

Luther and Calvin's Ideas of Church Authority and the Change of Sabbath to Sunday

Donny Chrissutianto

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies

Abstract

During the Reformation era, Catholics criticized Protestants for not being faithful to the *sola scriptura* principle by accepting Sunday as the day of worship instead of the Sabbath. The Council of Trent claimed that the change occurred not because of the Bible, but the authority of the church. This accusation generates an inquiry about the reason why Luther and Calvin chose Sunday over the Sabbath. To understand why Luther and Calvin accepted Sunday instead of the Sabbath, this study aims to explore their ideas regarding the shift from the Sabbath to Sunday. Based on their understanding of the church authority and the relationship between the law and the Sabbath, both theologians concluded that while the meaning of the Sabbath still prevailed, the day of the Sabbath in a week could be compromised. They also assumed that the change of the Sabbath to Sunday was not mandated by God's command but by church authority.

Keywords: Church Authority, Sabbath, Luther, Calvin, Reformation Era

Introduction

A debate about church authority concerning the change of Sabbath is not only a recent discussion among Christians. It has been a dialogue between Catholics and Protestants during the Reformation era. For Catholics, the church has the right to change the Sabbath. In the Council of Trent (1545-1563), a significant council to counter the Reformation, Bishop of Reggio, in his speech at the 17th Session of the Council, said on January 18, 1562, that Sunday replaced the Sabbath as the most glorious day in the Ten Commandments not because of divinely command but the

church authority.¹ The Church also claims that the Council of Trent assumed that “the Church of God has thought it well to transfer the celebration and observance of the Sabbath to Sunday.”² What church, according to the Council of Trent, has changed the Sabbath? It says, “The Apostles therefore resolved to consecrate the first day of the week to the divine worship, and called it *the Lord's day*.”³ This idea still prevails to this day.⁴

The Catholic Church claimed that it had the church authority from Jesus Christ Himself, which Jesus passed to Peter. Catholics view the apostle as the first bishop of Rome, based on Matthew 16:18-19. This church argued that it maintained Peter's authority. Then, this authority was handed down to the next bishop of Rome

¹ Joannes Dominicus Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio* (Repr, 1802. Leipzig: Rue Bernanrd-Palissy, 1901), 33: 529-530. See also C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1981), 1:128; George R. Knight, ed., *Seventh-Day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, Annotated Edition., Adventist Classic Library (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 148.

² *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*, trans. by John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1934), 402.

³ *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 398. Italics in original.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications From The Editio Typica* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 581. See also W. J. Sherzer/P. R. Cooney/eds., “Sunday,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2003), 13:608. In the Tridentine Profession of Faith written in November 1564, it is required for all converts to Catholicism, even until today, to recite this saying, and part of them is “I recognize the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Roman Church as the mother and mistress of all churches; and I vow and swear true obedience to the Roman Pontiff, the successor of blessed Peter, the chief of the Apostles and the representative [*vicarious*] of Jesus Christ.” Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 267. Italics in original.

and his successors.⁵ Thus, this denomination believed that it possessed this authority as the successor of Peter.⁶ Based on this idea, the proponents argued that the Catholic Church derives its lineage power from the apostles to maintain the changes of the Sabbath.⁷

The self-understanding of Catholics of their authority to change the Sabbath encouraged John Eck to accuse Martin Luther of not being consistent in applying the *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) principle. He stated that the Bible teaches the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, and he claimed that “the church has changed the Sabbath into Sunday on its own authority, on which you [Luther] have no Scripture”⁸ evidence. Justo L. Gonzalez noticed this 16th-century important debate on the Sabbath between Catholics and Protestants. He wrote that “the notion that Sunday had taken the place of the Sabbath was so generally held that in their polemics against Luther’s principle of *sola scriptura* Catholics often used the argument that the practice of Sunday worship was established

⁵ Epiphanius, *Interpretation of the gospels* 28, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, vol 1 b see “Mat 16:19.” Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Fragment* 92, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, vol 1 b see “Mat 16:18.” See also Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1983), 2:139. The idea about the superiority of the pope was also promulgated by Petrus de Ancharano. About 1400 AD, he stated that “the pope can modify divine law, since his power is not of man, but of God, and he acts in the place of God upon earth, with the fullest power of binding and loosing his sheep.” Lucius Ferraris, *Prompta Bibliotheca*, 8 vols (Venice: Caspa Storti, 1772) Art “papa, II” cited in Maxwell, *God Cares*, 1:128.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 30-32.

