

LECTURES

ON

THE SABBATH

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by

G. I. Williamson

#1 - THE HISTORIC IMPASSE

I don't know any better way to get into this important subject of the Sabbath day than by telling you how I came to my present conviction.

I was brought up by a father and mother who came from a rather strong Sabbath-keeping tradition in the old United Presbyterian Church. And while I cannot claim that I faithfully observed the weekly Sabbath myself, neither can I say that I questioned its legitimacy. This remained with me, in a somewhat subconscious way, even during my two and a half years of military service. Even when I was at the point of greatest neglect I still felt uncomfortable about the fact that I was profaning the Sabbath. And so, when I was converted—and called to the ministry of the Word of God—after the second World War, I made a genuine effort to keep the Sabbath. And I continued in this practice and conviction until I was called to serve one of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. It was there that I suddenly found myself right in the middle of what I will call 'The Australasian Sabbath Controversy.'

I. The Australasian Sabbath Controversy

1. The Historical and Creedal Context

The main reason for this controversy—in my opinion—was the difference between the Confessional position of the Reformed Churches of Australia (or the RCA), on the one hand, and the Reformed Churches of New Zealand (the RCNZ), on the other.

- a. The difference between the RCA and the RCNZ because of immigration policy differences between Australia and New Zealand.

Soon after the World War II many Dutch immigrants began to seek a new life in these two countries. And for reasons that I will not try to explain it was more difficult to enter New Zealand than it was to enter Australia. This meant that the people who founded the Reformed Churches of New Zealand were—on average—considerably younger than in Australia. And you might imagine that this would have resulted in the New Zealand Churches being doctrinally weaker. But, again without trying to explain why it was so, the fact is that the New Zealand Churches—right from the start—were the more militant body.

This can be seen in the way in which they reacted to the Liberalism in the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. Most of these immigrants tried, for a time, to find a place in this Church. But the Liberalism was so rampant that they simply couldn't do it in good conscience. But in leaving the Presbyterian Church, and starting a new denomination alongside it, they issued a challenge. If the Presbyterian Church would only get back to its historic doctrine and practice, *as it is set forth in the Westminster Standards*—then these immigrants would only be too willing to join them.

And they were serious! Because it was not long after the new denomination was formed that it adopted—alongside the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt—*also* the Westminster Confession of Faith (in the same form as we hold it in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). And, let me add with emphasis, that *they adopted it as of equal authority with the other three confessions*).

- b. The difference in the resultant Confessional stance of the two denominations.

And it is right here that a quite significant difference emerged as between the RCNZ and the RCA. The Australian churches *also decided* to adopt the Westminster Confession. But they did *not* adopt it in the same whole-hearted way that characterized its adoption by the RCNZ. No, the RCA only gave it a qualified adoption so that it would have no authority at all wherever it went beyond—or said anything different from—the three continental confessions.

- c. The growing influence of the Westminster influence via OPC men in New Zealand.

It was into this situation that several Orthodox Presbyterian pastors came in the early 1960's, to serve in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. For these men the adoption of the Westminster Confession alongside the three Continental Standards posed no difficulty at all. In fact—as I can testify—it was an exhilarating experience. Here was genuine Reformed Ecumenicity at work as we were forced to reexamine all of our traditions in order to try to agree on the things that were most clearly in harmony with the Scriptures.

2. The Rise of the Sabbath Controversy in Australia-New Zealand.

Maybe all of this seemed like a threat of some kind to men on the other side of the Tasman Sea, I'm not sure about that. But I will never forget when I first began to read the series of articles in Trowel and Sword—a church paper jointly serving the Reformed Churches of Australia and New Zealand—in which there was a strong attack against the Westminster Confession's teaching on the Sabbath.

- a. The statements in the series of articles by Professor Klaas Runia.

(1) The mistaken assumption under which these were written.

These articles were written by Dr. Klaas Runia—who was then Professor of Theology at the Reformed Theological College in Geelong, Victoria. Professor Runia himself later apologized for writing these articles, saying that he had not realized that the New Zealand Churches—in adopting the Westminster Confession—had included Chapter XXI. But by that time the damage had been done and the controversy engulfed the two churches.

(2) The extreme character of these statements.

To help you see why I want, at this point, to quote a few of Professor Runia's statements. I think you will see why many of us found them offensive.

[1] *"Characteristic of this view (i.e. that of the Westminster Confession) is that it generally takes its starting point in the O. T."* (Article 1, p. 5) *"In recent years there is an ever increasing feeling among many Reformed theologians that this is not the correct procedure. Is it not the correct starting point of all biblical interpretation to begin with the N. T."* (Ibid). *"We... believe that the only correct way of studying this problem is to start with the N. T. and to study first what this 'charter' of the N. T. church teaches about the Sabbath and the Sunday."* (Ibid.)

[2] *"There is HARDLY ANY MENTION OF THE SUNDAY in the New Testament."* (Article 2, p. 3).

[3] *"Jesus himself keeps the sabbath, but this is not surprising, nor is it binding for us."* (Article 2, p. 4)

[4] He quotes Professor H. N. Ridderbos with approval when he says in his commentary: *"The way Paul writes about the Sabbath proves that for him the fourth commandment of the Decalogue has no continuing significance.."* (Ibid. p. 6)

[5] *"We can summarize the New Testament teaching as follows. The sabbath has been abrogated, for it has been fulfilled in Christ. No one is any longer bound to it, although there is still liberty to keep the day, as long as it is not in a Judaizing way and spirit."* (Ibid.)

[6] *"Nowhere, however, does the New Testament say, or even suggest, that the Sunday has come in the place of the sabbath, or that the two are essentially the same. In fact the Sunday is never prescribed, nor is it even suggested that it was 'instituted' by the Lord."* (Ibid.)

[7] *"Nowhere is it said: the first day of the week is the Christian version of the Old Testament sabbath. Nowhere the Christians are commanded to rest on this day."* (Article 2, p. 3)

[8] *"The main reason, however (i.e. for rejecting the view of the Westminster Confession) is the fact that in the N. T. the sabbath is declared to be abrogated."* (Article 3, p. 6)

[9] *"The fact that the N. T. rejects the Jewish sabbath (which was the SEVENTH day) can therefore only mean that the WHOLE commandment as COMMANDMENT is not permanent and that the Sabbath was NOT a creation ordinance."* (Ibid.)

[10] *"Paul says that the sabbath belongs to the past, and by saying this he declares it to be a*

PURELY JEWISH INSTITUTION."

[11] *"Jesus nowhere says that the sabbath is a creation ordinance."* (Ibid, p.4)

[12] From such texts as Ro. 14:5, Gal. 4:9,10, Col. 2:16,17 (especially) means that *"the sabbath has come to its definite end."* (Ibid. p. 5)

[13] *"In the whole New Testament there is no reference to the Decalogue on the point of Sunday celebration."* (Ibid. p. 6)

[14] *"Whatever books one studies, there is always the same fact: the thesis that the sabbath is a creation ordinance is a DEDUCTION from certain scriptural data. Nowhere is it stated in clear words."* (Article 3; p. 5).

b. The crisis generated by these statements

(1) A Strong Rebuttal

These statements provoked a series of articles in Trowel and Sword—and other church papers—defending much of what is taught in the Westminster Confession. And some of the best material came from men in Australia.

