

WAS KARLSTADT A PROTO-SABBATARIAN?

EDWARD ALLEN
Union College
Lincoln, Nebraska

Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486-1541) is still somewhat of an enigma to the scholarly community. There are those who see him as a tragic, heroic figure, denied his due importance. On the other hand, there are others who see him as a nearly heretical fool, a traitor to the Reformation's cause.¹

His 1524 tract "On the Sabbath" was controversial from its first publication. His ambiguous treatment of the subject has made it difficult to define Karlstadt's view of Sabbath observance. After a brief review of the events in Karlstadt's life leading up to the time when the tract was written, this essay will examine the text in detail to try to determine Karlstadt's position concerning Sabbath observance. It will conclude with a brief description of some of the reactions to the tract.

Biographical Background

Karlstadt was educated in the intricate philosophy of the late Medieval period. He knew the *via antiqua* well and was versed in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Called in 1505 to the new University of Wittenberg, he put the school on the map by being the first of its teachers to issue a publication. Though it has now been determined that he was three years younger than Martin Luther, he was his senior on the faculty and actually presided at the ceremony in which Luther was granted his doctoral degree.²

¹Biographical information about Karlstadt can be found in Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Andreas Bodenstein of Carlstadt, Prodigal Reformer," *CH* 35 (1966): 379-398; Calvin Augustine Pater, *Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movements* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Gordon Rupp, *Andrew Karlstadt: The Reformer as Puritan*, Part 2, *Patterns of Reformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 49-153; Ronald J. Sider, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); David C. Steinmetz, "Andreas Bodenstein Von Carlstadt," in *Reformers in the Wings*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 123-130. A review of the literature on Karlstadt's life may be found in Calvin Pater, "Lay Religion in the Program of Andreas Rudolff-Bodenstein von Karlstadt," in *Leaders of the Reformation*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (London: Associated University Presses, 1984), 99-133. Among the most recent treatments of Karlstadt are two articles by Neil R. Leroux, "Karlstadt's *Christag Predig*: Prophetic Rhetoric in an 'Evangelical' Mass," *CH* 72 (2003): 102-137; and idem, "In the Christian City of Wittenberg?: Karlstadt's Tract on Images and Begging," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 34 (2003): 73-105.

²With reference to Karlstadt's date of birth, see Edward J. Furcha, "Iconoclast or Regenerator?" in *The Three Loves*, ed. Robert C. Culley and William Klempa (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 159-169. Edward J. Furcha refers to a new archival find described in an article by Ulrich Bubenheimer ("Karlstadt," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. G.

A major turning point in Karlstadt's life came when he was challenged by Luther to examine the writings of Augustine. At the Leipzig book fair on January 13, 1517, Karlstadt apparently purchased an entire set of Augustine's corpus.³ He must have burned the midnight oil reading them, for within a few months his entire theology had become reoriented. He repudiated his scholastic education and under Augustine's influence became devoted to Scripture.

One of his first acts was to begin lecturing on Augustine's *De spiritu et litera*.⁴ Karlstadt took the distinction between the Spirit and the letter that Augustine developed as an organizing principle for his theology. The issue that Karlstadt dealt with beginning in 1517 and continued to address throughout the rest of his writings was "How can one fulfill the law of God?"⁵ Karlstadt's answer was that one can fulfill the law only by the Spirit and not by the letter. In contrast, the organizing principle Luther developed for his theology was the dichotomy between law and grace. For him, the single question worth addressing was, "What makes a person a Christian?"⁶ Luther's answer was that grace makes a person a Christian and not the law.

As the movement for reform gained steam, Karlstadt joined Luther in his emphasis on *sola Scriptura*. When Luther posted his "95 Theses," it was Karlstadt who initiated the debate over Luther's theses with John Eck. For the first four years of the Wittenberg Reformation, Karlstadt was one of Luther's prominent colleagues. When Luther was taken into protective custody at the Wartburg Castle after the Diet of Worms in March 1521, Karlstadt took a leading role in the subsequent work of implementing an actual program of reform. Luther was unhappy with the results and returned to Wittenberg in March 1522. He preached a series of eight sermons on eight successive days attacking the innovations and insisting that they be rolled back. Though not named in Luther's sermons, Karlstadt was implicated in the disturbances. Within a short time, he was forbidden to preach and publish. Not long afterward he assumed the pastorate at the church in Orlamunde. After an eight-month silence, Karlstadt printed five tracts in quick succession from December 1523 through early 1524. One of these tracts, written in German, was entitled

Krause and G. Müller [Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1987]: 17:649ff.).

³Sider, 17.

⁴Augustine, "The Spirit and the Letter" in *Augustine: Later Works*, ed. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 193-250. Augustine, 213, 218, 213, affirms that the Christian ought to keep all the Ten Commandments, except the Sabbath. His complex view of the law is expressed paradoxically: "The law was given that grace might be sought; grace was given that the law might be fulfilled" (*ibid.*, 200).

⁵Steinmetz, 125.

⁶Martin Luther, "Letter to the Christians at Strassburg," in *Luther Works* 40 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958), 67. This letter was written at the request of the reformers in Strassburg who were concerned about Karlstadt's theology. It directly addresses the root issue between Luther and Karlstadt.

Von dem Sabbat und gebotten feyertagen; “Regarding the Sabbath and Statutory Holy Days.”⁷ It appears to have little, if any, relationship to a specific issue in Wittenberg or Orlamunde. While it certainly fits within the larger scheme of Karlstadt’s theology, it is not a particularly polemical tract. E. J. Furcha suggests that it was a popular piece of work, since, after its initial printing in Jena, it was reprinted in Augsburg, Strasbourg, and Constance.⁸

Angels, Festivals, and the Law

Karlstadt’s first, and perhaps primary, concern is with the festival and feast days associated with angels and saints. His intention is to advocate the observance of Sabbath to the exclusion of the celebration of saints and angels. Before specifically addressing the issue of the Sabbath, Karlstadt deals with the place of “commandments and prohibitions.” Since the place of the law in the believer’s life was a major source of contention between him and Luther, his opening words on the law bear close attention.

Karlstadt contends that the law was given to make us aware of our “inner image and likeness.”⁹ By this he means that we were originally created in God’s image and his intention is for us to return to being “as God is” [*wei Gott ist*].¹⁰ This is not a mystical union with God, where humanity is “lost” in godness; but rather a moral likeness to God, characterized by God’s moral attributes, which Karlstadt lists: “holy, tranquil, good, just, wise, strong, truthful, kind, merciful, etc. All commandments of God demand of us to be godlike [*glüchheit seiner gotheit*]; in fact, they have been given us so that we might be conformed to God [*gotförmig*].”¹¹

Karlstadt’s positive evaluation of the law is in contrast to Luther’s more negative view. In his second set of lectures on Galatians, Luther describes only two uses of the law. First, there was the civil use of the law, where the sinfulness of unregenerate humanity was kept in check by the civil magistrate. Second, there was the theological use of the law, where it functioned to convict humanity of sin and prepare human beings to receive the gospel. As far as Luther was concerned,

⁷Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, “On the Sabbath,” in *The Essential Carlstadt: Fifteen Tracts*, trans. and ed. E. J. Furcha (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 317-338. The German text is from D. Stupperich, “Karlstadts *Sabbat-Traktat* von 1524” (hereafter *Sabbat-Traktat*), *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 1 (1959): 349-368. Stupperich’s commentary follows on pp. 368-375.

⁸E. J. Furcha, Introduction to “On the Sabbath,” in *The Essential Carlstadt: Fifteen Tracts*, trans. and ed. E. J. Furcha (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 317.

