

The Sabbath Examined

by

John Leland

Edited and Introduced by David W. Cason

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Introduction

John Leland (1754-1841) was an American Baptist preacher and evangelist. He is best remembered in popular history as the custodian of the Mammoth Cheese, a gift to President Thomas Jefferson from the people of Cheshire, Mass.

Leland was an unabashed defender of religious freedom, liberty of conscience, and separation of church and state, but he also represents an important dissenting voice regarding the doctrine of the *perpetuity of the Sabbath*, especially among Calvinistic Baptists. Modern publications surrounding this issue tend to leave the impression that there has been little to no historic debate amongst ‘orthodoxy’ regarding the perpetuity of the Sabbath; that anyone who questions the Scriptural support for the doctrine is little more than an antinomian or libertine seeking to undermine all religion and clear the weekend for sports and games; that virtually everyone from Calvin onward has held to a Puritan-style observance of the first day. The rejection of the doctrine has even become a point of fellowship and sharp division, especially amongst ‘Reformed’ Baptists.

A fair question is whether the historic balance of opinion on this question is being fairly represented in today’s polemic, especially when the modern republishing ministries which promote Calvinistic doctrine are almost completely dominated by one view of the matter. The result has been a wealth of treatises defending the Sabbath or giving directions for its care and observance, with virtually no evidence of a contrary stream of thought.

Leland provides something of an antidote to this view, and a strong one. He espouses a radical New Testament theology: consigning the entire Sabbath institution to the Mosaic period; rejecting any distinction of days under the New Covenant; and advocating a liberty of the church to meet on any or every day of the week, while yet respecting the right of every man to keep a religious day as he feels compelled by conscience.

The purpose of our republication is *not* to suggest that any or every argument Leland makes is valid or conclusive, though many readers may find many challenging or compelling. The primary purpose *is* to begin to undermine the exclusive claims to orthodoxy which sabbatarians have advanced based on representations of the history of the doctrine in the church which are quite unfounded in actual fact.

—David W. Cason, *April*, 2009.

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I have never been able to find out on what part of the globe the Garden of Eden was planted. Geography gives no account of a spot whence four rivers take their rise. It is, therefore, most likely that the flood so changed the bed of rivers, that no such place exists. If it was at or near one of the poles, one entire day was as long as three hundred and sixty-five days are in the middle regions:¹ of course God was six of our years in creating and forming the heavens and earth, and all things therein, and then ceased from his² work the following year.³

Solar years—lunar months—day and night are measured and established by monuments in the laws of nature. Weeks—watches—hours and moments have no fixed barriers in nature, but arose and exist, either by a revelation from God or the children of men. Years, months, and days are frequently found in the writings of Moses: *week* only in the affair of Laban and Jacob: and in that place of uncertain meaning.⁴ In Daniel, the seventy weeks are supposed to include four hundred and ninety years, taking a day for a year; but whether a week in either of those places intends seven days, I cannot tell. In any case, the *week* belonged to the calendar of men. God rested on the seventh day of *time*; no account of a *week*.

Though God rested on the seventh day, I have not yet found that he ever enjoined a rest from labor *on men* for more than two thousand years after creation; nor any account that men ever observed a seven-day rest,⁵ during that length of time, taking Enoch, Noah, and Abraham among the rest.

The solemn *feast day of the new moon* was ordained by a statute of the God of Jacob, in the days of Joseph in Egypt,⁶ before the Sabbath was appointed,⁷ and is placed on a level with the Sabbath.⁸

¹ Leland is here referring to the fact that at 90° N or S latitude (the Poles), six months of continuous daylight are followed by six months of continuous night, causing one 'day', measured from sunrise to sunrise, to actually last for 365 Julian days. A chart which depicts the relationship of latitude to length of daylight can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Day_length.jpeg [Editor]

² Leland, or at least the printer of this edition, does not follow the common custom of capitalizing pronouns which refer to God or Christ. We have left the capitalization as it originally appears. [Editor]

³ Leland clearly espouses the belief that each creation day lasts for twelve months. Leland's lack of belief in the 24-hour creation day should not be viewed as 'liberal.' Prior to the rise of modern Fundamentalism, a variety of opinions on the length of the creation day were espoused by theologians who held firmly to the inerrancy of Scripture and the historical accuracy of the Genesis account. [Editor]

⁴ Gen 29:27-28 Fulfill the week of this one and we will also give you this other one, for the service which you will serve with me, yet another seven years. And Jacob did so, and he fulfilled the week of this one, and he gave to him his daughter Rachel, to him for a wife.