⁷ Some of the Catholic theologians argued that the change of the Sabbath was not happening on the resurrection of Christ, but afterward, either at the time of the Destruction of Jerusalem or by the church of Rome itself. W. F. Dicharry, “The Lord’s Day,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 8: 782; R. North, “Sabbath,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 12:460. However, the Council of Vatican II confirms the idea that the change started with the tradition of the apostles. W. J. Sherzer/P. R. Cooney/eds., “Sunday,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 13:608.

⁸ John Eck, *Enchiridion of Commonplaces against Luther and Other Enemies of the Church*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 13. Word in brackets added.

by the authority of the church, and not of Scripture.”⁹ By accepting the change from the Sabbath to Sunday, Catholics often challenged the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

Eck's accusation was reasonable because he thought that there was no biblical evidence of the Sabbath change. He claimed that the Catholic church authority caused the change of the Sabbath to Sunday. What authority did Luther and Calvin have to accept Sunday as the day for worship? Was it the authority of the church or biblical imperative? There is a lack of studies examining Luther and Calvin's ideas on the change from Sabbath to Sunday. This study examines both theologians' arguments on the relationship between the authority of the church, the Sabbath, and the choice of Sunday. It is significant because their ideas helped the early Protestant Churches continued to accept Sunday instead of Saturday as the day for worship. Exploring Luther and Calvin's ideas will also contribute to understanding why many Protestants today maintain Sunday instead of the Sabbath. For this purpose, the following sections discuss their ideas about the church authority, the relation between the law and the Sabbath, and the reasons for its change.

Church Authority

Luther maintained the idea that the existence is derived from the authority of Scripture. He stated that “the church is established by the Word.”¹⁰ In his commentary on Genesis 2:18, about the creation of Eve, Luther described Adam and Eve as the first church. About this institution, he said, “We have the church established by the Word and a distinct form of worship.”¹¹ In his opinion, the first family was the first church. The church's function was for worship and spiritual purposes. There was no need for another arrangement

⁹ Justo L. Gonzalez. *A Brief History of Sunday: From the New Testament to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 99.

¹⁰ Luther, *Luther's Works* [LW], vol. 1, *Genesis 1-5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 104.

¹¹ Luther, LW, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-5*, 115.

until the first human fell into sin.¹² Thus, the Word of God is the foundation of church existence.

Since the Word of God is a reason why the church exists, the church could not surpass the authority of the Bible. Luther argued that the church “was instituted by God’s promises, and not God’s promises by her. For the word of God is beyond comparison superior to the church.”¹³ Luther made a difference in his idea about church authority with the Catholics. He believed that “the church has no power to initiate and institute divine primroses of grace, as is the case when the Romanists pretentiously claim that anything instituted by the church has no less authority than what has been ordained by God, since the church is governed by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ Luther viewed that the church “is a created thing, and, being such, has no power to institute, to ordain, and to be brought into being. No man can beget his own parents or settle the author of his own being.”¹⁵ In this sense, Luther claimed, contrary to the Catholics, the church of God was not free to do anything without Scripture authority. Instead, before the church decides something, it must seek the Lord’s advice and guidance. For Luther, the authority of Scripture surpasses the church. It should follow the Bible and not vice versa.

Calvin believed that the church authority is not given to a single minister to govern the worldwide church. He said, “No doubt Paul meant to express the manner of connection, by which believers cleave to Christ, the Head. There he not only mentions no ministerial head, but assigns particular functions to each member [Eph. 4:16],

¹² Luther, LW, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-5*, 115.

¹³ John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 2011), 341.

¹⁴ Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther*, 341.

¹⁵ Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther*, 341. Luther was talking about ordination, which is not part of the sacrament. Luther argued that in the Bible, ordination is not considered a sacrament; therefore, the church cannot establish ordination as a sacrament.

according to the measure of grace bestowed upon each [Eph. 4:7].”¹⁶ Calvin believed that the church authority should be collective and not individual. He also emphasized shared responsibility rather than a supreme authority. This idea he got from Paul as he stated, “For the apostle [Paul] teaches that the whole supply is spread through the members, and that power flows from that one heavenly Head [Eph.4:16]”¹⁷ Thus, the source of authority is from the Lord, which means that the church should depend on the guidance of the supreme leader, Jesus Christ.