⁹“On the Sabbath,” 319.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid. (“*das ist heilig, still, gut, gerecht, weyß, starcke, wahafftig, gütig, barmhertzig etc. Und all gebot Gottes fordern von uns eyn glüchheit seiner gotheit, synd auch uns derhalben gegeben, das gotförmig werden sollen,*” *Sabbat-Traktat*, 350). Karlstadt apparently draws mystical ideas from a voluntative mystical tradition rather than an essentialist tradition.

this second use was the chief use of the law.¹² Reformed writers, including Calvin and some later Lutheran writers, came to see a third use of the law. For Calvin, the principal use of the law was in the life of the believers, where it not only reveals God's will, but also arouses the flesh to work.¹³ While not using the later terminology that spoke of a third use of the law, Karlstadt's Sabbath tract contains a positive view of the law for the Christian life. In his introductory material to "On the Sabbath," Karlstadt teaches that the law not only reveals God's will, but also arouses our "desire to become holy as God is holy."¹⁴ He sees both the law and the Sabbath as a means to the believer's sanctification: "God has given us his commandments and counsels that we might become holy and conformed to God, which is to be like God [*Gottförmig*] and as he is. Thus the Sabbath has been instituted by God that we might desire to become holy as God is holy and rest like him, letting go of our works as he did."¹⁵

Luther taught that the purpose of the law is to convict of sin. In Karlstadt's mind, the Spirit and the gospel are what convict of sin. Following Augustine, Karlstadt taught that the law by itself was a "letter that kills." It engenders lust and anger toward God and thus cannot prepare a person for the gospel. In Karlstadt's scheme, it is the gospel's focus on the sufferings and death of Christ that the Holy Spirit uses to reveal what sin really is to humanity. It is not the law that gives life, but the Spirit. To Karlstadt, the law could be a letter that kills or, in the hands of the gospel and the Spirit the law could become an instrument of holiness.¹⁶

It seemed to Luther that Karlstadt's theology of the law involved a loss of Christian freedom:

We must see to it that we retain Christian freedom and do not force such laws and works on the Christian conscience, as if one through them were upright or a sinner. Here questions are in order concerning the place which images, foods, clothing, places, persons, and all such external things, etc., ought to have. . . . From which you now see that Dr. Karlstadt and his spirits

¹²Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, in Luther Works 26 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 308-309. See also Alden Lorne Thompson, "Tertius Usus Legis in the Theology of Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1969), 6-14.

¹³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. II, chap. 7, sec. 12, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 360, 361. Calvin, 360, says that "The law is to the flesh like a whip to an idle and balking ass, to arouse it to work."

¹⁴"On the Sabbath," 319.

¹⁵Ibid., 319 ("*Daruf ist zu leeren, dz uns Gott syn gebot und räte ggeben hat, das wir heylig und Gottförmig werden, das ist got gleich, als gott ist. Demnach ist der Sabbat von Gott ingesetzt, das wir begeren heylig zu werden, als Gott heylig ist, und rugen als er, unnd die werck lassen faren,*" *Sabbat-Traktat*, 350).

¹⁶Thompson, 102-106. See also Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, "Several Main Points of Christian Teaching" in *The Essential Carlstadt: Fifteen Tracts*, trans. and ed. E. J. Furcha (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 343.

replace the highest with the lowest, the best with the least, the first with the last. Yet he would be considered the greatest spirit of all, he who has devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all.¹⁷

For Luther, the law is “not for the Christian, but for the crude and unbelieving.”¹⁸ To Luther, Karlstadt improperly applies the law to the Christian, majoring in minor things and elevating minor things to major status. Luther ridicules Karlstadt’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit, but never takes Karlstadt’s theology of the law and the Spirit seriously.

Ronald Sider examines Karlstadt’s theology carefully and presents the evidence of his teachings on faith and salvation. For example, Karlstadt taught that “Nothing makes us blessed except faith. Nothing damns us except unbelief.”¹⁹ His Christocentric viewpoint is clear from his teaching that

[God] sent his beloved Son in order that we should obtain and have peace through him. As often as we sense our sin and want to atone for it, we see . . . that we need a Saviour, who is Jesus Christ, . . . a payer and compensator of all deficiency. If we believe on him, . . . then we are sure and certain that he placed our sin upon himself and paid for it. The Father sent him for that purpose.²⁰

Sider concludes that Karlstadt did not teach “works-righteousness” as Luther charged him with teaching, though he suggests that Karlstadt’s teaching on the normative role for the OT and NT law in the life of the Christian was legalistic.²¹

The Sabbath and “Sabbatarianism”

Luther saw Karlstadt as imposing a Judaic Sabbath observance. In fact, he held that if one were to keep the Sabbath, one must logically go ahead and be circumcised also.²² Gordon Rupp considers Karlstadt to be a “Proto-Puritan,” especially in his discussion of the Sabbath.²³

The outlines of Reformation-era Sabbatarian teachings can be discerned from Daniel Liechty’s reconstruction of the teachings of the Anabaptist Sabbatarians. Those teachings included three essential components: first, the Sabbath commandment is a part of the moral law, and Christians were to obey all

¹⁷Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments” (1525), in *Luther Works* 40, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958), 83.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁹Sider, 251. The quote is from a work, “*Wie sich der gelaub und unglaub gegen dem liecht und finsternus halten*,” which has no English translation (Basel, 1524); cf. Sider’s, 246-259, work on this topic.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 256. The quotation is from a work that has no English translation, “*Von Manigfeltigkeit*,” Civ V-D [Köln 1523].

²¹Sider, 299, 300.

²²Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets,” 94.

²³Gordon Rupp, “Andrew Karlstadt and Reformation Puritanism,” *JTS* 10 (1959): 308-326. Rupp moderated his views on Karlstadt in his subsequent volume *Patterns of Reformation*.

of the moral law; second, Saturday is still the Christian Sabbath, having its origins in the word, will, and command of God for the Sabbath was not changed to Sunday by Christ or the apostles, but by Constantine and the pope; and third, the Sabbath should be observed as a rest.²⁴

The issue in this essay has to do with whether Karlstadt's teaching on the Sabbath approximates the elements that came to characterize "Sabbatarianism." It is my hypothesis that his tract does not reflect the concepts of "Sabbatarianism."

*The "Spiritual" Sabbath Distinguished
from the "Physical" Sabbath*

A major organizing theme of the tract distinguishes the spiritual, inner Sabbath from the physical, external Sabbath. The first reason God commanded the Sabbath was a spiritual reason—to honor him and to benefit us. The second reason was a physical reason—out of love for the neighbor. The physical Sabbath provides a day free for rest and leisure, that employees and beasts of burden might "renew their strength and be refreshed."²⁵

The spiritual reason for the Sabbath has to do with becoming holy as God is holy, resting as he did, and letting go of our works so that God may do our work.²⁶ This reason, according to Karlstadt, is spiritual, invisible, and eternal. "We may not, without notable diminishment, stray even by a hair's breadth from the reason for the Sabbath."²⁷ Here is one of Karlstadt's characteristic overstatements. It suggests that any slight deviation from this ideal could be disastrous, yet at the same time he qualifies it by suggesting that straying merely brings "diminishment" and that the amount one strays determines how much diminishment occurs.

