

Sanctification of the Sabbath

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The Permanent Obligation to
Observe the Sabbath or Lord's Day

Robert Haldane



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Sanctification of the Sabbath

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Preface

One biographer wrote astutely of Robert Haldane that he “was what the years had made him; the years, his heritage, and the grace of God.”¹ Robert Haldane was born in 1764 to a noble family in Overton, Scotland, although his parents would die before he turned ten. Robert was educated under the supervision of relatives in Scotland until in 1779 he joined the Royal Navy. He lived an exciting life of service until, soon after attaining his majority, he married eighteen-year-old Katherine Cochrane Oswald and stepped into the role of elder son and heir to his father’s noble lineage (and wealth).

Around 1795, Robert’s brother, James, experienced a powerful conversion. James’s newfound faith, along with the influence of pastor David Bogue in Gosport, would

1. Joe Ridholls, *Spark of Grace: The Story of the Haldane Revival* (Pool, Redruth, Cornwall: self-published, 1978), chap. 2, <https://archive.org/details/SparkOfGrace>.

prove deeply influential in Robert's own conversion.² Their warm, evangelical faith became known and spread abroad in ways that can still be seen today.

An Evangelical Leader

Robert soon directed his enthusiasm toward missions. He devoted significant amounts of his own fortune toward several missionary endeavors. He helped fund the Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home, training courses for future ministers, and the printing of tracts and Bibles for public distribution, and he helped organize a building fund to accommodate larger crowds to hear the preaching of God's Word.³ He went on to fund the establishment of a seminary, the erection of

2. For more on the younger James Haldane, see Alexander Haldane, *The Lives of Robert and James Haldane* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990); Dudley Reeves, "James Haldane: The Making of a Christian," *Banner of Truth*, August 13, 2019, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2019/james-haldane-making-of-a-christian>. James was a solid theologian in his own right. See, for example, James Alexander Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Galatians: Showing That the Present Divisions among Christians Originate in Blending the Ordinances of the Old and New Covenants* (Springfield, Mo.: Particular Baptist Press, 2002), <http://archive.org/details/anexpositionepi00haldgoog>.

3. D. W. Lovegrove, "Robert Haldane," in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. Nigel Cameron (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 386; Haldane, *Lives of Robert and James Haldane*, chap. 6.

tabernacles in six Scottish cities, the operation of Sunday schools, and the ongoing publication of Bibles.

But Haldane was not happy to let the hands-on ministry be left to his seminarians. He was an avid open-air preacher who preached with such vigor that he often injured his throat and had to sit out to rest. This nobleman traded in his worldly possessions and status for the life of a fool (1 Cor. 1:23). But he loved it, and God blessed it.

In 1816, Haldane and his wife left to visit the Continent for a few months, not knowing that God would have him stay on the mainland for three years. Those three years would prove to be immensely impactful, both on Haldane and for the kingdom.

Though it was not his plan, Haldane was persuaded to remain in Geneva, much like another foreigner, John Calvin, was persuaded nearly three hundred years earlier. In God's providence, Haldane met a young divinity student, and their relationship blossomed. The young man must have been quite impressed because the following day he returned with a friend, Charles Rieu. Haldane later wrote of these two students, "I questioned them about their personal hope of salvation, and the foundation of that hope. Had they been trained in the schools of Socrates or Plato, and enjoyed no other means of instruction, they could scarcely have been

more ignorant of the doctrines of the Gospel.”⁴ Haldane had found his new ministry field.⁵

These young ministerial students were hooked, and many came to meet with Haldane at all hours of the day. He eventually started regular meetings, thrice weekly for two hours in the evening, in which the Bible and theology would be taught to any who would come. The divinity students loved it. One student said of Haldane, “Here is a man who knows the Bible like Calvin!”⁶ And know the Bible he did. Haldane would regularly take twenty or thirty students and sit around a long table, on which were laid Bibles in French, English, and German, plus the original Greek and Hebrew. This uneducated Scotsman—with no formal divinity training, no university degree, no reputation as a scholar, and with poor ability to speak French—would become the spark that brought revival to Geneva again.

