augustine, who interpreted external rest simply in terms of signifying the future rest Jesus identified in his gospel offer (Matt.11: 28). But how significant then, is resting from physical labor? Are we left then with but nine commandments?

The distinction between literal and allegorical was later accompanied by the distinction between ceremonial and moral, where ceremonial refers to what is no longer binding and moral to what remains binding. The term ‘ceremonial’ can have at least three different meanings, all of which promotes confusion, rather than clarification. Aquinas argued that the Sabbath is ceremonial (1) in that it fell on Saturday — something has disappeared, (2) in that it adumbrates Christ’s rest in the grave — something now fulfilled is foreshadowed and (3) in that it points ahead to our heavenly rest — something unfulfilled is foreshadowed. The term ceremonial, therefore, is confusing. The distinction between permanent and provisional is much more helpful.

Hebrews 4. Hebrews 4 is often appealed to, to demonstrate the provisional character of the Old Testament Sabbath. The question of the Sabbath day in this passage is only indirectly present. What are in view are Sabbath places, more so than Sabbath days. Often we could translate the word ‘rest’ simply by ‘resting place.’ This activity of resting is not an exclusively Old Testament phenomenon — therein lies the mistake — it is also a New Testament phenomenon since we too rest on the Sabbath in anticipation of the heavenly and definitive rest. The relationship between the Sabbath of old and the Sunday of now is analogous to the Passover of old and the Lord’s Supper of now — we are still awaiting something: the eternal rest and the great banquet feast.

Once More: the Difficulties. We wish to affirm that the fourth commandment remains intact for today. To do so, the objections mentioned in the beginning must be dealt with:

1. The institution of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was not given at creation as a universal human institution but was given to Israel (Ezra.20:10-12; Ezek.20: 12; Neh.9: 14; Exod.16: 29). The Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel (Ex.31: 12-17; Ezek.20: 20). Not everything beginning with Israel ended with her. Yet while the Sabbath may not have been present from the beginning, the elements of the Sabbath certainly were (e.g. prayer, Gen.4: 26). The essence of the fourth commandment is permanent; its expression is from Sinai onward. Mankind always had to set aside time to worship (essence), but not always on the Sabbath (expression).

2. The observance of the Sabbath. Since the Sabbath was not instituted at creation, it was not intended to be observed then either. God sanctified the seventh day of the creation week for Himself. He set apart this day to rest. Later, He required the Israelites to do the same. The fourth commandment doesn’t say the Sabbath was instituted at creation, but simply grounded in God’s creation rest. Again, the question we ask is, why couldn’t a gift and a mandate that originated at a later time become so universally significant that it embraces our Sunday?
Texts from Paul’s Epistles.

3. The abiding validity of the Sabbath. The fourth commandment is not expressly maintained in the New Testament. In fact, the initial impression we get from some of Paul’s epistles is that it has expired with Christ.
   1. It is true that nowhere is the fourth commandment explicitly maintained, but even more so, nowhere is it explicitly done away with.
   2. Jesus, though resisting the pharisaical understanding of the Sabbath, upheld the Sabbath in His life, even emphasizing its festive character. Would this gift of refreshment and celebration and praise not be fitting for the new dispensation?
   3. Paul’s remarks must be understood in terms of their context and his audiences. Such an investigation will lead to our conclusion that Paul is not disposing of the fourth commandment.

I. Romans 14:5. The days mentioned here are clearly *days of fasting* because of the context of eating and not eating. The Sabbath had to do with feasting, not fasting.

II. Gal.4:10. Paul here, in addressing the Judaizers, is not rendering an isolated judgment about the fourth commandment, but is discussing the Sabbath in the context of matters like circumcision and the entire Jewish festival cycle. This entire cycle was established by the Judaizers as an indispensable condition for sharing in the salvation of Jesus the Messiah. The Jewish Sabbath has ceased to be replaced by Sunday. The fourth commandment has abiding validity.

III. Col.2:16-17. Paul here is addressing a legalistic-ascetic religiosity of a Jewish-pagan brand. He explains that the Sabbath was a shadow — a vague outline of what Christ would bestow upon His church. With the coming of Christ, it is not longer possible to travel the old paths of circumcision, feast-days, Passover and Sabbath. Their shadows have disappeared and something more Christ-apparent has appeared in its place — baptism, the Lord’s Supper (no shedding of blood) and Sunday.

From Sabbath to Sunday.

4. It is apparent that the early church did not view Sunday observance as a requirement of the fourth commandment. Some have argued, in line with this, that Sunday observance is an ecclesiastical ordinance rather than a divine one. With this we must agree, but in a qualified way. Sunday observance is an ecclesiastical ordinance, *which inevitably followed on account of the Spirit of Christ who has led the church into all truth*. The authority of this ecclesiastical ordinance lay with the Lord of the Sabbath. Sunday observance, therefore, was not merely an ecclesiastical ordinance. That’s why, beginning already with the Bible (Rev.1:10) Sunday became known as ‘the Lord’s Day.’ The Didache, Ignatius, Justin Martyr and Tertullian and Dionysius of Corinth (ca.170), who spoke of the ‘holy Lord’s Day, repeat this designation.

The question remains, why didn’t these early writers make the connection between Sunday and the fourth commandment? A number of reasons are possible: (1) the tension between Christians and Jews would have resulted in an aversion to attach a Christian activity to a Jewish precept; (2) the allegorical understanding of those, such as Augustine, who held that the significance of the fourth commandment
for us today was purely spiritual — rest from our evil works. The early church may have been weak in this, but she no doubt received Sunday as a day of joy in line with the original intention of the Sabbath.