²⁴Daniel Liechty, *Sabbatarianism in the Sixteenth Century* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 30-39; see, in Liechty, Oswald Glaidt's points numbers 1, 2, 10, 21, 25, 32, 33 and Andreas Fischer's points numbers 1, 2, 10, 11, 14. Not much can be inferred about the actual nature of Anabaptist Sabbath observance. Supposedly, Glaidt's booklet on the Sabbath contained suggestions about how the Sabbath was to be observed. Cf. Richard Greaves, who notes the teaching of the much later English Sabbatarians: (1) the Sabbath commandment was a perpetual moral law; (2) Sunday was the Christian Sabbath and had its origins in a divine appointment, thus (3) the Sunday Sabbath should be observed for the entire day in public and private exercises of religion with no time devoted to labor, idleness, or recreation ("The Origins of English Sabbatarian Thought," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 12/1 (1981): 115.

²⁵"On the Sabbath," 319, 320.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 319 ("[U]nd die werck lassen faren, als er than hat, unnd doch ewiglich Gottes werck in leidender weyß wircken, das Gott unser wircklichkeit on usshören wircke," *Sabbat-Traktat*, 350). Stupperich, 371, notes that Karlstadt is here quoting the *Theologia Germanica*. Stupperich interprets Karlstadt as saying that the human being is ready to receive for himself God's reality in order to grasp the condition that God is working to achieve.

²⁷"On the Sabbath," 319.

After affirming that the reason for the spiritual Sabbath is focused on faith and the love of God, he argues that “just as little as we are able to shorten faith or ignore God’s love without bringing about our perdition, so little can we ignore God’s Sabbath without condemnation.”²⁸

Apparently Karlstadt means that to the extent that we shorten faith, ignore God’s love, and ignore the Sabbath, we are in greater danger of perdition and condemnation. While it might seem that he places the Sabbath on an equal footing with faith and love, it must be remembered that the Sabbath he is speaking of here is not the external, physical day, but the spiritual experience of resting in God in order to become holy as God is holy. Karlstadt is affirming that resting in God’s provision for salvation instead of seeking to earn it by works is as essential or perhaps even equivalent to faith in Christ and the love of God.

Karlstadt explicitly acknowledges the challenges of integrating his concept of the “spiritual” Sabbath with his concept of the “physical” Sabbath. His first attempt at this states that the physical reason for the Sabbath “must conform to the spirit, i.e., it is to be turned into spiritual rest and must be subject to and serve the first reason.”²⁹ Spiritual rest takes priority over physical rest. The inner spiritual reason for the Sabbath must remain unchanged, while the external forms are merely signs between God and humankind and can be changed; yet they are important, for “they indicate that God alone, not our works, sanctifies humankind.”³⁰

For whom has the Sabbath been commanded? For the whole people of God, Karlstadt answers. This includes both human and angelic creatures. All the commandments apply to all members of the people of God. “All who desire to be saved have been given and commanded the Sabbath.”³¹ But to clarify what he means, Karlstadt immediately follows this statement by applying Rom 6:14 to the believers: “You are no longer under the law, but under grace, for the law soon turns into an external testimony and does not remain a commandment.”³²

It seems probable that Karlstadt quotes Rom 6:14 in order to answer the objection that he is legalistic. But his subsequent explanation is puzzling. Perhaps he means that when the law is put into practice within the believer by the power of the Spirit, it turns into an external testimony of God’s work in the believer’s life and does not remain a merely external commandment. The believer keeps the law externally because it has become internalized within him or her. The law of the letter is transformed by the Spirit into a testimony of God’s grace.

²⁸Ibid., 320.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 320-321.

³¹Ibid., 321.

³²Ibid. The German text reads, “*do er sagt Gal. ij*” (*Sabbat-Traktat*, 352). The English text places Gal 2:16f. in brackets. The correct allusion is to Rom 6:14: “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”

Celebrating the "Spiritual" Sabbath

When it comes to the section of the tract on "How the Sabbath is to be Celebrated," Karlstadt again begins with the spiritual and inner Sabbath. The real rest of Sabbath-keeping consists of "knowing that one cannot attain to any holiness save through Christ and that one ought to be holy as God is holy."³³ Since we are incapable of holiness on our own, we are dependent on God to sanctify us: "When we know truly that God sanctifies through Christ alone, without any work or merit, and when we know and understand that God sanctifies without cost, we are at peace with God and enter into the rest of God."³⁴

The form of the Sabbath is dependent on the spiritual "reason for the Sabbath."³⁵ The person who really understands the spiritual reason will just know what ought to be done on the Sabbath. The inner, spiritual Sabbath will determine the form of the external, physical observance of the Sabbath. Thus Karlstadt can state that "the most direct way of celebrating the Sabbath is to understand in a loving manner the abundant glory of Christ. . . . Christ is the perfection of the Sabbath."³⁶ Thus in Karlstadt's thought, the inner spiritual Sabbath is virtually indistinguishable from an experience with Christ.

Karlstadt connects the "spiritual" Sabbath with the concept of "*gelassenheit*."³⁷ Karlstadt first wrote a tract on this concept in 1520.³⁸ He addressed the topic again in April/May of 1523 with a tract entitled "The Meaning of the Term *Gelassen* and Where in Holy Scripture It is Found." Since it was published only seven or eight months prior to the tract on the Sabbath, it provides an important background to Karlstadt's Sabbath theology.

In Karlstadt's writings, *gelassenheit* has a constellation of meanings, including "surrender," "renunciation," "resignation," and "yieldedness."³⁹ For

³³Ibid., 322.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Gordon Rupp points to mystically inclined authors who influenced Karlstadt's concept of *die Gelassenheit*, including Johann Tauler, Johann von Staupitz, and the author of the *Theologia Germanica* ("Word and Spirit in the First Years of the Reformation," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 49 [1958], 15-16). Karlstadt specifically refers to the *Theologia Germanica* twice in his "Tract on the Supreme Virtue of *Gelassenheit*" (Furca, *The Essential Karlstadt*, 154, 156). Tauler's influence is certain, since notes in Karlstadt's hand have been found on a copy of one of Tauler's sermons (Hans-Peter Hasse, "*Tauler und Augustin als Quelle Karlstadts: am Beispiel von Karlstadts Marginalien zu Taulers Predigt zum Johannistag über Lk 1, 5-23*," in *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt [1486-1541]: Ein Theologe der frühen Reformation*, Hrsg. Sigrid Looss und Markus Matthias [Wittenberg: Drei Kastanien Verlag, 1998], 247-275).

³⁸"Tract on the Supreme Virtue of *Gelassenheit*," 133-168.

³⁹See Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, 118, n. 4. Rupp, *ibid.*, suggests that Karlstadt's tracts are the "bridge between the late medieval mystics and the Reformation radicals."

him, it was the epitome of what happens in the human experience when the “I” yields itself to God. For Karlstadt, the focus was on surrendering or yielding up the human will in favor of God’s will. Karlstadt writes: “I must not want to know or find out anything about myself and my own, which I might then hanker after, and I must be so fully immersed in God’s will as to have truly died to self.”⁴⁰

Perhaps part of Karlstadt’s fascination with the Sabbath came from the way he connected *gelassenheit* to the Sabbath. For him to celebrate the inner Sabbath meant that “we must not have our own will, but must let go of our will, and accept and do God’s will.”⁴¹ We must “abandon [*galasse*] our delight [*sic*], will, desires, ways and our own soul and mind and everything that delights us. Instead, we must take on the delight, will, desire, ways, and thoughts of God.”⁴²

Celebrating the Physical Sabbath

When Karlstadt discusses the physical Sabbath, it is in the context of one’s relationships with the neighbor. He says that readers must allow their servants and their beasts of burden the day off to be idle and to celebrate. This is so important that to force a servant to work on the Sabbath is against the will of God. It is an act of violence and tyranny so heinous that it is sufficient cause for the servants to oppose the authority of the master.⁴³

Karlstadt acknowledges that he is as guilty as most other Christians of his day in desecrating the Sabbath.⁴⁴ Karlstadt’s confession suggests that he was advocating a greater strictness than he was practicing. That he could live with a contradiction between his preaching and his practice suggests that he viewed a more careful Sabbath observance as an ideal to strive for, but not a requirement of salvation or of the Christian life. He then details further abuses of the Sabbath that he feels should be corrected. The Christian will work his horses in the fields all week long and then take them out on a joy ride on the Sabbath. Workhorses need a rest too. As a result of this horrible vice of disrespect for God, “our animals are stricken and allowed to die.”⁴⁵ While it is an abuse to force children and servants to work on the feast day, it is better for them to work than to carouse.⁴⁶ “It is better for them to till the field than to

⁴⁰“Tract on the Supreme Virtue of *Gelassenheit*,” 138.