⁵ The text is correct. Leland coins a word. [Editor]

⁶ Psa 81:3-5 Blow the ram's horn in the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day. For this was a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob. This He ordained as a testimony in Joseph, when He went out

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The strict observance of the seventh day, as a Sabbath of rest, was enjoined on the children of Israel, with a penalty so severe that the transgressor was not to be fined, whipped or put out of the synagogue, but *surely put to death*.⁹ The Passover, as well as the new moon, was appointed by an express precept, before the Sabbath.¹⁰

Very soon after the appointment of the Sabbath, it was incorporated into the laws of Moses, and became an integral part of the ten commandments, which were written by the finger of God, on tables of stone.

The law of Moses contains three parts. *First*. The ten commandments engraven on stone. *Second*. The sixty precepts written in a book and sprinkled with blood, designed for the government of their commonwealth. *Third*. Their religious usages, containing bleeding victims, smoking altars, diverse washings, and carnal ordinances; to be continued until what they prefigured should take place. Sometimes the whole of Moses' writings, without distinction, are called Moses, or the *law*.

When it first took rise, to call the ten commandments moral, distinct from the other parts of the law, or why it is continued, I cannot tell.

The word *moral* is not in the Bible, but it is a word of general use, in these days, and of a variety of meanings. In the religious department, it is used by many divines, to express *the eternal rule of right* which proceed from the relation that exists between God and men, and between man and man, and that will continue as long as the perfections of God and the faculties of men exist, without change, amendment, or repeal. In this point of light I receive and use the word in my research.

over the land of Egypt; I heard a lip I did not understand.

⁷ Exo 16:25 And Moses said, Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to Jehovah. Today you will not find it in the field.

⁸ Isa 1:13 Do not add to bringing vain sacrifice; its incense is an abomination to Me. I cannot endure the new moon and sabbath, the going to meeting, and the evil assembly.

Col 2:16-17 Then do not let anyone judge you in eating, or in drinking, or in part of a feast, or of a new moon, or of sabbaths, which are a shadow of coming things, but the body is of Christ.

⁹ There were twenty crimes punished by death in the laws of Moses, either by hanging, stoning, or burning, viz: adultery, bestiality, blasphemy, cursing father or mother, enticing to idolatry, false prophesying, false swearing, idolatry, incest, kidnapping, murder, presumption, rape, Sabbath breaking, sacrificing to Molech, smiting father or mother, sodomy, stubbornness of a drunken son, whoredom of a priest's daughter, and witchcraft.

¹⁰ Exo 12:24 And you shall observe this Word for an ordinance for you, and for your sons forever.

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Why men should pay more deference to the Decalogue than to the other parts of the law, I cannot ascertain. True, the ten commandments were spoken aloud by God, amidst awful emblems of his power; so also the sixty precepts were written in a book, by a holy man of God, inspired by the Holy Ghost, and sprinkled with blood. When our Lord was asked by a lawyer, which was the first and greatest commandment, our Lord did not answer him from any of the ten commandments, but from Deuteronomy 6:5, and Leviticus 19:18, where Moses was not treating of the Decalogue.¹¹

The *law of eternal right and equity* is seen running through the Bible like a golden cord, and is binding on all the progeny of Adam, whether they are favored with the oracles of God or not: but it never enjoins on man to do that which the laws of nature render impossible, nor does it ever give way to *absolute precepts*.