**The Provisional and the Permanent.** The terms provisional and permanent are much more fitting than ceremonial and moral. The Sabbath was provisional in that Christ has fulfilled it. As a commemoration of liberation from Egypt, the Sabbath was a ‘shadow’ of what we now possess in Christ, who it its ‘substance.’ Our commemoration on Sunday focuses on Christ and His resurrection from the grave. Much about the Sabbath remains permanent:

1. **Sunday looks back,** like the Sabbath, to God’s seventh day rest — one day rest in seven;
2. **Sunday looks forward,** like the Sabbath, to our definitive rest from our evil works (Heb.4: 10).

The following elements were provisional:

1. The Sabbath is no longer observed on Saturday
2. The entire Sabbatical cycle is no longer observed because of its inseparable ties with Israel’s existence as a separate theocratic nation (e.g. regulations about working the land, releasing slaves, etc.)
3. Capital punishment for Sabbath desecration has passed away. This sanction too was tied to Israel’s separate existence as a special people wholly dedicated to Yahweh, a people for which civil and ecclesiastical discipline was blurred.
4. Many limitations of Sabbath observance have also passed. Such carefully formulated prohibitions were fitting, whereas the New Testament is characterized as a period of freedom (Gal.4: 1-5).

**Not Overestimating Confessional Differences.** The Westminster Catechism focuses on rest from daily work, while the Heidelberg Catechism focuses on resting from our evil works. The one focuses on not working, the other on worshiping. But in order to worship, one can’t work so the differences are minimal. Besides, both catechisms operate on the assumption that the fourth commandment is abiding.

**Celebrating Sunday.** Enjoying Sunday presupposes a few important realities, such as:

1. Denying oneself—relinquishing our ordinary daily concerns. We must not be *enslaved* to any daily activity, be it our employment or our hobbies or our leisure.
2. Loving neighbor—cherishing other people. In the Old Testament, everyone was equal in that everyone rested — family members, slaves, work animals and the stranger. The celebration of the Sabbath is not an individual activity, but requires the communal celebration of our liberation through Christ Jesus. We must be, and act like, a communion of saints.
3. Serving God—devoting the day to God. Sunday was created for man, but it remains the Lord’s Day. We must do things on that day for the Lord that we can’t do normally on other days — going to church, but also singing and praying as a family and discussing our obligations as Christians.
Sunday must take on a special character, different even from a Saturday off work. Sunday involves rest, but rest is tied to consecration. Sunday rest therefore differs from holiday rest. We must be selfless on Sundays, rather than selfish.

**Filling Our Sunday.** On Sunday we celebrate the fact that we are free from ourselves because we are free for God. Excessive casuistry can downplay, even eliminate this celebration. Karl Barth suggested that we must always be in a position to celebrate Sunday as a true day of joy. And Christians cannot defend a uniform celebration of Sunday. Yet there is uniformity to the degree that we all seek to obey the same commandment. We must have uniformity in denying Sunday as a workday, for example, and in upholding Sunday as a ‘church-day.’

The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us not to forsake assembling together. That alone will give shape to our Sunday observance. School assignments, attending sporting events, long trips, etc. are not fitting exercises for Sunday. Wanting to spend the day in communal celebration will also give shape to our Sunday observance. We won’t want to spend it with pagans watching a ball game. We must always be asking the question, what kind of Sunday celebration are we pursuing?

Sunday is a day of consecration and rest. Precisely how we enjoy the Sabbath is a matter of Christian liberty. But Sunday boredom within families is often the result of the inability of families to celebrate Sunday together. Sunday may have a recreational dimension, enjoying things you are not enslaved to which allow for meaningful acknowledgment of the day as the Lord’s day.

**Working on Sunday.** Christians have always recognized that certain works are permitted on Sunday: works of necessity (pulling an ox out of the pit, Luke 14:5), mercy (healing, Mark 2:31) and religion (Matt.12: 5). The work of necessity is the most difficult. Wouldn’t a farmer’s work of baling hay that might otherwise be destroyed by forecasted bad weather be a work of necessity? How about working for utility companies? Two points need to be mentioned: (1) Secularization increases Sunday labor; (2) Many work activities need not be done on Sunday. A nurse’s hours, for example, can be restricted. It would be better to speak of those tasks which might be necessary — work in the health care sector, in service and safety sector (police, telephone operators), work in industrial sector (round-the-clock shifts, long-distance trucking, perishable goods). We must be careful, however, that necessity and mercy don’t become economic productivity and profit. Some jobs simply must be refused in the confession that one who keeps the commandment keeps his soul (Prov.19: 16). A refusal to work on Sunday may be scorned, but it may also be admired.

**A Few More Comments. Four questions:**

1. Does the fourth commandment require us to work six days?

No, it simply says that we must perform our work within six days. Laziness comes under the eighth commandment.

2. Can we use the term ‘Sunday observance’?
Yes, we serve Christ every day, but on Sunday in a special, prescribed way. It is a holy, set apart day, both because we rest and because we go to church.

3. Is the transgression against the fourth commandment as weighty as the transgression against the sixth?

No, although it may have been in Israel since both were capital offences. Our context and situation, as being significantly different from Israel’s, leads us to this conclusion.

4. Must we rest other Christian feast days to preserve Sunday’s unique significance?

No, because these days can also be spent meaningfully commemorating their own redemptive significance in history.