



On Keeping the Sabbath Holy in Martin Luther's Catechisms and Other Writings

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The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere. It is not a different state of consciousness but a different climate; it is as if the appearance of all things somehow changed. The primary awareness is one of our being *within* the Sabbath rather than of the Sabbath being within us. We may not know whether our understanding is correct, or whether our sentiments are noble, but the air of the day surrounds us like spring which spreads over the land without our aid or notice....It is a day that ennobles the soul and makes the body wise.¹

It seemed fitting to begin this essay with this quotation from the late Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great twentieth-century scholar, author, and theologian. Heschel provides an image of the Sabbath that complements yet transcends the word-centered understanding of the Sabbath advanced by Martin Luther. Heschel's poetic reflection—as representative of Jewish tradition—provides a fit-

¹Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (1951; repr., Boston: Shambhala, 2003) 11. For a description of Heschel's life and work, see Edward Kaplan and Samuel Dresser, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University, 1998).

In his catechisms and other writings, Martin Luther condemned legalistic understandings of Sabbath observance on the one hand and disregard (“despising”) of the Sabbath on the other hand. Since Luther’s teachings on the Sabbath were advanced between the poles of legalism and neglect, Luther’s view of the “day of rest” may be seen as a “middle way.”

ting rejoinder to the anti-Jewish rhetoric Luther often employed in support of his Sabbath teachings. Examples of such rhetoric will be considered toward the end of this essay. However, the primary aim of this essay is the identification of the key elements of Luther's understanding of what it means to remember and hallow the Sabbath.

The main, defining principle of Luther's understanding of the Sabbath can be easily discerned in the brief, third commandment section of Luther's *Small Catechism*:

The third commandment: Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

What does this mean?

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise the preaching of God's Word, but instead keep that Word holy and gladly hear and learn it.²

On the surface, Luther's explanation is straightforward—about as straightforward as Luther can be. For Luther, the Sabbath is (all) about the hearing of the word of God. Luther's elaborations of this commandment emphasize and develop certain words, namely “hear,” “learn,” “holy,” “Word,” and “preaching.” These elaborations are found in *The Large Catechism* and several of Luther's other writings on the subject of Sabbath. Taken together, Luther's reflections add up to a useful framework, one that amounts to a “middle way” between strict, legalistic Sabbath keeping on the one hand, and Sabbath neglect on the other. In order to establish this middle way, Luther's teachings reject certain Sabbath understandings and practices common to other traditions—especially those traditions Luther might have understood as legalistic. At the same time, Luther expends tough language for those who disregard the Sabbath or abandon it altogether. Above all, Luther asserts that any and all Sabbath practices should revolve around one primary concern, namely, the hearing and learning of God's Word.

KEEPING THE SABBATH HOLY: A CHALLENGE THEN AS NOW

Church leaders and churchgoers alike are familiar with the struggle posed by modern society regarding the “Day of Rest”: How does one keep the Sabbath holy when there are competing commitments and obligations that need to be kept as well? Luther's exhortation to hallow the “day of rest” was written five centuries ago—and the original commandment was recorded at least two millennia before then. One may well wonder: Did Luther ever have to compete with the NFL on

²The explanation is from: Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 352. The translation in the 2000 edition of *The Book of Concord* renders the commandment as “You are to hallow the day of rest”—a translation that more accurately reflects part of the literal sense of the German word *Feiertag* (*feiern* = to feast or celebrate; *tag* = day). In addition, the 2000 edition renders Luther's catechetical question, “Was ist das?” as “What is this?”—again reflecting the literal sense of the German original. However, I have here chosen to render the commandment and the catechetical question in their older English phrasings—if only because these phrasings (“Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” and “What does this mean?”) are likely still the more familiar to most readers.

Sundays? What was worship attendance like in Luther's day? Were most people "good churchgoers"? Or, like twenty-first-century Christians, did sixteenth-century Christians struggle to keep the Sabbath holy? In response to these questions, consider this lengthy and altogether revealing "announcement" made by Luther prior to a sermon he preached on Sunday, November 29, 1528:

It has so far been our custom to teach the elements and fundamentals of Christian knowledge and life four times each year. We have therefore arranged to preach on these things for two weeks in each quarter, four days a week at two o'clock in the afternoon. Because these matters are highly necessary, I dutifully admonish you to assemble with your families at the designated time. Do not allow yourself to be kept away by your work or trade and do not complain that you will suffer loss when, for once, you interrupt your work for an hour. Remember how much freedom the gospel has given you. You are now no longer obliged to observe innumerable holy days; you can pursue your work. And besides, how much time do you spend drinking and swilling? You don't count that! But spending as much time on the Word is boring to you. Woe to you who scorn this treasure on account of your greed! For you will not give your household a free hour to hear God's Word. Give them an hour that they may come to know themselves and Christ more fully.