(2) The New Zealand Gravamen

It also brought about the lodging of a 'Gravamen' against Chapter XXI, sections 7 and 8 of the Westminster Confession, by one of the ministers serving in the RCNZ who had come from the Netherlands. And it is interesting to note that this Gravamen was rejected by a strong majority of the ministers and elders serving the New Zealand Churches even though a large majority of them did not come from a Presbyterian background. Thus the Westminster Confession of Faith continued to have binding authority in their churches. And, quite naturally, this meant that there was real tension between these two Dutch immigrant denominations.

(3) The appeal to the RES

It was for this reason that the Reformed Churches of Australia decided to take the matter to the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. It was hoped that a wider discussion of the issue, involving churches of both the British and Continental traditions, might bring about a more unified viewpoint.

3. The 'Wider' Discussion.

As it turned out, however, this hope was never realized.

a. The 1968 RES appointment of a Study Committee

The 1968 Synod meeting in Amsterdam appointed a committee made up of a reporting committee drawn from Europe and N. America, and two Regional Committees drawn from (1) Europe and Africa, and (2) N. America and the South Pacific.

b. The inconclusive 1972 report

The Reporting Committee came to the next Synod (which met in 1972 in Sydney Australia) with a brief introductory statement which was followed by two Appendices—each of which took a different position. Though much less radical than the Runia articles had been in Trowel and Sword, Appendix A followed essentially the same line, while Appendix B pretty much upheld the Westminster Confession's view of the Sabbath.

c. The 1972 RES appointment of another Study Committee

This was a considerable disappointment to a number of RES churches, and so the 1972 Synod decided to appoint another study committee to try, again, to resolve the differences.

d. The inconclusive 1976 report

But this too proved to be a failure as, again, two reports were produced along basically the same lines as before.

5. The Value of these Studies

There is, however—in my humble opinion—considerable value in these four reports. The chief value lies in the fact that:

a. The various views are clearly delineated

b. The differences are more clearly defined

c. And these differences are clearly shown to have stubbornly persisted, from early in the Reformation period, down to the present. *This historical material I found to be especially enlightening.*

And here I want to draw on a fine paper written at the time by one of the founding fathers of the RCNZ, the Rev. William Deenick.

In drafting their catechism answer to question 103 the Heidelberg theologians, Ursinus and Olevia-

nus, took careful note of the publications of their time, particularly...those of the Swiss Reformers. In a letter to Bullinger, Olevianus wrote: *“If there is any clarity in our catechism, then we owe this mainly to you and to the clear minds of the Swiss. Not from one but from many have the pious thoughts been gathered.”* One of these Swiss theologians was...John Calvin, whose Institutes and catechism were known to them. Calvin’s view...could be summarized as follows:

1. The rest that Israel was commanded to observe was a ceremonial rest and together with the other ceremonies of the Mosaic law it was fulfilled and abolished by the accomplished work of Christ;

2. This does not mean that the fourth commandment has been entirely abrogated; it demands from us under the New Testament

(a) that we seek the spiritual and eternal rest, mortify the works of the flesh and let God’s Spirit work in us;

(b) that we observe the order given in the creation and follow God’s example in taking one day off for the contemplation of His work, for coming together with the church for worship and instruction in the truth;

(c) that we make it a day of rest for our servants and for ourselves;

(d) however, as believers under the New Testament we are no longer bound to “the letter” of one day in seven; we could make it two in seven if we wanted to do so.

But there were still others to whom the men in Heidelberg had learned to listen; there were e.g., John a Lasco and Martin Micron who ministered to the Dutch Reformed refugees in Ostfriesland, in London and in Frankfurt a/M. In connection with their answer to question 103 it is remarkable then that Ursinus and Olevianus strictly followed the Swiss theologians and declined to give way to a somewhat different trend as proposed by Micron and a Lasco, in their two shorter catechisms edited for the instruction of the children in the Dutch refugee congregations in London and Embden. There is no doubt that these two writings were known in Heidelberg. In other instances the authors of the catechism made grateful use of them, but not here where the fourth commandment is explained.

Martin Micron instructed Dutch youngsters in London (1551) as follows: *“on the seventh day we should, being free from all work, give ourselves wholly to being trained in godliness”*. Here we notice two new elements: [1] the Lord’s day is referred to as the seventh day and [2] there is a free-from-all-work obligation. It is true that in his second answer Micron followed more closely the Swiss theologians, placing in the foreground that obedience to this commandment first requires that we, *“denying ourselves, let the Lord work in us through His Spirit”*; but he immediately follows this by referring to the *“whole sabbath day”* during which we *“being free from our daily work*

should wholly devote ourselves (as far as possible) to hearing the Word of God in the common congregation etc.”. And in his third answer he adds that this commandment is trespassed by not attending the worship services of the church, and by joining unbelievers and godless people in their meetings.

The other catechism, meant for the Reformed refugees in Embden (1554), answered the fourth commandment question as follows: *“that I together with my household shall not devote the Sabbath or rest of the Lord, ordained to the welfare of our body and soul, to bodily or to useless idleness, empty activities or works of the flesh, but shall observe the same as commanded by God to the praise of His holy Name and to the welfare our [own?] body and soul”*.

It is obvious that these two catechisms represented a somewhat different approach from that of the Heidelberg Catechism. The emphasis is on the Lord’s day as the seventh day—the day of rest, or the Sabbath for the church of the N.T. In London, Micron and a Lasco may have come into contact with the stricter English observance of the Lord’s day. Puritanism with its denunciation of idle amusements and its emphasis on a strict observance of the Sabbath had left an indelible mark on the Christian life of many in England. In any case in Reformed circles at the time it was a new trend that did not find a cordial welcome everywhere. Not for example in Heidelberg.

Ursinus and Olevianus chose to follow the Swiss. In their catechism answer there is hardly any mention of the no-work aspect of the fourth commandment. All emphasis is on the ministry of the Word and on church attendance. And here too the fourth commandment is taken to imply that we must rest from all evil works and thus begin the eternal Sabbath in this life.

There has been some debate on the question of what the authors of the catechism meant when they referred to the Lord’s day as the *“Feiertag”*. It is translated both in English and in Dutch as *“the day of rest”* and [Petrus] Dathenus in his Dutch translation [of the catechism] added the words: *“...the Sabbath”*. From the Dutch it was taken over in the English translation. The question therefore arises: did Dathenus have any right to make this addition? *“Feiertag”* could also have been translated as *“feast day”*. The later Latin edition of the catechism in the *“Opera Omnia”* of Ursinus does not even mention the Lord’s day or the day of rest at all. It reads: *“utque ego cum aliis, tum festis diebus studiose coetus divinos frequentem”*, which would read in English: *“that I diligently attend the divine services on other days as well as on feast days”*. Rev. Deenick thinks the Latin text contains a deliberate modification. The singular of the German text is changed into a plural. The German text speaks of *“am Feiertag”*, which means: *“on THE feiertag”*. And taking into account the meaning of *“Feiern”* in German and of *“vieren”* in Dutch at the time, the translation by *“day of rest”* seems to be wholly justified.