With simple but confident biblical knowledge, Haldane reasoned boldly from the Scriptures. Much like the Savior he proclaimed, Haldane wowed his listeners with the authority of his argumentation (e.g., Matt. 7:29)

4. A. L. Drummond, “Robert Haldane at Geneva (1816–17),” *Royal Scottish Church History Society* 9 (1947): 75.

5. For more on Haldane’s time in Geneva, see Haldane, *Lives of Robert and James Haldane*, 422ff.; D. MacGregor, “The Haldanes,” in *Essays by Ministers of the Free Church of Scotland*, ed. W. Hanna (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1858), 126ff.

6. Drummond, “Robert Haldane at Geneva (1816–17),” 75.

rather than the speculations being made by their divinity professors. And, unlike the divinity professors who clamored to keep their revered and dignified status as Genevan pharisees, Haldane spoke with humble sincerity, further endearing him to the hearts of his disciples. His influence continued to grow.

Haldane centered much of his teaching on Paul's letter to the Romans. He would lecture on the gospel of grace, the role of the law in salvation and in a believer's life, and man's condition outside of grace. Man's natural corruption was an idea completely foreign to the divinity students. One student, J. H. Merle D'Aubigné (who later became a significant evangelical influence in his own right), remembered saying to Haldane, "I now see the doctrine of sin in the Bible," to which Haldane replied, "Yes, my good man, but do you see it in your own heart?" D'Aubigné later recounted how the Holy Spirit used that question to pierce his conscience and lead him to conversion.⁷

Haldane eventually landed back in Scotland, where he would spend the remainder of his life and ministry. Much of his influence was made in his engagement

7. Drummond writes of D'Aubigné, "He who had championed his Socinian professors was one day to be a burning and shining light of Continental Evangelicalism." "Robert Haldane at Geneva (1816–17)," 76; cf. L. Maury, *Le Réveil Religieux Dans L'Eglise Reformée à Genève et En France, 1810–1850; Étude Historique et Dogmatique*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1892).

with various theological controversies and through his voluminous publications. He published his widely influential three-volume commentary on the book of Romans, which was translated into multiple languages and included his treatise on the Sabbath. He engaged unorthodox teachings and liberalizing views wherever he found them, faithfully proclaiming the grace of the gospel until his death in December of 1842.⁸ He was buried in Glasgow Cathedral.

Haldane's stalwart defense of an evangelical Calvinism, and his role as mentor to many other men who carried the torch of reformation in Europe, demonstrates his confidence in the principles Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 1. A man with no formal divinity education, no firm grasp of the language, and no backing from the religious establishment foolishly chose the simple message of Christ crucified. And with that foolish message he not only sparked a revival in Geneva but also showed that the foolishness of God is wiser than man's and the power of God is stronger than man's (1 Cor. 1:25).

8. One significant and related example of his engagement with contemporary issues is Haldane's treatise against the opening of the railways on the Sabbath. See his *On the Purposed Desecration of the Sabbath by the Directors of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway, with an Appendix Occasioned by a Recent Circular Avowing Their Real Object*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: William Whyte & Co., 1842).

Haldane on the Sabbath

Haldane's work on the Sabbath is of particular benefit for believers today. We live in a time when evangelicals have largely dismissed the command to keep the Sabbath holy. Remarkably, we see in Haldane an evangelical leader anticipating and addressing two key difficulties faced by modern skeptics of a Christian Sabbath.

First, Haldane labors to show that the Sabbath principle is not something peculiar to the covenant made with Old Testament Israel. By showing that the Sabbath was mandated before the law of Moses, the moral nature of the Decalogue, and even how the prophets expected Sabbath keeping in the new covenant, Haldane demonstrates the Sabbath principle's abiding validity and permanent obligation for believers.

Second, he presents a compelling examination of the transfer of the Sabbath day from Saturday to Sunday in the new covenant. Many non-Sabbatarians view the transfer of the day as the Achilles' heel of the Sabbatarian position.⁹ Haldane, however, demonstrates that the transfer of the day is not only seen in the New Testament but was in fact foreshadowed in the Old Testament. For example, the Old Testament contains

9. E.g., see Gaffin's comments in "A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God," in *Pressing toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gambel (Philadelphia, Pa.: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 148.

differing motivations for Sabbath observance: Exodus 20 offers creation as the motivation, while Deuteronomy 5 offers redemption, a fact that Haldane believed indicated a forward-looking anticipation to the change of day. Further, all the “eighth day” language of the Old Testament (e.g., circumcision on the eighth day, priestly consecration on the eighth day) found its typological culmination in the resurrection—the eighth day, or first day of a new creation. His arguments remain profitable because they are exegetically nuanced and informed by a firm grasp of biblical theology, no doubt gained through his years of careful study and teaching of the book of Romans.