⁴¹“On the Sabbath,” 322.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 322-323 (*Wir müssen “der gelasse seinem willen, begirden, weg und sein eigne seel und gedancken und alles, das yn belustet, und neme an sich den lust, willen, begirden, weg und gedancken gottes,” Sabbat-Traktat*, 353). Furcha’s translation is slightly at variance from Stupperich’s German text.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 324. Stupperich suggests that speaking against the “lords” means to revolt [*aufzulehnen*] against them. Cf. Stupperich, 373.

⁴⁴“On the Sabbath,” 324.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 325.

⁴⁶This is an allusion to Augustine’s “Exposition of Psalm 91,” where Augustine

throw dice, curse, blaspheme, get drunk, fornicate, gossip, ridicule, fight, steal, and murder."⁴⁷ Servants or maids that cook should not be forced to do more work on the Sabbath than they would on another day.⁴⁸

In the midst of these instructions to householders to let their servants rest, Karlstadt states: "How Christians observe this, however, I need not tell you."⁴⁹ The reason for his reticence becomes clear later in the tract, where he tells the servants and maids that they cannot appeal to the Sabbath to get out of work when their masters are in need or face potential loss. In those kinds of situations, the servant is "obligated by God to work on the Sabbath."⁵⁰ The female cooks cannot excuse themselves from the necessary work of keeping the fire going and providing food.⁵¹ There seems to be a contradiction between Karlstadt's insistence that the master give his servants the day off, and his teaching that the servant is obligated to work on the Sabbath anyway. That contradiction is resolved by the distinction between the internal and the external Sabbaths.

Since the external Sabbath is for the benefit of people, the external behavior of Sabbath-keeping is not as important as the welfare of people: "The external celebration has not been commanded so rashly and seriously that work which might benefit another could not be done on the Sabbath, or that we should suffer loss or disaster rather than do an external work."⁵² Therefore, the Christian has the right to break the Sabbath under two conditions. The first has to do with benefitting another, and the second with preventing loss. In an apparent reference to 1 Sam 16:7, Karlstadt says: "God does not look to

discusses Jewish Sabbath observance. He ridicules the lazy, lax, and dissolute rest of the Jews and their involvement in frivolous pursuits on the Sabbath. Speaking of Christians, he says: "We rest from wrongdoing; they [the Jews] rest from good works. It is better to plow than to dance." Augustine then develops the idea that "Our Sabbath is within, in our hearts. . . . A person with a good conscience is tranquil, and this tranquility is itself the Sabbath of the heart" (in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III, vol. 18, trans. Maria Boulding [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002], 346). Karlstadt's dependence on Augustine's Sabbath conceptions is apparent, but needs further study.

⁴⁷Ibid., 325.

⁴⁸Ibid. See R. Willard Wentland, "The Teaching of Andreas Bodenstein Von Carlstadt on the Seventh-Day Sabbath" (M.A. Thesis, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1947), 28-29, 35. Wentland refers to these paragraphs and suggests that Karlstadt advocated a virtual return to Judaistic Sabbath-keeping. On the contrary, it seems more likely that Karlstadt's tract advocated something closer to the minimal level of Sabbath-keeping that was being taught in his day. There were also many who taught a much stricter Sabbath than Karlstadt did. For a description of medieval Sabbath practice and theology, see Kenneth L. Parker, *The English Sabbath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. chaps. 2, 8-23.

⁴⁹"On the Sabbath," 325.

⁵⁰Ibid., 330.

⁵¹Ibid., 331.

⁵²Ibid., 327-328.

external things and sacrifices, but to the internal ones.⁵³ If a person is upright internally, then his external behavior will be right too.⁵⁴

In Karlstadt's mind, the internal condition of the heart is much more important than any external celebration. God prefers a broken heart to any celebration or work. He has no need of a person's external leisure. God attends to the inner rest and leisure. If that is honest, then the Christian can stand before God even though there may be no external celebration.⁵⁵ Karlstadt's readiness to dispense with "external celebration" suggests that he would not have supported the positions advocated by the "Sabbatarians" of later years.

Works of Mercy

Karlstadt's terminology becomes complicated when it comes to the issue of doing works of mercy on the Sabbath. He acknowledges that one might think that he is endorsing the breaking of the Sabbath. But it is right to break the Sabbath to help another person in need. Then again, "it is impossible for a work of love to break the Sabbath."⁵⁶ That is because there is a hierarchy of commandments. The command of love is a better and higher command than those that speak of sacrifices, Sabbaths, and similar ceremonies. God prefers the commandment of love and mercy toward the neighbor to the commandment of the Sabbath.⁵⁷

Thus one does not break the Sabbath when one works in situations of need or potential loss. One is merely disregarding the external Sabbath, and in that case, "the external Sabbath is then no longer a Sabbath."⁵⁸ The priority of the "neighbor" over the external Sabbath becomes clear as Karlstadt tells the servants that if they see a thunderstorm coming and their master's crop is in danger of being ruined, they ought to harness the horse and help bring it in.⁵⁹ In fact, the master has the right to force his servants to work on the Sabbath if necessity demands it.⁶⁰

⁵³Ibid., 328.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., 329.

⁵⁷Ibid. Here Karlstadt speaks of the Sabbath as a ceremony. This terminology links the Sabbath to the contingent rituals of the OT. Karlstadt's use of the terminology suggests the presence of a Thomistic view of the Sabbath. Thomas Aquinas divided the Sabbath commandment into two components, teaching that the requirement for a "particular time" was ceremonial, but the requirement to observe a time for concentration on the things of God was moral (*Summa Theologica* Pt. II-II, Q. 122, Art. 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [New York: Benzinger, 1947], 1701). The Puritan Sabbatarians specifically rejected the division of the Sabbath commandment into ceremonial and moral components.

⁵⁸"On the Sabbath," 330.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., 331.

