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Against the Sabbatarians (Martin Luther)

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“Against the Sabbatarians,” Excerpts

By Martin Luther

1538

[Luther, Martin. “Against the Sabbatarians: Letter to a Good Friend.” 1538. In *Luther’s Works.* Volume 47: *Christian in Society IV*. Edited by Franklin Sherman. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1971. Pages 89–92, 94–95.] All footnotes are taken from this edition.

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[*This treatise was published by Luther in the form of an open letter. Its purpose was to refute those who argued that Christians ought to observe practices of God’s covenant with Israel (the Old Testament, or Judaism) that Christians historically either had set aside or had changed with the coming of Christ, but which the Jewish people had continued to practice. One of these Old Testament practices, to observe the Sabbath on Saturday (rather than on Sunday, as Christians had done historically), gave rise to the name that Luther uses for his opponents: “the Sabbatarians.” In Part One of the work, here omitted, Luther argues that God’s covenant with Israel, also called the Law of Moses, is not in force for Christians. Yet he goes on below to say that those parts of the Ten Commandments that are based on the universal moral law remain in force for everyone because that law preceded the Law of Moses. –Site Editor*]

Part Two

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Finally, we also want to discuss the Ten Commandments. For perhaps the Jews will also call the Ten Commandments the law of Moses, since they were given on Mount Sinai in the presence of none but . . . children of Abraham, etc. You must reply: If the Ten Commandments are to be regarded as Moses’ law, then Moses came far too late, and he also addressed himself to far too few people, because the Ten Commandments had spread over the whole world not only before Moses but even before Abraham and

all the patriarchs. For even if a Moses had never appeared and Abraham had never been born, the Ten Commandments would have had to rule in all men from the very beginning, as they indeed did and still do.[1]

For all creatures rightly regard God as God and honor his name, as do also the angels in heaven. Thus we and all human beings are obligated to hear his word, to honor father and mother, to refrain from killing, from adultery, from stealing, from bearing false witness, from coveting one's neighbor's house or anything else that is his. All the heathen bear witness to this in their writings, laws, and governments, as can be clearly seen; but nothing is said therein of circumcision or of the laws Moses gave to the [Israelites] for the land of Canaan.

Moses did precede all other legislators, however, in revealing in his history the genesis of all creatures and the coming of death into the whole world through Adam's fall or sin. And later when he wants to set up a special law and nation apart from all others, as he has been commanded to do, he first introduces God himself; he is the universal God of all the nations, who gives the universal Ten Commandments—which prior to this had been implanted at creation in the hearts of all men—to this particular people orally as well. In his day Moses fitted them nicely into his laws in a more orderly and excellent manner than could have been done by anyone else. Circumcision and the law of Moses, however, were not implanted in men's hearts; they were first imposed by Abraham and Moses on their people.

We and all Gentiles are just as duty-bound as the Jews to keep the first commandment, so that we have no other gods than the only God. But we Gentiles have no use and can have no use for the phrase with which he modifies this commandment and which applies solely to the Jews, namely, "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage," . . . for God never performed such a work for [us]. . . . Yet I must recite and keep all the other words of the first commandment. I may also say, "You are my God, the God and also the Creator of us all, who, to be sure, led the children of Israel out of Egypt, but not me; however, you did lead me out of my Egypt and my exile." Thus the first commandment remains common to both Jews and Gentiles. It is especially adapted and suited to the Jews with reference to the exodus from Egypt, just as everyone after his own exile can and should name and praise the God of all as his own God and Helper.

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Similarly, the third commandment concerning the Sabbath, . . . is per se a commandment that applies to the whole world; but the form in which Moses frames it and adapts it to his people was imposed only on the Jews. . . . For the true meaning of the third commandment is that we on that day should teach and hear the word of God, thereby sanctifying both the day and ourselves. And in accord with this, ever after to the present day, Moses and the prophets are read and preached on the Sabbath day among the Jews. Wherever God's word is preached it follows naturally that one must necessarily celebrate at the same hour or time and be quiet, and without any other preoccupation only speak and hear what God declares, what he teaches us and tells us.

. . .

Nor can we Gentiles join in the words of the fourth commandment, "that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." And yet all of us must obey the first part, namely, the words, "Honor your father and your mother." Moses, or rather God himself, is here speaking with the people of Israel whom he had led from Egypt into the land of Canaan. In this commandment he refers to the same country of Canaan, which he gave them at that time in order that they should live long in it and experience good times if they would observe the fourth commandment concerning obedience to parents. So here again the general commandment implanted, into the hearts of all people is adapted and applied especially to the Jews with reference to the land of Canaan. We Gentiles, of course, are not able to say or believe—nor could God tolerate our doing so—that he brought us out of Egypt or led us into the land of Canaan, in which we will prosper if we honor father and mother. No, we have to take this in a general

sense, that God would give happiness and well-being to anyone in his own country who honors father and mother. We also observe that countries and governments, yes, also families and estates, decline or survive so remarkably according to their obedience or disobedience; and it has never happened otherwise than that he fares badly and dies an evil death who dishonors father and mother.

Therefore this fourth commandment cannot be eternal, that is, it cannot . . . be applied to us Gentiles in the sense that we will possess the land of Canaan and prosper in it. . . .

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[1] The concept of natural law is deep-rooted in Luther's thought. His essay of 1525, *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (*LW* 35, 155–174), had already employed the distinction made here between the natural-law elements and the historically conditioned elements in the Mosaic code. "We will regard Moses as a teacher," Luther affirmed, "but we will not regard him as our lawgiver—unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law" (*LW* 35, 165). He took the same tack in his pamphlet *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, published in the same year: "Where then the Mosaic law and the natural law are one, there the law remains . . ." (*LW* 40, 97). For the rest, the Mosaic code is merely the *Sachsenspiegel* of the Jews—their ancient equivalent of the social and economic laws obtaining in Luther's own sixteenth-century Saxony. See also the references to natural law in Luther's treatises *Warning to His Dear German People* and *Against the Antinomians* in the present volume. For brief studies from among the voluminous modern literature on the question, see John T. McNeill, "Natural Law in the Thought of Luther," *Church History*, X (1941), 211–227, and Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms*, trans. Karl H. Hertz ("Facet Books, Social Ethics Series," No. 14; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

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