The power that Jesus has given to the church, according to Calvin, cannot be separated from the Word of God. On this idea, he explained, “For when the Lord testifies that he was ‘set them over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to root out, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant’ [Jer. 1:10], he immediately adds the reason: because he has put his words in their mouth [Jer. 1:9].”¹⁸ Thus, for Calvin, the church authority, that it has received from the Lord, should be exercised under the guidance of the Scripture.

Calvin thought that the authority of the church is not unlimited, and it should look for guidance from the Word of God. On this thought, he wrote, “The power of the church, therefore, is not infinite but subject to the Lord’s Word and, as it were, enclosed within it.”¹⁹ He also stressed that there is no authority outside the Scripture. He differentiated this idea from Catholicism: “Our opponents locate the authority of the church outside God’s Word; but we insist that it be attached to the Word, and do not allow it to be separated from it.”²⁰ He emphasized that the binding authority of Scripture applies to everyone without exception.²¹

¹⁶ Jean Calvin, and Ford L. Battles. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 4. 6. 10.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 4. 6. 9.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 4. 8. 3.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* 4. 8. 4.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 4. 8. 13.

²¹ Calvin stated, “For he [God] thus spared no one, and subjected the authority of all to the judgment of God’s Word.” Calvin, *Institutes* 4. 8. 9.

For those who have the privilege to teach, Calvin advised that their teaching should only have a foundation from the Scripture. About this idea, he explained, “Therefore, that whole body, put together out of law, prophecies, psalms, and histories, was the Lord’s Word for the ancient people; and to this standard, priests and teachers, even to the coming of Christ, had to conform their teaching. And it was not lawful for them to turn aside either to the right or to the left [Deut. 5:32], for their whole office was limited to answering the people from the mouth of God.”²² Thus, for Calvin, the church’s teaching through priests and teachers should be based on the authority of the Scriptures.

Luther and Calvin agreed that Scripture’s authority should guide and enlighten all the church’s decisions. Both also emphasized that the authority of the Bible surpassed the church authority, and that the latter should be subject to the former. They also taught that the teachings of all the church’s teachers should have their foundation in the Scriptures. As the reformers understood that the Bible had higher authority than the church and its leaders, how did they apply this idea to the law and the Sabbath?

The Decalogue and the Sabbath

Luther understood that the principle of the Decalogue had been in human hearts even before the Sinai. He said that Adam and Eve fell into sin due to their belief in “his [Satan’s] lie after they have lost the Word and their trust in God.” This condition, Luther argued, “Brings with the overthrow or the violation of the entire Decalog [*sic*]. Unbelief is the source of all sins.”²³ In the story of Cain and Abel, Luther commented that Cain had lost his sense of God’s law, particularly in loving your neighbor. He stated, “This law [love your neighbor] was not promulgated for the first time in the Decalog [*sic*] but it is written in the hearts of all men. Cain contends against it.”²⁴ Luther considered the existence principle of

²² Calvin, *Institutes* 4. 8. 6.

²³ Luther, LW, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-5*, 147. Word in brackets added.

²⁴ Luther, LW, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-5*, 278.

the Decalogue, that is love, had been in the hearts of the first human even before the fall.

The reformer recognized the pivotal role of the Decalogue in Christian lives. He believed the Ten Commandments are “a complete guide for Christian Living.”²⁵ He also described that “whoever knows the Ten Commandments perfectly must know all the Scriptures . . . and decide both spiritual and temporal matters.”²⁶ Luther summarized this significant role of the Decalogue as “we have the Ten Commandments, a compend of divine doctrine, and the true fountain and channel from and in which everything must flow that is to be considered a good work, so that outside of these Ten Commandments no work or thing can be good or pleasing to God.”²⁷ As the conclusion of this important function of the Decalogue, he wrote, “Therefore they [Ten Commandments] should be taught above all others, and be esteemed sacred and precious, as the highest treasure given by God.”²⁸ Here, Luther stressed the significant character of the Decalogue in Christian daily lives.

Luther distinguished the functions of the Law and its relation to salvation. He understood that “the Law serves to indicate the will of God, and it leads us to a realization that we cannot keep it. . . . The Law was given to us for the revelation of sin; but it does not have the power to save us from sin and rid us of it. It holds a mirror before us . . . And this image impels us to cry: ‘Oh, come, Lord Jesus Christ, help us and give us grace to enable us to fulfill the Law’s demands!’”²⁹ Thus, for Luther, the law is to show God’s preference, human sins and their helplessness, and the need

²⁵ Martin Luther, LW, vol. 39, *Church and Ministry I*, ed. Eric Gritsch and Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1970), 37.