How does one keep the Sabbath holy when there are competing commitments and obligations that need to be kept as well?

But you fathers who have given your children and servants time off and then found that they did not want to come to church, I give you the liberty to compel them to come. Don't think that you have fulfilled your responsibility for your households when you say, "Well, if they don't want to go, why force them? I dare not do it." By no means! You have been appointed their bishop and pastor; take heed that you do not neglect your office over them. If you neglect this office in your homes, we shall fall into public disgrace, as we have seen happen already. For you will have to answer for your children and servants whom you have neglected. If you have neglected their education inwardly or outwardly, see to it that this is corrected! See to it, then, that they come to hear this preaching. I hold the office of pastor and I will preach these sermons. I will do my part—even more than we are obliged to do.³

This admonition to attend to the preaching of the word was made on the Sunday *before* the Monday that Luther began a two-week-long preaching series on the Catechism. Note that Luther announced that these Catechism-based sermons were to be preached on four days of the week—Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and

³Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958–1986) 51:135–136 (hereinafter: *LW*), with adjustments for the purpose of readability and in consultation with the original text, WA 27:444. The major variation is where I have replaced the *LW* translation, "...when you are asked to spend time on God's Word you are disgusted," with "But spending as much time on the Word is boring for you." Compare with the original: "*tantumque temporis verbo indulgentes tediosi estis.*"

Friday, as it turns out—at 2:00 p.m. on each day. Did Luther expect his parishioners—men, women, and children—to attend each sermon? In a word: Yes. (Think about that the next time you complain about church attendance.) The practice of preaching on most days of the week, and the expectation that citizens would attend to such preaching, is part of what explains one facet of Luther’s understanding of what it means to keep the Sabbath holy. For although Luther supported keeping the church’s tradition of observing the Sabbath on the first day of the week (rather than on Saturday, the last day), Luther did not give particular emphasis to Sunday. Instead, by making the Sabbath commandment about the hearing and learning of God’s word, Luther in a sense *expanded* the commandment to cover *all* days on which the word could be heard.

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At the same time, Luther’s announcement suggests that worship attendance, whether on Sunday or during the week, was not what he expected it to be. If Luther’s admonition to Wittenberg’s householders is any indication, then it seems that the preferred excuse for missing church was work. There was too much work to be done, work that required the participation of all, including house servants, fieldworkers, apprentices, etc. In fact, Luther’s inclusion of “servants” (“*servos*” in the original Latin) suggests that he had in mind Exod 20:10’s concern that the day of rest be extended to all (including animals): “But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.”

On the other hand, Luther (ironically?) gives householders the “liberty” to force family members and household workers to take an hour for (daily) church, whether they want to or not. He implies that timid heads-of-household—those who wonder, “Well, if they don’t want to go, why force them?”—have the wrong approach. In Luther’s view, parishioners who stay away from church (and therefore from preaching and the sacraments) abuse their evangelical freedom. Luther’s proposed remedy was to authorize householders to make church attendance non-negotiable in order that the household might not miss out on the chance to hear a sermon about, say, Christian liberty. Here Luther reminded Wittenberg’s *patresfamiliae* of their holy office, their authority as pastor and bishop of their own households. This reminder evokes Luther’s words from his treatise *On the Estate of Marriage* (1522): “Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.”⁴

⁴LW 45:46.

There are a number of additional noteworthy items in Luther's announcement, including the remark about "drinking and swilling" and his acknowledgment that one reason that people might stay away from church is because they find it boring.⁵ Also noteworthy is that Luther's admonition to his members to attend the upcoming sermon series on the Catechism is: it's a sermon series on the Catechism! Furthermore, such a series (on "the fundamentals of Christian knowledge and life") happened "four times each year." Not all of Wittenberg's sermon series on the Catechism were recorded and not all were preached by Luther. But in 1528, three of the four series were transcribed by Luther's longtime transcriber, Georg Rörer, with an eye to their eventual publication. While the May and September sermon series each spanned two weeks, the December series went an extra week. Luther preached on each part of the Catechism, including baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁶ As Luther explained: "The reason we take such care to preach on the catechism frequently is to impress it upon our young people, not in a lofty and learned manner but briefly and very simply, so that it may penetrate deeply into their minds and remain fixed in their memories."⁷ This rationale for two months of almost daily sermons on the Catechism helps explain Luther's understanding that the "day of rest" was not a Sunday-only affair. For Luther, to "keep the Sabbath holy" meant to keep the word of God holy which meant to go and hear the preacher as often as possible, on any and all given days.