Rev. Deenick thinks it would be difficult to say, however, whether Ursinus and Oliveanus would have approved of Dathenus’ insertion of those two words: *“...the Sabbath”*. The Swiss theologians had generally avoided speaking of the Lord’s day as the Christian Sabbath, for fear that people

might fall back into Jewish or medieval legalism. They were reluctant to endorse the Thomistic identification of the Christian Sunday with the Sabbath of the Old Testament and looked askance upon the superstitions of the medieval period, fearing that by way of a legalistic interpretation of the fourth commandment the sins of the past might be reintroduced.

Rev. Deenick goes on to note, however, that *“it cannot be denied that later in his commentary on the catechism, Ursinus quite freely referred to the Lord’s day as... the Sabbath. He inserted whole chapters on how the Sabbath belongs to us and on how the Sabbath is kept holy in the church.”* Dathenus therefore cannot have been too far removed from the spirit of the men in Heidelberg and his insertion—though it may have been somewhat deliberate—was later substantiated by Ursinus’ own commentary. In this commentary Ursinus maintained in general the original Reformed position. [1] The Sabbath was instituted from the beginning. [2] According to the moral and perpetual aspect of the fourth commandment the Sabbath must be kept holy; [3] according to its ceremonial and temporary aspect the seventh day must *not* be observed. That ceremonial aspect has now been fulfilled and abolished. The church is no longer bound to the seventh day. However [4] the no-work obligation still stands and, as with Israel in the Old Testament, refers to servile work (Lev. 23:25), i.e., in as much as it would hinder the worship of God and the design or use of the ministry. Resting from labor signifies ceasing from sin. [5] Under the New Testament God Himself instituted—through the church—the Lord’s day as the mediate and external Sabbath to be observed by us now.

6. From all of this it seems quite clear to me that there was considerable uncertainty and disunity on the doctrine of the Sabbath among the Dutch theologians.

a. The Synod of Dordt and it's aftermath

It is not surprising, then, that one of the controversies that agitated the Dutch churches had to do with the Sabbath. The Synod of Dordt dealt with this conflict—which had come up in the province of Zeelandt—after the foreign delegates had left. It adopted a compromise formula which, as Rev. Deenick says, *“established for the Reformed Church in the Netherlands a ‘status quo’ that allowed for a rather wide variety of opinion.”* It is noteworthy, too, that some of the staunchest Calvinists—such as Franciscus Gomarus—argued strongly *against* the key elements of the Westminster position. Yet there were also those—such as Gysbertus Voetius—who strongly defended the so-called puritan view. As Rev. Deenick rightly notes: *“To him the Sunday was the Sabbath of the N.T., which ought to be observed by private and public activities of worship and Christian charity. There is nothing ceremonial about any of the ten commandments and we should cease from all ordinary daily work. Travelling, studying or recreation are to be considered as a desecration of the Sabbath.”*

b. The Reformed resurgence under Abraham Kuyper

It was this view, which was close to the teaching of the Westminster Confession, that came to pre-

vail in the second half of the 19th century through the work of Abraham Kuyper and others. Kuyper, for instance, *“followed Voetius by looking upon the Sabbath as a creation ordinance. The fourth commandment is wholly valid. Christ himself changed the day through his resurrection on the first day.”*

The view of Kuyper and others of similar conviction came to prevail not only in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands but also in churches of Dutch descent in the U.S. *and* this remained true until World War II. In Rev. Deenick's view it can even be said that the American churches were more zealous for this view than their Dutch counterparts.

But then, since World War II, there have been many radical changes. One of the most important has been in hermeneutics—by which I mean *“the branch of theology that deals with the principles and methodology of exegesis”* (Collins English Dictionary). It is this, more than anything else, that has led to the radical shift away from the pre-war consensus view espoused by Abraham Kuyper.

Speaking of the Westminster Confession's doctrine of the Sabbath Professor Klaas Runia said: [it is] *“Characteristic of this view...that it generally takes its starting point in the Old Testament.”* This is indeed true! But isn't that exactly what Jesus himself did (Matt. 19)? And isn't this what Reformed people have always done? Do we not do that, for instance, in our whole doctrine of the covenant and the sacrament of baptism? But, says Professor Runia, *“In recent years there is an ever increasing feeling among many Reformed theologians that this is not the correct procedure. Is it not the correct starting point of all biblical interpretation to begin with the New Testament?”*

“We believe that the only correct way of studying this problem is to start with the New Testament and to study first what this ‘charter’ of the New Testament church teaches about the Sabbath and the Sunday.”

C. Well, our Lord told us that we could know them by their fruits, and the fruits of this new hermeneutic have been catastrophic, to say the least.

We will therefore follow the lead of the Bible itself as we trace this doctrine right from the beginning. It is this that we will consider in our next lecture.

7. And now, one final comment.

It seems to me that the ultimate source of this long-standing discord concerning the Sabbath must be traced to John Calvin himself. I myself became aware of this during the Australasian Sabbath controversy, as I went back to the writings of this great Reformer. For the fact is that there are statements in both his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and his commentaries that *can be—and have been—*quoted in defense of both of these positions. Abraham Kuyper, for example, held that the *Institutes* set forth Calvin's earlier view, while the *Commentaries on Genesis* set forth his later, more mature, conviction.

I'm convinced, however, that Professor R. B. Gaffin is correct in saying that Calvin was in fact consistent with himself, and that appeal to him will never settle this issue.

What Calvin did—according to Professor Gaffin—was to give to the fourth commandment by itself what can only belong to the Decalogue as a whole. He tried to define the Sabbath, in other words, with exclusive reference to the eternal state. And in doing so he completely failed to do justice to the fact that the Sabbath was—*first*—a creation ordinance. Calvin did not deny that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance, or even that it does have some kind of binding effect for all men. But he did not allow this aspect of biblical revelation its proper place in his Sabbath doctrine. This is brought out in the following way by Dr. Gaffin:

“It is in the light of this failure...[that] Calvin cannot possibly find anything ‘positive’ in the commandment’s mention of six days of labor. For since the fall of [man,] man’s efforts are of themselves worthless and sinful, worthy of divine condemnation rather than approval. Thus the command to rest on the seventh day is cut off from any positive correlation to the six days of work, and these two elements of the commandment can only be related antithetically.”*

This can be seen, says Gaffin, from “the way Calvin construes the language of the commandment. On the one hand, the mention of six days of labor is given stative force. On the other hand, the reference to rest on the seventh day is understood imperatively. Calvin's meaning could thus be paraphrased as follows, “thou art laboring for six days and doing all thy work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work. . . .” In the Hebrew (both Ex. 20 and Deut 5) the three verbs in question, “laboring,” “doing work,” and “not doing work” (resting), are all in the imperfect tense of the *qal* stem which can be used imperatively but generally has a stative force. The problem here, however, is that it is difficult to see how Calvin can take the two verbs which refer to the six days of labor statively, and then given an imperative force to the third verb which refers to the rest of the seventh day. For the three verbs appear in close conjunction to each other, and moreover, are syntactically related to each other as parallels. Unless there were other contravening considerations, which in this case are not present, it is most natural to take the three verbs as all having either stative or imperative force. To take them all statively is impossible in this instance, for the commandment would then make no sense. But to take them imperatively, which is the proper understanding, is an alternative which is not open to Calvin. For he would then be faced with the intolerable thought of introducing an exhortation to commit sin into one of God’s commandments.”