Karlstadt's endorsement of field work on the Sabbath when "necessity demands it" is in contrast to later "Sabbatarians." For example, Nicholas Bownde, the chief exponent of English "Sabbatarianism," taught that when his readers were tempted to harvest a crop on the Sabbath because of threatening weather, they should believe that God will alter the weather and preserve the grain. If he doesn't, he may be punishing them or testing their faith as he tested Job's faith.⁶¹

Karlstadt's position was that a person can break the external Sabbath whenever need demands. This relatively "liberal" position on Sabbath observance may have been in agreement with the common practice of the people. Kenneth L. Parker describes repeated attempts by medieval ecclesiastical authorities to secure a more stringent Sunday-Sabbath observance, yet they were primarily opposed to Sunday market days, servile labor on the holy day, and tipping, dancing, and other entertainment.⁶² Even the stringent and influential "Epistle on Sunday" from the sixth century made exception for cases of danger and acts of mercy.⁶³ It is surprising, then, that Karlstadt addresses the possibility that one might be criticized for breaking the Sabbath in order to help one's neighbor. In fact, he refers to Paul's apparently anti-Sabbatarian message in Col 2:6-16 to support those who might be criticized.⁶⁴ Not only should one help their neighbor, but the Christian should help themselves (if necessity demands it), rather than celebrate the Sabbath.⁶⁵ The reference to critics of his position makes it clear that Karlstadt's teaching would have been considered too "liberal" in some more conservative circles.⁶⁶

Karlstadt concludes the section on "Works of Mercy" with a cryptic statement about the Spirit's work. It is worth quoting because it bears on the question of Karlstadt's alleged spiritualism: "We ought to help ourselves as well, rather than celebrate, as long as we understand that external leisure prevents God's grace from reaching us and that the spirit of God—who leads people in all things to God—directs and leads everything, although this may

⁶¹Nicholas Bownde, *Sabbatum Veteris et Novi Testamenti* (London: Felix Kyngston, for Thomas Man and John Porter, 1606), 149. Bownde quotes Exod 34:21 to support his position against work during harvest time. For a more complete description of Bownde's teaching, see Edward Allen, "Rest as a Spiritual Discipline" (D.Min. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1991), 180-217.

⁶²Parker, 10-14.

⁶³Ibid., 9-10.

⁶⁴The German text reads "*wie Paulus sagt. Coloss. Ij. (16)*" (*Sabbat-Traktat*, 362). Furcha's translation reads "as Paul says [Col 2:6-16]."

⁶⁵"On the Sabbath," 331.

⁶⁶For example, Erasmus ridicules those who claim "that it is a lesser crime to butcher a thousand men than for a poor man to cobble his shoe on a single occasion on the Lord's day" (Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* [1515], trans. Betty Radice, nn. A. H. T. Levi [London: Penguin 1971], 88-89). Levi's note, 108, says that this interpretation was derived "from the exaggerated application of the scholastic principle that crimes against God have a malice not intrinsic to crimes against men."

appear foolish to carnal people who lack the Spirit.”⁶⁷

This sentence has in view two possible scenarios. In the first one, a person whose understanding of the Sabbath was not limited to mere “external leisure” would experience God’s grace even though he was “helping himself” on the Sabbath. It might seem to an outside critic that he was “breaking” the Sabbath by not celebrating it, but in reality he is following the leading of the Spirit of God. The person in tune with the Spirit is directed and led in everything. He understands what it means to be led by the “spirit of God.”

In contrast, the second scenario envisions a person who understands the Sabbath as merely an “external leisure.” That kind of limited view of the Sabbath “prevents God’s grace from reaching us,” while an understanding of the “spiritual” Sabbath would bring God’s grace. The person with the limited, merely external view of the Sabbath would not be in tune with the Spirit of God, their leisure on the Sabbath would not come from the Spirit’s leading, and, in fact, they would consider the leading of the Spirit to be mere foolishness.

Apparently Karlstadt feels the need to make this distinction as a defense against his more stringent Sabbath-observing critics. He envisions a situation where one person is “breaking the Sabbath” and another is at leisure. An outside critic would condemn the “Sabbath breaker” and approve of the person observing “external leisure.” But their judgment would be in error, for they were not able to distinguish which activities were being done as a result of the leading of the “spirit of God” and which were being done as a part of “external leisure.”

Later spiritualistic writers, such as Sebastian Franck, tended to separate the work of the Spirit from the word.⁶⁸ In his other writings, Karlstadt gave the Spirit a significant role in the exegetical task. In his thinking, the Spirit enables one to be obedient to the Word and assures one that the text is from God. The Spirit also reveals the proper interpretation of difficult scriptural passages.⁶⁹ But in this passage there does not appear to be a direct issue of scriptural interpretation. The issue is more a matter of application.⁷⁰ How does one know

⁶⁷“On the Sabbath,” 331 (“*Sollen uns auch lieber helfen dann feyren, so offt wir versteen, das eüsserliche müßigkeit uns an gottes kunst verhindert, das alles der geist gottes weyßt und leret, der den menschen in allen dingen nach Gott leyet. Wiewol das die fleyschlichen und geistlosen menschen nerrisch dunckt,*” *Sabbat-Traktat*, 362).

⁶⁸In “A Letter to John Campanus,” Sebastian Franck writes from Strassburg in 1531: “I wish, however, that thou wert not so addicted to the letter of Scripture, thus withdrawing thy heart from the teaching of the Spirit, and that thou wouldst not drive out the Spirit of God as though it were Satan, crowding him against his will into the script and making Scripture thy god. . . . Thou shouldst not believe and accept something [merely] reported by Scripture—and feel that the God of thy heart must yield to Scripture” (*Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, eds. George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957], 159). See Sider, 205-206; and Walter Klaassen, “Spiritualization in the Reformation,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 37 (1963): 67-77.

⁶⁹Sider, 276-277.

⁷⁰Stupperich, 370-371, argues that Karlstadt has a spiritualistic understanding of the

what work must be done out of necessity on the Sabbath? How does one know when to “break the Sabbath and put it off to help our neighbor?”⁷¹ How could one do that in the face of potential criticism of one’s actions? How does one discern whether they should “break the Sabbath” or remain at leisure? Karlstadt’s answer to each of these questions is that the Spirit of God will direct and lead you.

This is a kind of spiritualism that presupposes the Scriptures and the Spirit’s guidance in interpreting Scripture. It doesn’t separate Spirit and Word, rather it is Karlstadt’s answer to the tendency toward casuistry. Rather than giving a whole list of detailed rules about Sabbath observance, he simply leaves it to the Spirit to apply the principles to the individual situation. This fits with his earlier statement that a person who spiritually rests in God will simply do what ought to be done.⁷² Thus Karlstadt’s spiritualism is not a threat to the principle of *sola Scriptura*. Rather it is a threat to a rule-oriented approach to Sabbath celebration.

The Slave and Lord of the Sabbath

Karlstadt next seeks to clarify the relationship of the inner, spiritual Sabbath to the external, physical Sabbath. He uses a pattern that appears to be influenced by Luther’s treatise on “The Freedom of a Christian.” Luther’s organizing principles were two seemingly contradictory statements:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.⁷³

Luther’s solution to the contradiction focuses on the distinction between the spiritual and bodily nature in “man.” The spiritual, inner, new “man” is lord of all the external world. He is free from all things. The carnal, outward, old “man” is the servant of all. The Christian has both “men” within himself in a way that he willingly is the servant of all yet remains inwardly free of all.⁷⁴

In his tract on the Sabbath, Karlstadt apparently uses Luther’s scheme with reference to the Sabbath. He says that “human beings are both slave and lord of the Sabbath.”⁷⁵ The spiritual, inner Sabbath is lord over humankind because God is lord over humankind and it is he that sanctifies the soul. The person who rests in and expects holiness from God acknowledges that the Sabbath is

Bible. Karlstadt does use spiritualistic language and concepts from the *Theologia Germanica*, but he does not set the Spirit in opposition to the Bible in the way that Franck did.

⁷¹“On the Sabbath,” 331.

⁷²Ibid., 322.

⁷³Martin Luther, *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 20.

⁷⁴Ibid., 34.

⁷⁵“On the Sabbath,” 332.

