

The Doctrine of the Sabbath (Part I) Within the Context of Chapter XXI of the Westminster Confession of Faith

By James E. Bordwine

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explain the *Westminster Confession's* Sabbath doctrine within the larger context of the doctrine of worship as it appears in Chapter XXI (“Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day”). Before dealing with the specifics of Chapter XXI, we will provide an overview of the contents. The following are the chief teachings of this chapter on Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day.

- **First**, the only acceptable way of worshiping God is that given in the Scriptures. The Westminster Divines believed that God alone is capable of telling His creatures how He may be approached in worship. Therefore, we are bound to use only those elements and means of worship that are revealed in the Bible. This belief is known as the Regulative Principle.
- **Second**, having laid the foundation of the Regulative Principle, the writers of the *Confession* list what the Bible identifies as the ordinary parts of worship. They include: prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, the singing of psalms and the proper administration of the sacraments. To these, the Divines state, may be added: oaths, vows, fastings and thanksgivings upon special occasions.
- **Third**, according to the commandment of God, which binds all men in all ages, one day in seven is to be kept holy unto Him during which men are to engage in the worship of God and the performance of deeds of necessity and mercy.

Paragraph I: The Light of Nature and the Regulative Principle¹

Now that we have an overview of the contents of Chapter XXI, let's begin analyzing the first paragraph:

I. The light of nature shows that there is a God, who has lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and does good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.

The Divines begin their treatment of the subject of worship by stating that the light of nature reveals the existence of God. In the language of the *Confession*, the phrase, “light of nature”, refers to the “testimony” of creation, that is, what creation “teaches” about its origin and its makeup. This terminology appears first in Chapter I, which deals with Holy Scripture. The first sentence of Chapter I reads:

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation.

In this opening sentence, the *Confession* teaches that this creation, and the providence that can be observed in it, reveal the existence of a Supreme Being, a Being of goodness, wisdom and power. To put it in the simplest terms, what God has made shows that it was made by Him; creation bears the signature of its Creator. Therefore, when the writers of the *Confession* refer to the “light of nature” in Chapter XXI, they have in mind the same idea first explained in Chapter I. In the study of theology, what we have described is known as the doctrine of “natural” or “general” revelation. Natural revelation is that which can be known about God and His creation based upon an examination of the creation itself.

What can be known “by the light of nature”, according to this opening statement of Chapter XXI, is not significantly different from what the Divines said at the beginning of Chapter I (mentioned above): The light of nature, creation's “testimony” regarding its origin and composition, shows that “there is a God, who has lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and does good unto all”. The existence, beauty, orderliness and complexity of creation point to a benevolent and supremely powerful Creator.

¹ We want to emphasize that this opening paragraph is foundational. Its theological principles govern the remaining sections. Therefore, we will give this first paragraph more attention than paragraphs II-VI, which will be presented in summary form.

As Chapter I says, creation plainly teaches such things, so plainly, in fact, that man is left without excuse for not acknowledging God. Man's failure to acknowledge the God who is revealed by and in His creation highlights his corruption and need of salvation. Although creation tells of God's existence and attributes, its witness goes unheeded by creatures dead in their trespasses and sins (cf. 9-3; 10-1, 2; *Larger Catechism* 25-28, 149)

Nevertheless, the fact that fallen man does not “hear” creation's testimony does not alter the implications of that testimony. This is what the Divines refer to next: “...therefore, [God is] to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might.” The thinking of the Divines goes like this: If there is a God who has lordship and sovereignty over all, who is good and does good to all, then He is due a certain response from those reasonable creaturesmen and angels (cf. 2-2; 4-2; *Larger Catechism* 16, 17) that He has made. Notice that in the theology of the *Confession*, worship is an *obligation*. We are obligated to find out what true worship is, then we are bound to engage in it

We see, then, that the writers of the *Confession* establish the validity of the idea of worshipping God *before* they deal with the ways and means of worship. This is an important point to note for two reasons. First, who or what is to be worshiped *must be determined before worship can be offered*. The Divines, having referred to the doctrine of natural revelation, determined that the God of the Bible is to be worshiped. Second, the nature of who or what is to be worshiped *determines how worship is to be done*. If, as the *Confession* teaches here, the God of the Bible is the “who or what” that is to be worshiped, then *His nature must determine how He is worshiped*. And, the Divines are going to add, information about God's nature must be taken from God's special written revelation.