Or, in other words: “Calvin’s view of the fourth commandment impales him on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, when he deals specifically with the language of the commandment, he obtains a notion of Sabbath-keeping that has no meaning outside of the orbit of redemption. On the other hand, when he states the core of the precept, that is, that it requires that the creature imitate the creator, a notion which could be understood as having relevance apart from redemption, the result is an idea which is equivalent to the summary of the whole law and thus misses the specific force of

the commandment. In short, Calvin is unable to do justice to the fourth commandment, in respect of its most basic characteristic, namely, as one of the eternal and immutable principles by which God governs his creation and the movement of history.”

* The quotations in these three paragraphs are from Dr. Gaffin’s 1962 Thesis for the Master of Theology degree at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia

#2 - THE WESTMINSTER VIEW DEFENDED

The title of my second lecture is “*The Westminster View of the Sabbath Defended.*” And before I begin this second lecture I want to make a few preliminary remarks.

1. The first is the fact that *I’m not going to try to say anything novel or original.*
2. The second is that *I’m won’t try to impress anyone with my ‘scholarly’ qualifications.*
3. The third is that *what I say will be strongly colored by my pastoral experience.*
4. And the fourth is that *it is my hope that what I say will bring you under conviction concerning this commandment.*

With these preliminary observations in mind, then, I go directly to:

I. The Biblical Warrant

1. I believe the Bible clearly shows that the Sabbath was instituted at the beginning of history.
 - Genesis 2:2,3 says: “*And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested [tBVyw] on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested [tBV]from all His work which God had created and made.*”
 - I have also been impressed by the fact *that the very text of the fourth commandment itself seems to be designed to warn us against any and every attempt to argue for its abrogation.*
 - As far as I know it is the fourth commandment alone which has been treated this way.
 - The argument given is that it no longer stands because it was *not* a creation ordinance, but only ceremonial and Jewish. And yet—as you know—it is the 4th commandment *alone* which contains within its very text a reference to the time of creation. The commandment says: “*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...For in six days the LORD made the heavens and*

the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it [Ex. 20:8,11].” And in Genesis 2:2-3 we are expressly told that “on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done” and that it was “Then [that] God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.”

- I have never persuaded by—or, for that matter, even been able to understand—arguments that seek, in one way or another, to deny that the Sabbath was a creation ordinance. If man was made in the image of God, as the Bible says he was, then it seems self-evident to me that the example provided by God in his own cycle of work and rest *must have been normative for man right from the beginning.*
- Against this it is often argued that there is no record of any Sabbath observance from the beginning of human history until the giving of the law at Sinai.
- But it is my conviction that the following facts—clearly revealed in the book of Genesis—are sufficient to show that this argument is not cogent.

a. There were also other things instituted at a very early time which were not observed (or recorded) for a long time thereafter.

- There is no mention of animal sacrifices during the period of time between the death of Abel and the time of the world-wide flood.
- We also know that there was a departure from the original ordinance of marriage at an early time in history—a deviation that even persisted among God’s covenant people, though it was “*not so*” (as Jesus said [Matt. 19:4-6]) “*from the beginning.*”
- The rite of circumcision was given to Abraham and his seed with a clear warning that those who neglected this would be “cut off” from God’s covenant people. Yet, a whole generation grew up in the wilderness without it. And, furthermore, there is no *record* of the observance of this ordinance from the time of Joshua to Jeremiah. This is no proof, of course, that there was no circumcision during that period.
- I therefore see no reason to be impressed by the fact that there is no mention of Sabbath observance from the time of the creation of man until Israel’s wilderness journey.

b. In addition to this I would point out that **there is evidence of an awareness among the ancients of the seven-day cycle**

- In Genesis 4:3 we read that Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord 'at the end of days' [μy my qm]](Gen. 4:3)
- And in Gen. 7:4, 10; 8:10, 12 we read that Noah's life was regulated on the basis of a seven day cycle.
- The life of the patriarch Abraham was not without statutes and ordinances, according to Gen. 18:19 (Cf. Gen. 26:5). And while we cannot say, for sure, what these statutes and ordinances were, it is entirely possible—even probable—that one of these was the observance of the seven day cycle.

c. How else are we to explain the teaching of Exodus 16?

- This chapter tells us of the miracle of the manna. And I believe it shows one thing quite clearly: even if the Sabbath had, by that time, been entirely forgotten by man, it was not forgotten by God. For "*behold,*" said the Lord to Moses: "*I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not. And it shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily*" (16:3,4). "*And so it was, on the sixth day, that they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. And all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. Then he said to them, "This is what the LORD has said: "Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning." So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it. Then Moses said, 'Eat that today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, there will be none'"* (Ex. 16:22-26).
- So the re-institution of the Sabbath (if we choose to call it that) *preceeded* the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. And when Moses said '*This is that which the Lord spoke*' it is my conviction that he was referring to what God had said right after creation.

2. The second line of argument that I find too strong to withstand is the fact that **the fourth commandment was revealed at Sinai as part of the moral** (not ceremonial or civil) **law.**

- a. In the first place it seems entirely self-evident to me that there is a profound difference between the ten commandments and the so-called 'case laws' of the Bible.
- b. It was for this reason, as I see it, that these ten laws—or the ten "words" as it is in the Hebrew—were *given in a radically different manner* than all the rest of the Old Testament. Is it not self-evident again, I say, that what God himself wrote with his own finger on tablets of stone must

have special significance? Does this not suggest to any human without a predisposition to argue against God, that these ten laws are permanent?

- well, then, add to that *the awesome circumstances* in which these ten laws were given to the people of Israel.
- then, in addition to that, consider the fact that *these two tablets of stone were laid up in the ark of the covenant*—the most important thing in the entire ceremonial system of worship.
- from this one thing seems quite clear : namely, the fact that *nothing but the clearest revelation from God himself to the effect that one of these great commandments is now cancelled, or abolished, would be sufficient to reach such a conclusion.*

c. And then, as you consider the commandment itself—and what God says about it in the rest of his Word—it again seems self-evident to me that there is no support for any such thesis.

- The fourth commandment begins with the word ‘remember.’ How very appropriate if—as I believe both biblical history and the subsequent history of the church clearly demonstrate—it is the persistent tendency of men to want to forget the Sabbath.
- It is also very important—in my opinion—that *the Sabbath day*, like the rite of circumcision, *is called a sign* of the people of God. (Ezek. 20: 12).

In Exodus 31:12,16,17 we read that: “*the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: ‘Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for **it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations**, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you... Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.’”*

- I will say about this in my third lecture. Here I simply state that I deem this repeated emphasis on the perpetuity of the Sabbath to be very important.
- You will also note, from Numbers 15:32-36, that disregard of the fourth commandment was treated very severely. I quote:

“...while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘The man must surely be

put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.’ So, as the LORD commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died.”

— And, finally, I point out that it was *spoken of by the prophets* as destined to form a part of the Messianic dispensation (Compare Isa. 56:2; Ezek. 44:24]

d. It seems to me, then, that all of this drives us to one conclusion. The fourth commandment, just as much as the other nine, is binding on New Testament Christians.

— Genesis 17:13 says circumcision was given for an everlasting covenant [oiµlw[e tyrbl]. And we know, from Colossians 2:11,12 that we are circumcized in our baptism.