²⁶ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord; Or, the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Henry Eyster Jacobs (Philadelphia, PA: The United Lutheran, 1911), 386.

²⁷ Luther, *Large Catechism*, 435.

²⁸ Luther, *Large Catechism*, 438.

²⁹ Martin Luther, LW, vol. 22, *Sermons of the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1957), 143.

of Jesus for salvation. He made it clear as he explained further that “even the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments does not save us or make us holy, but only the grace of Christ accomplishes this.”³⁰

Regarding the vanity of the Law separated from the faith, he wrote, “The entire Law, including the Law of the Decalog [sic], is also fatal without faith in Christ. . . . This does not mean that the Law is evil; it means that it cannot contribute anything to justification.”³¹ Luther emphasized the powerlessness of the Law for salvation by saying, “For no matter how much the Law is taught or observed, it does not purify the heart itself.”³² Even though he specified the benefit of the Law, it is not intended for salvation. Luther held that only by God’s grace are sinners saved.

Luther recognized that the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath still existed among Christians. He rejected the ceremonial Sabbath of the Jews because he believed that the Sabbath had been abrogated on the cross.³³ Nevertheless, he confirmed that the “Sabbath command remains for the church, it denotes that spiritual life is to be restored to us through Christ.”³⁴ Luther attempted to shift the understanding of the Sabbath from a literal to a more spiritual perspective. He

³⁰ Martin Luther, LW, vol. 27, *Lectures on Galatians, Chapters 1-6*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1964), 188.

³¹ Martin Luther, LW, vol. 26, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999), 139.

³² Luther, LW, vol. 27, *Lectures on Galatians, chapters 1-6*, 188.

³³ Martin Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” in *The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, vol. 1, *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 321. At this time, some proponents of the Sabbath “stubbornly insist on their own ceremonies as a means of justification.” Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. William R. Russell and Timothy F. Lull, Third Edition. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 424.

³⁴ Luther, LW, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-5*, 80. Cf. Martin Luther, LW, vol. 3, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 15-20*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999), 141.

claimed that “the sabbath is above the other days of the week.”³⁵ His acceptance of the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath, resting from works, was because “God also commanded us to rest on the seventh day and refrain from the works that we have been doing the other six days.”³⁶ Even though he was not specific about which day of the Sabbath, he acknowledged its existence. However, for Luther, the Sabbath did not bind the Christians to observe it.

There are two ways, for Luther, to keep the Sabbath: physical and spiritual. For physical purposes, he considered it was “not commanded by God for the Christian church.”³⁷ Did he mean that it is not necessary? No. He continued, “Nonetheless, such a rest day is necessary and has been set up by the whole Christian church for the sake of those not under a vow and working folk so that they have time to come and hear the word of God.”³⁸ The second way to keep the Sabbath, which is spiritual, for Luther, was more important than the first. He stated that the “spiritual rest, for which above all else God intended this commandment, entails not only laying down our work and labor but—much more—letting God alone work in us without applying any power of our own at all.”³⁹ What did Luther mean with “letting God alone work in us”?

Luther argued that there are three aspects of practice in which God is spiritually working in His people while they are keeping the Sabbath. The first is through “our own practice” and the other one is “through the external practice and pressure from others.”⁴⁰ The self-practice, according to Luther, was the best way for God to work in us. In this exercise, one should control “reason and will.” It means to set away “evil desires” and “put the flesh to death and

³⁵ Martin Luther, “Sermon XI: 1 Timothy, Chap. 1 Verses 5, 6, and 7,” in *A Selection of the Most Celebrated Sermons of Martin Luther* (New York: S. & D. A. Forbes, 1830), 151.

³⁶ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” in *The Roots of Reform*, 321.

³⁷ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 321.

³⁸ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 321.

³⁹ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 322.

⁴⁰ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 323.

quiet it with fasting, vigils, or labors; and for that reason, we are teaching why and to what extent we should fast, perform vigils, or labor.”⁴¹ In this sense, the measures of each person to exercise himself from refraining the bad tendencies vary.⁴² The reason for it is that every person has different weaknesses.⁴³ Therefore, by allowing God’s power to control bad tendencies, one can benefit from keeping the Sabbath spiritually.