Many difficulties arise against the conclusion, that the fourth commandment, in the Decalogue, was of moral obligation.

1. Moral obligations never intermit, but are every day, and all the time binding.

2. In the case of circumcision and the annual atonement, works were commanded, contrary to the prohibition of the fourth commandment. Would God, by an absolute precept defeat the principles of *eternal right*?

3. In Deuteronomy 5:3, Moses says, "The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day." What words could be plainer, and what sense of them more judicious, than to believe that none of the fathers before Moses were under the obligations to keep the fourth commandment, (which was a part of the covenant that Moses was speaking of), which would have been the case if it had been *moral* in its nature?

4. None of the laws of Moses were written and engraven in stones but the *ten commandments*; and yet it is expressly said, that the ministration of what was there written, is done away and abolished,¹² which will never be the case with moral law.

5. The prophets of the Lord faithfully and abundantly reprov'd the *Jews* for Sabbath breaking; but while they point out the many crimes of the Egyptians, Moabites, Edomites, Assyrians, Ninevites, Chaldeans, Tyrians, and others, they never mention Sabbath breaking. The apostle of

¹¹ Deu 6:5 And you shall love Jehovah your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Lev 19:18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people; but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am Jehovah.

¹² 2Co 3:7 But if the ministry of death having been engraven in letters in stone was with glory, so as that the sons of Israel could not gaze into "the face of Moses" because of the glory of his face, which was to cease...

2Co 3:11 For if the thing done away was through glory, much rather the thing remaining is in glory.

2Co 3:13 And not as "Moses, who put a veil over his face," for the sons of Israel not to gaze at the end of the thing being done away.

the Gentiles also draws a black picture of them. In Rom 9:29-31, he lays to their charge twenty-two sins, but Sabbath breaking is not among the number. The like is true of Gal 5:19-21, where seventeen sins are mentioned.¹³

6. The Sabbaths appointed by Moses were limited by evening. Whether the evening began at mid-day, at the setting of the sun, when the stars appeared, or at any other season, is immaterial: the Israelites, no doubt understood the expression used by their law-giver, *from evening to evening*. That it intends a whole day is evident. There has never been a minute since the fourth day of creation, but what the sun has been rising—at his zenith, and setting on the different part of the globe. In a line of longitude, therefore, although the people round the globe might keep a day, the day would not be the same time at all. If the subject is viewed in a line of latitude, at or near the poles, there would be but one day in our year: of course the frigid nations would have but one Sabbath, while those of the middle regions would have three hundred and sixty-five.¹⁴ Let a Mahometan, a Jew, and a Christian stand at any spot, and dispute about the holy day: the Mahometan says Friday—the Jew is for Saturday—the Christian pleads for Sunday: not agreeing in opinion, they part at variance. The Christian takes his course eastward and travels round the world, scrupulously keeping every Sunday for holy time. The Mahometan takes a western course, and, like the Christian, circumambulates the earth, rigidly observing every Friday. The Jew remains stationary, keeping every Saturday in Mosaic style. In a lapse of time the travelers return to the spot where the Jew was residing, and to their astonishment find the holy day of all was the *same day*. The Christian by traveling east had gained a day, and the Mahometan by going west has lost a day: every nine hundred miles gaining or losing an hour.

7. There is nothing in the starry heavens—in the atmosphere, or the productions of the earth, that marks one day in seven to be more holy than another. Should a man, in derangement of mind, lose time (which often is the case), when he returns to his reason he could never find the sanctified day by any fixed monument. This is the case universally, except in the double portion of manna given on the sixth day, and none on the seventh; which lasted but forty years.¹⁵

¹³ “The character which St. Paul gives of the Gentiles, previous to their receiving the gospel, and the faithfulness of the apostle to testify the whole counsel of God, forbid the conclusion, either that the Gentiles had never broken this law, (if it was binding on them), or that Paul shunned to reprove them for this sin. The most natural result is, that the precept was not *moral*, but *absolute*, obligatory on the Jews, and on them only.”