— And, again, Exodus 12:24 says the Passover was given as an ordinance “forever” [µlw[d[]] And in I Corinthians 5:7 the Apostle says it continues, today, as the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 5:7)

— We would expect, therefore, that the Sabbath day would also continue for God's new covenant people. And it's my conviction that this is exactly what find in the New Testament scriptures. (Hebrews 4:9 says “there remains, therefore, a rest [Greek: sabbatismoV (sabbstismos)] for the people of God.”

3. I hardly need to remind you that our Lord, himself, observed the Sabbath.

a. This, indeed, is one point at which the various views come together. Even those who argue for the abrogation of the fourth commandment agree that it was observed faithfully by Jesus.

— It is a well known fact that *our Lord refused to be bound by man-made Sabbath traditions. But there is no instance in which our Lord ever violated the fourth commandment itself.* Indeed, the very thing that Jesus demonstrated, again and again, in the controversies that he had with the religious leaders of that day, was that *he* was the one rather than *they* who kept this holy commandment (Cf. Mt. 12 and the great Sabbath controversy).

— In the gospel accounts, *on numerous occasions, our Lord upheld the sanctity of the ten commandments* (Mt. 19:16, Mk. 10:17, Lk. 18:18, Mt. 15:6 etc.). He did not deal with all ten of these commandments in particular, but he did say that he did not come to abrogate or annul even the least of these commandments (Mt. 5: 17,18). And then he went on to show how much higher—or, stricter, if you prefer—his view was than was that of the then-prevailing Jewish tradition. He also issued solemn warning that no one should ever dare to take away the least jot or little.

— He said the Sabbath was made *for man*’ (Mk. 2:27 28). He did not say it was made for the

Jews. He also said that man was not made for the Sabbath. It is my conviction that, whatever else this may mean, it certainly shows that *our Lord fully accepted Genesis chapter 2 as the inerrant account of the origin of the Sabbath*. And there we read that God made man first, and then—after he had created man—he instituted the Sabbath.

- It's an interesting phenomenon that I've observed in reading the argumentation of those who want to prove the abrogation of the fourth commandment. They always seem to back away from the consequences of the very thing they are trying to prove with this kind of statement (and here I quote again from Professor Runia): he says "*we believe that, in actual fact, the appreciation of the great importance of the Sunday...will not really differ irrespective of what interpretation is accepted...according to the traditional view...the Sunday is a clear divine commandment, while according to the other interpretation it is rather a matter of spiritual insight...*" by which Professor Runia appears to mean that Christians are going to realize that they need a day of rest and worship anyway, even if the fourth commandment is abrogated. Well, isn't that exactly why God made the Sabbath for man in the beginning?
4. And isn't that why the New Testament Church came to observe what John calls "*the Lord's Day*" instead of—or, in other words, as the replacement for—the Jewish Sabbath?
- a. It was our Lord himself who really established this as His day, and he did it by way of his own example.
 - There was, first of all, the fact that *his resurrection took place on the first day of the week*, the day after the Jewish Sabbath (Jn. 20:1-18).
 - It is also of great importance to note that *his gathering with his disciples on the first day of the week was repeated a number of times until his ascension* (Mt. 28:9-11; Jn. 20:19,20, 26). And here I quote the succinct summary in the words of B. B. Warfield:

"It is true enough that the record of a commandment of our Lord's requiring a change in the day of the observance of the Sabbath. Neither has any of the apostles to whom he committed the task of founding his Church given us such a commandment. By their actions, nevertheless, both our Lord and his apostles appear to commend the first day of the week to us as the Christian Sabbath. It is not merely that our Lord rose from the dead on that day. A certain emphasis seems to be placed precisely upon the fact that it was on the first day of the week that he rose. This is true of all the accounts of his rising. Luke, for example, after telling us that Jesus rose "on the first day of the week," on coming to add the account of his appearing to the two disciples journeying to Emmaus, throws what almost seems to be superfluous stress on that also having happened 'on that very day.' It is in John's account, however, that this emphasis is most noticeable. 'Now, on the first day of the week,' he tells us, 'cometh Mary Magdalene early,' to find the empty tomb. And then, a little later: 'When therefore it was evening on that day, the

first day of the week,' Jesus showed himself to his assembled followers. The definition of the time here, the commentator naturally remarks, is 'singularly full and emphatic.' Nor is this all. After thus pointedly indicating that it was on the evening of precisely the first day of the week that Jesus first showed himself to his assembled disciples, John proceeds equally sharply to define the time of his next showing himself to them as 'after eight days'; that is to say it was on the next first day of the week that 'his disciples were again within' and Jesus manifested himself to them. The appearance is strong that our Lord, having crowded the day of his rising with manifestations, disappeared for a whole week to appear again only on the next Sabbath. George Zabriskie Gray seems justified, therefore, in suggesting that the full effect of our Lord's sanction of the first day of the week as the appointed day of his meeting with his disciples can be fitly appreciated only by considering with his manifestations also his disappearances. 'For six whole days between the rising day and its octave he was absent.' 'Is it possible to exaggerate the effect of this blank space of time, in fixing and defining the impressions received through his visits?'

- *"We know not what happened on subsequent Sabbaths: there were four of them before the Ascension. But there is an appearance at least that the first day of the week was becoming under this direct sanction of the risen Lord the appointed day of Christian assemblies. That the Christians were early driven to separate themselves from the Jews (observe Acts 19:9) and had soon established regular times of 'assembling themselves together,' we know from an exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews. A hint of Paul's suggests that their ordinary day of assembly was on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2). It is clear from a passage in Acts 20:7 that the custom of 'gathering together to break bread' 'upon the first day of the week' was so fixed in the middle of the period of Paul's missionary activity that though in haste he felt constrained to tarry a whole week in Troas that he might meet with the brethren on that day. It is only the natural comment to make when Friedrich Blass remarks: 'It would seem, then, that that day was already set apart for the assemblies of the Christians.' We learn from a passing reference in the Apocalypse (1:10) that the designation 'the Lord's Day' had already established itself in Christian usage. 'The celebration of the Lord's Day, the day of the Resurrection,' comments Johannes Weiss, 'is therefore already customary in the churches of Asia Minor.' With such suggestions behind us, we cannot wonder that the Church emerges from the Apostolic Age with the first day of the week firmly established as its day of religious observance. Nor can we doubt that apostolic sanction of this establishment of it is involved in this fact."*

b. This is further supported—or confirmed—by the testimony of the early Church Fathers:

- We must always keep in mind, of course, that we cannot base any doctrine of the Christian Church on nothing more solid than tradition. No, we cannot recognize any extra-canonical tradition as even the smallest part of its foundation. But we can find some confirmation—from the testimony of some of the early fathers of the Church—of what they had received as of Apostolic. And it *does* have corroborative value.

- Ignatius (who had personal fellowship with the Apostle John wrote: *‘Let us no more sabbatize, but let us keep the Lord’s day on which our life arose.’*
- Justin Martyr (who lived in the late first and early second century) wrote: *‘On the day called Sunday is an assembly of all who live in the city or country, and the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read... it was the day on which the creation of the world began, and on which Christ rose from the dead.’*
- Irenaeus (who lived in the second century) said: *‘On the Lord’s Day every one of us Christians keeps the Sabbath, meditating on the law, and rejoicing in the works of God.’*
- And Tertullian (who lived during the last part of the second and first part of the third century) called it *‘the holy day of the Christian Church assemblies, and holy worship... kept as a day of rejoicing.’*
- What we have, in other words, in these uninspired writings of the ancients who lived near the time to the Apostles is a strong confirmation.