The principle that God's being determines how God is to be worshiped is the foundation for the *Confession's* doctrine of worship; this conviction is, we maintain, one of our “Reformed distinctives.” We say that the God of the Bible, the Creator, is to be worshiped and we say that His nature what He is, who He is, His power, His holiness, His perfection, etc. is the determining factor in the question, “*How is God to be worshiped?*”. And since all that we know about God comes via revelation, then *only those acts and expressions that He has said are compatible with His nature are permissible*. Simply put, only God can tell us how God can be worshiped. In light of this tenet of Reformed theology, it is not difficult to understand the caution historically associated with the activity of worship in Reformed churches. Even those who disagree with the *Confession's* rule that “God's nature determines God's worship” should be able to understand its implications for those who do think this pattern is Biblical.²

2 Romans 1:20 is cited in support of the idea that creation testifies concerning certain attributes of God: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.” This testimony is so obvious and convincing, according to Paul, that men who fail to acknowledge God are left without an excuse. That is, they cannot legitimately complain that they have seen no evidence of God. Acts 17:24 states that God is “Lord of heaven and earth”: “God that made the world and all things

The next thought found in the opening paragraph of Chapter XXI has to do with that special written revelation that God has provided:

But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.

A contrast is established by the disjunctive, “But.” The writers mean that although much can be learned from nature about God (cf. Chapter I, paragraph I noted above), *how* He is to be worshiped is not part of that information. The only source remaining, therefore, is special revelation, namely, the Scriptures that God caused to be written. Notice, too, that the *Confession* refers to the *acceptable* way of worshiping God. Various acts and expressions may be labeled “worship”, but in the mind of the Westminster Divines, that doesn't make them true worship. Worship of God must be *lawful*. (We are using the term “lawful” as it is employed elsewhere in the *Confession*, i.e., as referring to what is valid or legitimate according to Scripture; cf. 21-4, 22-3 original, 23-2, 23-4, 24-1, 24-3, 24-4, 31-2 original.) God's creatures have a duty to worship God rightly. It is not enough to do something and *call* it worship; true worship is *only* what God has revealed as true worship.

The *Confession* says that the acceptable way of worshiping God is “instituted by [God] Himself.” We repeat our little phrase: “Only God can tell us how God can be worshiped.” Further, the Divines state, the acceptable way of worshiping God is *strictly limited* to what He has revealed. They mean that there are acts and expressions that God has said are proper ways by which and in which He may be worshiped; God's creatures are not free to go beyond, add to, modify or leave out any of those divinely approved acts and expressions. As sources for guidance and inspiration in the matter of worshiping God, the writers rule out “the imaginations and devices of men”, “the suggestions of Satan”, “any visible representation” and “any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture”.

Of this forbidden list of sources, it is the “imaginations and devices of men” that needs one further brief comment. This statement means that what we, as men, might think is an acceptable act or expression of worship is illegitimate *unless God, in His Word, has prescribed it as worship*.³

therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands." This is, of course, no less than what the *Confession* states. Psalm 119:68 is included because it says plainly that God is good and does good: "Thou art good, and doest good; teach me thy statutes." This, too, is in accord with what the Divines wrote. The remainder of the Scriptures that are cited (Jer. 10:7; Psa. 31:23; 18:3; Rom. 10:12; Psa 62:8; Jos. 24:14; and Mark 12:33) speak of those various parts of the duty that belongs to us as God's creatures: fear of God, love for God, praise of God, etc.

3 The Scripture proofs cited for this section highlight two things: First, the seriousness of worshiping God only as He has instructed, which is taught, for example, in Deut 12:32: “What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.” Second, the danger of substituting our ideas for God's Word (or modifying God's Word with the addition of our ideas),

Summary of Paragraphs II-VI: The Elements of Religious Worship

II. Religious worship is to be given to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to Him alone; not to angels, saints, or any other creature: and, since the fall, not without a Mediator; nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone.

Having established the validity of the duty we have to worship the God of the Bible according to His directions, the Divines turn to the specific elements of this obligation. They begin by stating that worship “is to be given to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost”, but not to “angels, saints, or any other creature.”⁴ Considering what the *Confession* has just stated in the opening paragraph, this prohibition is not unexpected. Only the God revealed by “the light of nature” and “Holy Scripture” is to be “feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in and served.” (cf. 1-1; 21-1) A variation on the principle (stated above) that the nature of who or what is worshiped determines how worship is to be performed is applicable here. In this case, the nature of who or what is worshiped, namely, the God of the Bible, so distinguishes Him from other beings that, by comparison, *only He is worthy to receive worship*. All other beings are, in fact, “creatures”; they have been fashioned by the God to whom worship is due. Therefore, the *Confession* declares that worship is to be given to God alone.⁵