REMEMBER THE SABBATH: HEAR A SERMON

In a fine example of understatement, one Luther scholar observes that "Luther appears to exercise considerable freedom in how he renders...and how he interprets" the Sabbath commandment in *The Small Catechism*. In an insightful chapter on "Luther's Radical Reading of the Sabbath Commandment," Charles P. Arand describes three things that stand out in Luther's one-sentence explanation of Sabbath observance:

First, Luther renders the Sabbath as "a day of rest" without identifying which day of the week this might be...Second, Luther establishes a close connection between the First Commandment and the Sabbath commandment. Finally,

⁵In regard to "boring," one of Luther's sermons later that week included this teaching: "It used to be that the Sabbath was 'made holy' in that after hearing a mass we spent the day getting drunk. Now, too, we abuse the Sabbath, going in and out of the church by habit to hear a sermon but not observing the word. You go in...and come out no wiser than before, snorting and sleeping in church. But that does not sanctify the Sabbath." *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) 260. The translation is based upon WA 301:66 (not 311). The entire sermon is in *LW* 51:143–145.

⁶The last of these sermons was completed about five weeks before the publication of *The Small Catechism*, suggesting that catechetical subjects were fresh on Luther's mind when he wrote what would eventually become (over the centuries) his all-time best seller. Luther's "Ten Sermons on the Catechism"—preached during December, 1528, can be found in *LW* 51:133–193. For a brief overview of Wittenberg's development of the catechetical tradition, see the introductory material for "The Small Catechism" in *The Book of Concord*, 345–347.

⁷*Book of Concord*, 386. For a robust understanding (and exhortation) regarding the Lutheran tradition of catechetical preaching, see James A. Nestingen, "Preaching the Catechism," *Word & World* 10/1 (Winter 1990) 33–42.

one sanctifies the day not by obeying any particular regulations but by occupying oneself with God's Word, which sanctifies all things.⁸

Arand's first point is in regard to Luther's use of the German word, *Feiertag* (as noted in footnote 2, above). The second point is in reference to the words "You shall fear and love God"—words that introduce Luther's explanation of each commandment. Arand's most salient point—the one that makes Luther's reading of the third commandment most radical—concerns the notion that the Sabbath day is for engaging the word of God and *not* for obedience to rules about, say, resting, fasting, praying, sexual abstinence, or collecting on a loan.⁹

In *The Large Catechism*, Luther drives home this point that the third commandment is primarily, perhaps even solely, about hearing and learning God's word. Luther does mention that "common people" need to "retire for a day to rest and be refreshed." But the need for a day of rest pales in comparison to the need for a day or more of listening to a preacher. "The most important" reason for observing holy days, Luther explains, is "so that people will have time and opportunity on such days of rest, which otherwise would not be available, to attend worship services, that is, so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God's Word and then offer praise, song, and prayer to God."¹⁰ Luther clarifies, however, that this kind of Sabbath remembrance

is not restricted...to a particular time so that it must be precisely this day or that, for in itself no one day is better than another. Actually, worship ought to take place daily. However, because this is more than the common people can do, at least one day a week ought to be set apart for it...

This, then, is the simple meaning of this commandment: Because we observe holidays anyhow, we should use them to learn God's Word. The real business of this day should be preaching for the benefit of young people and the poor common folk. However, the observance of rest should not be so restrictive as to forbid incidental and unavoidable work.¹¹

The Large Catechism's rationale for obedience to the divine command here sounds offhand, almost cavalier, as if Luther was simply contending that since common folk need to rest up anyway, why not have them hear a sermon while they're at it? Despite the comment, hearing a sermon and being occupied with God's word was serious business for Luther, since, as Arand points out, such hear-

⁸Charles P. Arand, "Luther's Radical Reading of the Sabbath Commandment," in *Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views*, ed. Christopher John Donato (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2011) 216–261. Beyond Arand's fine exposition of Luther's understanding of the Sabbath, this volume also offers descriptions and evaluations of three other traditions around Sabbath keeping: Seventh Day Adventist, Reformed, and American Evangelical. Readers interested in the most recent and broadest discussion of Protestant views concerning the Sabbath are directed to this volume. For an accessible and comprehensive exploration of the entire Lutheran Catechism, including its proper use and function, see Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000).

⁹For a discussion of such rules, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3.Supp.64.7.