5. I therefore find the evidence to be entirely sufficient for the abiding authority of the fourth commandment.

a. After his resurrection Jesus said this to his eleven apostles: *“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

— He sent them forth to teach the nations *“everything”* that he commanded.

— I believe they did this, and did it by way of both precept and example.

b. It is not surprising, then, to find—in the teaching of the Apostles—a strong sense of continuity between what they taught and what was written in the Old Testament Scriptures.

— The members of the Synagogue in Berea tested everything that Paul preached to them by these inspired Scriptures (Acts 17:11).

— When they were convinced that his teaching agreed with these inspired and authoritative Scriptures, they believed his testimony.

c. There were, of course, various things that came to an end with the ascension of Jesus.

- One of them was the need for, and even the legitimacy of, ceremonial worship.
 - Although God tolerated the continuance of this ceremonial worship, for a time, it is the clear teaching of the Apostles that these shadowy things—as “weak and beggarly elements”—were now to be terminated because they had been fulfilled by the arrival of that of which they were shadows.
 - The old sacrifices of animals were transcended—and thus made obsolete—by the sacrifice of the lamb of God, Jesus.
 - Circumcision was a ceremony in blood which has now been transcended. We today are circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands by our baptism into union with Jesus.
 - The old Passover sacrifice was also a bloody ceremony. It too is now transcended—and fulfilled—in its transformed expression in the Lord's Supper.
 - It is much the same with the old Jewish Sabbath. The old celebration on last day of the week—looking forward to the time of fulfillment—is now transcended by and transformed into the Lord's Day, our Christian Sabbath. It is transformed because the work of the Lord Jesus Christ is like the work of God at the time of the first creation. He entered into *his* rest when our redemption was accomplished, effecting a new creation.
- d. Christ *finished* the work of the new creation as God had finished the work of the old creation. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: old things have passed away, behold all things have become new.” One of the old things which has passed away is the *Jewish Sabbath*. That Sabbath was observed on the *last* day of the week because it looked entirely to the future—the day in which the finished work of the second Adam would be done, and in which he could enter into his rest even as God did from his.

It is precisely *because* the Jewish Sabbath was entirely future oriented that it can no longer serve as a proper sign of the people of God. No, with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus *that* future Sabbath became a present reality. It is therefore my conviction that the Heidelberg Catechism is wonderfully right in teaching us that I ought to “*begin—in this life—the eternal Sabbath*” of God. For there is a sense in which we are already seated in heavenly places—and in that Sabbath—in the person of our Mediator, Jesus.

And yet—as the book of *Hebrews* faithfully reminds us—there is also a final and complete Sabbath rest that still remains in the future. That’s why the inspired writer exhorts us to “*be diligent to enter that rest*”—warning us not to repeat the mistakes of those who have gone before us. So the old Sabbath day of the Jews has given way to the Lord’s Day. It is the first day of the week be-

cause there is a new creation. But it also remains a symbol and reminder of what is yet to be when everything which has been accomplished by Christ is completely applied to his people. Only then will we possess in full the Sabbath which is eternal.

- e. From all this you will understand why I'm not sure that our customary terminology is the best, for you will notice that there is hardly any instance in the New Testament—unless it be Hebrews 4:9—in which the Lord's Day is referred to with the use of the Greek word *sabbatismos*. I'm therefore inclined to think that we should learn to refer to Sunday as the Lord's Day, as the Apostle John did, in preference to calling it 'the Sabbath.'

But be that as it may—and whatever designation we use—one thing remains certain: **the first day of the week belongs to the Lord and has the nature and status of the Sabbath. It is the day with which we, under the new covenant, take heed to the fourth commandment.**

#3 - PROBLEM TEXTS IN SCRIPTURE AND CONFESSION

In this, my final lecture, I want to deal with some of the so-called "Problem Texts" in the Bible and in the Confessions.

First of all, then, we consider some of the:

I. Problem Texts in Scripture

In a committee report to the 1972 Reformed Ecumenical Synod (in Appendix A) there is an extended argument against the teaching of our Westminster Confession. This report tried to show:

1. that the Sabbath was *not* a creation ordinance,
2. that the fourth commandment does *not* reiterate this creation ordinance, and
3. that therefore this commandment does *not* remain in force for the people of God.

The following two sentences indicate the drift of this section.

"There are only about three sentences in all of Paul's letters which may have bearing on our topic. The three texts are well known: Rom. 14:5, Gal. 4:10 (and) Col. 2:16. They who are sure that God has set a pattern of six-plus-one at the dawn of history tend to exegete these texts in terms of what they cannot mean. Even if their exegesis would be correct, that is, even if Paul were merely addressing himself to ceremonial habits and observances and, in the case of Rom. 14:5, to fasting days, then we

must continue to assume that the Apostle himself did not 'esteem all days alike.' And we must further believe that this conviction of his concerning the consecration of one day out of seven, was so well understood, that he had no need to safeguard the words from misunderstanding.

A more natural interpretation of the Apostle's words is obtained when one assumes that Paul did not wish to recognize a holy day any more than holy places or holy foods" (RES 1972 Acts, p. 150).

1. Texts which are quoted to show that the fourth commandment has been cancelled are:

a. Rom. 14:5,6 — *"One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks."*

b. Gal. 4:8-11— *"But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain."*

c. Col. 2:16,17 — *"Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."*

— Now it seems to me that in all three of these texts we are dealing with essentially the same problem. "For"—as John Calvin put it—"as he [that is, the Lord] had ...appointed festal and solemn days and commanded them to be observed, the Jews—who had been brought up from their childhood in the doctrine of the law—would not lay aside that reverence for days which they had entertained from the beginning..."

— And that was true of their *Sabbath* day—which they observed on the *last* day of the week—just as much as it was for the feast of the Passover, or Pentecost, or one of the new moons.

— And it is right here, in my humble opinion, that opponents of the Westminster view fall into error. Because the simple fact is that none of these Old Testament feasts had ceased to exist in the time of the Apostle. And, for that matter, many of them are still present in the world today. We still have new moons. And there are still last day of the week Sabbaths observed among the Jews (and sects such as the Seventh Day Adventists). So it is not *these things* which have been done away with, but the divinely mandated *observance* of these things. *That* has been taken away through the work of the Messiah. No Christian today is obligated in any way to observe *any* of these days—not even the Jewish Sabbath.