Due to the disruption in the relationship between Creator and creature that occurred at the Fall, the Divines add that the worship due to God alone must involve a Mediator. The Fall ruined man's natural communion with God and rendered man incapable of rightly responding to his Creator (cf. Chapter VI). Consequently, as the *Confession* teaches in Chapter VIII, God provided Jesus Christ to serve as the Mediator between Himself and fallen man. As the *exclusive* Mediator (cf. “nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone”), Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the law (cf. 8-4), triumphed over death by His resurrection (cf. *Larger Catechism* 52), fully satisfied the justice of His Father and purchased reconciliation and an everlasting inheritance for the elect (cf. 8-5; *Larger Catechism* 40, 44). Jesus Christ, then, enables redeemed man to fulfill his obligation of worship; without the Mediator, this duty would remain, but man would have no access to God and no desire to perform his obligation (cf. [Rom 3:10-18](#))⁶

regardless of how pious they sound or what might motivate them, which is seen, for example, in Matt. 15:9: “But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.” Other passages cited here are: Acts 17:25; Matt. 4:9, 10; Deut. 15:1-19; and Ex. 20:4-6.

4 When originally written, this statement was, of course, a deliberate refutation of Rome's doctrine. See A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 272-275 for an extended discussion. The exclusive nature of Christ's mediation, mentioned at the end of the second paragraph, is to be understood in the same historical light.

5 Scripture proof-texts include: Matt. 4:10; John 5:23; 2 Cor. 13:14; Col. 2:18; Rev. 19:10; and Rom. 1:25.

6 In addition to Chapter VIII, which is concerned with “Christ the Mediator”, see: *Larger Catechism* 32, 36, 38-42, 57-59, 153, 154. Scripture proof-texts offered are: John 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5; Eph. 2:18; and Col. 3:17.

The third and fourth paragraphs discuss prayer as “one special part of religious worship”:
7

III. Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men: and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of His Spirit, according to His will, with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love and perseverance; and, if vocal, in a known tongue.

IV. Prayer is to be made for things lawful; and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter: but not for the dead, nor for those of whom it may be known that they have sinned the sin unto death.

Since we are only interested in summarizing this information, we will reduce the Divines' teaching to four guidelines for prayer.⁸ First, the *Confession* teaches that prayer is a universal duty: “[Prayer] is by God required of all men.” Prayer originating with us and directed to God is a natural occurrence given the Creator-creature relationship upon which the whole concept of worship is based. Second, in light of the previous statements concerning the Mediator, the Divines teach that prayer is to be made “in the name of the Son, by the help of His Spirit, according to His will.”⁹ This further emphasizes the necessity of the Mediator and His critical role in worship. Prayer, “one special part of religious worship”, must go “through” Him, as it were, to be acceptable to God. Third, the *Confession* describes certain emotional and intellectual characteristics that should accompany worshipful prayer: understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love and perseverance. And, it is added, if prayer is vocal, it is to be in a “known tongue”. This is nothing less than a list taken directly from Scripture.¹⁰ Fourth, the objects of prayer are stipulated: “Prayer is to be made for things lawful”, and “for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter; but not for the dead, etc.” As we mentioned earlier, in the *Confession* the term “lawful” stands for that which is Biblically legitimate. As prayer is directed to the holy and righteous God of the Bible, its focus must be in accord with His nature.¹¹ While prayer for righteous means and ends (as defined by God) is “lawful”, prayer for things that are not compatible with what God has revealed about Himself and His will are forbidden.¹²

The fifth paragraph contains the remaining “parts of the ordinary religious worship of God”:

7 Phil. 4:6 is cited.

8 Cf. *Larger Catechism* 178-196 where these directions of paragraphs III and IV are expanded upon.

9 Proof-texts are: John 14:13, 1; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rom. 8:26; 1 John 5:14.

10 Psa. 47:7; Ecc. 5:1, 2; Heb. 12:28; Gen. 17:27; Jam. 5:16; 1:6, 7; Mark 11:24; Matt. 6:12, 14, 15; Col. 4:2; Eph. 6:18; and 1 Cor. 14:14.

11 1 John 5:14 is cited again.

12 The Scriptures cited regarding prayer for the living, but not for the dead or those who have sinned the sin unto death are: 1 Tim. 2:1, 2; John 17:20; 2 Sam. 7:29; Ruth 4:12; 2 Sam. 12:21-23; Luke 16:25, 26; Rev. 14:13; and 1 John 5:16.