¹⁰*Book of Concord*, 397.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 397 (italics added).

ing makes “all things” holy. In other words, we are to keep the Sabbath holy on account of God’s word, which in turn makes us holy (so that we might in turn live holy lives, which would include continuing to keep the Sabbath holy). Indeed, Luther’s understanding of the Sabbath and the hearing of the word implies a cyclical understanding of how articles 5–6 of the *Augsburg Confession* ought to function “on the ground.” Article 5 understands that faith is obtained through preaching. Article 6 understands that the faith obtained through preaching “is bound to yield good fruits.”¹² If one of the good fruits produced by the faith that is produced by preaching is keeping the Sabbath day holy (which entails hearing a sermon), it follows that—in theory at least—the hearing of proper preaching should be habit-forming.

*we are to keep the Sabbath holy on account of God's Word,
which in turn makes us holy*

The Large Catechism provides many additional paragraphs in support of the single, main idea—this “middle way”—that the Sabbath is primarily for hearing and learning God’s word. On the opposite sides of the middle are those who neglect the Sabbath on the one hand, and those who center the day upon adiaphora, indifferent things, traditions of little consequence. Against the neglectful, Luther clarifies that the commandment is not only violated by those who “lie around in taverns dead drunk like swine.” “It is also violated by that other crowd who listen to God’s Word as they do any other entertainment, who only from force of habit go to hear the sermon and leave again with as little knowledge at the end of the year as at the beginning.” On the other hand, against those who make the Sabbath about nonessentials, Luther’s words are marked with polemics against Rome (as one might expect). Here Luther fulminated against “the whole swarm of clerics in our time who stand day after day in the church, singing and ringing bells, but without keeping a single day holy, because they neither preach nor practice God’s Word, but rather teach and live contrary to it.” And again: “Even if we had the bones of all the saints or all the holy and consecrated vestments gathered together in one pile, they would not help us in the least, for they are all dead things that cannot make anyone holy.”¹³ Still, the polemical edge of Luther’s teachings about the Sabbath was not addressed to the Roman church only.

AGAINST THE JEWISH SABBATH

As it happens, the first paragraph of *The Large Catechism*’s treatment of the third commandment—Luther’s “lead-in,” as it were—is dominated by a disparagement of Jewish history and practice:

¹²*Ibid.*, 41 (after the Latin).

¹³*Ibid.*, 398–399.

As far as outward observance is concerned, the commandment was given to the Jews alone. They were to refrain from hard work and to rest, so that both human beings and animals might be refreshed and not be exhausted by constant labor. In time, however, the Jews interpreted this commandment too narrowly and grossly misused it. They slandered Christ and would not permit him to do the very same things they themselves did on the day, as we read in the gospel—as if the commandment could be fulfilled by refraining from work of any kind.¹⁴

In this passage, Luther conflates the reported “slander” of first-century Pharisees with “the Jews”—a conflation that is also featured in John’s Gospel.¹⁵ Luther here initiates his argument for a word-centric understanding of the Sabbath in light of a negative characterization of “the Jews” in both the Scripture and in his own day. This characterization is an example of Luther’s strategy of utilizing “the Jews” and Jewish faith as a foil (or straw man) in the making of an argument. Indeed, as Kirsi Stjerna recently noted, Luther’s “thought regarding the Jews is so often anchored in the interpretation of concrete biblical texts.”¹⁶

Stjerna’s observation is certainly true in regard to Luther’s understanding of the third commandment. Luther portrays the laws and traditions of the Jewish Sabbath in a manner intended to enhance his argument that the Sabbath is primarily for hearing and learning God’s word. In order to make such an argument, Luther first joins himself to the long-standing Christian understanding (rooted in Acts 15:12–29) that Gentile followers of Jesus are absolved from obedience to the “ceremonial” elements of the Law of Moses. In fact, Luther cites both Paul and Isaiah in support of the idea “that there shall be a *daily* Sabbath in the New Testament, with no difference in time.”¹⁷ Based on such interpretations of Scripture, Luther could apply a “supersessionist” regard for Jewish traditions of obedience to the Sabbath commandment. Furthermore, by applying biblical narratives to his perception of what sixteenth-century Jews preached about Christians and the Sabbath, Luther could make statements such as this one found in a sermon “On the Dropsical Man Healed on the Sabbath”:

¹⁴Ibid., 397. Luther’s charge of slander is likely in reference to those place in the Gospels where the Pharisees accuse Jesus of “unlawful” conduct for healing on the Sabbath, for example in Matt 12:2, Mark 2:24, Luke 6:2, 14: 3, and John 5:10.