“As Jesus was made under the law, he submitted to it, and regarded the Sabbath; not in a mode that pleased the Pharisees and Rabbis, for by them he was often accused of Sabbath breaking; but in a mode that was pleasing to God.”

“Let it be carefully noticed that the *first day of the week is never* called *Sabbath* in the New Testament.”
— *Remarks on Holy Time, &c.* [by John Leland]

¹⁴ The sun is at all times partially and totally eclipsed in some of the regions of *space*, and the same is true of the moon.

¹⁵ Exo 16:5 And it shall be on the sixth day they shall prepare what they bring in. And it shall be double what they gather day by day.

Exo 16:35 And the sons of Israel ate the manna forty years, until their coming into an inhabited land.

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8. The law of the Sabbath, when given by Moses, could be kept by all Israel. The tribes, in their encampment, did not cover a district, it is presumed, more than ten miles square; and after they took possession of Canaan, their whole country was but a very small part of the habitable world; of course they could all rest a specific day with ease, which would be impossible for all the nations of the earth to do.

9. The precepts of Moses were divinely binding on those for whom they were intended, for the length of time designed; and all of them that are evangelized in the New Testament are binding on Christians: the rest of them belong to the Jews, and other nations, and individuals to whom they were addressed, or have ceased by their limitation.¹⁶

10. All the ten commandments, except the fourth, are brought forward and enjoined in the New Testament. That there is one God to be worshipped—that idolatry must be forsaken—that the name of God must not be taken in vain, or blasphemed—that father and mother must be honored—that murderers have not eternal life—that stealing is criminal—that adultery is heinous—that covetousness and love of the world is abhorrent, are interwoven in *that* book.¹⁷ But where shall we find a precept given by him who was greater than Moses—who was faithful in all his house, that his followers should abstain from labor and keep holy the seventh of every week? Or that the first day of every week should supersede the seventh, to be kept in remembrance of his resurrection? He appointed one meeting for his disciples on a mountain in Galilee: and he appeared to above five hundred brethren at once; but on what day of the week I know not.

11. A day, limited by the unchangeable monuments of nature, could be observed by the nation of Israel in their section of the country; but as the gospel was for all the world, no one day could be observed by the inhabitants at large. Would the blessed Jesus enjoin an impossibility upon his followers?

12. If the fourth commandment is *moral*, (still binding, without change or decay), servants, cattle, and gates must exist forever, as long as the perfections of God and the faculties of men endure.

13. The essential prerequisites of salvation are not hereditary, nor do they depend upon social union, but are affairs that lie between God and individuals; hence a person in lonely solitude may possess those views and exercises of mind, and perform those works that are acceptable to God: yet God (who saw it was not good that man should be alone) has ordained the assembling of saints

¹⁶ “What light these men” (the advocates of the first-day Sabbath) “view those nations in, who proceeded from Adam, but were not under the law of Moses, and have never heard of Christ, whether they are under divine obligation to keep the seventh day of the first day, I cannot tell, for they have never told me.”
Remarks, &c.

¹⁷ See Romans 13:9, and many other places.

Rom 13:9 For, “Do not commit adultery,” “do not murder,” “do not steal,” “do not bear false witness,” “do not lust,” and if there is any other commandment, in this word it is summed up, in the words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

for religious worship, and marked out the rules of their devotion.

14. Men began to call upon the name of the Lord, (by publicly assembling, it is presumed), 235 AM.¹⁸ Some think that Abraham's three hundred and eighteen trained servants, were such as he had disciplined in the knowledge of God, who assembled with him at his altar. Jacob, in obedience to God, took his household, and all that were with him, and went to Bethel and worshipped God. But whatever may be said of the patriarchal age, the institutes of Moses appoint three solemn assemblies for every year, each one to last seven or eight days, in which all the males of Israel were to be present; and many solemn assemblies beside. The seventh day Sabbath was appointed, with the awful penalty of death to the transgressor, to be observed as a day of rest, more than a day of worship.