- Yet I cannot see that this conflicts in any way with the abiding force of the fourth commandment. For what, after all, does the fourth commandment say? (And here I want to give my own translation). It says:
 - *“Remember the day—the Sabbath—to keep it holy. Six of days shall you labor and do all your work. And a day—the seventh—is a Sabbath to Jehovah your God. Not shall you do any work; you, or your son or your daughter, your man-slave or your girl-slave, and your cattle, and your stranger in your gates; because in six days Jehovah made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day; therefore Jehovah blessed a day—the Sabbath—and sanctified it.”*
 - Now there is nothing in this statement at all to require a **Saturday** Sabbath. And here I want to quote, once again, the words of Rev. William Deenick. *“It is argued”* he writes *“that if we desire to observe the fourth commandment we should rest on the seventh day of the week. This misunderstanding arises from the fact that the fourth commandment is read as if it said: ‘the first six days of the week you shall labor, but the seventh day of the week is the sabbath day.’ It is obvious however that this ‘of the week’ is nowhere in the text. The text says that they were to rest for enjoyment in the Lord on the seventh day after six days of work. We find this manner of dating everywhere in the Bible. In Numbers 19:11 & 12, for example, it says that the man who touched a dead body would be clean again on the seventh day—not the seventh day of the week, but after so many days of uncleanness...It was not until the rule of sabbath observance was well established that people began to call the days with their number in relation to the sabbath as the seventh day. The week was ordered around the sabbath, not the sabbath in the week.”*
 - In other words, there is nothing in the fourth commandment itself that tells us on which day of the week the Sabbath is to be observed.
 - The seventh day of the week is much like the tenth of my income. To say that it is my duty to give the tenth to the Lord tells me nothing at all as to which tenth this should be. It does not tell me whether the tenth is to be the first portion, or the last—or for that matter any other portion.
- d. Let me also point out the analogy, here, between what the Apostle says in these texts about these Jewish feast days and what he says elsewhere about circumcision.
- In 1 Corinthians 7:19 the Apostle says *“circumcision is **nothing**.”* And in Galatians 5:6 he says *“in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails **anything**...”*

- From statements such as these we might well conclude that circumcision has been completely abolished. And yet in Philippians 3:3 the Apostle says “*we are the circumcision,*” and in Colossians 2 he says that we are “*circumcised with the circumcision made without hands... by the circumcision of Christ, being buried with Him in baptism.*”
- My point is that there is indeed a sense in which circumcision has been annulled and abolished. It has been annulled and abolished as a ceremony or rite required of God’s covenant people. And that is not all. If we failed to realize this, and put it forward *as if it was still required for God’s people*, well then—the Apostle says—we would be “*fallen from grace*” (Gal. 5:4). And yet, at the same time, there is also a sense in which circumcision is still a primary sign of the people of God—only now it is accomplished in our baptism.
- It seems to me that you have the very same thing with respect to the Sabbath. There is a sense in which the sabbath—meaning the old Jewish sabbath of the last day of the week—is *abolished*. But there is also a sense in which the sabbath—of the creation ordinance of God and the fourth commandment—*remains* in the Lord’s Day.
- as the writer of Hebrews put it “*there remains therefore a Sabbath-keeping* [Greek μ - which could be translated 'Sabbathizing'] *for the people of God*” (4:9).

And this leads me to call your attention to:

2. Texts not usually considered but which are vital to this issue.

Here is one of them.

- a. Matt. 28:18-20 — “*Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen.*”
 - As John Calvin put it, our Lord “*sends away the apostles with this reservation, that they shall not bring forward their own inventions, but shall purely and faithfully deliver from hand to hand (as we say) what he has intrusted to them*” (Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Vol. III, p. 390).
 - If Paul had to withstand Peter to the face when he failed to live according to that truth—which the Lord Jesus had revealed to him (Gal. 2)—may we not also have confidence that he would not observe the first day of the week as he did (1 Cor. 15:1,2) unless he was sure it was the will of the Lord Jesus Christ to do so.

- b. Another such text is found in Acts 17:11 — *“Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”*
- Imagine, if you will, what would have been the result if the Apostle Paul had declared that one of the ten commandments—namely, the fourth—had now been abrogated. Do you think the Berean Jews would have found *that* in accord with their own Scriptures? The answer, of course, is obvious.
 - But if Paul said the very same thing about the Sabbath day that he did about the Passover and Circumcision—on the one hand that they were no longer to be observed as they had been observed in the past, and yet on the other hand that they were still in effect in a new way—then we can understand why they would have judged him to be in conformity with their Old Testament Scriptures.
- c. And isn't that what the inspired author of the Book of Hebrews actually *does* say about the Sabbath? (And here I want to quote from the fourth chapters of Hebrews [4:9-11]).
- *“There remains therefore a sabbath-rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience.”*
 - The text I have quoted is mentioned repeatedly in an extended section of the book of Hebrews (3:7-4:13). And one thing that is rather widely acknowledged is that **this is a difficult passage of Scripture to fully grasp.**
 - This is evident from the fact that the greatest exegetes in the history of the church have not reached a consensus in expounding it.
 - Take verse 10, for instance. Does the personal pronoun “he” in this statement refer to Christ or the believer? The experts do not agree.
 - Yet it seems clear to me that it must refer to Christ for one simple reason.
 - **The only one who has entered his rest**—and ceased from his works—***as God did from His*** is the Lord Jesus. In other words, the only person who can be described in terms of this kind of likeness to God is the second person of the God-head. So, for this reason, I am quite convinced that this must refer to our Lord Jesus (although, of course, this does not in any way deny that we—by virtue of our union with Christ—participate in what he has accom-

plished).

- Indeed, there is a sense in which we already participate in his rest because we already have life eternal. But there is also a sense in which—as we are plainly told in verse 11—the rest is yet in the future. That is why we are warned to “...*be diligent to enter that rest...lest anyone fall according to the*” sad “*example of disobedience*” which was exhibited in the wilderness generation.
- The term I’ve rendered as “*sabbath-rest*” is the Greek word μ . This term was evidently coined by the inspired author because it appears nowhere else in the New Testament or in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. And whatever else it may mean one thing is sure: it means that the people of God in New Testament times are not finished with the Sabbath. And since they have not yet entered into the final state—and are warned that they must seek it—it is clear that *sabbathizing remains today for God’s eovenant people*.
- And that is exactly what we would expect by the analogy of Scripture. As with circumcision and the passover feast there has been a transformation. The old Sabbath day has now been transformed into this “Sabbatismos.”

But now I want to turn to:

II. Problem Texts in Confession.

And the first is the compromise decision made by the Synod of Dordt. I do not mean by this to demean this famous international Synod. Yet it is a fact that the statement on the Sabbath—which was made after the overseas delegates had departed, and which arose in the first place because of unresolved differences within the Dutch Churches—was a compromise.

1. The decisions of the Synod of Dordt

I will read the six statements that the Synod of Dordt formulated concerning the Sabbath, and briefly comment on each.

1. “*In the fourth commandment of God’s Law there is a ceremonial and a moral element.*”

- It’s my opinion that it is not correct to say there is a ceremonial element in this commandment.
- It is true that there are expressions in the ten commandments that reflect the time in history in which the law was given to Israel. But this is true of the fifth and tenth commandments too, and—as far as I know—it has never been alleged that this weakens their authority as part of God’s abiding moral law.

2. *“The rest on the seventh day after the creation, and the strict observance of this day with which the Jewish people were charged particularly, was ceremonial.”*

It is my opinion that this statement is in error at two points.

- The fourth commandment does not designate “the seventh day *after creation*”—just as it does not designate “the seventh day *of the week*”—but only a seventh day in relationship to six days of work.
- And the idea that these commandments are not to be strictly observed *by us* is contrary to the teaching of our Lord in Matthew 5 (and, for that matter, Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 115).

Jesus said: *“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 5:17-19).