Lord and that he or she is a servant of the Sabbath.⁷⁶

However, the external, physical Sabbath exists for humankind. It is lower than the inner Sabbath, serving the inner Sabbath when needed. Karlstadt says that “We stand between both Sabbaths, under the spiritual and invisible and above the physical and perceptible—servant of the higher and lord of the lower.”⁷⁷

After an extended treatment of the point, he concludes: “It is not always good for [the inner being] to be bound to time and place, wherefore, God set him above all external Sabbaths.”⁷⁸ Thus, in Karlstadt’s way of thinking, the literal, physical, weekly Sabbath is of less consequence than the inner, spiritual Sabbath.

Karlstadt’s Sabbath Discipline

When Karlstadt returns to the question of what a person is to do on the Sabbath, his answer reveals more of his mystical inclinations than it does a “program” for Sabbath observance. The way he forms this question has to do with how to “pass the long time or [overcome] boredom.”⁷⁹ The question implies a quietistic Sabbath where the person observing it not only avoids work, but does little else. A quietistic Sabbath does not seem to fit with Karlstadt’s teaching about doing works of necessity and mercy on the Sabbath because he has thus far focused on what work is permissible under what circumstances.

Karlstadt now addresses what he envisions to be the discipline of Sabbath observance:

We ought to be idle, do nothing, and endure the long time. The Sabbath has been instituted for the spirit to reach a point of boredom and learn something during the idle time.

For idleness and getting bored is a spiritual circumcision and preparation to receive God’s work, since boredom and ennui drive out human desires.⁸⁰

The discipline here described seems extreme. But its purpose is to act as a sort of “spiritual circumcision” that apparently cuts away the human will and puts God’s will in its place—a concept similar to Karlstadt’s use of self-surrender or resignation (*gelassenheit*).⁸¹ He also says that idleness and boredom have the

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid. (“*Auch ist im nit stets gut, gebunden sein an zeyt oder stedt, der wegen hat in Gott über allen eüsserlichen Sabbat gesetzt,*” *Sabbat-Traktat*, 363).

⁷⁹Ibid. (“*für die lange zeyt oder lange weyl thun sol,*” *Sabbat-Traktat*, 363).

⁸⁰Ibid. (“*Der mensch sol müßsig steen, nichts thun und die lange zeyt leiden. Wann der Sabbat ist derhalben yngesetzt, das der geist in langweyligkeit komme und etwas in seiner langen zeyt lerne. Dann langweyligkeit und verdrieff der zeyt ist ein geistliche beschneydung und bereytung, zu entpfahen gottess werck, alle weyl verdrieff und die langweyleigkeit der creaturen lusten außstreybet,*” *Sabbat-Traktat*, 363).

⁸¹A modern Jewish psychoanalytical parallel to Karlstadt’s idea is found in Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 233-237.

specific purpose of preparing one “to receive God’s work, since boredom and enui drive out human desires.”⁸² God’s work is described in the next paragraph in terms of cleansing and sanctifying.

Rupp suggests that Karlstadt’s Sabbath discipline of idleness and boredom has its roots in the mystical tradition. He finds in this passage a set of technical terms for a mystical “‘plan of salvation’ about which we have only intriguing hints.”⁸³ In Rupp’s translation, boring idleness, and ennui [*langweylikheit und verdriß der zeyt*] are the “Waiting Time” and the “Passing of Time,” and he suggests that a reader attuned to mystical terminology would understand what Karlstadt meant by these terms.⁸⁴

Karlstadt’s expression of his Sabbath discipline was evidently meaningful and attractive to him. It is clear that he has a positive assessment of boredom. Thus it is probable that behind his words are mystical ideas that need further explanation. As an example of what those ideas might have been, Michael Raposa describes positive assessment of boredom in his book, *Boredom and the Religious Imagination*, suggesting that boredom can have a positive religious significance.⁸⁵ It is preparation for a detachment from “external” matters and preparation for union with God. Clearly, the mystical terms Karlstadt uses deserve further study to determine whether he was merely using the terminology, transforming the concepts, or was actually using mystical conceptions.

Regardless, Karlstadt’s concept of the ideal Sabbath seems to place him among the most extreme advocates of the Sabbath. He wrote: “It would be good if on a Sabbath we were to put our head in our hands, bow down, and acknowledge our misfortune and weakness with great sorrow; thus we should rush more quickly to the One (who alone cleanses and sanctifies).”⁸⁶ Mitigating the apparent extremity of these words is the fact that Karlstadt’s statement is not a command. He does not lay down a rule or requirement, but merely describes what he thinks would be a good idea. It fits with his ideas of *gelassenheit*. Above all, it is theological. The purpose of bowing down in confession and sorrow is to encourage the believer to rush more quickly to

Zornberg, 235, states: “Shabbat is the very enactment of ‘vacancy’—of ‘not-doing,’ of an apparent lethargy. In the ‘empty time’ of Shabbat, the question of the wilderness comes to its sharpest expression: ‘What does one want to do with one’s time?’ In its earliest form, therefore, Shabbat is a paradoxical gift—bittersweet, curing the bitterness with bitterness.”

⁸²“On the Sabbath,” 333.

⁸³Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, 127. Stupperich, 372, supports the idea that Karlstadt’s system can be called a late blooming of German mysticism.

⁸⁴Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, 127, 129.

⁸⁵Michael Raposa, *Boredom and the Religious Imagination* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

⁸⁶“On the Sabbath,” 333 (“*Gut wer es, das einer am Sabbat seinen kopff in die handt neme und sich nider druckte und seine unseligkeit und gebresten mit schmerzzen erkennet, dann also würd er dester geschwinder zu dem (der allein rein unnd heylig machet) zu eylen,*” *Sabbat-Traktat*, 363).

God. Karlstadt's Sabbath discipline is designed to prepare a person for contact with "the One" who works within his life to cleanse and sanctify him.

In fact, the theme of God's work in contrast to human work runs through Karlstadt's entire tract.⁸⁷ Immediately following the seemingly extreme and morose paragraph on the Sabbath discipline quoted above, Karlstadt expands on this contrast: "God forbids human beings to work on the Sabbath [Ex. 20:10]" because "our works impede God's work." Rather than working, we are to "remain surrendered [*in der gelassenheit bleiben müssen*]." The human part of Sabbath observance is to do nothing but suffer. And when one's limit of suffering is reached, "God's spirit will fill you with his work."⁸⁸

Karlstadt sees a theological reason for the stricture against human work on the Sabbath. The Christian is not saved by his or her own works. The believer needs to renounce his or her own works and rest rather in God's sanctifying work. The Sabbath then becomes a sign that the believer is saved and sanctified not by his or her own works, but by God's.

The Day of Celebration

Karlstadt relates his ideas on Sabbath observance to three contexts: mystical terminology, the Ten Commandments, and a view of salvation by God's works and not by human works.