¹⁵For an investigation of the term “the Jews” in John’s Gospel, see James J. G. Dunn, “The Question of Anti-Semitism in the New Testament Writings of the Period,” in *Jews and Christians, The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70–135*, ed. James J. G. Dunn (1992; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 177–212. For an investigation of the assignment of responsibility for Christ’s death to the Jewish people in Luther’s time, see Heiko Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). For a modern response, see Norman Beck, *Mature Christianity in the 21st Century: The Recognition and Repudiation of Anti-Jewish Polemic in the New Testament*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1994). Finally, for an excellent overview of Luther’s view of the Tanakh (“Hebrew Bible”), Judaism, and “the Jew,” see *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader*, ed. Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

¹⁶Kirsi I. Stjerna, “The Text Selections,” in *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People*, 39.

¹⁷LW 40:93; italics added for emphasis. Luther’s argument here that Isa 66 forecasts the end of the Jewish Sabbath is from “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments” (1525), LW 40:79–223. The argument is rendered again in 1538’s “Against the Sabbatarians” (LW 47:65–98), in which Luther writes “that the seventh day... will cease at the time of Messiah when true sanctification and the Word of God will appear richly” (LW 47:93).

[For the Jews] the sabbath was no joke, and so they were much annoyed that Christ should heal the sick on the sabbath, of all days, and accused him of not keeping the sabbath... just as they revile us Christians to this day, saying that we preach the Ten Commandments and the sabbath and yet do not keep them in their way. But what they gain from their reviling and blaspheming of Christ and his church we can see in this Gospel also; they had to swallow their own words and were publicly shamed by having their own example compared with oxen and asses.¹⁸

Luther's barely veiled implication is clear enough. Insistence upon keeping Sabbath law equates with "reviling and blaspheming Christ and his church," the net gain of which is public shaming—both in the Gospels and in sixteenth-century society. The sermon was preached in 1538, near the start of Luther's period of heightened anti-Jewish teaching, the nadir of which resulted in the publication of the infamous *On The Jews and Their Lies* (1543).¹⁹

Luther strongly supported the retention of Sunday as the public Sabbath—even as he insisted that any day on which time is taken to engage the word of God is properly a Sabbath day

Luther's ire against the Jewish understanding of Sabbath extended to anyone who taught that proper Christian Sabbath observation included Saturday worship. Luther strongly supported the retention of Sunday as the public Sabbath—even as he insisted that any day on which time is taken to engage the word of God is properly a Sabbath day.²⁰ But well before Luther escalated his anti-Jewish rhetoric, Luther complained about some Christians, including his colleague Andreas Karlstadt, who were teaching that the church should return to the practice of Sabbath observance on Saturdays.²¹ Luther's response to such Christian "Sabbatarianism" was to insist that if Saturday worship was mandatory then circumcision for all (male) Christians should be mandatory as well.²²

In his catechisms and other writings, Martin Luther condemned legalistic understandings of Sabbath observance on the one hand and disregard ("despising")

¹⁸LW 51:335.

¹⁹Most historians mark Luther's 1537 correspondence with the Jewish legal advocate, Josel of Rosheim, as the start of this period. For an overview of this correspondence, a translation of Luther's letter, and a relevant Table Talk, see Schramm and Stjerna, *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People*, 126–128. See also the introduction to "Against the Sabbatarians (Letter to a Good Friend)," in LW 47:57–63.

²⁰See, for example, LW 51:336.

²¹See Andreas Karlstadt, "Regarding the Sabbath and Statutory Holy Days (1524)," in *The Essential Carlstadt: Fifteen Tracts by Andreas Bodenstein (Carlstadt) from Karlstadt*, trans. and ed. E. J. Furcha (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald, 1995) 317–338. Karlstadt did not originally argue for a return to a Saturday Sabbath as Luther seemed to believe. What Karlstadt did recommend was that "each householder would be entitled to select a seventh day that suits him and his household best..." (334).

²²Luther makes this suggestion in a number of places, including in "Against the Heavenly Prophets" (LW 40:93), the Genesis Lectures (LW 2:31) and in a Table Talk (LW 54:51).

of the Sabbath on the other hand. Since Luther's teachings on the Sabbath were advanced between the poles of legalism and neglect, Luther's view of the "day of rest" may be seen as a "middle way." At the same time, Luther's *via media* for keeping the Sabbath wholly rested on his insistence that the Sabbath is primarily for the hearing and learning of God's word and therefore all days of the week are potentially Sabbath days. The possibility of having, say, Wednesday or Saturday or both as Sabbath days can be seen as an advantageous consequence of evangelical freedom. However, if a pastor exhorts her or his parishioners to force their entire households to attend church several times a week—as Luther did in 1528—then it can be argued that the pastor has simply replaced one kind of Sabbath legalism with another. ⊕

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