

The Third Commandment

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Some time ago, a bumper sticker appeared urging us to "Support your labor union: the people who brought you the weekend." The folks who dreamed up the ad campaign seem never to have heard of the Third Commandment. For, of course, it was *God* who invented the weekend. The idea of a Sabbath rest was unheard of in antiquity except among these strange Jews. For the pagan slave, life was work—always—except for the feast day now and then. Only Judaism had this glorious insistence that every seventh day must be dedicated to *God* in rest, contemplation and family jollification—and that this included even the slave.

What a lot of people don't know is why, even though Scripture is really pretty plain: the Sabbath was observed in honor of the seventh day of Creation, the day *God* "rested".

It's a curious thing to speak of *God* resting. It should be our first dead giveaway that the creation account in *Genesis* is not intended to be read as a newspaper but as a theological document that is getting at truths about *God* and our relationship with him. In short, we need no more believe in six literal 24 hour days of creation than we need to believe that *God*, panting and sweating on the seventh day, flopped down on the heavenly sofa with a brewski and took a breather after hurling the galaxies into being and fashioning the aardvark, scarab beetle, and Eve's left eye.

So what's the theological point of a Sabbath rest? To get at it, you need to know what "Sabbath" links together in the ancient Hebrew mind. The words

for Sabbath and "seven" (*shevah*) are related. They are words of covenant and oath-making, for to swear an oath is to make a covenant and, in Hebrew, to swear an oath is to "seven yourself". The author of *Genesis* tells the story of creation in a deeply *liturgical* way. The creation of the earth portrays the earth as a sort of temple or tabernacle, all ordered toward the worship of God. And, just as pagan shrines always had placed at their heart an image of the god, so the creation account zeros in on an image as well: man and women, the image and likeness of God himself.

The point is profoundly subversive of pagan thinking. The image of the God of Israel is, like the pagan image, made of the clay of the earth (*adamah*). But instead of the king or some other poobah having sole contact with the god, Israel's God is imaged in the lowest plowboy or slave. Man and woman—any man and woman—are the image of the true God. Yet the true God is not to be identified with any of the creatures worshiped by the nations. They are his creation, not his embodiment. Earth is his footstool, not his vesture.

In the same way, the scriptural portrayal of the Sabbath is deeply liturgical as well. It is a sort of sanctuary in time just as the Tabernacle or Temple were sanctuaries in space. The Sabbath was a sign, every seven days, that creation is all ordered toward God and finds its rest in him. Not surprisingly, then, when the covenant relationship of God and man takes a profound step forward at Sinai, God reiterates the great sign of the covenant by commanding Israel, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8).

It is commonly noted that the Church "changed the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday", but strictly speaking this is not so. The truth is, the real Sabbath was never a day of the week any more than the real Lamb of God was a member of the species *Ovis aries*. On the contrary, the real Sabbath, like the real Lamb of God, is Jesus Christ, who is our Rest. The Old Testament Sabbath was not simply a sign that pointed backward to the covenant in creation. It was also a prophetic foreshadow looking forward to the Messiah who would bring true rest and deliver us into the ultimate Promised Land, Heaven. That is the point of the somewhat obscure language of Hebrews 4, which urges Jewish Christians—who are tempted to return to the Old Covenant and who have been observing the Sabbath all their lives till their acceptance of Messiah—to enter into a new sort of Sabbath rest via the New Covenant of Christ. Something more than the seventh day of the

week is needed for the true Sabbath rest. That something is not Sunday but Jesus.

That doesn't mean "Don't observe the Lord's Day." It means that the Church observes the Lord's Day as a way of sacramentally realizing the grace of Christ in time just as she realizes the grace of Christ in matter through the sacraments. The reason that happens on Sunday and not Saturday is because Sunday is the Eighth Day of Creation, the day of the Resurrection of Jesus, who is the sign of the New Covenant. This is, by the way, not a change that came in the "Dark Ages". It is something that was already recognized in the first century (Revelation 1:10).

The cool thing about the Sabbath rest who is Christ is that he continues all the best parts of the old observation of the Sabbath. The Church still, to this day, calls us out of the Rat Race and bids us to remember that the real story of our lives is not Work Buy Consume Die but Pray and Play. She can do this because a basic message of the gospel is that everything—including work—is a gratuitous gift. The Church that long ago told slaves that they were the equals of their Masters, that they were men and not talking plows, and that life is a gift to be received with gratitude before it is a struggle to fought still tells us today that the first and last word in life is Eucharist—thanksgiving—not survival of the fittest.

It is a classic example of the way in which holiness and merriment are bound up together. Holidays come from holy days.

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