15. That Christ was crucified on our *Friday* is generally understood. That he rose early on the first day of the week, our *Sunday*, is believed. Afterwards he was seen forty days, and then ascended, which was *Thursday*. Pentecost being fifty days after the Passover, was on *Saturday*. It is difficult to see any partiality shown to days in the great events of eternal redemption.¹⁹

17. There is a scattering class all over Christendom, and in some parts they are numerous, who strictly regard the *first day* of every week, in obedience to the fourth commandment. They have changed the *seventh day* for the *first*, placed the resurrection of Christ for the object instead of God's rest and the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, altered the penalty from death to a small fine, changed a rest within their gates for a go-abroad to perform Christian worship, and added to the commandment, "Except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy." But they have not told us who is to be the judge, to decide whether the works done on the first day works of necessity and mercy, or not. Is the parent to be the judge for the child? The church for its members? And the magistrate for the populace? Why a weekly day should be appointed to celebrate one event in the scheme of redemption and no day to commemorate other events, equally important, seems strange. If, however, there is a divine precept for it, our reasoning must be quiet: but where do we find the command, that the disciples of Christ should keep the first day of every week in remembrance of the resurrection of Christ? The class of Christians that I am now treating of, wherever they are numerous enough, make the observance of their first day an article of jurisprudence. The day is legalized, and the offender punished; regardless of the good maxim "That neither legislators, judges, nor jurors, in their official capacity, have any thing to do with souls and eternity; for where conscience begins, empire ends."²⁰

¹⁸ Anno Mundi, "In the year of the world." Leland follows the Hebrew convention of counting forward from the creation of the world. [Editor]

¹⁹ The list omits the number "16." This appears to be a printer's error. We reproduce the error to avoid confusion in the event of a comparison or reference to the original text. [Editor]

²⁰ This seems to be a loose paraphrase of a statement made by Napoleon to a group of Reformed pastors attending his coronation. "The empire of law ends where the unlimited empire of conscience begins; neither the law nor the princes can do any thing against this liberty." *History of the Protestants of France*, by Guillaume Felice and Francois Bonifas. [Editor]

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18. Another respectable sect is ever found in Christendom who keep every *seventh* day of the week as holy time; believing that the fourth commandment is unalterable in its nature, and binding on all nations. Their motto is, “Do we then through faith make void the law? God forbid: yea we establish the law.”²¹ They are as firm believers in the resurrection of Christ as those who keep the first day for a holy Sabbath, and acknowledge him as the only Savior of men, but punish those who disregard their holy day with nothing but non-fellowship. They also appeal to the first centuries of Christianity for precedent as much as their first day brethren.

19. Among the rest there has been, and still is, a goodly number who believe the divinity of the fourth commandment, and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and worship him in private and public, in spirit and in truth, who, nevertheless, believe that there is no sanctity in one day more than in another; they see that God blesses the assembled saints on one day of the week, as well as another, and that individuals have access to God, and receive the joy of believing, without a diary reckoning.

20. That many churches were formed in Judea, Samaria, and among the Gentiles, in the days of the apostles, is abundantly proved. In what manner they were separated from the world, and whether they had any badge that distinguished one church from another, except local situation, and unity of sentiment, is hard to ascertain. As we read of the *whole* church, the presumption is that each church knew her own members. The inspired apostles, by word and epistles, gave much instruction to those churches—to the ministers raised up among them, and to all the scattered saints who were so located that they could not assemble with others.

21. As individuals, their right temper of mind and private devotion is described, their relative and civil behavior is enforced, and their various duties, as members of churches, are imperiously enjoined.

22. There are duties enjoined on the disciples, when assembled together, that required *fixed days* for their performance. These days must be fixed by divine appointment, by legal authority, or by mutual agreement. When Christ and the apostles were on earth, the power of making laws was in the hands of the heathen, who were enemies of Christ, and opposed to his cause; and in their hands it continued until the fourth century. Of course, during that length of time, there could be no laws made to regulate Christianity, either in times or proceedings.