How closely does Karlstadt tie these conceptions of Sabbath observance to an actual day of the week? Karlstadt devotes an entire section of his treatise to "Which Day of the Week Must Be Celebrated."⁸⁹ His opening idea is that the commandment envisions six days of labor, with the seventh off. He notes that God doesn't specify in the commandment that Sunday or Saturday must be kept. So the master and his servants must celebrate the Sabbath on the seventh day after the servants have worked for six days.⁹⁰ The householder ought to be able to "select and set the seventh day as he pleases."⁹¹ He notes that this only applies to the external Sabbath. When it comes to the spiritual Sabbath, "then every day is a Sabbath and one Sabbath flows from the other. . . . [W]e must therefore keep all days holy and be without work on every working day and

⁸⁷ It is first evident in the second section ("On the Sabbath," 319). "The Sabbath has been instituted that we might become holy as God is holy and rest like him by letting go of our works as he did and yet perform God's work in a passive manner for eternity, so that God may do our work without ceasing" ("*Demnach ist der Sabbat von Gott ingesetzt, das wir begeren heylig zu werden, als Gott heylig ist, und rugen als er, unnd die werck lassen faren, als er than hat, unnd doch ewiglich Gottes werck in leidender weys wircken, das Gott unser wircklichkeit on uffhören wircke*") (*Sabbat-Traktat*, 350). See also the idea of the Sabbath as a "work of faith" ("On the Sabbath," 325-326).

⁸⁸Ibid., 333.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid., 334.

experience tranquility [*gelassenheit*] and ennui."⁹²

Karlstadt does not tie the external Sabbath to a specific day of the week. He does not see that as part of the commandment. Neither does he connect it with the resurrection. His mention of the preaching of the Word is in connection with the fact that preaching would be disrupted if each household had its own Sabbath.

Karlstadt and Luther have virtually identical positions in terms of their relationship to the literal day of worship. The administration of the Eucharist as a Sabbath discipline does not seem important to either Karlstadt or Luther. Like Karlstadt, Luther taught that "in itself no one day is better than another."⁹³ Luther also taught that "we Christians should make every day a holy day and give ourselves only to holy activities."⁹⁴

As an apparent aside, Karlstadt mentions that "It is no secret that human beings instituted Sunday."⁹⁵ By that, he meant that Sunday was based on human ecclesiastical authority and not on the authority of Scripture. This was a commonly accepted position. Aquinas taught that "In the New Law the observance of the Lord's day took the place of the observance of the Sabbath, not by virtue of the precept but by the institution of the Church and the custom of Christian people."⁹⁶ John Eck wrote in his *Enchiridion of Commonplaces Against Luther and Other Enemies of the Church* that there is no warrant in Scripture for a change from Saturday to Sunday. He argued that the church had changed the day to Sunday.⁹⁷ The Augsburg Confession sought to refute the Catholic use of this argument, asserting that the change had scriptural warrant.⁹⁸

⁹²Ibid. ("So man in usserlich ansicht. Wann aber die ußerliche deck uffgehoben und in den geistlichen sabbat gesehen, würden alle tag sabbaten sein und ein sabbat uß dem andern fhyessen, dann ye meer sich der mensch in geistlichem feyr übet, ye meer sabbaten folgen und einer uß dem andern kommet. Dann warumb der mensch bedarff gottes heyligkeit alle tag und stund, darumb muß er den Sabbat alle tag heyligen und al tag werckloß seyn und in der gelassenheit und langweyligkeit steen, wie obgemelt ist," *Sabbat-Traktat*, 364).

⁹³Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* [1529], trans. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 20.

⁹⁴Ibid., 21.

⁹⁵"On the Sabbath," 333.

⁹⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Pt. II-II, Q. 122, Art. 4.

⁹⁷John Eck, *Enchiridion of Commonplaces Against Luther and Other Enemies of the Church*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 13, 101-102, 126. Eck, 101, says that the "Sabbath is manifoldly commanded by God [Gen 2:3; Exod 20:9f.; Num 15:32f.] and neither in the Gospel nor in Paul is it set forth that the Sabbath was to cease. Nevertheless the Church established the Lord's Day through the traditions of the apostles without Scripture."

⁹⁸"Augsburg Confession Part II, Article VII," in *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th rev. ed., ed. Philip Schaff, David S. Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3: 64-70. It continues: "For they that think that the observation of the Lord's day was appointed by the authority of the Church, instead of the Sabbath, as necessary, are greatly deceived.

After his statement on Sunday, Karlstadt notes: "As for Saturday, the matter is still being debated."⁹⁹ We know nothing about this debate. Evidently Karlstadt was open to the possibility that Saturday was the more "proper" day upon which to celebrate the Sabbath. But as noted above, he would not have felt it was obligatory. The issue of the "proper" day was part of the external Sabbath and human beings are lord of the external Sabbath. This suggests that even if Karlstadt had been convinced that Saturday was the more "proper" day, he would not have felt he must observe the Sabbath on Saturday.

Karlstadt himself is clear about the fact that "you must celebrate on the seventh day and allow your servants to celebrate whenever they have worked for six days."¹⁰⁰ From the context, it is clear that the seven-day period of time he has in mind is not tied to the weekly cycle. What he means is that after any six days of work on any of the days of the week, the seventh day should be celebrated as a Sabbath. In fact, the householder can "select and set the seventh day as he pleases."¹⁰¹

Karlstadt's Final Observations

Karlstadt then contrasts the "lower" earthly Sabbath with the "higher" heavenly Sabbath. The earthly Sabbath is characterized by fear and bitter resignation [*gelassenheyt*], while the heavenly Sabbath is characterized by "total love, complete rest, and nothing but inexpressible, heavenly, eternal joy and freedom."¹⁰² The earthly Sabbath is a promise and an indication of the bright, shining, and eternal Sabbath to come.

In conclusion, Karlstadt ties the Sabbath to God's mercy. Daily work is the result of Adam's sin. It ages people and leads to death: "It would not be unreasonable for God to do away with us and kill us through work."¹⁰³ But God shows his love and mercy toward humanity by issuing the commandment of the Sabbath. Humanity is to work only six days and have the seventh to "revive and strengthen ourselves and restore our exhausted strength."¹⁰⁴

Returning to the use of mystical terminology, Karlstadt says that the boredom, tedium, and ennui are good for those who are strong, well able to work, and, in fact, greatly delight in work. The Sabbath breaks their delight and makes sure that they think about their sinfulness. The Sabbath is not to be turned into pleasure. The idleness of the Sabbath was imposed on humanity "to

The Scripture, which teacheth that all the Mosaical ceremonies can be omitted after the Gospel is revealed, had abrogated the Sabbath."

⁹⁹"On the Sabbath," 333.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 334.

¹⁰²Ibid., 335.

¹⁰³Ibid., 337.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

make the Sabbath also a day of renunciation, sadness, and tribulation."¹⁰⁵

Karlstadt appends to this dark and gloomy view of the Sabbath one sentence about forgiveness: "Never forget that the Sabbath includes forgiveness of sins, for we cannot be sanctified and enter into God's forgiveness before we obtain forgiveness of sins."¹⁰⁶ It sounds like Karlstadt was so caught up with his mystical concepts that he himself almost forgot about forgiveness. Besides that, this sentence is not a very clear nor integrated statement of forgiveness. How does one obtain forgiveness? How does it relate to reflection on one's evil will? Do "idle ennuï" and "boring idleness" provide opportunity for more than morose meditation?

Karlstadt and "Sabbatarianism"

Did Karlstadt advocate ideas that were later labeled "Sabbatarianism"? Karlstadt did assume the perpetual character of the moral law and included the Sabbath as part of that law. He was in agreement with the first aspect of "Sabbatarianism." Yet he did not tie the physical Sabbath to a specific day. By separating the spiritual, internal Sabbath from the physical, external Sabbath, he gave priority to the spiritual Sabbath at the expense of the physical Sabbath. Thus he did not see a specific day, either Saturday or Sunday, as a command of God, the second aspect of Sabbatarianism. When it comes to the third aspect, Karlstadt did advocate specific practices of Sabbath observance. Using mystical terminology, he encouraged a discipline of self-reflection and self-renunciation. But he did not advocate a Sabbath with rules concerning what should and should not be done. His ideal Sabbath discipline was complete idleness, and it is entirely possible that he was not seriously advocating it as a regular practice for most people.