The second practice of the spiritual Sabbath is facing outward challenges. Luther stated that “we are harmed by other people or by devils that take our property and our honor, make our bodies ill, and in every possible way drive us to anger, impatience, and unrest.”⁴⁴ For Luther, these difficulties are an opportunity for God to work with His people. He said, “Peace is also God’s work; impatience is the work of our flesh that should cease and die, so that we may keep in every respect a spiritual Sabbath, stopping our own activity and letting God work in us.”⁴⁵ Why did God bring the suffering to his people? Luther replied, “By doing these things, God is simply trying to expunge our anger, impatience, and turmoil and replace them with his work, that is, with his peace.”⁴⁶ What did Luther mean by this argument? Luther explained, “God sends us suffering and turmoil in order to teach us patience and peace.”⁴⁷ Then, Luther

⁴¹ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 323-324.

⁴² Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 324-325.

⁴³ Luther gave some examples. “Suppose someone discovers that fish causes more arrogance in the flesh than eggs or meat, then that person should eat meat instead of fish . Or again, if fasting drives someone mad or ruins the stomach or body, or is unnecessary for slaying the flesh’s arrogance, then that person should omit it entirely and eat, sleep, and relax as much as it takes to stay healthy, even if it contradicts the precepts of the church and the rules of religious orders and societies. For no precept of the church and no rule of a religious order can set a higher standard for fasting, vigils, or labor or demand more observance than it takes to tame or slay the flesh and its desires. Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 325.

⁴⁴ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 326.

⁴⁵ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 326-327.

⁴⁶ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 327.

⁴⁷ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 327.

summarized, “This is what it means to keep the Sabbath rest and make it holy in the right way.”⁴⁸

Luther concluded that the aspect of the spiritual Sabbath was to submit God's people's challenge into God's hand and to let His power work in them. It means letting God's rules reign among His people. If God allowed something to happen in one's life, there is a good intention on His part. Luther ended this spiritual exercise by stating, “There are three sides of human nature—reason, desire, and aversion—into which all human works may be classified. They must be choked out by these three practices: God's rule, self-discipline, and suffering inflicted by others. Then we can take our rest spiritually in God and leave God room to do his work.”⁴⁹ Practicing Spiritual Sabbath for Luther allows God to work in oneself and suppress one's evil desires and weaknesses.

Calvin believed that the Decalogue is a mirror in which we can see our weaknesses and true spiritual condition. He explained, “The law is like a mirror. In it, we contemplate our weakness, then the iniquity arising from this, and finally the curse coming from both – just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face.”⁵⁰ In this sense, Calvin viewed the Decalogue as a significant spiritual aspect.

On the idea of God's law, Calvin suggested that the law reflected the character of God. If someone wants to be like God in character, then the law of God would lead the person to it. He wrote about the law that “if any man carries out in deeds whatever is enjoined there, he will express the image of God, as it were, in his own life.”⁵¹ On this law, he continued, “Here is the object of the teaching of the law: to join man by holiness of life to his God, and, as Moses elsewhere says, to make him cleave to God [cf. Deut 11:22; 30:20].”⁵² Thus,

⁴⁸ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 327.

⁴⁹ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 328.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 7. 7

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 51.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 51.

Calvin lifted the law to guide Christians in reflecting the character of God in their lives.

Calvin also argued that the Decalogue is important for Christians as they await the second coming of Jesus and will prevail forever. He stated that the moral law is “to foster hope of salvation in Christ until His coming.”⁵³ In this statement, he argued that the Decalogue is “the eternal rule of righteousness naturally imprinted on man’s heart.”⁵⁴ Here, Calvin understood the Decalogue as the moral standard for Christians.

There are three reasons why Calvin considered the Fourth Commandment still necessary. The first is that the ultimate meaning of the Sabbath is to have a spiritual rest, not a literal or ceremonial one. God’s people still need this spiritual meaning. He said, “Under the repose of the seventh day the heavenly Law-giver meant to represent to the people of Israel spiritual rest, in which believers ought to lay aside their own works to allow God to work in them.”⁵⁵ The second reason is the need for a specific day to do religious activities. Calvin argued “that there was to be a stated day for them to assemble to hear the law and perform the rites, or at least to devote it particularly to meditation upon his works, and thus through this remembrance to be trained in piety.”⁵⁶ The third argument why the fourth commandment is still needed is to give rest to those who are under the subordination of others. He wrote, “He [God] resolved to give a day of rest to servants and those who are under the authority of others, in order that they should have some respite from toil.”⁵⁷ Although Calvin recognized the importance of the Sabbath, he regarded it spiritually and did not specify a particular day of the week as the Sabbath.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.