V. The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.

This list constitutes what are, according to the writers of the *Confession*, designated by God as acceptable acts and expressions of worship. There are four ordinary and three extraordinary items listed. The ordinary elements of worship, that is, those acts or expressions that will normally be engaged in on a regular and predictable basis, are: the reading of Scripture, the preaching/hearing of the Word, the singing of psalms and the administration of the sacraments. The Divines are careful to attach several proof-texts to each of these elements of worship.¹³ This is to be expected in light of the previous declaration that the only right worship is *prescribed* worship.

It is worth noting the many modifiers used by the writers: The Scriptures are to be read with *godly fear*; the word is to be preached *soundly* and listened to *conscionably*; psalms are to be sung *with grace in the heart*; and the sacraments are to be administered *duly* and received *worthily*. This pattern emphasizes something to which we called attention earlier when considering the first paragraph: God's creatures have a duty to worship God *rightly*. It is not enough to do something and *call* it worship; true worship is *only* what God has revealed as true worship. The Westminster Divines stress worship grounded in God's revelation.¹⁴

The three extraordinary elements of worship, that is, those acts or expressions that occasionally will be observed depending on circumstances, are: oaths and vows, fastings and thanksgivings. Once again, the writers of the *Confession* are careful to supply Scripture proofs for each element.¹⁵

At this point, we want to emphasize that while the *Confession* is absolutely clear concerning the parts of worship, it does allow some flexibility on the *circumstances* of worship.¹⁶ In 1-6 we read: “there are some circumstances *concerning the worship of God*,

13 The reading of the Scriptures: Acts 15:21, Rev. 1:3; preaching/hearing of the Word: 2 Tim. 4:2, Jam. 1:22, Acts 10:33, Matt. 13:19, Heb. 4:2, Isa. 66:2; singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs: Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:19, Jam. 5:13; administration of the sacraments: Matt. 28:19, 1 Cor. 11:23-28, Acts 2:42.

14 We also would like to call attention to the fact that the *Confession* sees worship as an activity in which God's people participate. Notice that the writers speak of conscionable hearing of the preached Word and the worthy reception of the sacraments. These statements correspond to the *Confession's* teaching that worship is an obligation that rests with all of God's creatures.

15 Oaths: Deut. 6:13, Neh. 10:29; vows: Isa. 19:21, Ecc. 5:4, 5; fastings: Joel 2:12, Esth. 4:16, Matt. 9:15, 1 Cor. 7:5; thanksgivings: Psa. 107, Esth. 9:22.

16 For a different view on identifying the elements of worship, see John Frame, “Some Questions about the Regulative Principle”, *Westminster Theological Journal* 54/2 (Fall 1992): 358-59. See also what is,

and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word...” Matters such as the time and place of worship are not specified in Scripture. To a certain degree, the circumstances of worship and the worship itself are two different things. The next paragraph, in fact, treats one of the circumstances the place of worship:

VI. Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now, under the Gospel, either tied unto, or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed: but God is to be worshipped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as, in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself; so, more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or wilfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by His Word or providence, calls thereunto.

This section provides a good illustration of the principle just mentioned: some circumstances are not regulated by God's Word, but the parts or elements of worship are regulated. Under the Gospel, worship itself is limited to what has been prescribed (“in spirit and truth”), but the location of worship is no longer restricted to a particular place. God is to be worshiped “everywhere”, the Divines say. As examples, they include: families, individuals and public assemblies.¹⁷

Paragraph VII: The Sabbath Principle

As we begin our consideration of the *Confession's* teaching on the Sabbath within the context of religious worship, we must keep in mind what was written at the beginning of Chapter XXI. Therefore, we will take the time to review the foundational first paragraph. We will do this through several summary statements taken from our examination of that section:

- What God has made shows that it was made by Him; creation bears the signature of its Creator.
- Although creation tells of God's existence and attributes, its witness goes unheeded by creatures dead in their trespasses and sins.
- If, as creation reveals, there is a God who has lordship and sovereignty over all, who is good and does good to all, then He is due a certain response from those reasonable creatures that He has made, specifically, they are *obligated* to worship

in our opinion, an excellent response by T. David Gordon, “Some Answers about the Regulative Principle”, *Westminster Theological Journal* 55/2 (Fall 1993): 321-29.