23. That Christ gave any command to his disciples to assemble every first day of the week in commemoration of his resurrection, is not to be found—but he had many things to say unto them which they were not able to bear, which he assured them, should be revealed to them by the spirit of truth, after his ascension. To the inspired writings of the Acts and Epistles of the apostles we therefore apply for aid, as our last and sure guide.

24. Acts 21:20, “Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe, and they are all zealous of the law.” Acts 15:21, “For Moses, of old time, hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogue every Sabbath day.” Galatians 4:10, “Ye observe days, and

²¹ Rom 3:31

months, and times, and years.” From these texts, without any comment, it appears highly probable—almost certain, that the Jews, who embraced Christianity, assembled on the Sabbath, and not on the first day of the week. If our translation of the New Testament is correct, there is a marked difference between the Sabbath and the first day of the week.

25. The *order* which Paul gave to the churches of Galatia, reads thus: “Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teaches in all good things. As we have, therefore, opportunity, let us do good unto all men; especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”²²

This *order* he refers to and enjoins on the church of Corinth, in the following words: “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given *order* to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.”²³ (if any other order was given to the Galatians, it is not recorded). This order to the Galatians had no respect to the time of doing, but to the work to be done; but to the Corinthians, the *time* (first day of the week) is particularly noticed. The work to be done was not reading the scriptures—preaching—exhortation—prophesying—praying nor singing, but laying by in store as God had prospered every one. The articles to be laid in store, were all good things; clothing, food and money, for the poor saints in Judea. Whether this work was to be repeated on the first *day* of more weeks than one, is not said. The business of the day seems to have been measuring, weighing, deducting, casting, and conveying the proceeds to the depot, that all might be ready for Paul to receive and carry to the poor saints in Judea. If a strained construction of the text can be admitted, it looks as if the Corinthians had voluntarily selected the first day of the week to meet together, to perform those duties which are of a social nature; which agreement Paul was acquainted with, and in order to economize time, he directs then to carry their donations with them to the place of their gathering together. This interpretation of the text, does not correspond with the views of those who believe in the sanctity of the first day of the week. To see every member of the church repairing to the place appointed for public worship, one carrying a bag of grain, another a luncheon meat, a third a bundle of clothing, etc., would appear a profanation of holy time to them.

26. Nothing appears more likely to me, than that the several churches appointed their own days to assemble together. The churches in Judea preferred their old Sabbath, the Corinthians the first day of the week, etc.; contiguous churches taking care to appoint different days, that men of leisure and piety might attend several meetings in a week. By this mode one preacher would do all the essential work that seven do on a different plan. Daily (not weekly) in the temple and in every house, they would not cease to teach and preach Jesus.²⁴

²² Gal 6:6, 10

²³ 1Cor 16:1-2

²⁴ Acts 5:42

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27. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.^{25 26}

28. The *preparation* was the day before the *Sabbath* in the feast of the Passover. The day after the preparation, which was *Sabbath*, the elders and priests applied to Pilate for authority, and obtained a commission to make sure the sepulcher, seal the door, and set a watch, which they executed. How strange, that the men, who had so often condemned the Savior for Sabbath breaking, should do it themselves!

29. Considering the laws of the states, and the long usages of this country, it is not probable that the suggestion made in the foregoing, (No.26) will take effect until some revolution takes place in the religious department. The most that can be expected, is, that legislatures will cease making sabbatical laws, and churches decline making the observance of one day or another, or no day, a test of fellowship; leaving individuals to judge and act for themselves.

30. I have only to add, that in some of my writings that have been published heretofore, I have given more credit to the arguments in favor of the appointment of the first-day Sabbath, and its general observance, than I can now admit of.

June, 1838.

²⁵ Rom 14:5

²⁶ The foregoing remarks are now written when I am more than 83 years old; but they contain the exercises, views and conclusions of my mind, when I was in the full vigor of those powers of mind which God was pleased to give me. *August, 1837.*