⁵⁴ Robert S. Franks, *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ in Its Ecclesiastical Development*, 2 vols., 1 (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d), 426.

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 28.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 28.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 28.

Calvin recognized the existence of the spiritual Sabbath. He believed that the literal seventh-day Sabbath (Saturday), or what he named a ceremonial day of Sabbath, had been abrogated by Jesus on the Cross. He argued, "But there is no doubt that by the Lord Christ's coming the ceremonial part of this commandment was abolished. For he himself is the truth, with whose presence all figures vanish."⁵⁸ Concerning this idea, he continued, "For this reason, the apostle elsewhere writes that the Sabbath [Col. 2:16] was 'a shadow of what is to come; but the body belongs to Christ' [Col. 2:17], that is, the very substance of truth, which Paul well explained in that passage."⁵⁹ He did not just think about the seventh-day Sabbath but abolished all ceremonial days and rites. To conclude this subject, he said, "Christians ought therefore to shun completely the superstitious observance of days."⁶⁰

By considering that the Sabbath has spiritual meaning but avoiding superstitious values, Calvin encouraged his followers not to keep the Sabbath strictly. He maintained, "For we are not celebrating it as a ceremony with the most rigid scrupulousness, supposing a spiritual mystery to be figured thereby."⁶¹ Through this statement, Calvin did not require his followers to keep the Sabbath rigidly. The flexibility of Calvin's idea in observing the Sabbath contributes to the laxity of Sunday observance after his time.

For his spiritual idea, Calvin emphasized the present obedience over the *eschaton* rest of the Sabbath. One observes of his Sabbath idea that "Calvin's stress is on sanctification in this life rather than the eschatological Sabbath rest as the spiritual meaning of

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 31.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 31.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 31.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 33.

the commandment.”⁶² Calvin could not see the eschatological importance of the Sabbath since he focused on its present blessings.

Luther and Calvin thought that the Lord on the cross had abrogated the Sabbath, but since the fourth commandment is part of the Decalogue, and they believed that the law is still binding on Christians, thus, the spiritual Sabbath still exists. Both theologians considered that the Lord abolished the literal seventh-day Sabbath on the cross because it was part of the ceremonial Sabbath. Some scholars suggest, “In the Reformation, Calvin and Luther abolished the religious authority of the Sabbath law, but they followed Aquinas in retaining the law of Sabbath on moral grounds.”⁶³ It seems Luther and Calvin’s ideas on keeping the Sabbath impacted their followers’ laxity practices on the Sabbath.

What Day Is the Sabbath? And Why That Day?

Luther’s idea about which day is the Sabbath was flexible. For Luther, every day can be a Sabbath. He argued, “If all of us were perfect and well versed in the gospel, then we could work every day if we wished or have a day of rest whenever we could.”⁶⁴ Luther suggested that everyone should “keep the Sabbath on whatever day.”⁶⁵ He also believed, “that every day is a feast day of rest” and “every day will be free from work.”⁶⁶ That is why he considered, “The use of images and the keeping of the Sabbath are, in the New Testament, as optional as all other ceremonies

⁶² R. J. Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Protestant Tradition,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 316.

⁶³ Thomas B. Dozeman, “Exodus,” in *The Old Testament and Apocrypha*, ed. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber, *Fortress Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 167.

⁶⁴ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 321.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, LW, vol. 47, *The Christian in Society IV*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 93.

⁶⁶ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 321.

enjoined by the Law.”⁶⁷ He expressed his flexibility on keeping the Sabbath because “it is clear that he who does not need rest may break the Sabbath and rest on some other day, as nature allows.”⁶⁸ Thus, Luther thought that keeping the seventh-day Sabbath was not mandatory.

For Luther, since God has abrogated the literal seventh-day Sabbath (Col. 2:16-17),⁶⁹ God also did not command any day to be observed.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, why is it necessary to keep a certain day as a Sabbath? Luther replied, “Although all days are free and open, one like another, it is nevertheless useful, good, and necessary to observe one, be it Sabbath, Sunday, or any other day, because God wants to rule the world orderly and peacefully.”⁷¹

Then, when God ordered human beings to keep the Sabbath, what is the meaning of this command for Christians? Luther answered, “We should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.”⁷² The meaning of Sabbath for Luther “is to learn God’s word and to pray.”⁷³ He also said that Sabbath is “whatever hour God’s word is

⁶⁷ This writing was addressed to the Christians at Strasbourg in the face of a fanatical spirit. E. G. Rupp and Benjamin Brewery, eds, *Martin Luther*, Documents of Modern History Series (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1970), 116

⁶⁸ Martin Luther, LW, vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1999), 98.