17 Scripture proof-texts cited up to this point include: John 4:21, where Jesus instructs the woman concerning the “location” of worship; Mal. 1:11 and 1 Tim. 2:8, which speak of worship being offered in “every place” and “everywhere”; John 4:23, 24, from which the *Confession* borrows the phrase, “in spirit and truth”; Jer. 10:25, Deut. 6:6, 7, Job 1:5, 2 Sam. 6:18, 20, 1 Pet. 3:7, Acts 10:2, all of which speak of individual or family-oriented acts of worship; Matt. 6:11; Matt. 6:6 and Eph. 6:18, the first of which sanctions private prayer; Isa. 56:6, 7, Heb. 10:25, Pro. 1:20, 21, 24, Pro. 8:34, Acts. 13:42, Luke 4:16 and Acts 2:42, most of which, at least, have a vague connection to the final statement of paragraph VI to which they are attached.

- Him.
- The writers of the *Confession* establish the validity of the idea of worshiping God *before* they deal with the ways and means of worship.
 - The principle that God's being determines how God is to be worshiped is the foundation for the *Confession's* doctrine of worship.
 - Since all that we know about God comes via revelation, then *only those acts and expressions that He has said are compatible with His nature are permissible*; simply put, only God can tell us how God can be worshiped.
 - Worship of God must be *lawful*; God's creatures have a duty to worship God *rightly*. It is not enough to do something and call it worship; true worship is only what God has revealed as true worship.

Paragraph VII opens with a reference to “the law of nature” which, according to the *Confession*, establishes that “a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God”:

VII. As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, He has particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week: and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

The phrase, “law of nature”, pertains to what is indicated by the structure and characteristics of creation. This term is essentially the same in meaning as “light of nature”, which we have already discussed. Since creation reveals that there is a God who is to be worshiped, it is only logical to assume that this duty must be regulated to ensure its fulfillment. We must not miss this point: *The Confession's doctrine of the Sabbath is grounded in its more general doctrine of worship*. If we are going to preserve the consistency of the theology in this chapter, we cannot take what the Divines say about worship in general, but reject what they say about the Sabbath. The latter is *organically* related to the former. If we accept the validity of the argument that unfolds in paragraph I, we cannot easily discard what is explained here in paragraph VII. The principles of interpretation used to produce the theology of the first paragraph are the same ones used in the development of the Sabbath doctrine.

If, as has been maintained by the writers up to this point in Chapter XXI, we are obligated to worship God because of who and what He is, and if, as they also have affirmed, how we are to worship God is a matter of special revelation, then some instruction concerning the proportion of our time that is to be given to this duty is not unexpected. Therefore, according to the *Confession*, God “has particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him.” The Sabbath principle, as we will call it, provides an orderly way by which and in which the worship obligation is met.

By the phrase, “by which and in which”, we mean to say that the Sabbath day is not only *the* day on which the elements of worship (see previous paragraphs) are to be performed, but also that *observing the one-day-in-seven principle is, itself, an act or expression of worship*. In our estimation, the *Confession* teaches that Sabbath observance is an element of worship just as much as the reading of Scripture, preaching of the Word, etc. The fact that the Divines refer to the Sabbath commandment as “binding all men in all ages” (see below) shows that this is what they intended to communicate. Note, as well, that the *Confession* says the Sabbath is “to be kept holy unto Him”. That Sabbath observance is an act of worship which, therefore, puts it in the same regulated category as the other elements is obvious from this statement concerning worship's “object”.¹⁸

In Chapter XIX, concerning the Law of God, we read:

- I. God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which *He bound him and all his posterity, to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience...*
- II. This law, after his fall, *continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness*; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments...
- III. Besides this law, commonly called *moral*, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws...
- V. The moral law *does forever bind all*, as well justified persons as other...
- VI. Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life *informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly...* [emphasis added.]

All that Chapter XIX says about the moral law is applicable to the Sabbath ordinance mentioned here in Chapter XXI. Due to the fact that the moral law expresses the will of the Creator and due to the fact that it was first made known to the head of our race, the *Confession* teaches that God's moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, is permanently binding and serves to inform us concerning our duty. Therefore, in reference to the Fourth of the Ten Commandments, the Divines write that it is “a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages...” The *Confession* does not make a distinction between the nature of the Fourth Commandment, which concerns Sabbath observance, and the nature of the remaining Nine (consider, again, the statements from Chapter XIX). As constant expressions of the Divine will, they are all morally restrictive. The Sabbath commandment is “positive” in that it enjoins a duty, it does not

18 Scripture proof-texts include: Ex. 20:8 ff. where the Fourth Commandment is found along with the other Ten Words; Isa. 56:2 ff., which speaks of blessings associated with Sabbath observance. These citations establish two things: one, that, as the *Confession* states, the Sabbath ordinance is “a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages”; and two, the keeping of the Sabbath principle is pleasing to God.

forbid an action. The law is “moral” in that it is ethical in nature; it has to do with universally correct behavior. And the ordinance is “perpetual” in that it is “in force” at all times.