A Word about This Book

Sanctification of the Sabbath developed from Haldane’s exegetical work and was originally added to his Romans commentary as an excursus on Romans 14:5–6. Later, during a controversy surrounding the Scottish railways being run on Sunday, he extracted the essay and published it as a booklet. While Haldane’s work on the Lord’s Day served as a useful supplement to his exegetical work and an accessible resource in the middle of a dispute, years passed by and it fell into obscurity.

As many of the best research discoveries are made, I stumbled on this gem while digging through an obscure footnote in a relatively unknown document. I was doing research for my dissertation on the Sabbath and happened to read through something Errol Hulse

had written years ago on the subject.¹⁰ Hulse mentioned in passing something that Robert Haldane had argued over a hundred and fifty years ago. I decided to follow the footnote, and I'm so glad I did. I believe Haldane to be of great value for us to read today on the topic of the Christian Sabbath. His is the single most helpful treatment I have read on the subject.

In order to make Haldane's essay useful for a broader audience, I decided to extract it once again and present it in the format of this small book. This edition revises and updates the text found in volume 3 of Haldane's 1842 edition of his Romans commentary.¹¹ I have updated some of the language but have sought to retain as much of Haldane's own voice as possible. I hope that this treatise is as much of a blessing to you as it was to me.

I would be remiss if I didn't express my sincere gratitude to Cody Floate, my friend and former pastoral intern, who helped me greatly with formatting the original Haldane manuscript.

Soli Deo Gloria
Jon English Lee

10. Errol Hulse, "Why I Believe in the Sabbath," *Reformation Today*, <https://www.reformedontheweb.com/miscellaneous/why-i-believe-in-the-sabbath-hulse.pdf>.

11. Robert Haldane, "The Sanctification of the Sabbath," in *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (W. Whyte, 1842), 3:340–402.

Introduction

The general attention which has of late years been drawn to the observance of the Sabbath cannot fail to be the subject of congratulation with every Christian. The importance of the institution is fully perceived only by those who tremble at the Word of God; yet every reflecting mind is compelled to acknowledge that whether as regards mental or physical exertion, some such interval of rest is necessary for the well-being of society. But no argument, however cogent, unless immediately derived from the Scriptures of truth is sufficient to establish the obligation to sanctify the seventh day which must always be rested on the authority of God. It is, therefore, of great moment that the divine character of the sabbatical institution should be distinctly understood, and the more so because many have been led to imagine that it is a mere Jewish ordinance unrecognized in the New Testament and even set aside or in a measure superseded by our Lord and His apostles as in chapter 14:5–6 of the epistle to the Romans. This

is a most pernicious error—an error exhibiting great ignorance of spiritual things and one highly calculated to retard the progress of the Christian in the divine life. The apostles, when speaking of days which might or might not be observed without sin, obviously alluded to holy days peculiar to the Jewish economy, and with it about to vanish away; but the Sabbath was set apart from the beginning of the world and was therefore intended to be held equally holy under the patriarchal, the Jewish, and the Christian dispensations.

In proving the duty of Christians to hallow the Lord's Day, it is necessary to show that there is nothing in this duty peculiar to the law of Moses, but that it rests on the permanent obligation of the original institution, afterward embodied in the Decalogue, and also recognized by our Lord and His apostles. It is necessary, also, to prove that the change of the day from the last to the first day of the week has not made void the import of the primary institution or of the fourth commandment, whose binding and permanent authority is by no means affected by that change. If it could be ascertained that the Sabbath is not appointed to be observed on the first day of the week, the consequence would be not that we should be freed from its obligation, but that we ought to sanctify it on the original day. This would be incumbent on all the posterity of Adam to the end of the world.

We are taught that it is the reasonable service of every intelligent creature to hold all that he possesses at

the disposal of "Him in whom we live, and move, and have our being." In paradise a grant was made to man of the fruits of the earth with one reservation; after the flood this grant was renewed and extended, and without such a grant it would have been an act of robbery for man to seize upon any one of the productions of his Maker. The same is true in regard to our time. Every minute belongs to God, and it is for the Almighty to determine in what manner we are to number and employ our days. On this subject He has not left mankind in ignorance but has instituted the ordinance of weekly rest and commanded it to be observed according to His appointment.