⁶⁹ Martin Luther, *A Short Exposition of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism: English Text*, English-German Edition (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1912), 47.

⁷⁰ Luther, *Short Exposition*, 47-48.

⁷¹ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther Werke*, 16:478, 479, cited in William M. Landeen, *Martin Luther’s Religious Thought* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1971), 197.

⁷² Luther, *Small Catechism*, 47.

⁷³ Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” 321.

preached.”⁷⁴ Thus, for Luther, the Sabbath is to learn, hear, pray, and study God’s words at any time.

Why did Luther reject that the Saturday Sabbath should be kept continuously? There are four reasons for this. First of all, the seventh day “Sabbath is only ceremonial.” Then, he argued that there is no obvious order from the Bible that the Decalogue is “to be applied to and imposed upon us Christians.”⁷⁵ He said, “We don’t accept Moses, because he was not sent to us.”⁷⁶ Then why Christians accepted Moses’ message? Luther reasoned, “For what Moses teaches is also taught by the nature.” The third reason is “those who insist on the Sabbath ought to be circumcised as well.”⁷⁷ The fourth is that “the commandment concerning the Sabbath is different from the other commandments of the Decalogue. The others are general and are all taught by nature, . . . So Sabbath is special and applies only to the Jews.”⁷⁸

The decision of Luther to choose Sunday as the Sabbath was based on extra-biblical motives. Sergio Becerra suggests, “Augustine’s spiritualization of the Sabbath commandments” and “anti-semitism that began with the early church fathers” as the reasons.⁷⁹ For Luther, the reason to “celebrate Sunday and other feasts” is “Not by divine command, but in order to have time and

⁷⁴ Luther, LW, vol. 47, *The Christian in Society IV*, 93.

⁷⁵ Martin Luther, LW, vol. 54, *Table Talk*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), 52.

⁷⁶ Luther, LW, vol. 54, *Table Talk*, 52.

⁷⁷ Luther, LW, vol. 54, *Table Talk*, 52.

⁷⁸ Luther, LW, vol. 54, *Table Talk*, 52. He wrote this in the Fall of 1532. For further discussion about Sabbath see Luther, LW, vol. 26, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters I-4*, 7; Luther, LW, vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II*, 93-98; Martin Luther, “Greater Catechism,” *Luther’s Primary Works: Together with his Shorter and Larger Catechism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896), 47-51.

⁷⁹ Sergio Becerra, “Martin Luther and the Sabbath,” in *Here We Stand: Luther, the Reformation, and Seventh-day Adventism*, ed. Michael W. Campbell and Nicolaus Satelmajer (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017), 154. For further reading on the allegorical thinking of Luther on Sabbath and paradise see Luther, LW, vol. 3, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 15-20*, 141.

opportunity for public worship.”⁸⁰ But why Sunday, if it is only to look for a specific “time and opportunity for public worship”? Luther reasoned, “Since from of old Sunday [the Lord’s Day] has been appointed for this purpose, we also should continue the same, that everything be done in harmonious order, and no one, by unnecessary innovation, create disorder.”⁸¹ Whose power did appoint Sunday as the Sabbath? In Augsburg Confession, which was written largely by Philipp Melanchthon in consultation with Luther,⁸² stated, “And yet, because it was necessary to appoint a certain day, that the people might know when they ought to come together, it appears that the Church [the Apostles] designated the Lord’s Day for this purpose.” This shows “an example of Christian liberty.”⁸³ Thus, for Luther and Lutherans, Sunday was chosen as the Sabbath based on church authority.

Like Luther, Calvin rejected any observance of the literal day of the Sabbath or ceremonial day. He maintained that this sanctifying act would create superstition. He believed this practice was not relevant for Christians. He also added the reason prohibiting the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath “because it was expedient to overthrow superstition.”⁸⁴ Thus, Calvin considered believing a certain day sacred to be a superstition.