As it is explained in the *Confession*, the Sabbath principle requires that one day out of the seven in our week be “kept holy unto” God. (see the following discussion of paragraph VIII, which deals with practical instruction). Clearly, as the Divines note, the Sabbath Commandment was fulfilled on the last day of the week “from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ.”¹⁹ However, the writers state further, the day on which and in which (cf. our earlier phrase, “by which and in which”) the Sabbath principle finds expression was “changed into the first day of the week” at the time of Christ's resurrection.²⁰ This “new” Sabbath day (or “Christian Sabbath”) is called “the Lord's Day”²¹ and, according to the morally binding character of God's law (discussed above), “is to be continued to the end of the world.”²²

The proposal that the Sabbath has changed from the last to the first day of the week has caused more than a little debate. In order to understand the *Confession's* position, it is imperative to keep in mind that the Divines believed that the *idea of Sabbath*, what we are calling “the Sabbath principle”, was instituted at creation.²³ The Sabbath principle did not originate at the time the Ten Commandments were given on Mount Sinai any more than did the principles of *exclusive worship of God* (the First Commandment) and *preservation of life* (the Sixth Commandment). As Chapter XIX specifies, the Ten Commandments were merely summary codifications of the Divine will that was first expressed to Adam at his creation. Therefore, it is to be expected that the Sabbath principle would find expression at all times and in all circumstances. The Divines have simply looked at the New Testament evidence to determine how and when those believers incorporated the Sabbath principle into their routines. The evidence points convincingly to that day on which Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of all Old Testament types and shadows, exhibited His triumph over death, thus instituting a process of restoration and re-creation.

19 Gen. 2:2, 3 is cited: “And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.” As a point of interest, which we will not explore, we call attention to R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1984), 134-36. Citing the work of Curtis Clair Ewing, Rushdoony states: “...the Hebrew sabbath and the modern Saturday cannot be equated.”

20 Scripture proof-texts are: 1 Cor. 16:1, 2 and Acts 20:7. Both passages indicate that the New Testament churches were meeting on the first day of the week for formal worship.

21 Rev. 1:10 is referenced: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet.” Cf. Isa. 58:13, cited later by the Divines, where God calls the Sabbath “My holy day.”

22 Ex. 20:8, 10 is repeated; Matt. 5:17, 18 is added at this point.

23 Cf. the long discussion of the Sabbath doctrine in Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*, 2 vols. (Edmonton, AB Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993), 341 ff. (note particularly Ridgeley's comments concerning “The Date of Sabbatic Institution”). See also G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964), 172 and Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Lochcarron, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1980), 229-31.

The early Church, under apostolic direction, adopted Sunday, the first day of the week, as that one day out of their seven that would be “kept holy unto” God.²⁴

It is, we believe, a mistake to frame a discussion about the Fourth Commandment in terms of the continuation of a particular day. The *day* of observance is, in one sense, a secondary consideration. The idea or principle of Sabbath is the *primary* focus of this section of Chapter XXI. As it stands, of course, the New Testament day of observance has been *authoritatively determined* by apostolic example. Therefore, no debate is necessary, from the *Confession's* perspective, concerning either the principle of Sabbath or its expression.

Being able to distinguish between the Sabbath principle and its expression is, we are convinced, essential to a right understanding of this doctrine. The writers of the *Confession* have cited many Old Testament Scriptures that speak of Sabbath observance precisely because the Divines view Sabbath keeping as a *common obligation* which, since the resurrection of Christ, occurs on Sunday. They did not look at the Sabbath references in the Old Testament as strictly “Jewish” or as belonging exclusively to the “Old Covenant”. The blessings, for example, associated with Sabbath keeping are relevant for all times because the blessings promised come *primarily* in response to the keeping of the Sabbath principle, not in response to the particular day on which and in which the principle was observed. Therefore, New Testament believers can draw encouragement from the many positive things said about the Sabbath in the Old Testament because, while not keeping the Sabbath on the same day of the week, they are still keeping the Sabbath. Again, we repeat, a distinction must be made between the Sabbath *as a day* and the Sabbath *as a principle*. The day was changed from "the last day of the week" to Sunday, but the principle of Sabbath that is to be expressed on the specified day *remains the same*.