3. *“That a definite and appointed day has been set aside to the service of God, and that for this purpose as much rest is required as is necessary for the service of God and for hallowed contemplation, this element is moral.”*
 - This, of course, is in error only because it defines as a mere *element* in the commandment what is, in fact, the entire principle of this commandment.
4. *“The Sabbath of the Jews having been set aside, Christians are in duty bound to hallow the Day of the Lord solemnly.”*
 - This needs no comment.
5. *“This day has always been kept in the early Church since the time of the Apostles.”*
 - Nor does this.
6. *“This day must be so consecrated unto the service of God that upon it men rest from all servile labors, except those required by charity and present necessities, and likewise from all such recreations as prevent the service of God”.*

We believe these are correct statements.

- To say that “Christians are **in duty bound** to hallow” the Lord’s Day, and that they are bound to do so “**solemnly**” is equivalent to saying that this is a divine commandment!
- This statement, in my opinion, therefore rules out all claims regarding any *abrogation* of the fourth commandment.

The formulation adopted by the Synod of Dort was a compromise. It left the Continental Reformed Churches to live with the unsatisfactory ambiguity that traces back to Calvin himself. And, in my opinion, that is a deficiency that the Westminster Standards transcended—and from which it would be counter-productive to decline.

Having said this I will hasten to add that while I am a great admirer of the Westminster Standards, they too are fallible statements. And here is a case in point:

2. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXI, Sect. 8.

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

- And here I want to quote from the pen of Rev. William Deenick, a staunch defender of the fourth commandment as an abiding law for the people of God.

Here is what he says about certain elements in this last section of Chapter XXI of the Westminster Confession.

- *“It is on this point that even those theologians in the Swiss tradition who inclined—or incline—to a more Puritan doctrine of the Sabbath have always refused to follow the Westminster Confession with its rejection of ‘**worldly** employments and recreations’ on the Lord’s day and its demand that the believer ‘should be taken up, the whole time, in publick and private **exercises** of his worship and in the duties of necessity and mercy.’ It was, and is, felt that not Scripture but the ascetic thinking of medieval Puritanism led the Westminster Divines to write as they did...*
- *“The very use of the word ‘worldly’...is peculiarly revealing. It certainly is not the Biblical use of the word. In Scripture ‘worldly’ means sinful—that which belongs to the sinful world. In the Westminster Confession here it means, in the obvious ascetic tradition, that which is not directly related to the devotional. What would, according to this distinction, be a worldly recreation*

*and what a non-worldly recreation? Reading a devotional book would most likely qualify as a non-worldly entertainment, but playing tennis as a worldly one. Playing tennis is naturally not worldly in the Biblical sense of the word, but it **would** be in the ascetic understanding of what is and what is not worldly. All this places us immediately in the atmosphere of the monastic casuistry that was so repulsive to the original Reformers. It was not without reason that Calvin had so strongly emphasized that the Sabbath symbolically called us to “resting from EVIL works”. The Westminster Confession appears to invite us to a medieval rest from **‘worldly’** works...*

- *“It seems further unfortunate that the Westminster Confession refers to the Sabbath as a day of ‘exercises’ and ‘duties’; exercises of worship and duties of mercy. The immediate impression is that we are placed back, be it only for one day of the week, in the atmosphere of the monastery where the black-friars and the black-nuns of Protestantism (here together with their children) far removed from all ‘worldly’ pleasures piously and precisely observe a day of devotional exercises and duties of charity. Once again man seemed to have been made for the Sabbath instead of the Sabbath for man.*
- *“From the beginning the Sabbath was meant to be the weekly festive occasion for enjoyment in the works of God, for rest from servile labour so that we might be free for the worship of God. But the scope of worship has always been far wider than exercises of devotion or duties of love, and has never excluded the cheerful and thankful enjoyment of God’s mercies in nature and culture as well as in grace. Thus there is certainly on the Sabbath no place for a Reformed type of asceticism introducing the unbiblical notion of a worldliness that is not in itself sinful.*

a. With these sentiments I am constrained to agree.

The more I’ve thought about the use of the word ‘worldly’ in this section of the Confession the more I’ve come to see that it is a term that ought to be changed.

- There is no place for *anything* worldly in the life of the Christian—not on Monday any more than on Sunday. I think the men who formulated this section understood this too. I think they really had in mind the kind of thing forbidden by the prophet Isaiah, namely, preoccupation with the things of this present age. Indeed, the very proof text appended by the Assembly at this point—Isaiah 58:13 & 14—clearly shows this to be the case.
- *"If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

- I'm not merely being 'Puritan' when I turn away from being preoccupied with the things that dominate the other six days of the week in order to sanctify the Sabbath. I am being Scriptural.
- It is *not* a species of asceticism to strive to give one whole day over to a concentrated focus on the great works of God and his Christ. No, it's simply being Biblical. I would therefore suggest that we need to understand the word "*worldly*" to mean that which pertains to this present world only.

But I also think the use of the term "*exercises*" needs some modern translation.

- To most of us today this word conjures up images of a sweating gymnasium in which people are hard at work in an effort to reduce their fat content. And to think of the observance of the Lord's Day as analogous to this kind of strenuous *work* is surely erroneous.
- Therefore this term too, in my opinion, needs a modern translation.

b. I would therefore suggest that the text of Chapter XXI, section 8 would be more accurate if it said:

- *"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, not only observe an holy rest, all that day, from their own works, words, and thoughts **about the employments and recreations of the other six days of the week**, but also **concentrate on** the things of God during the entire Lord's day, except for works of necessity and mercy."*

c. The bottom line:

In the midst of the Australasian Sabbath Controversy I was asked to write a contribution to a Symposium entitled The Sabbath-Sunday Problem. It was my assignment to summarize the teaching of the Westminster Assembly. In doing this I became convinced that the Westminster Assembly's view of the Sabbath could not be understood apart from its view of the ten commandments as a whole. Stating this conclusion I wrote: *"If there was one thing that was utterly discountenanced by the Westminster Assembly, it was all thought of any abrogation, deprecation, or even depreciation of the moral law of God in the economy of grace. Far from seeing the ten commandments as 'contrary to the grace of the gospel,' the Assembly rather insisted that they 'do sweetly comply with it.'"* I stand by that assessment today.

It is quite true—as has often been stated—that the Westminster Standards set forth an extremely high standard for the observance of the Sabbath. I will even go so far as to say that it is an unattainable standard. But is that not precisely what is confessed in *all* of the great Reformed Confessions

concerning the law? Listen to the Heidelberg Catechism:

114. Q. But can those who are converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?

A. No; but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; yet so that with earnest purpose they begin to live, not only according to some but according to all the commandments of God.

115. Q. Why, then, will God have the ten commandments preached so strictly, since in this life no one can keep them?

A. First, that all our life long we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature, and so become the more earnest in seeking remission of sins and righteousness in Christ; second, that we may constantly endeavor, and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, to be renewed more and more after the image of God, till after this life we arrive at the goal of perfection.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism says the same thing:

82 Q. Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?

A. No mere man, since the fall, is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.

That is really the issue. Has God relaxed the high demands that he makes on man, made in his own image? The Westminster Assembly said 'No!' and in doing so was only being consistent with the teaching of Scripture.

After all, it was not concerning the *past* that Isaiah spoke, but of the glorious future, when he said: *"If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD, honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken."*
(58:13,14)