In contrast with the sacred day idea, Calvin had no objection to the observance of a day if there was “no superstition” element in it. If choosing a certain day is to maintain “discipline and good order,” he supported it. Thus, for those who choose a day without sanctifying it but for doing a religious activity, he allowed

⁸⁰ Luther, *Small Catechism*, 48.

⁸¹ [Martin Luther], “Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord; Or, the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Henry Eyster Jacobs (Philadelphia, PA: The United Lutheran, 1911), 402.

⁸² Nathan P. Feldmeth, *Pocket Dictionary of Church History: Over 300 Terms Clearly and Concisely Defined* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 19.

⁸³ [Luther], “The Augsburg Confession,” in *The Book of Concord*, 65.

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 33.

it for several reasons. First, Christians need time to contemplate themselves for spiritual purposes so “that the Lord may work in us through his Spirit.”⁸⁵ Second, Calvin thought that a Christian should keep the Sabbath individually, “whenever he has leisure, is to exercise himself diligently in pious meditation upon god’s works.”⁸⁶ In this idea, there is no specific day one should observe; it depends on the individual’s choice. Third, Christians should not oppress their subordinate by giving them a day of rest. While God abolished the literal day of the Sabbath, He maintained that the principle of spiritual rest still prevails. Another reason why a day for church meetings is needed is “in order to prevent religion from either perishing or declining among us, we should diligently frequent the sacred meetings, and make use of those external aids which can promote the worship of God.”⁸⁷

Calvin viewed that the authority of the early church had transferred the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. He noted, “The ancients did not substitute the Lord’s day (as we call it) for the Sabbath without careful discrimination.”⁸⁸ Who were “the ancients”? Richard Gaffin says that Calvin understood it as “the ancient church.”⁸⁹ From this statement, “it is hardly holding that the change of day was sanctioned by divine authority.”⁹⁰ Even though Gaffin hesitantly recognized that the church authority had changed the Sabbath, the text gives no other meaning than the ancient church, which Calvin assumed did it. Calvin argued

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 34.

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 34.

⁸⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 34.

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 34.

⁸⁹ Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Calvin and the Sabbath: The Controversy of Applying the Fourth Commandment* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2008), 143.

⁹⁰ Gaffin Jr., *Calvin and the Sabbath*, 42.

that Christians need to keep Sunday, “because it was necessary to maintain decorum, order, and peace in the church.”⁹¹

Luther and Calvin's views on the Sabbath are reflected in the Protestant Creeds. Gaffin outlined their influence on Lutheran, Calvinist, and evangelical traditions.⁹² This illustrates the enduring effect of their teachings on the Sabbath in many Christian churches to this day.

Their theological thinking on the Sabbath still has a major impact on Christianity. On four different views of the *Perspectives on the Sabbath*, one can observe that Luther and Calvin's ideas occupy the understanding of many theologians.⁹³ Their theology of the Sabbath remains the dominant view for many Protestant denominations.

Conclusion

For Luther and Calvin, the death of Jesus on the cross indicated the abolishment of the literal seventh-day Sabbath, which was Saturday, based on Col. 2:16-17. However, they still recognized the spiritual rest that could fall on any day. The choice of Sunday as the day of Sabbath, that is, as a day to hear and learn from God's word and to pray, according to Luther and Calvin, was arbitrarily done by the church authority. Both argued that the ancient Christian church

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 8. 33. Cf. “Calvin believed that the Sabbath had been abrogated, with Sunday being substituted for it by the early Christian church.” Kenneth A. Strand, “The Sabbath,” in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. by Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 523.

⁹² Gaffin Jr., *Calvin and the Sabbath*, 133-137. The list of creeds, which is influenced by Luther and Calvin, according to Gaffin, is the Augsburg Confession (1530), The Formula of Concord (1576), The first Helvetic Confession (1536), The Second Helvetic Confession (1566), The French Confession of Faith (1559), The Belgic Confession (1561), The Scotch Confession of Faith (1560), The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (1562).

⁹³ Christopher John Donato, ed., *Perspectives on the Sabbath: 4 Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011).

in the times of the Apostles, not the Catholic church, changed the day of worship. In this way, Luther and Calvin did not recognize that the authority of the Popes was derived from Peter. Thus, both believed that they were in debt to the authority of the Apostles' church and not to the Catholics.

By surveying Luther and Calvin's ideas that the church authority should not supersede the Bible in teaching the truth, it is evident that their choice of Sunday as the new day of worship violates this principle. Luther and Calvin's ideas on changing from Sabbath to Sunday are based on the church authority, rather than divine command.