Paragraph VIII: Practical Instruction on Sabbath Observance

This last paragraph is concerned with the practical side of Sabbath observance:

VIII. This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken

24 Ridgeley, *Commentary*, 346 ff. In the Old Testament, Sabbath observance is tied to God's “resting” after His six days of creation (Gen. 2:2, 3; Ex. 20:11) and Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Deut. 5:15). Sabbath observance, therefore, gave opportunity for the people to be reminded of God's sovereignty over creation and of His role as their Deliverer. If, as the *Confession* has stated, Sunday is now the New Testament Sabbath, it is not difficult to see the same two elements represented. The work of Christ began a process of restoration or re-creation (Acts 3:21; Rom. 8:20 ff.; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15); and His work is certainly pictured as a “deliverance” (2 Cor. 1:10; Col. 1:13). Cf. the discussion of shabat in R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:902-3.

up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

How is the Sabbath kept “holy unto the Lord”? The *Confession* speaks of a twofold duty: preparation and performance. According to the Westminster Divines, a man should prepare his heart and order his common affairs before the time of Sabbath observance arrives so that he can give his full attention to this most important duty. In the words of the *Larger Catechism*, “we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.” (Q/A 117) The writers mean that, as far as we control such things, we are to arrange our schedules and take care of other duties so that we are not hindered by the ordinary, day-to-day concerns of life and can, therefore, focus our attention on the sanctification of the Sabbath day in obedience to God’s commandment. Keeping the Sabbath, therefore, requires *advanced planning*. By referring to preparation, the *Confession* underscores the seriousness of Sabbath observance. The worship of God on the Sabbath is such a solemn and serious matter that it should occupy our thoughts before the time actually arrives. This emphasis is in line with what the Divines have already said about worship, in general (see the examination of paragraph I), and the individual elements of worship, in particular (see the summary of paragraphs II-VI). The accomplishment of any moral duty, especially one concerned with approaching God, can only be helped with advanced contemplation and planning. The Divines aim to encourage a view of the Sabbath that considers the day unique and, therefore, more likely to be kept “holy unto the Lord”.²⁵

Following preparation comes performance. What is to be done on the Sabbath day? The *Confession* says that men are to “observe an holy rest”, which consists of two things: one, the momentary setting aside of ordinary cares, works and recreations; and two, the participation in worship.²⁶ The Sabbath day is to be characterized, as far as we are able to do so, by a temporary abandonment of those responsibilities, worries and activities in which we are routinely engaged so that we can concentrate on other responsibilities and activities that highlight the special character of the Sabbath day (cf. *Larger Catechism* 117-119).

The Sabbath principle says that one day out of our seven is to be wholly dedicated to the fulfillment of the Fourth Commandment. The one-in-seven rule naturally means one whole day in seven. The other six days “belong” to us in their entirety, but the Sabbath day belongs to God exclusively. The Divines recognize, of course, that there are some matters that cannot be ignored even on the Sabbath; therefore, they make allowances for

25 Some understanding of the Divines' view on Sabbath keeping can be gleaned by following the thread of discussion on the topic in Alex Mitchell and John Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly (1644-49)* (Edmonton, AB Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 3, 6, 17, etc.

26 Scripture proof-texts for this last paragraph are: Ex. 20:8 and Ex. 16:23, 25, 26, 29, 30, which records the advanced planning of the Israelites in anticipation of Sabbath observance; Ex. 31:15-17, where the Israelites were reminded that the Sabbath principle is a creation ordinance; Isa. 58:13, which urges “turning thy foot” from “thy own pleasure” in order to honor God on the Sabbath; and Neh. 13:15-19, 21, 22, which records Nehemiah’s efforts to revive Sabbath observance in Jerusalem.

“duties of necessity and mercy”.²⁷ Apart from such exceptions, however, the *Confession* teaches that we are to spend the entire day “in the public and private exercises of [God's] worship” (cf. the “parts of religious worship” listed in paragraphs III-IV). The consistency of this conclusion is readily discerned if, as we have suggested, Sabbath keeping itself is an element of worship.