Thus on this issue, as on the issue of adult baptism, Karlstadt stood in a no man's land between strongly stated and competing ideas.¹⁰⁷ On the one hand, Luther and Rupp see Karlstadt's discussion of the Sabbath discipline as evidence not only of his "Sabbatarianism," but of an incipient legalism.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, "Sabbatarians" would view his concepts of the Sabbath as inadequate. They would agree with him that the Sabbath is part of the moral law and they would resonate with some of what he says about the Sabbath discipline, although they would probably want to distance themselves from

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 338. Karlstadt believed that "All pleasure is sin. . . . The nature of our pleasure prevents us from knowing God and his divine works" ("The Meaning of the Term *Gelassen*," in *The Essential Karlstadt: Fifteen Tracts*, trans. and ed. E. J. Furcha [Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995], 139).

¹⁰⁶"On the Sabbath," 338.

¹⁰⁷He opposed infant baptism, but, at the same time, he did not require the re-baptism of adults. See Pater, *Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movements*, 110-113.

¹⁰⁸Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, 130. Rupp, *ibid.*, states that "In the end Karlstadt's Sabbath is under the sign of the Law rather than of the Gospel."

Karlstadt's mystical conceptions of Sabbath boredom and ennui. They would not agree with his principles for deciding what was necessary work, and they would be disappointed that he did not believe that God had appointed one day or another as the Christian Sabbath.¹⁰⁹

Luther's reaction to Karlstadt's whole theology was virulent. He saw Karlstadt as returning to a works-righteousness because of the positive role he had for the law. Karlstadt's Sabbath tract came in for particular ridicule. According to Luther, the Ten Commandments have two ceremonial laws: those concerning images and the Sabbath. He expresses gratefulness to Paul and Isaiah for freeing Christians from factious spirits like Karlstadt.¹¹⁰ Otherwise:

We should have to sit through the sabbath day with "head in hand" awaiting the heavenly voice, as they would delude us. Yes, if Karlstadt were to write more about the sabbath, even Sunday would have to give way, and the sabbath, that is, Saturday, would be celebrated. He would truly make us Jews in all things, so that we also would have to be circumcised, etc.¹¹¹

Luther exaggerates Karlstadt's spiritualism and his position on the law. Karlstadt says nothing about waiting for a heavenly voice. He affirms the continuity of the moral law, but circumcision is not part of the moral law. It is not necessarily true that if one were to follow Karlstadt's ideas, they would come to Saturday celebration. Luther's comment, soaked with sarcasm, is not a serious description of Karlstadt's position.

Within five years of the publication of the tract, a group of Anabaptists in Moravia began to observe a Saturday Sabbath. While there is no evidence of a direct connection between Karlstadt's tract and this movement, there is a possibility that Karlstadt's tract may have had some influence. We know that Karlstadt's German writings were second only to Luther's in terms of popularity in the years leading up to 1525.¹¹² Balthazar Hubmaier was an avid reader of Karlstadt's works.¹¹³ When Hubmaier fled to Moravia, one of his

¹⁰⁹Having focused on one question in relation to this tract, it is apparent that other issues would provide fruitful study. How does Karlstadt use Jesus' teaching and example, as well as other scriptural passages? How does his use of the categories of "interior" and "exterior" relate to his use of the same categories in his discussion of images, the Lord's Supper, and baptism? Does he use these categories consistently in dealing with all four of these major doctrinal issues? How does Karlstadt's use of these categories relate to their use in the *Theologia Germanica*?

¹¹⁰Martin Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets," 93.

¹¹¹Ibid., 94.

¹¹²Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 26-27. Luther had 1,465 total printings and reprintings of German editions between 1518 and 1525. Karlstadt had 125. After him came Urbanus Rhegius with 77, Philip Melancthon with 71, and Ulrich Zwingli with 70.

¹¹³Pater, *Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movements*, 134, 143, 150, 167, 236, 248. Hans J. Hillerbrand, "The Origin of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism: Another Look," *Archive für Reformationsgeschichte* 53 (1962): 167. Hillerbrand quotes Hubmaier as saying

associates was Oswald Glaidt. Glaidt was the founder of the group that began to keep the seventh-day Sabbath in Moravia.¹¹⁴

Karlstadt himself only mentions the Sabbath once more, and that in a refutation of Luther's "Against the Heavenly Prophets." Luther attacked him for speaking about "external matters," such as the Sabbath. Karlstadt responds that Paul, Moses, and Christ himself spoke about such matters.¹¹⁵ He also uses the Sabbath as an illustration of the "hidden meaning of the law." "Those who truly understood the Sabbath were the lords of the Sabbath and had genuine freedom."¹¹⁶ As far as the record exists, these are the only subsequent references to the Sabbath in Karlstadt's writings. The Sabbath was not one of Karlstadt's major focuses and his connection to the Sabbath movement in Moravia is improbable and at best indirect.

The Anabaptist "Sabbatarianism" that arose shortly after Karlstadt's period of theological activity included three aspects. All three aspects were essential for a "Sabbath" experience to occur. At best, Karlstadt was only one third of a "Sabbatarian." He accepted the Sabbath as part of the law that had ongoing validity. But since he did not believe any particular day was of divine command, there was no way a Sabbath culture could develop. And since he did not advocate a program of positive and negative Sabbath disciplines and, in fact, he idealized idleness, it was unlikely that a positive Sabbath practice could develop from his ideas.

At best, Karlstadt saw the Sabbath as an optional spiritual discipline. It is possible that Karlstadt's tract influenced Anabaptists by raising the issue of Sabbath observance. While rejecting Karlstadt's emphasis on the inner spiritual

that Karlstadt's writings were instrumental in having him "proclaim from the roof-tops what he formerly had to keep in his heart."

¹¹⁴Werner O. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 103-105. George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), 333-334. Gerhard F. Hasel, "Sabbatarian Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century," *AUSJ* 5 (1967): 101-121. The seventh-day Sabbatarian Anabaptists Glaidt and Fisher appear to be familiar with Karlstadt's writings on the Sabbath. They oppose Karlstadt's emphasis on the Sabbath's so-called "spiritual" nature. See Glaidt's points number 26 and 33 and Fisher's point 26 (Liechty, 32). Fisher writes: "You cannot be constantly separating the 'inner' from the 'outer.' Therefore, the 'Sabbath of faith' must be seen as allegory and does not mean at all that the Sabbath should not be held externally"(cited in Liechty, 39). Glaidt and Fisher also deny Luther's charge that they are legalists. See Glaidt's point number 17 (where he says that no one would argue "that simply to refrain from murder is an attempt to achieve salvation on the basis of 'works'"); and Fisher's point 6 (where he affirms that "Faith in Christ does not abolish the law (Romans 3:31) but rather through Christ we are able to uphold the law. This includes the Sabbath") (Liechty, 31, 37).

¹¹⁵Karlstadt, "Several Main Points of Christian Teaching," 349-350.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 375.

Sabbath and also rejecting his unwillingness to commit to a Sabbath observance on a particular day of the week, it is possible that some Anabaptists in Moravia followed Karlstad's insistence on the continuity of the moral law and decided that the observance of a particular Sabbath day was not an optional spiritual discipline, but a command of God. They went even further and chose to require the observance of the Sabbath day on Saturday. Nonetheless, Karlstadt's own Sabbath tract does not advocate ideas that can be characterized as Sabbatarian.