Conclusion

Our Conclusion will consist of a simple summary of the main points detailed above followed by a few remarks concerning worship in the modern Church. These statements come from paragraph I, which has to do with the *Confession's* worship doctrine in general, and paragraphs VII and VIII, which are concerned with the Sabbath doctrine in particular:

- God's creation reveals God's existence and certain of His attributes.
- The God who is revealed in creation is due a certain response from His reasonable creatures.
- The nature of the God who is revealed in creation determines what that response should be.
- As we are unable to "hear" creation's testimony concerning its Creator and are, therefore, not able to discover what is the proper response to which we are obligated, we are bound to depend on special written revelation.
- What God has prescribed as a proper response to Him (worship), and only what He has prescribed in His special revelation, is permissible in the fulfillment of our worship duty.
- The creation itself reveals that there is a God who is to be worshiped and also that a regulated proportion of time is to be set apart for that worship.
- The *Confession's* Sabbath doctrine is grounded in its more general doctrine of worship.
- Theological consistency requires that if the doctrine of worship is accepted, the doctrine of the Sabbath cannot be rejected.
- God has appointed one day in seven to be kept “holy unto Him” during which time our worship obligation is met.
- The Sabbath day is not only the day on which we are to worship God, it is an element of worship itself.
- The Sabbath Commandment is moral in nature and, therefore, permanently binding.

27 “And nothing is to be allowed to interfere with this consecration of the day except the evident and reasonable demands of necessity as far as our own interests are concerned, and of mercy as far as the necessities of our fellow-men and of dependent animals are concerned.” Hodge, *Confession*, 283. “These works are works of piety (that is, work that must be done in order that God be worshiped, such as the work of a pastor in preaching the gospel on the Lord's Day), works of necessity (that is, work that cannot be delayed without harm to life or property, such as rescuing an ox that falls in a ditch, or helping to put out a fire), and works of mercy (such as an act of kindness to a person who is sick or in distress)... [T]he example of Christ showed us that the Sabbath allows for, or rather requires, works of piety, necessity, and mercy.” Williamson, *Confession*, 171.

- Since Christ's resurrection, the day on which and in which the Sabbath principle is to be observed is Sunday.
- Distinguishing between the Sabbath principle and its expression is essential to a right understanding of the *Confession's* teaching.
- In terms of practice, Sabbath observance requires two things: preparation and the performance of those responsibilities and activities that highlight the special character of the day.
- With the exception of deeds of necessity and mercy, the whole day is to be taken up with Sabbath observance.

Chapter XXI expresses theology that is distinctly Reformed. In our opinion, the modern Church desperately needs instruction in the area of God's worship. Reformed churches are in the unique position of having a theological system that can supply just what is needed. The neglect of the approach to worship that is explained in the first paragraph of this chapter is *precisely what is wrong with much of the worship in modern Christianity*. The worship patterns of many evangelical churches have been established with little or no preparatory study of the nature of God. Consequently, instead of having their worship determined by God's nature as revealed in the Scriptures, which is the *Confession's* approach, these churches allow whatever they choose to call "worship" define God. This methodology is *guaranteed* to produce error of the most dangerous kind.

The idea that only God can tell us how God can be worshiped and that, therefore, simply calling something "worship" doesn't make it worship flies in the face of American Christianity of the late twentieth century. In many cases, the emphasis is on sincerity. If what a congregation does on Sunday mornings during their stated time of worship is done sincerely, then that is what really matters, some would say. Sincerity, not Biblical theology, ends up becoming the qualifier for worship. The Reformed Church flatly rejects (or *should* reject) any such notion.

We don't deny that God is to be worshiped sincerely, we deny that sincerity alone qualifies what we do as genuine worship. We may come up with a dozen additions or modifications for our Sunday morning servicethings that will attract people, things that will "liven up" the service, things that will make us more eager to comebut unless those ideas are grounded in what God has said about His worship, they are inviting God's chastisement, not His favor. One thing that the modern Church needs to get straight is the fact that we will be relatively ineffective in our task of calling men to Christ and training them to be useful disciples *until we begin to consistently, reverently and obediently approach God according to His stipulations instead of our own*. Unless the worship of the Church is what it should be (i.e., unless it is Biblical), we need not expect God's abundant blessings on our other activities.

No single example illustrates the Church's shortcoming better than the contemporary attitude toward the Sabbath principle. *If* it is accepted that a Sabbath obligation is binding on Christians today, then there is no legitimate argument to be offered against the "whole day" concept of the *Confession*. The modern practice of sanctifying only a *portion* of the

Lord's Day for worship and Bible study (i.e., morning worship and, possibly, evening worship or study) is not justifiable *unless one takes the position that we are operating, not under a binding regulation, but according to an arbitrary custom.*